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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 18 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

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Care Home Safety

1. **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): How many care homes are rated good and outstanding for safety.
[911401]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): No compromise can be made on the safety of care homes, and that is why the Government introduced robust inspection regimes led by the Care Quality Commission. Latest figures from 3 June show that 80% of care homes have been rated good or outstanding for safety, with 84% of adult social care providers rated as good or outstanding overall.

Emma Dent Coad: I draw the Minister's attention to one example of a care home run by a private provider: Ellesmere House, which offers residential care for dementia sufferers. In February 2015, there was a serious safeguarding incident leading to the death of a resident after an incident with another resident, yet its latest CQC report underlines continued failures in management. Is the Minister confident that we have a generation of providers with the skills, training and facilities needed to keep dementia sufferers safe and well cared for?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. It is of course incredibly concerning when we hear cases of abuse or neglect in care homes. That is why the Government asked the CQC to inspect them in the first place and why we have put in place training through Skills for Care and given councils access to a lot more funding to help support them. However, abuse and neglect of any kind must not be tolerated.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the fact that the latest report from the Care Quality Commission indicates that four out of five adult social care services in England are rated either good or outstanding, but there is no room for complacency. Will the Minister expand on how she will ensure that that becomes five out of five?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that four out of five care homes are rated good or outstanding. That is largely down to the more than 1.5 million adult social care professionals, who work with great professionalism and integrity. We drive up quality by supporting them better and ensuring that we can recruit more people into this incredible profession. We have had a very important adult social care recruitment campaign called, "Every day is different", which looks to attract people with the right values into the sector to drive up quality and provide robust social care.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I know from my family's personal experience that just because care homes have a CQC rating of good does not mean that there are not dangerous and serious issues lurking beneath the surface that impact patient safety and care. Will the Minister outline today what the Government are doing to look into reports from CQC homes that are rated good?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady has often spoken very movingly in the House about her personal experiences, and she is absolutely right: abuse of vulnerable people is absolutely abhorrent. We are very determined to stop it, and we want to prevent it from happening in the first place through the tough inspection regime. We want to shut down poor-quality homes and, most importantly, we have made sure that across the country, police, councils and the NHS work together to help to protect people in the long term.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The integrity of CQC ratings was dealt a mortal blow by the uncovering of abuse at Whorlton Hall by BBC "Panorama". Watching the abuse on that programme is made worse by the knowledge that the abuse may have started five years ago. The unpublished inspection report from August 2015 described allegations of assaults on patients, the undocumented use of a seclusion room and the use of rapid tranquilisation not backed by an organisation policy. I do not have any confidence that the review called by the CQC will uncover the truth behind that abuse. Will the Minister agree to set up an inquiry into this matter, so that we can establish whether the care regulator is fit for purpose?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: abuse of any kind must not be tolerated, and we have heard horrific accounts of abuse that must be tackled. That is why in May, we announced much stronger commissioning oversight arrangements, where people are put in place out of area. Local commissioners must visit regularly. The CQC has commissioned two independent reviews, and the findings and recommendations of both will be published. The point is that opportunities to intervene have been missed, and we must be open and transparent in getting to the bottom of what happened.

NHS: New Technology

2. **James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase NHS access to new technology.
[911402]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): To increase the access to new technology across the NHS, we have expanded the accelerated access collaborative to get the best technologies in faster, and NHSX is delivering our tech vision to drive forward digital transformation of the NHS.

James Cartlidge: I welcome the way my right hon. Friend has really put a stamp on ensuring that technology is at the heart of his health policy. Can he tell me whether the accelerated access collaborative will engage locally, particularly with the sustainability and transformation partnerships, so that it eventually leads to better outcomes for our constituents?

Matt Hancock: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a reason why we care about using the very best technology in the world in the NHS, and that is that it improves treatment for patients. The regional delivery of better technology is critical. The 15 regional academic health science networks are a key part of the AAC and they work closely with local hospitals.

24. [911425] **Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that in Greater Manchester we spend over £1 million a year on keeping and storing paper-based assessment records made in the early years by health visitors. Will he work with us to eradicate that cost and get the digital licences we need?

Matt Hancock: Yes, 100%. One of the reasons we have put NHSX in place is to drive exactly this policy agenda, where we can get better treatment for patients and save money.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Earlier this year, the Secretary of State attended the launch of a report on artificial intelligence by the all-party parliamentary group on heart and circulatory diseases. Can I get a commitment from him that AI is very much part of the future through the NHS long-term plan?

Matt Hancock: A most enthusiastic commitment! My hon. Friend has led on this agenda and driven it, because it is all about using technology to save lives. The report that he mentions is optimistic about the power of using data better to ensure that people can live longer.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): On new technology and saving lives, I met the Secretary of State last month to discuss making the innovative enzyme replacement therapy Brineura—the only treatment available for Batten disease—available on the NHS urgently. I have heard nothing since that meeting, and the wait is agonising for the families, so what will he do urgently to make this life-saving treatment available to children in England?

Matt Hancock: I had an incredibly moving meeting with the hon. Lady, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and others, and some of the families and children who have Batten disease. I have since met the chief executive of the NHS. The decision on the availability of the drug in question is, of course, one for the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and NHS England, but I have had those meetings and I continue to make the case.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The electronic prescription service is now used by more than 90% of GP practices, and more than 70% of prescriptions are issued in that way. As well as providing a better patient experience, how much money has this saved for the NHS?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is dead right to say that this provides a better service and saves money. I do not have the figure at my fingertips, but I will write to him with the answer and ensure that it is published for the whole House to see.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Patients in my constituency have to travel vast distances—often in excess of a 200-mile round trip—to be seen at Raigmore Hospital. As and when properly working visual teleconsultations are brought into being, when that technology is developed, may I appeal to the Government to share the technology with the Scottish Government and with NHS Highland?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. Places like Caithness are a great example of where GP consultations that can be done over the phone or over a video conference can save people hours and hours. Of course they sometimes need to see their GP in person, but not always. We are driving this agenda hard in England, and I would be happy to work with the NHS in Scotland to ensure that that technology is taken up there, too.

Male Suicide

3. **Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): What his Department's strategy is to reduce the level of male suicides. [911403]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Men remain the group at the highest risk of suicide and continue to account for three quarters of all suicides. Clearly, targeting suicide in men must be the main thrust of our suicide prevention strategy. We are investing £25 million to support local suicide prevention plans in every local area, and that funding is testing different approaches and sharing best practice. We also announced £600,000 yesterday to support local authorities with exactly these processes.

Conor McGinn: It devastates me to have to tell the House that St Helens has the highest rate of suicide in the country, and three quarters of those who take their own lives are men. We know that working class men in deprived areas are 10 times more at risk than those in the most affluent areas, so will the Minister recognise class and community, and poverty and place, as key factors in male suicide and its causes? Will she come to St Helens to see and support the vital work that is being done to prevent the tragic crisis of suicide that is affecting more families in my community?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman says, and I would be delighted to go to St Helens, not least because the more we can do to share good practice around combating male suicide, the more we can prevent it. Everybody in this space wants to do more to prevent suicide, and location is important, too,

which is why a big part of my plan is to ensure that we are putting in good measures in the places that attract more suicides.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): A few weeks ago, I held a debate in this Chamber on the subject of suicide in the farming community. What are my hon. Friend's plans to improve the mental health of males under 40 in rural areas?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is highlighting the farming community. He is right that the incidence of suicide is particularly high in that community, not least because those people work in remote areas, have less engagement with others and have access to the means. We must ensure that all vulnerable men feel that they can reach out to people who can support them. I encourage everybody to get the message out that if we see people who look vulnerable or struggling, we should be comfortable about reaching out to them. We have heard amazing stories of when just the simplest intervention, such as, "Are you all right, my friend?" can make the difference between life and death.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Sharing information saves lives when it comes to suicide prevention, but families are too often unnecessarily excluded because clinicians may be unaware of or do not follow the consensus statement guidance on seeking consent and sharing information in the patient's best interests. I thank the Minister for meeting me and the National Suicide Prevention Alliance recently. She will know that the Matthew Elvidge Trust has highlighted the importance of how consent is sought, and it has suggested the following wording:

"In our experience, it is always much better to involve a family member, friend or colleague whom you trust in your treatment and recovery... This will result in you recovering much quicker. Would you like us to make contact with someone and would you like us to do this with you now?"

The Minister will agree that there is a huge difference between that and just asking someone whether their mum can be phoned. Will the Minister set out how she will raise awareness of the consensus statement?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her continued interest in this matter. She will recognise the cultural challenge of encouraging all practitioners in the NHS to embrace the change, because we quite rightly have a culture in which discretion is paramount. Practices are in place to encourage information sharing, and I highlight our support for the Zero Suicide Alliance—£2 million was provided last October—and central to its work will be spreading understanding of the consensus statement throughout the NHS.

NHS Staffing

4. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the NHS has sufficient staff to meet its long-term needs. [911404]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The interim people plan that we published this month puts the workforce at the heart of the future of the NHS and will ensure that we have the staff needed to deliver high-quality care.

Nigel Huddleston: The Secretary of State will be aware that recruitment and retention is particularly difficult for hospitals in special measures, such as the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which he recently visited. Such hospitals have to rely heavily on agency staff, which puts pressure on their finances. What specific steps is he taking to help those hospitals with their financial and recruiting pressures?

Matt Hancock: We are working closely with that trust, and it was good to visit and see just how hard working the staff are. They are dedicated to the cause and well supported by their MPs. My hon. Friend is quite right to make that case, and we have a direct package of support for the Worcestershire Royal Hospital and the trust more broadly because it faces unique challenges, some of which are not at all of its own making. The staff at Worcester are working incredibly hard to deliver for their local citizens.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My constituents find it very difficult to access their GP, as we have a recruitment shortage in the constituency. The "General Practice Forward View" pledged to boost the GP workforce by 5,000 by 2020. Are the Government on course to meet that target?

Matt Hancock: We retain that target of 5,000 more GPs. We have managed to increase the number of staff working around GPs, because a GP does not need to do everything in primary care, so we have a more mixed workforce with physios and practice nurses working alongside GPs. There is more work still to do, and the NHS long-term plan sets out how we will make that happen.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): The leadership team at King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has asked for assistance from NHS Improvement to put in post a clinical director at the emergency services department, which has just been rated inadequate by the Care Quality Commission. This vital post, however, remains unfilled. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give that NHS Improvement can help trusts when they request assistance in this way?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an important point. This is a vital post in a hospital and a hospital trust that does amazing work—some of the best medicine in the world is done at King's—but it also has significant challenges with delivery, especially with respect to meeting financial targets and delivering value for money. King's needs that support, which we are putting in place. I will raise the specific issue of the post he mentions with the head of NHS Improvement.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Royal Stoke University Hospital, in partnership with Staffordshire University and Keele University, is training the next generation of clinicians, but the Secretary of State will know those universities need to be properly resourced to continue that vital training. What conversations is he having with the Department for Education to make sure that partnership thrives?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We have expanded the number of medical training places; we have more people going into medicine; and we have a record number of GPs in training. This takes

time, of course. I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education about this recently, and I will make sure that we keep pushing hard.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Our future immigration policy will be key to ensuring that our NHS is sufficiently staffed across the country. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Home Secretary specifically on the £30,000 annual minimum income? I believe that limit is very detrimental to the sector.

Matt Hancock: I have had those discussions, and the Migration Advisory Committee has raised a specific concern about social care. We need to deliver better social care, with people coming from all around the world in addition to domestically trained people. I take on board my hon. Friend's point.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Pinderfields Hospital in Wakefield has struggled to retain midwives. As a result, the trust has proposed to cut and close the popular midwife-led maternity unit in Pontefract. Local mums are up in arms, as it is completely unfair. We keep seeing this pattern. When the NHS is under pressure from austerity, from shortages or from management issues, it is the services in towns that are hit. What will the Secretary of State do to make sure we have enough midwives across the country so that we can keep Pontefract's midwife-led unit open and so the NHS can continue to sustain services that are vital to our towns?

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Lady, as always, puts the case for Pontefract very powerfully. The truth is that we will need more nurses and more midwives, as well as other health professionals, over the next five years because we are putting in a record amount of funding. More people are needed to deliver better services, and I am happy to meet her to discuss this specific case. Coming from and representing towns myself, I understand the importance of keeping services such as maternity services close to the people they serve.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend make sure that his interim people plan looks again at the hugely underutilised resource of the allied health professions, including osteopaths and chiropractors? What is the point of having a professional standards authority to regulate them if the Department will not use them?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an important point, one that we have frequently discussed. As he knows, I am married to an osteopath, so I do recognise the value that osteopaths bring to all of us.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Research shows that the ratio of registered nurses to patients is one of the most important factors in patient safety, so members of the Royal College of Nursing are calling on the Secretary of State to follow Wales and Scotland and to bring in safe staffing legislation. What is his answer to them?

Matt Hancock: Of course we need to have the right number of nurses. We need to make sure that we also put in the funding. If the SNP Government in Scotland had put the same funding increases into the NHS in Scotland, there would have been half a billion pounds

more there over the last five years. So let us start with getting the money in that we are putting in in England, but is not fully being reflected by the SNP Government in Scotland.

Dr Whitford: The SNP in Scotland spends £185 a head more than England, so the Secretary of State should check his figures. At over 11%, the nurse vacancy rate in England is more than double that in Scotland. Whereas student nursing numbers have increased every year in Scotland, there are 570 fewer nursing students this year in England. Is it not time to follow Scotland's approach, reintroduce the nursing bursary and end tuition fees?

Matt Hancock: I am not going to let the SNP spokesman get away with this. Normally, she brings a thoughtful contribution to health debates, but she said that there is more spending in Scotland per head. The truth is this: the increase in spending in England over the last five years is 17.6%, but in Scotland the increase is only 13.1%. That represents half a billion pounds less: the increase in spending that we have seen in England that they have not seen in Scotland. She should recognise that fact.

Mental Health Services

5. **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the long-term provision of adequate mental health services. [911405]

21. **David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the long-term provision of adequate mental health services. [911422]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Under the NHS long-term plan, there will be a comprehensive expansion of mental health services, with additional funding of £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24. That will give greater mental health support to an extra 345,000 children, at least 380,000 more adults, and 24,000 more new and expectant mothers.

Peter Heaton-Jones: Across the country there is a real challenge in recruiting qualified mental health nurses. Will the Minister work with me and the Devon Partnership NHS Trust to encourage as many qualified professionals as we can to come to work at the excellent in-patient wards at North Devon District Hospital?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I completely agree with my hon. Friend; it is important that we have the right workforce in place. That is a considerable challenge, but it is essential if we are to achieve the best outcomes. I am pleased that the Devon Partnership NHS Trust has seen an increase of 47 mental health nurses between February 2010 and February 2019, which shows that it is doing exactly as he says and going out of its way to recruit the best possible people. That work must continue, as is recognised in our "Interim NHS People Plan"

David Warburton: I recently met representatives from Somerset's NHS trust and its child and adolescent mental health services to look at young people's mental health services and I heard some worrying stories of

bed allocation. This has led to teenagers with mental health problems being moved out of the county, sometimes a huge distance from home, or sharing wards with very young children. So what is the Department doing to ensure that young people are not held in care for extended periods, which can exacerbate their difficulties, and that provision is sufficient for them to remain close to family and friends in an appropriate environment?

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is essential that we end the practice of out-of-area placements because, as my hon. Friend rightly says, being in close proximity to family and friends is clearly going to aid the recovery of anyone suffering from mental ill health. This has been a particular problem for children and young people, and a particular problem in the south-west, but I can report to him that NHS England is making sure that we have more adequate bed provision across the country, and we will continue to drive down these out-of-area placements.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Somebody is much more likely to need mental health services if they have experienced childhood adversity. The all-party group on the prevention of adverse childhood experiences has looked in detail at the evidence base on policies to prevent this adversity. What is the best thing the group can do to influence the Government's prevention strategy?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I have to say, the hon. Gentleman does it very well: he continually makes noise about this important issue. He is absolutely right that adverse childhood experiences inform people's future mental health, or mental ill health. We are currently looking at our provision for early years intervention and the first 1,001 days—the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed the importance of that—but we need to make sure that state organisations take advantage of every contact they have with children, to ensure that we pick people up when they are vulnerable.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My learning disabled constituent, who also has mental health and substance abuse issues, was placed in poor-quality housing and left without food and heating by a local care provider called Focus. What is the Department doing to ensure that subcontracted social care providers are fit for purpose?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The case that the hon. Lady mentions is clearly very concerning. It is for local authorities to make sure, when they commission care providers, that they are fit for purpose and discharge their responsibilities in the local care plan, but we also need to recognise that people with learning disabilities as well as mental health issues are particularly vulnerable. We need to make sure that local authorities and local NHS services work together more effectively to ensure that care needs are not neglected.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I was interested to see recent comments by the Secretary of State regarding the use of music to combat over-medicalisation—I should declare that I am married to a music therapist—so does that mean he shares my interest in the use of music therapy to combat mental health issues, as well as dementia and other conditions?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has declared his interest in this matter. He is right that mental wellbeing is about not only clinical interventions but very much the kind of things that he describes—wider social prescribing. We cannot overstate the role of the third sector in giving wraparound support to people going through periods of mental ill health. I am giving clinical commissioning groups the clear message that they need to look at what else they commission in this space, alongside clinical interventions.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In Manchester on Saturday, people were giving away free “Unknown Pleasures” t-shirts, partly to mark the 40th anniversary of one of the greatest albums ever made. But, as anyone who knows the history of Joy Division will know, there is also the important related issue of male suicide and people were being encouraged to donate to charities, particularly those that work with young men at risk of suicide. I was sent one of the t-shirts, Mr Speaker, but I thought you might rule it out of order if I wore it. These charities obviously do great work, but they are trying to fill real gaps in the system. How can we ensure, when we consider long-term health plans and long-term mental health services, that there are not gaps that people fall between?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady articulates the issue extremely well. The purpose of local suicide prevention plans is very much to make sure that we have a joined-up approach to combating male suicide and to identify exactly where the gaps in the services are. The £600,000 that we announced yesterday for the sector-led improvement package is to enable local authorities to share expertise and to make sure that, holistically, they provide the leadership to make sure that the gaps are plugged. I am grateful for the hon. Lady's interest in this matter.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): This week, the Children's Society published research to show that more than 110,000 children and young people were turned away from mental health services because their problems were not deemed serious enough—that is despite suicide rates for teenagers almost doubling in eight years and research from YoungMinds that shows that three quarters of parents feel their child's mental health has deteriorated while they wait for treatment. Why are so few children able to get the support from mental health services that they so desperately need?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As the hon. Lady and I have discussed previously, I would be the first person to recognise that we are not where we would like to be in respect of the provision of mental health services, but that is why we are investing an additional £2.3 billion to expand access for children by 345,000. In addition to that, we are investing in a brand new workforce in all our schools so that we can have exactly the kind of early intervention that will not require more lengthy periods of care and treatment. It is essential that we equip all schools and young people with tools to manage their wellbeing.

Junior Doctor Contract: Exception Reporting

6. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the exception reporting process in the junior doctor contract 2016.

[911406]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Our junior doctors work incredibly hard caring for patients around the clock. We introduced exception reporting in 2016 and it has been a major step forward in ensuring safe working. The British Medical Association, NHS Employers and the Department reviewed the effectiveness of exception reporting as part of the junior doctor's contract agreement, which we announced last week. Revisions will be made to exception reporting subject to the endorsement of the BMA.

Justin Madders: Is the Minister aware that research by the Hospital Consultants & Specialists Association shows that, despite thousands of exception reports from junior doctors in unsafe hospital trusts, no changes to shift patterns were made at all. The chief executive of NHS Employers has said that, undoubtedly, there are circumstances where trusts would like to make changes, but because they do not have sufficient staff in place they are unable to do so. What can the Minister do to ensure that, in future, these changes are actually implemented?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right: every exception report has to be addressed. Changing the rota is one possible outcome. He will recognise that there are other possible outcomes as well: the doctor may agree to work extra hours and be given extra time off; timing of the ward rounds in clinics may be adjusted, so that educational opportunities can be taken; and timing of the ward rounds can be adjusted so that support from other senior staff can be there as well. There are many ways around this.

Thames Valley Scanning Contract

7. **Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): For what reason he chose not to refer the Thames Valley PET-CT scanning contract to the independent reconfiguration panel. [911407]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): I am aware of the views that have been expressed on this matter. I can confirm that, having taken advice, we considered that the letter received from the Oxfordshire health overview and scrutiny committee does not constitute a valid referral under the relevant regulations. However, I have emphasised to NHS England, Oxford University Hospitals and InHealth the importance of continuing local discussions and working together at pace to find a service offer that works best for patients.

Anneliese Dodds: The Churchill's PET-CT cancer scanning service is world renowned, yet NHS England, apparently with the consent of this Government, is forcing it into partnership with a private company. That is what is happening. It is not a discussion; it is being forced into a partnership. NHS England has even warned the trust against staff raising their voice on this issue because of their concerns about patient safety. Surely this unprecedented partnership is illegitimate and must be called in by this Government.

Seema Kennedy: As I have said to the hon. Lady, we do not consider it to be a valid referral. What I would say is that NHS England remains committed to ensuring

that the public are involved in decision making. Part of the extensive public engagement included completing a 30-day engagement about the phase 2 procurement proposals in 2016. I understand the strong passions that this has raised on both sides of the House and I urge all parties to continue working together.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I have made it clear to my constituents that, in principle, I have no objection to private companies providing NHS services, but totally legitimate concerns have been raised about the consultation involved in awarding this contract. May I simply thank the Minister for agreeing to meet Oxfordshire MPs this afternoon? I know that she is very much engaged in this issue and, although it may not technically be overseen by the Department of Health and Social Care, I know that she will do all she can to help us to reach a solution.

Seema Kennedy: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I am looking forward to the meeting this afternoon. As I have said, I am assured that the decision will maintain services in Oxford and that there will be improved patient access, with new scanners in Milton Keynes and Swindon for people living there as well.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Surely the reason we have got to this point is that the clinical commissioning group was never actually consulted on what was right for the local population. How can the Minister ensure that, in future, centralised procurement services and local CCGs are always consulted as a matter of course?

Seema Kennedy: As I have said, there has been engagement with local people, Members of Parliament and the local health community. I think that the outcome that we are all looking for is good PET-CT scanners for the people in Oxfordshire and for the whole of Thames Valley.

Free Prescriptions

8. **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that vulnerable people are not unfairly penalised for incorrectly claiming free prescriptions. [911409]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): Last year, prescription and dental fraud cost the NHS an estimated £212 million. It is absolutely right that the Government take steps to recoup that money, so it can be reinvested into caring for patients. Our system for claiming free prescriptions should be simple for people and clinicians to understand, which is why we are currently piloting technology that allows pharmacies to check digitally whether a patient is exempt from charges before prescription items are dispensed.

Anna Turley: I appreciate the Minister's response, but I am afraid that that is just not the reality out there. One of my constituents—a woman with severe learning disabilities and anxiety, who is entitled to free prescriptions through her employment and support allowance claim—was hit with a £100 penalty charge when the NHS failed to obtain the correct information from the Department

for Work and Pensions. My office challenged that decision and got the £100 back to her, but the situation was extremely distressing, and the communication is clearly at fault and punitive. Will the Minister implement a review into the prescription penalties to protect vulnerable people?

Seema Kennedy: It is distressing to hear of such a case, and these situations are very distressing for patients and their carers. The NHS Business Services Authority has taken steps to make things clearer, including with an easy-read patient information booklet and an online eligibility checker. We are also running a national awareness campaign, but of course we do need to ensure that people are not claiming for things to which they are not entitled.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have constituents who are furious at repeatedly receiving penalty notices that subsequently have to be quashed. The system is rubbish, isn't it?

Seema Kennedy: I do not agree with my right hon. Friend that the system is rubbish. If somebody does receive a penalty charge notice incorrectly, there are procedures in place to challenge that notice. If somebody thinks they have received a penalty charge that they should not have received, they should contact the NHS Business Services Authority.

Mr Speaker: What is not rubbish is the very pithy line of questioning typically deployed by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I will call the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) if his question consists of a sentence, rather than a speech.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Access to prescriptions is made much harder given the closure of 233 community pharmacies in the last two years, so will the Minister introduce an essential community pharmacies scheme to support rural pharmacies such as those in Cumbria and keep them open?

Mr Speaker: Well done.

Seema Kennedy: We recognise the importance of community pharmacies. Pharmacists are specialists who have a great role in primary care, which is why they are highlighted in the NHS long-term plan.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Since 2014, 5.6 million penalty charge notices have been issued, including a staggering 1.7 million to people who are entitled to free prescriptions. FP10 prescription forms and the criteria for eligibility for free prescriptions are far from straightforward. Some people in receipt of universal credit are eligible for free prescriptions and some are not—and, by the way, universal credit is not mentioned at all on the form. Those claiming exemption on grounds of low income can see their eligibility change from one month to the next. Is it any wonder that some patients tick their box? What steps are the Government taking to sort out this chaotic system that is too often treating vulnerable people like criminals?

Seema Kennedy: A wide range of activity has been undertaken to help people to understand whether they need to pay for their NHS prescriptions, and I remind the House that 84% of NHS prescriptions are available for free. My Department and the DWP are working together to provide further clarity to universal credit, and hopefully we will be adding a universal credit tick box to the prescription form.

NHS: Changing Places

9. Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that people can access Changing Places facilities when they use NHS services. [911410]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Last year, I announced £2 million funding for NHS trusts in England to install Changing Places facilities in hospitals; this is now available for trusts to bid for. We estimate that 250,000 people in the UK cannot use standard accessible toilets, and the fund could help to install well over 100 more Changing Places facilities.

Dr Johnson: Many of the disabled children who use Changing Places facilities also have a life-limiting or life-threatening condition. I welcome the increase in Changing Places facilities, but in this national Children's Hospice Week could I ask my hon. Friend to go further in protecting these vulnerable children by increasing the children's hospice grants to £25 million to give them the financial security they need?

Caroline Dinenage: I am really pleased that my hon. Friend has mentioned that it is Children's Hospice Week. It is a great opportunity to pay tribute to the incredible work that children's hospices do up and down the country, supporting some of our most poorly children and their families. I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she does on the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care. The short answer to her question is yes; the NHS will match fund CCGs that increase their investment in children's palliative care, including hospices, by up to £7 million. That is increasing support to a total of £25 million a year by 2023-24.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): There are only about 40 Changing Places facilities in the NHS at the moment. I congratulate the Minister on the work she is doing on this, but will she continue to work with campaigners like Lorna Fillingham in my constituency to make sure that it not only happens quickly and on a timely basis but that we build on it in the future?

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because it was he who introduced me to Lorna Fillingham and the amazing Changing Places campaigners in the first place. It is really down to their incredible work that we have seen the growth of this very important issue. There are about 38 Changing Places facilities on NHS England estates at the moment, but the £2 million pot will definitely help to improve that number significantly.

NHS Staff Retention

10. Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the retention of NHS staff. [911411]

13. **Greg Hands** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the retention of NHS staff. [911414]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The interim people plan sets out how the NHS will become a great employer with the culture and leadership needed to retain staff. NHS programmes to retain its highly talented staff are already having an impact. There are now more nurses working in the NHS than at any other time in its 70-year history. In addition, about 1 million NHS workers will benefit from the new Agenda for Change pay and contract deal.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the recent announcement of a consultation on NHS pensions arrangements for senior personnel. I hope that that will look at the taper impact, which raises the effective tax rate to an unacceptably high level. Retention of key personnel is critical across the Shropshire health economy, as well as in other parts of the country. Can my hon. Friend reassure me that senior-level changes in Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust's management will not delay the Secretary of State's consideration of the Independent Reconfiguration Panel's report on proposed acute hospital reconfiguration?

Stephen Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome for the pensions proposals and the consultation. The Department has received initial advice from the Independent Reconfiguration Panel on the Future Fit hospital reconfiguration. The Secretary of State is currently considering that. He will respond to the IRP's advice in due course, and I will ensure that he informs my right hon. Friend.

Greg Hands: May I thank the Secretary of State again for saving the A&E department at Charing Cross Hospital, which was a very, very popular move? Our brilliant hospital will benefit from the work that the Government are doing to increase the number of nursing associates across the NHS. What more can we do to get more nursing associates at Charing Cross Hospital, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, and across the whole NHS?

Stephen Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments on saving the hospital department—that is very important. He is right to raise the important role of the nursing associates, who deliver hands-on care in a range of complex settings. Thousands of nursing associates began training in 2017 and in 2018. Health Education England is leading a programme to recruit more than 7,500 into training in 2019, and I am sure that some of them will benefit his constituency.

15. [911416] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): Bradford NHS Trust is pressing ahead with plans to set up a wholly-owned subsidiary company. Last week, 97% of Unison members voted for strike action. Given that the trust is currently run by a temporary chair and a temporary chief executive, and is acting on guidance from a now-defunct body, will the Minister, to improve retention, call on the trust to drop these plans and keep the NHS family as one?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady knows that a wholly-owned subsidiary is created as a legal entity. It is 100% owned by NHS organisations. It is also the case

that local trust board members sit on the boards of those subsidiary entities. It is therefore appropriate that the local organisation takes that decision.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): The King's Fund says that the earnings threshold in the Government's immigration proposals, which was mentioned earlier, will definitely impact on the ability to retain and attract NHS staff. The proposals for a transition period during which many social care workers would only be allowed to come here for a limited time with no entitlement to bring dependants will, again, negatively impact on the ability to retain staff. When will this Government realise that immigration is good for our public services and good for our country, and that badly thought out policy in this area that impacts on the retention of NHS staff is wrong and nonsensical?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right—immigration has benefited the national health service. This Minister, this Secretary of State and this ministerial team celebrate the fact that global immigration has benefited the NHS. From 2021, the new system will allow people with skills to come to the UK from anywhere in the world. It will remove the cap on skilled migrants, abolish the requirement to undertake the resident labour market test, and should improve the timeliness of being able to apply for a visa.

NHS Funding: Cambridgeshire

11. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent comparative assessment he has made of the adequacy of NHS funding in Cambridgeshire and local population growth. [911412]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): NHS England is responsible for the allocation of resources to clinical commissioning groups. Funding is distributed on the basis of a weighted capitation formula informed by the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation. Population estimates are provided by the Office for National Statistics. This year, as the hon. Gentleman will know from a debate that we had last week, ACRA recommended and NHS England accepted a wide-ranging set of changes to that formula. Those changes are likely to benefit his constituency.

Daniel Zeichner: We had a discussion last week, but the Minister was unable to answer my question so I will try again. Is Cambridgeshire's clinical commissioning group correct that it will have less money to spend on providing health services next year than it does this year?

Stephen Hammond: As I pointed out to the hon. Gentleman last week, we recognise that historically, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG has received less funding per person than neighbouring CCGs, but as I also pointed out to him, the CCG has received an absolute increase of 5.7% in 2019-20, bringing the funding up to £1.1 billion. We had a disagreement about the figures, because I could not agree the figures that he provided. As he knows, I have promised to write to him when I have been able to resolve his figures.

Childhood Obesity

12. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of progress in implementing Childhood obesity: a plan for action, chapter 2, published in June 2018. [911413]

14. Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of progress in implementing Childhood obesity: a plan for action, chapter 2, published in June 2018. [911415]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): The Government are taking a world-leading approach to obesity. We have held consultations on ending the sale of energy drinks to children, calorie labelling in restaurants, restricting promotions of sugary and fatty foods by price indication, and further advertising restrictions, including a 9 pm watershed. We are considering all the feedback, and will respond later this year.

Paul Blomfield: Alongside prevention, we have to do more to help the growing number of children who are already overweight or obese. It is more than a year since the Health and Social Care Committee highlighted the lack of tier 3 and 4 services. Voluntary groups such as Shine Health Academy in my constituency fill the gap. They take children on referral from GPs, but they do not receive any public funding. There can be no other serious health condition affecting children where the NHS says, "Sorry, we can't help." Will the Minister take action and agree to meet me to discuss it?

Seema Kennedy: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman that childhood obesity is a massive challenge to our nation. It is a problem internationally, and we are taking serious steps to tackle it. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to hear more about Shine.

Ellie Reeves: Public health budgets have fallen by over 5%, with millions more in cuts anticipated. In both Lewisham and Bromley, the ring-fenced public health budget has fallen by 2.6% this year. The Government expect local authorities to play a greater role in tackling obesity while simultaneously cutting funding to councils, schools and the NHS. When will the Minister take action to tackle childhood obesity by restoring funding for public health?

Seema Kennedy: I have set out to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) the measures we have taken. Through the childhood obesity trailblazer programme, we are working with local authorities—I am hoping to visit one in Blackburn later this week—that want to see how they can use their powers to best effect, doing things such as limiting new fast-food outlets. We have spent billions of pounds over the past five years. The public health grant will be subject to the spending review.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Given that 46% of food and drink advertising is spent on unhealthy food—and unhealthy foods are three times cheaper than healthy food—will the Minister follow in the footsteps of her predecessor, and go to the Netherlands to look at the Marqt supermarket, which has 16 stores

around Amsterdam and does not market any unhealthy food to children? It is a profitable business and a model for our supermarkets, so will she go and look at it?

Seema Kennedy: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest in this area. The Amsterdam model has been very successful, but it is not just about food—it is about place and culture. I would hope to be able to visit the model very shortly.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) has been trugging round Amsterdam in pursuit of the public interest he is a remarkably assiduous and dedicated fellow. We are all deeply obliged to him—it is way beyond the call of duty, but we are appreciative none the less.

We now come to topical questions. I call Justin Madders.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab) *rose*—

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will think it is a conspiracy, but he will get his moment in a moment. I call Mrs Hodgson.

Mrs Hodgson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Government's second childhood obesity plan will celebrate its first birthday a week today, but we will not be celebrating. The Government have ducked and dived on their responsibility to the children in this country and have failed to produce any policies as a result of the six consultations the plan has promised, but the rate of childhood obesity is still at a record high. Instead of waiting for the chief medical officer to report on obesity, will the Government act now to tackle the childhood obesity crisis, and introduce and implement the policies they have consulted on already?

Seema Kennedy: We have a very ambitious aim to halve childhood obesity by 2030. We are still considering all the answers to the consultations, and we are hoping to respond to them very shortly.

Topical Questions

T1. [911426] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): This week is Children's Hospice Week, Loneliness Awareness Week, National Breastfeeding Week and Learning Disability Week, and today is International Fathers Mental Health Day. The Government have made plans to more than double funding for children's palliative care and end-of-life care services, developed a loneliness strategy and launched a consultation on folic acid in flour to support expectant mothers, and yesterday the Prime Minister announced a package of further work to support people from all backgrounds in the UK with their mental health. I and my brilliant ministerial team will continue to drive forward the health of the nation.

Mr Speaker: We are indebted.

Justin Madders: I want to bring to the Secretary of State's attention some mental health waiting times that my constituents have recently come to me with. Someone with an urgent referral for trauma counselling is looking at a minimum six-month wait. A teenager who has attempted to take her own life is waiting over a year to see a psychiatrist. Several adults have been told there is a three-year wait just to get a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. These waits are appalling. The Secretary of State billed himself as the leadership candidate for the future, but he is the Secretary of State for Health now. What is he going to do to address this appalling waiting system?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to ensure that access to mental health services improves. As part of the increase in funding we are putting into the NHS, the biggest increase is in mental health services, and it is a critical part of what we need to do to address the sorts of problems he rightly raises.

T3. [911428] **Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con):** Will my hon. Friend take up as a matter of urgency the recommendations of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report on eating disorders treatment, which we have released today to follow up on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report from 2017, named "Ignoring the alarms"? Does she agree with us that too many people are dying from eating disorders, which still have the highest mortality rate of any mental health condition, and that much more must be done to train health professionals, support sufferers and their families, and enhance and accelerate treatment and care in the community?

Mr Speaker: Far too long!

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the Committee for its report, which follows the health ombudsman's report on the tragic death of Averil Hart. It is clear that we have made significant improvements in eating disorder provision since then, but there is still more to do. We have made considerable progress with regard to treating children, and that progress now needs to be translated to the care of adults with eating disorders. My hon. Friend is right that it is the mental health disorder that has the highest mortality rate. At any one time, 1% of the population will be suffering from an eating disorder, and we need to make this more of a priority to make sure that services are available.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I know the shadow Secretary of State will be brief, because he will not want to crowd out his colleagues. That would be an uncomradely thing to do—inegalitarian no less—and he would not do that.

Jonathan Ashworth: Indeed.

I dare say that this is the Secretary of State's final outing at Health questions, because we believe he has secured transfer to pastures new. In his time here, he has

failed to deliver a social care Green Paper and failed to deliver a prevention Green Paper, while he is privatising Oxford cancer scanning services and we have hospitals charging £7,000 for knee replacements. Does he really think that is a record deserving of Cabinet promotion?

Matt Hancock: I am agog—and aghast. Over the last year, we have not only delivered £33.9 billion of increased funding, but we have produced the long-term plan for the future of the NHS. Starting this year, with the money already flowing, we are seeing the biggest increase in funding for community, primary care and mental health services. We have developed our work on the prevention agenda, and we have instituted a new verve and energy into the adoption of new technology in the NHS. I look forward to driving forward all these things in the future.

Jonathan Ashworth: Will the Secretary of State tell us about the verve and energy in his own constituency in Suffolk, where 32 health visitors are being cut because of his cuts? He is apparently now supporting a candidate who wants £10 billion-worth of tax cuts for the richest in society. Will that not mean further cuts to public health, further cuts to social care and, ultimately, cuts to the NHS as well?

Matt Hancock: For the majority of its 71-year history, the NHS has been run under the stewardship of a Conservative Secretary of State. At this moment, it is getting the biggest funding increase and the longest funding settlement in its history, along with the reforms to make sure that everybody can get the health care that they need.

T4. [911429] **Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con):** What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to improve the diagnosis and treatment of prostate cancer, in particular increasing the use of new technologies such as gel spacers, laser ablation and MRI in diagnosis?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): More than 94% of men survive prostate cancer for one year, and 86% for five years, but there is more to do. That is why last April the Prime Minister announced £75 million over five years so that 40,000 men can take part in innovative research into early diagnosis and treatment. The long-term plan sets out our commitment to speed up the path from innovation to business as usual, spreading proven new techniques and technologies faster. Safer and more precise treatments in diagnostic techniques will continue to improve prostate cancer survival.

T2. [911427] **Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab):** Kensington has an ageing population, many of whom will need residential care at some point, yet our council seems determined to move needy elders out of the borough, far from family and friends. Our last ever council-owned care home was sold off to a provider of caviar care, which lets luxury flats at £300,000 a year, with care, plus caviar, on top, for those who can afford it. Will the Minister explain what, if any, statutory obligations councils are under to provide affordable residential care for their residents? We are not all billionaires in Kensington.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinéage): The Care Act 2014 gives councils a responsibility to provide residents with a choice of quality care options in a local area. More broadly, we are backing up councils with increased funding. Over the last three years, we have increased funding in real terms by 8%. That has given councils access to about £10 billion to help ensure that there is provision in local areas.

T7. [911432] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Will the Secretary of State assure my constituents in Kettering that taking advantage of the local government reorganisation in the county to establish a combined health and social care pilot is one of his Department's very top priorities?

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The House will not be surprised to know that the hon. Gentleman has raised this with me and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on a number of occasions. I am happy to reconfirm to him that we do consider it a top priority to make sure that all of his constituents get the care they need.

T5. [911430] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): With abortion rates for women over 30 rising, I am sure the Secretary of State will agree with Professor Lesley Regan, the president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, who said:

"Women must have access to effective contraception and sexual health services to enable them to take control of their health and fertility by preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections."

Does the Secretary of State also agree with Professor Regan's comments on the need to end the fragmentation of commissioning, and the underfunding of services that disproportionately affect women?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is quite right. As part of the long-term plan, we have considered the best way to commission sexual health services, which were moved over to local authorities five years ago. We think that the responsibilities are sitting in the right place, but we need to see far more co-commissioning, where local authorities and the NHS together ensure that there is more joined-up provision, rather than the siloed provision that she mentions.

T10. [911435] **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): I welcome the successful trial of the new NHS app. How does the Department plan to use APIs to allow third-party developers to improve the app for patients?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right to celebrate the development of the NHS app. More than 80% of people are now able to use the NHS app to link to their GP practice. Our plans for the year ahead include API-based connections to a number of third-party products, including the NHS app. More importantly, I want the opening of this system to allow other innovators to be able to develop products for patients to use in a way that we have not imagined before. I want a load of innovations so that people can get the best possible access to their NHS.

T6. [911431] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In York, it has taken 46 weeks for children and young people to commence the diagnosis process for autism—and demand and the number of referrals is going up. It takes

a further 12 months, once there is a positive diagnosis, for parents even to access the SEND—special educational needs and disability—course. Precisely what service improvements can families expect to see in the next 12 months, and how will they be achieved?

Caroline Dinéage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to this issue. We are very concerned about the diagnosis times, which is why we are reviewing our autism strategy this year and are extending it to include children, whereas before it catered only for adults. We want to ensure it remains fit for purpose. We have launched a national call for evidence and have already received in excess of 1,000 responses.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Patient safety in the NHS depends on compassionate care training and staffing levels, but it also depends on patient safety systems. What progress is the national health service making towards implementing those systems in every place where patients are cared for?

Caroline Dinéage: Patient safety, as my hon. Friend suggests, remains an absolutely key priority for the NHS. NHS Improvement and NHS England are developing a national patient safety strategy, which will sit alongside the NHS long-term plan. It will be published this summer and will build on existing work to provide a coherent framework that the whole NHS can recognise and support.

T8. [911433] **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): There are fears that NHS medical data could be on the table as part of a desperate post-Brexit trade deal with the US on digital services, where patient data would be mined by companies to develop medical technology that would then be sold back to the NHS. What guarantees can the Secretary of State give that private companies will not be profiteering from NHS assets in that way?

Matt Hancock: I wish my hon. Friend, with whom I have worked closely and whom I admire very much, great success in her leadership bid. I wish her more success than I had. With the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) sitting next to her, I am sure they will run a great race. I want to reassure her that, as I said the week before last, the NHS is not on the table in trade talks. We now have that assurance from the Americans. NHS data must always be held securely, with the appropriate and proper strong privacy and cyber-security protections.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the Secretary of State means well, but I am not entirely sure that the hon. Lady's joy at the endorsement from the right hon. Gentleman was undiluted.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State support one of the key recommendations of the joint report from the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee into the future funding of social care, which is for a German-style system of social insurance?

Caroline Dinéage: Absolutely. We are very keen to look at the Select Committees' recommendations and the contributions of all key stakeholders. We are committed

to ensuring that everyone has access to the care and support we need. The Green Paper will include ideas to protect people from high and unpredictable care costs.

T9. [911434] **Stephen Lloyd** (Eastbourne) (Ind): Over the weekend, I was contacted by a number of parents of severely disabled children with very distressing news. Up until now they have been receiving five pads a day, because their children, grown up or otherwise, are very severely disabled. However, they have been told by the clinical commissioning group that that has been cut to three. This is incredibly distressing. Some of the parents are on universal credit and the additional cost they will have to pay themselves will be £80 a month. That is unacceptable. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and representatives of my constituents, the parents of these very disabled children from Eastbourne, so that we can try to sort this out before it really gets out of hand?

Matt Hancock: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this case. The ministerial team has not seen the details in advance, but if he would like to write, the appropriate Minister will of course meet him.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): The inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal, the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS, is currently taking place in Leeds. What is the Department doing to compensate the victims of this scandal and to make sure their voices are heard?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend will wish to know that we are collaborating fully with the inquiry, and it has raised with us several issues about payments. We have made available an additional £30 million to give to those affected and will consider any conclusions the inquiry ultimately draws.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): As the Minister will know, two weeks ago I went to the Netherlands with Teagan Appleby's mother, Emma, to collect one month's supply of medical cannabis. The Department laid down the requirements for Emma to meet with Border Force, and she met them by providing a UK prescription. Will the Secretary of State and Ministers meet me to ensure that there is no more ambiguity in a policy that currently criminalises parents in possession of a UK prescription bringing their much-needed medicine into the country?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Lady and other colleagues know from having worked on this important issue, we acted swiftly to change the law to make sure that medicinal cannabis was available. Those patients for whom it is clinically appropriate can now be prescribed medicinal cannabis. As she knows, whether to prescribe is a clinical decision, but those prescriptions are available and flowing and are being issued where it is judged clinically appropriate for the patient. We will continue to work on this to make sure we get it right.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Time for another dose of Somerset I think. I call Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): My constituent Max is aged eight and has Batten disease. He is one of only two sufferers of this disease who are not receiving the medicine that can improve their quality of life and keep them alive. Eleven other children in this country with Batten disease are receiving the drug, which is very effective but very expensive. The drug manufacturer has offered six months' free supply to Max and the other person not getting it and has made other proposals to NHS England, which is currently refusing even to have meetings with the drug company to discuss how my constituent, this dying child, may receive the drugs he needs. Will my right hon. Friend intervene and use whatever reserve powers he has to ensure that my constituent gets this life-saving drug?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend speaks for the whole House about the need for these rare diseases to be given the attention they need so that sufferers such as Max can get the medicines if at all possible. As he knows following our meeting, the formal legal responsibilities lie with NHS England and NICE. I have raised this case, and that of others mentioned earlier, with the chief executive of NHS England and will raise it once again following this Question Time. We will do all we can to resolve this.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Thousands of my constituents will be left without access to dental care because a Swiss-owned investment firm has decided to shut three practices in my city. What is the Department doing to ensure that the people of Portsmouth have access to vital oral health services?

Seema Kennedy: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern. As I understand it, the Colosseum dental group practices will remain open until 31 July. NHS England has put in place plans to ensure that where possible patients currently undergoing dental treatment will complete their course of treatment before the practice closures and is working with other local dental practices to provide additional capacity to treat patients as well as considering the longer-term options for procuring dental services in the Portsmouth area.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I declare an interest as a doctor's wife. If the sub-dean at Chelmsford's brilliant new medical school continues to teach the students and work in the hospital, she faces a 90% tax rate. If she continues to do the weekend hours the hospital needs, she faces having to pay more in tax than she is earning. Will the Minister look again at the taper, which is driving our consultants out of our hospitals?

Stephen Hammond: As I said in response to an earlier question, we are putting out a consultation on pensions that will allow for looking at a number of issues, including the taper.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very sorry, but, as in the national health service—under Governments of both colours, I emphasise—demand invariably exceeds supply. I will take the remaining questioners whose names are on the Order Paper and who wished to ask substantive

questions but did not manage to get in. That seems only fair, as they have been bobbing up and down for the duration. Let us hear them.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Regardless of which type of Brexit we face this autumn, bureaucracy, customs charges and stockpiling costs will inevitably drive up the price of imported drugs and medical devices. Will the Secretary of State undertake to provide additional funds for NHS England and the devolved nations to cover those Brexit-induced costs and to avoid cuts in clinical services?

Matt Hancock: Additional funds have already been provided to ensure that medicines are available throughout the country, whatever the Brexit scenario.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Given the increased likelihood that the next Prime Minister will be determined to leave the European Union at the end of October, deal or no deal, will the Secretary of State update the House on what preparations are currently being made to protect the import of critical supplies such as insulin and radioisotopes?

Matt Hancock: Meeting the need for unhindered medicine supplies was an incredibly important piece of our Brexit planning, which was successfully completed ahead of 29 March. Of course we are updating those plans as we speak, but the ability to reassure people that there will be no impact on the supply of medicines is an important part of that work.

Syria: Civilians in Idlib

12.45 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for the Middle East what assessment he has made of attacks on health facilities and the fate of civilians in the Idlib area of Syria, and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): The Government are extremely concerned by the current escalation of violence in north-west Syria, and are appalled by the disgraceful and wholly unwarranted attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools. The UN has confirmed that since the end of April at least 25 health facilities—including at least two major hospitals—and 37 schools have been damaged by airstrikes and shelling in north-west Syria. These attacks are a clear breach of international law, and we call on the regime and Russia in the strongest possible terms to cease them and end the suffering of those in the Idlib governorate.

The deteriorating situation is causing immense suffering to a civilian population who, as the hon. Lady will know, are already highly vulnerable. Even before the current escalation of violence, nearly 2 million people in the region had already been forced to leave their homes at least once, and nearly 3 million are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Let me take this opportunity to highlight, briefly, the assistance that we are providing for those who are in such dire need across north-west Syria. Last year alone, the UK provided over £80 million in humanitarian assistance in the region, which included supporting the provision of food, shelter and other essential items for those caught up in the conflict. We are continuing to support that effort this year as well. In response to the recent situation, the partners of the Department for International Development are scaling up their humanitarian response to meet the growing needs on the ground by, for instance, supporting health facilities.

A further escalation of violence, triggering waves of displacement, would be likely to overwhelm an already stretched humanitarian response. Once again, I call on all parties to cease violence in Idlib, to respect previously agreed ceasefires, and to bring an end to the needless and deplorable attacks on civilians, hospitals and schools in the region.

Alison McGovern: The first thing that has to be said, Mr Speaker, is that, as you and I both know, it should not be me who is standing here. It should be Jo Cox, and, three years after her brutal killing, we miss her every single day.

The second thing that I must do is thank you, Mr Speaker, for welcoming the surgeon David Nott to Speaker's House to discuss his book and his work, which has included helping the Syrian people. It was kind of you to host him.

As the Minister has said, the conflict in Syria has escalated once again and despite talks of so-called reconstruction it is far from over. Just in recent months reports say that nearly 500 civilians have been killed due to airstrikes.

This is a complex conflict but I want to focus on simple facts today and, as the Minister has described, we have seen yet again the bombing of hospitals. Reports from the region tell of scores of hospitals being attacked, and millions of people in the Idlib area are in desperate need of healthcare.

A bad situation is being made much worse by our failure to enforce the basic rules of conflict. What representations has the Minister made to UN agencies about fixing this system, because people there are saying the UN system is simply not working—the co-ordinates of those hospitals are not safe with the UN, and the protection that should be in place for medical systems in Syria, even at this late stage in the conflict, has now failed? What meetings has the Minister had to discuss this with UN agencies, what action is he proposing to take, and what work is he doing with our colleagues in the international community to fix this broken system?

Secondly, I would like to ask some questions about UK aid. The Minister mentioned food and basic supplies, but what about medical supplies, and what assessment have the Government made of the current risks given the political situation we are now facing in relation to Syria and the effectiveness of UK aid? It is a simple thing, surely, to get basic medical supplies that are needed over the border to the doctors who require them. Also, what action has the Minister taken to prioritise civilian access to medical supplies?

Finally, it is Refugee Week this week, and I do not always thank the Government but on this occasion I would like to thank them, and specifically the Minister for Immigration, who is not in her place at the moment, for her decision to extend the VPRS—Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme—that brings vulnerable refugees to our country. But we need to go so much further than that. We have failed to deliver against the values of this country when it comes to the victims of this conflict. What conversations is the Minister having with his colleagues in Government about getting more vulnerable Syrians to the UK for safety and shelter, and will he meet me and a delegation of Members of Parliament to discuss that point? We have failed Syria but we need not to continue to fail Syrians; will the Minister help us get more Syrians to safety?

This weekend many people will gather in towns and cities across our country for “Great Get Togethers”: they will remember our colleague Jo, and they will think about what we have in common, not what divides us. So I simply finish by asking the Minister to work with all of us across this House for the people of Syria.

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, and of course I join with her in her heartfelt tributes to our colleague Jo Cox.

The hon. Lady will know that we committed £400 million in the Brussels conference in March to Syria. That puts us in the premier division of donors to this. [*Interruption.*] She shakes her head, but that is a huge amount of money.

The hon. Lady asked what we are doing about refugees and she will know full well that in general refugees are best helped close to their homes so they can return to their homes, but she will also be aware of the refugees we have taken from this region to the UK, and I hope

she will salute the local authorities who are warmly accommodating those refugees, including my own local authority.

The hon. Lady asked what we are doing with our partners. She might be aware that on 10 May and 14 May the UN met in emergency session to discuss the deteriorating situation and she might also be aware that later on today it will be meeting in emergency session to discuss this deteriorating situation, and the UK will play a full part in that discussion. The important thing is to get back to UN Security Council resolution 2254; it is the cornerstone and basis of any long-term settlement in Syria.

The hon. Lady asked about other partners to this, and I am sure she will share my concern that the Sochi agreement of last year between two of the principal players in this has unfortunately not been carried out in the way we would wish and that the deteriorating situation is in significant part due to Russia's attitude towards what appeared at the time to be a very promising new beginning. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady that we need to work with others to attempt to bring some sense to the warring parties in this, but I emphasise that the UK is simply one player in this, and it is of course a multi-dimensional jigsaw.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank too the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), my co-chair of the all-party group on Syria.

The much respected and senior British military officer Colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon has just returned from Idlib where he is an adviser to the Idlib health directorate and he says this today:

"Nearly 700 civilians have been killed this year in Idlib and there are 500,000"

internally displaced people crammed into Idlib

"many without homes living in the open and off scraps".

He adds that there is

"evidence of another chemical attack. There have been 29 attacks on hospitals by Russian and Syrian aircraft with many now out of commission. A handful of hospitals and doctors are now trying to care for 3 million civilians."

The Minister will know that the Foreign Office is collecting evidence of those involved in atrocities and breaches of international humanitarian law. Can he confirm that the Foreign Office is seeking to identify, name and shame not only the aircraft attacking these hospitals, which are mainly marked with red crosses, but the pilots and people operating those planes? This is clearly a breach of international humanitarian law; it is arguably a war crime and we must ensure, wherever we can, that there is no impunity for such grotesque actions.

Dr Morrison: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend: either the regime and its supporters' statements are wildly inaccurate or its targeting is wildly inaccurate. He will know that the UN provides co-ordinates of sensitive sites including schools and hospitals. He will share my despair at the number of those institutions, including two major hospitals, that have been damaged in this, and I am sure he will also share my enthusiasm that those who responsible for this are, sooner or later, brought to book.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for asking this urgent question. I feel she spoke for the whole House when she spoke of Jo Cox at the beginning of her speech, and I thank the Minister for his response.

Once again we find ourselves here in this place shocked and appalled at the threat to hundreds of thousands of civilians in Syria. We had Aleppo, we had Raqqa, we had Ghouta, and now today it is Idlib: homes and livelihoods destroyed; civilians and children fleeing and dying; and, yet again, hospitals bombed and deliberately targeted.

Three years on from UN Security Council resolution 2286, medical facilities are still being hit in Syria—an unthinkable 29 hospitals in the past six weeks according to some reports. Amnesty International says these attacks targeting hospitals constitute "crimes against humanity". The International Rescue Committee says that these attacks continue to happen with "absolute impunity". This is shocking and reprehensible; even wars are supposed to have rules.

What steps is the Minister taking with our international partners to ensure that these appalling attacks on health facilities do not go by with impunity and, as he says, that these people are brought to book? Can the Minister tell us more about the UK's promised protection of civilians strategy—exactly when it will be delivered and whether it will be accompanied by a clear framework for accountability and implementation?

It is absolutely necessary that we urgently get all sides around a table to find a peaceful, political resolution to this horrific conflict. That is the only thing that will bring the carnage in Idlib to an end. That is the only thing that will protect the lives of those health workers still operating in Idlib and the civilians they are working to save. So what is the Minister doing to realise this? That peace must be achieved, and let me end by echoing the words of the president of Médecins Sans Frontières who put it so simply when she called on all warring parties to:

"Stop bombing hospitals. Stop bombing health workers. Stop bombing patients."

Dr Morrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and questions. It is important that we work with international partners to apply pressure to those who are responsible. He will be well aware of the difficulty of working with the regime in Damascus and its supporters, but the Sochi agreement at the end of last year held out such promise. Those were baby steps, perhaps, but it was the start of a process that might have brought some sense to this troubled region. I very much regret that Russia has decided to take the steps that it has and I prevail on it, even now, to think about its responsibilities that it signed up to with Turkey at Sochi.

It is important that the UN continues to meet in emergency session. I look forward to its deliberations this afternoon and we will take a full part in them. Ultimately, UN Security Council resolution 2254 has to be applied. That is the only way that we can restore peace and equanimity to this very troubled part of the world.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is definitely a war crime to attack either a school or a hospital—there is no doubt about that. Do we have good evidence that

[Bob Stewart]

Russian aeroplanes have attacked such targets and if so, are we raising the matter in the Security Council, which is in emergency session, as the Minister stated?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Russia is clearly a party to the current situation. It is supporting the regime and is responsible for a lot of the trauma that is now afflicting the Idlib governorate, and it must be held to account. It must be answerable for the consequences of its actions. As my hon. Friend said, the deliberate targeting of schools and hospitals is a crime. It is caused by criminals and, as with criminals everywhere, they must ultimately be called to account.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): We also pay tribute to Jo Cox's memory in the House today and to David Nott and his incredible work as a surgeon in Idlib; he recently won the Robert Burns humanitarian award for what he has done.

We in the Scottish National party are shocked and horrified by the reports that, since Syrian regime forces and their Russian allies began their offensive in Idlib in April, more than 24 medical facilities have been attacked. Tragically, the targeting of healthcare facilities is not new in Syria's civil war. The US-based Physicians for Human Rights documented more than 500 attacks on medical facilities between 2011 and 2018.

The deliberate and strategic bombing of hospitals carrying out their medical functions is a war crime. These latest attacks have eliminated vital lifelines for civilians in desperate need of medical care and medical centres are no longer sharing their co-ordinates with the UN for fear of being a target of Syria and their allies. However, the prevention of and protection from mass atrocities remain almost wholly absent from the UK's national framework of civilian protection. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to cover this glaring omission? Furthermore, will he ensure that the upcoming review of the Government's protection of civilians in conflict strategy reflects the changing nature of modern conflict, which blurs the lines between combatants and non-combatants?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He must know that what we are able to do depends very much on access and safety and whether or not we can get to those who are most in need. At the moment, that is extremely problematic. We would prevail upon all parties to this to allow humanitarian access and to allow those of us who wish to protect civilians to be able to access those civilians wherever they are, so that the necessary protection can be afforded. However, he has to understand the difficulty of assuring the safety and security of those now delivering aid, and I pay tribute to those who provide aid under extremely difficult circumstances. He will be aware that a number of those individuals in our troubled world today have paid with their lives for that. It is absolutely a duty that we in Government and our agencies have to ensure that they are not put at risk more than is absolutely necessary in trying to do their vital work.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I very much support what the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said about taking on more refugees from

the area, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration for her decision. What does the Minister think can be done to help to make the good Russian people aware of what is being done in their name by their Government? Surely they would be as horrified as the rest of us by the deliberate targeting of hospitals, schools and other humanitarian facilities.

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to say that the Russian people would indeed think that, if they knew the full extent of the actions being taken in their name by President Putin's Administration. This is a terrible calumny. It is a devastating thing for which Russia must ultimately assume responsibility. We have to hope that members of the Russian Administration are ultimately called to account for these atrocities. Knowing the Russian people as I do—I suspect that my hon. Friend knows them rather better than I do—I know they are good people and often misunderstood, since they are often seen through the prism of Moscow and the terrible acts, I am afraid, that President Putin and his people are too often associated with in our world today.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) not only on securing this urgent question, but on the very moving way in which she introduced it, and I absolutely share and endorse her tribute to Jo Cox.

It is heartbreaking to read the testimony coming out of Idlib, and it is horrific that there have been 257 attacks on hospitals and medical workers in the last year alone. I say to the people who are carrying out these attacks that it is beyond grotesque. The fact that doctors feel that they can no longer share co-ordinates with the United Nations is also a damning indictment of the international community's failure to protect some of the most vulnerable. I am reassured that the Minister wants to see people brought to book, but what further support could the UK provide to the United Nations or others to gather evidence, so that when the time comes and justice can be done, the information will be there?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady knows that this is an ongoing piece of work, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) rightly referred to. It does not relate simply to this current offensive; it goes back a long, long way. In particular, we have been at the forefront of condemnation of the regime with respect to chemical weapons, which are an abomination. All those who have been involved in the use of these illegal weapons must be called to account. Clearly, our imperative at the moment is humanitarian assistance—of course it is—but a slower piece of work is gathering evidence that ultimately will be used to ensure that those criminals who have been involved in perpetrating these atrocities are brought to book.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): This shocking new bombing campaign will lead remorselessly to more innocent loss of life, and up to 2 million people could be displaced into Turkey. I recently met a constituent who works very closely with charities that operate there and in the area, one of which is Syria Relief. What engagement has the Department had with charities on the ground, such as Syria Relief, which can do this work and have the local knowledge? Is work ongoing in that respect?

Dr Murrison: The truth is that we engage on an ongoing basis with charitable organisations, but I will not comment specifically on those organisations, really for their security. Much of our effort is channelled through the UN and its agencies, but I salute those across the charitable sector who engage in this extremely difficult and traumatic work. I will continue to engage with them as much as I can, the better to understand the challenges they face and their experiences on the ground.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): The Minister and everyone who has spoken has rightly pointed out that this is a complex political situation, and that it is complex for us to do anything about it. However, there is one piece of the jigsaw that we are entirely responsible for, and that is the number of refugees that we allow into this country. I speak as someone who has refugees from Iran and Kosovo in my own family who grew up in a place that has always provided a safe home for every wave of desperate refugees, and I ask the Minister, in the light of what we know is going on in Idlib: can we not do more to bring more people here?

Dr Murrison: The first thing to say about the recent onslaught in the governorate of Idlib specifically is that virtually all those involved are internally displaced people within that governorate. They are therefore not accessible, and it would simply not be practical to remove them to a place of safety in this country. The hon. Lady knows very well that we have been generous in relocating people who have been triaged by the United Nations, with the most vulnerable and needy being relocated to this country. We have all taken people from right across the demographic, but the UK has been particularly impressive in relocating vulnerable people, including women, children, elderly people and disabled people. That is the mark of a truly humanitarian nation, and I am immensely proud of that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can I just be clear about the Government's position on civilians in Idlib? Is it the Government's view that the Russians and the Syrians are being reckless and careless in the delivery of their ordnance, or is it their view that they are deliberately targeting medical facilities?

Dr Murrison: Our investigation into this is ongoing, and I am not going to pre-empt the outcome of our investigation into attribution or, indeed, intent. All I would say to my hon. Friend is that it seems to us that a very large number of schools and hospitals, including two major hospitals, have been hit, and that a regime and a country that were intent on protecting civilians, particularly the most vulnerable, would do their utmost in any conflict to avoid those targets. I see no evidence of that having been done, and the consequences are as we have seen. It is vital, if those institutions have indeed been deliberately targeted, that the criminals responsible should be held to account.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): What is the Government's latest assessment of the assertions about a chlorine chemical weapons attack in the Idlib area on 19 May? We have heard the Minister's responses—"Let's bring people to justice. Let's find who they are. We really implore the Russians not to do this"—but this is happening every day. We are a permanent member of

the United Nations Security Council, and we are supposed to eyeball those who are committing these atrocities and deliberately targeting hospitals, but what are we doing, other than saying, "Oh, well, let's take them to court at some point in the future"? That is not remotely good enough. The UK and our allies need to show some backbone in this and show that there are consequences for these grotesque war crimes, because every day that Russia gets away with this makes the world a less safe place. It is not being governed by the rules that we are supposed to have set up so that we can all live under international law.

Dr Murrison: First, I have an apology for the hon. Gentleman. Yesterday in the urgent question, I think I associated him with the Opposition Front Bench. I am afraid that this was a facet of my general excitement on that occasion, and it was of course entirely wrong. My apologies to the hon. Gentleman. I share his frustration—I really do—and I hope that that has come across, at least in the tone of some of the things I have been saying, but I have to ask him what on earth he thinks we could be doing, other than the things that we are doing with our partners and through the United Nations. Ultimately, this has to be dealt with not by escalating the situation but by dialling it down and ensuring that we restore the focus on UN Security Council resolutions. Although I am all ears, I doubt very much that the hon. Gentleman has many suggestions beyond that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. In my constituency, we have six Syrian Christian families who have been relocated under the Government scheme. The community and church groups are helping those families with accommodation, education for their children, pastoral care, language instruction and furniture and clothes. Other members of those families are threatened in and around the Idlib area, and I spoke to the Immigration Minister about this the other week. Will the Minister work with her to reunite those families in the United Kingdom, and particularly in my constituency of Strangford?

Dr Murrison: As I indicated in my remarks, my local authority has also been active in this area. It is important that the process should be conducted properly, and that relocations to places of safety in the United Kingdom should be done on the basis of assessed need. We all know of heart-rending cases, particularly involving families and children, where the best option is indeed relocation to this country, and I am proud of what this country has been doing in that regard. Ultimately, however, I do not think that this situation will be resolved simply by removing people from their homes. The sense we get is that most of them ultimately wish to return home, and I am proud of the fact that this country is in the premier division of providing financial assistance to ensure that proper humanitarian aid and support is given to those in the region itself.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South for securing this urgent question and for reminding us of the legacy of our dear departed colleague. I would like to ask the Minister to think again and to talk to his colleague, the Minister for Immigration. Her announcement yesterday about the resettlement schemes was welcome,

[Thangam Debbonaire]

and he is right to say that this country gives an enormous amount in aid, but my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) is also right to say that we could do so much more. There are 12 million people who have been displaced by this conflict in Syria, of whom 6 million are internally displaced and at least 6 million are in the border countries or not far off. The Minister is right to say that we want people to stay close to their country of origin, but we could be resettling so many more people and giving them a home, safety and sanctuary. I think that that is what the people of the United Kingdom expect from us in living out our values, so will he think again and talk to his colleague, the Immigration Minister, about increasing those numbers?

Dr Murrison: I am pleased that the hon. Lady welcomes yesterday's statement, which indicated that these matters are always kept under review. The Government will have heard the views being expressed across the House on this matter, but I come back to the central point that we have relocated people. They tend to be the most vulnerable, and that is important. One of the things that characterises this country—I hope she will endorse this—is that we have looked after, first and foremost, the most vulnerable: women, children, the disabled, the elderly and the sick. That is a tribute to the people of this country and their generosity, and I do not think it is right simply to dismiss some of the other aid and assistance that we have been giving in this terrible situation.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My constituent Sarah Ainsley, who is a sixth-former at Woodbridge High School, came to see me recently to express her concern about the Syrian refugee situation closer to home in Calais, where conditions for refugees—particularly young people coming of age—are not what we would expect for any of our children, and we should not expect them for children and young people in those circumstances. What assurances can I give her that the Government are taking that issue seriously in their bilateral conversations with the Government of France? Further to the points made by my colleagues on these Benches, does the Minister accept that there is more that the UK Government could be doing in the region, notwithstanding what is already being done?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman will have heard yesterday's statement and will hopefully have been reassured, at least in part. The situation in Calais clearly goes well beyond Syria and is part of a much bigger piece. I hope that he will agree that the way to resolve that situation is to ensure that we prevent people from making perilous journeys in the first place. That is the view taken by both the French and UK Governments. Although it is a big piece of work and will take a long time, the imperative has to be to deal with the things that drive people to make that journey and end up in the unsatisfactory situation in France that he describes.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The signatories 70 years ago to the fourth Geneva convention, which is international humanitarian law,

would not have been surprised that the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) has had to request this urgent question.

As a constituency MP with more than 40 Syrian families seeking refuge in my home town of Clydebank in West Dunbartonshire, it is my duty to represent them here. I have two specific points to raise with the Minister. First, in engaging with the United Nations, and maybe reforming international humanitarian law, we need to recognise that NATO leads on what is now called the importance of civilians in operational planning to ensure the protection of civilians. Secondly, with any increase in refugee numbers, will he assure existing refugees across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that the necessary investment to ensure their safety, wellbeing and health will not only continue but increase?

Dr Murrison: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman's local authority area has been helpful in accommodating refugees. My experience in my constituency is that they have been warmly welcomed, and I have been pleased with how they have been accommodated in my small part of the south-west of England. Refugees clearly need to be provided with the necessary resources to sustain themselves and to look forward to a potential long-term future, meaning all the things that those of us who are fortunate to have been born and brought up in a pacific part of the world take for granted. I am sure that that applies in his constituency, as it does in mine.

The hon. Gentleman is of course right to underscore the importance of the protection of civilians. As I said earlier, the difficulty in Syria, as in many conflicted parts of our world today, is with providing access to civilians. Our first duty must be to ensure that those who are undertaking that work are safe, and we will continue to ensure, so far as we possibly can, that that is the case.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is right and proper to think about why refugees are refugees and to think about ultimately getting them to return to their homes. However, as other Members have pointed out, right now, today, tomorrow, and the next day, people are being killed. This place is a hell-hole on earth. We have two big bases in Cyprus, which is close by, with 3,500 service personnel and helicopters. Why can we not go in now and get these people out in good numbers and take them to Cyprus? It is not far away, but it is safe enough for them.

Dr Murrison: In relation to the current escalation, as I said before, these are internally displaced people. They are within the Idlib governorate, so it is not simply a question of airlifting them to Cyprus, even if Cyprus were to agree to such a thing. However, we hope that the displaced people who are outside Syria will feel able to return home when it is safe to do so. It is not the United Nations' assessment at the moment that it is safe for them to do so, but that assessment must ultimately change. It will change, and at that point we will do our utmost to assist them to return to their homes, which I would maintain is the wish of the vast majority of refugees and those who currently find themselves displaced.

EU/British Citizens' Rights

1.24 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on what efforts the British Government have made to fulfil the instruction of this House, dated 27 February 2019, to seek agreement on EU and British citizens' rights and in particular the protection of British citizens in the EU in the event of no deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). It is testament to his passionate defence of the rights of EU citizens and UK nationals that the amendment he brought before this House was passed unanimously—a rare feat. I congratulate him on his work.

I thank my hon. Friend for organising a recent meeting with representatives from British in Europe and the 3million to discuss their proposal to seek a joint UK-EU commitment to adopt part 2 of the withdrawal agreement in any scenario. The Secretary of State was grateful for the opportunity to hear their views and the views of my hon. Friend on that matter. As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have written the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, to report those views, particularly to make it clear that in a no-deal scenario adopting the citizens' rights agreement is far superior to 28 unilateral solutions. I have also had representations from the devolved nations of the UK indicating their support for that approach. For example, Mike Russell, the Scottish Government's lead Minister on EU exit recently wrote to the Secretary of State to set out the Scottish Government's support for adopting the citizens' rights agreement.

The Government have been steadfast in their commitment to protect the rights of EU citizens. They are our friends, colleagues and neighbours, and we want them to stay. We are already implementing our no-deal offer to EU citizens in the UK, and the EU settlement scheme opened successfully on 30 March, with over 750,000 EU citizens having now applied. The Secretary of State wrote to the EU to seek its views on adopting the citizens' rights part of the withdrawal agreement in any scenario, and Michel Barnier responded on 25 March. Last night, the Secretary of State issued a response to Michel Barnier, reporting recent conversations with my hon. Friend for South Leicestershire, the 3million and British in Europe, and asked for officials to be able to continue to work together to explore how best we protect the citizens' rights in all scenarios.

In the response, the Secretary of State reaffirmed that adopting the citizens' rights part of the agreement as a UK-EU solution will offer the greatest protection for UK nationals in the EU and EU citizens in the UK. That is due to the importance of rights, such as the agreed social security co-ordination provisions, that cover areas such as reciprocal healthcare and the accumulation of pension contributions, which require a reciprocal agreement to provide the best level of operation. The Secretary of State wrote to my hon. Friend this morning with a copy of that letter, which was deposited in the Library and published on gov.uk.

Finally, I want to reaffirm that citizens' rights have been a priority throughout the negotiations, and it is an area that both the Government and this House take extremely seriously. As such, the best way to guarantee those rights, both for UK nationals in the EU and EU citizens in the UK, is for this House to approve a deal.

Alberto Costa: I thank the Minister for his response. I also want to put on the record my gratitude to the Secretary of State for meeting with the 3million and British in Europe a few weeks ago. It is inconceivable that a British Government—let alone a Conservative Government—could allow the rights of British nationals working, living or studying in the EU to vaporise overnight on 31 October. However, we find ourselves in a deeply unpalatable position in which our fellow citizens, and EU nationals resident in this country, have had their rights wrongly placed on the negotiating table.

I am not here to criticise the outgoing Prime Minister. I am here to invite whoever is going to take over, and the current Minister and his team, to ratchet things up a few notches to ensure that the will of this House, which was unanimously passed on 27 February, to carve out the citizens' rights element of the withdrawal agreement, thereby protecting under international law the rights of British nationals in the EU and the rights of EU citizens here, is carried out. We have seen two letters thus far, and I am inviting the Government to do the right thing, which means ensuring that a task force is set up urgently. Members of the existing Government, senior civil servants and other stakeholders should meet urgently with Michel Barnier, Donald Tusk and other stakeholders in the EU to convey the unanimous will of this House. There is no disagreement across the House or, indeed, across the Brexit divide on the protection of citizens' rights—no disagreement at all. This is low-hanging fruit, yet, for some reason or another, we simply have not achieved that agreement.

I welcome the Minister's work, and I know he has done a lot of work in particular on the voting rights of EU nationals here. I compliment him on his work, but when this House is united and when the devolved nations of our country have backed the House of Commons on this issue, there is no excuse for the UK Government to do anything other than intensify their efforts to get an agreement on the rights of citizens.

I end how I started. Never in peacetime, never, have the rights of over 1 million British citizens been placed on the negotiating table like this. I say to the British Government once again that, as a responsible Conservative Government, the rights of our citizens, along with the rights of EU nationals, must be protected whatever the outcome of Brexit.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend rightly calls on us to ratchet up the pressure, and I assure him that we will. I also assure him that, whoever takes forward the leadership of our party and our country, will feel pressure not only from him but from Back Benchers on both sides of the House to continue pressing on this issue. Of course, we made a commitment to him and to British in Europe that we would respond to Mr Barnier before the next European Council on 20 June. I am glad that we have been able to deliver on that commitment today.

As hon. Members on both sides of the House will know, the European elections were held between 23 and 26 May and Government activity had to respect the purdah period imposed because of those elections,

[Mr Robin Walker]

but it is right that we pressed forward swiftly after that to ratchet up the pressure on ring-fencing, as my hon. Friend said.

Meanwhile, I assure my hon. Friend that there is a large citizens' rights team in my Department that is working closely with colleagues in other Departments, including the Home Office. The team has been working tirelessly to ensure that citizens are given the certainty they need to plan for life once the UK leaves the EU. Our no-deal policy paper confirms that EU citizens resident in the UK by exit day can apply to the settlement scheme to secure their status in a no-deal scenario. As I mentioned earlier, the settlement scheme, which launched on 30 March, has had over 750,000 applications. Almost 700,000 of those applications have been concluded, with none being refused.

The UK pushed hard in negotiations for reciprocal voting rights, but as my hon. Friend knows, they did not form part of the withdrawal agreement. We have set out that we will seek to agree bilateral deals with all member states to secure those rights for the future. We are pleased to have now made significant progress on bilateral agreements, having signed agreements with Spain, Portugal and, today, Luxembourg. The Secretary of State signed the latter just a few hours ago, and we hope it will set a strong precedent for reaching agreements with other EU neighbours and friends to protect the right of UK nationals to continue voting in local elections.

We are very aware of my hon. Friend's key point. His amendment enjoyed the unanimous support of the House, of all parts of the United Kingdom and of all parties from all parts of the spectrum of opinion on Brexit. We remain committed to delivering on citizens' rights, and we are focused on making sure that we reach an overall agreement to secure an orderly EU exit for the UK, but we remain committed to executing the will of this House and we eagerly anticipate Michel Barnier's response to our letter on ring-fencing.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), who has won respect on both sides of the House and in the country for the way in which he has championed the cause of EU citizens in the UK and of British citizens in Europe. We were pleased to back his cross-party amendment on 27 February.

The hon. Gentleman is right to be worried that, as Conservative Members apparently prepare to crown a leader who seems willing to take the country to a no-deal Brexit, EU citizens face new uncertainty. Many of the disastrous consequences of a no-deal Brexit have been spelled out, not least by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who has talked of the deep damage it would do to our economy and our living standards. It would have helped if the Prime Minister had not spent so long talking up a no-deal Brexit as a viable option, but insufficient attention has been paid to the consequences for citizens' rights. Lives have been thrown into uncertainty by our current situation.

It did not have to be like this. If instead of making bargaining chips of EU and British citizens, as the hon. Member for South Leicestershire pointed out, the Government had accepted our motion back in July 2016 to provide a unilateral guarantee to EU nationals

in the UK, we could have quickly secured reciprocal agreements to protect the rights of Brits in the EU27. Those agreements would have stood ring-fenced, insulated from the calamity of the Government's withdrawal agreement.

It was clear in December 2018, when the Government backed off from their vote on the deal, that this issue would have to be addressed, so why did it take the action of the hon. Gentleman and the vote of this House to secure that action from the Government? After Michel Barnier wrote to the Secretary of State on 25 March, why did it take three long months for him to reply?

It has taken this urgent question to bring the issue back to the Floor of the House. Why did the Government not report back to the House sooner? The deep uncertainty facing the 3 million EU citizens in the UK and the 1.2 million Brits in Europe, who are by far the biggest national group affected by Brexit, is of huge importance, so why are the Government not treating it with that urgency?

Mr Walker: There is a great deal on these issues on which the hon. Gentleman and I agree. I suspect we take the same dim view of the attractiveness of any kind of no-deal exit, but where I disagree is on his narrative about the Government's urgency. We have always put citizens at the forefront of negotiations, and we reached an agreement with the EU on the detail of a citizens' rights agreement some time before the House voted on the amendment in February.

The EU has said repeatedly throughout this process that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. We have challenged that in taking up the call of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire for ring-fencing, and we will continue to press the case for ring-fencing, but it is a bit rich for the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) to suggest that the Labour party takes this more seriously than my party does when the Opposition Benches are a gaping empty space for this urgent question.

It is vital that we all work together, reflecting the cross-party nature of the amendment to secure these rights. In that respect, I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome the progress that has been made today and the further progress that we intend to make in the months to come on the issue of voting rights.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): A number of my constituents or their family members, even children, are caught up in this, and many of them have contacted me. Whatever one's views—whatever my views and whatever their views—of our future relationship with the European Union, they frankly do not deserve the very real anxiety this is causing.

Given what the Minister has said today about where the block now lies, it is not now a lack of will on the part of Her Majesty's Government, although they could have gone a lot further before the withdrawal agreement was set. Will he convey to Mr Barnier my sentiments and those of my constituents before he replies to the Secretary of State's letter? This is not a game. This is the lives of people living in my constituency and in many other constituencies. The very real anxiety of which I

spoke is there, and Mr Barnier can address it. He must understand that before he replies to the Secretary of State's letter.

Mr Walker: I fully appreciate my hon. Friend's point. The Secretary of State's letter to Mr Barnier has gone, and there is a copy in the Library, but this is something we should reiterate to our European counterparts at every opportunity. We have all said this, and the EU has said, I trust in good faith, that it wants to put citizens at the forefront of negotiations. We have an opportunity to do so, and we should continue to remind people that it is about individuals living in all our constituencies. We really value them, and we want to provide them with the greatest possible reassurance.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) not only for securing this urgent question but for his tireless efforts on behalf of EU nationals in the UK and of UK nationals overseas. I welcome the assurances in the Secretary of State's letter, but two big questions still remain. First, why has it taken so long to get not very far? Three years since the referendum, the UK Government have still failed to give the assurances that the Scottish Government were prepared to give the day after the referendum if only they had the powers to do so. I welcome the assurances from the Government, but those assurances ring hollow when we remember the shameful complacency this Government showed two weeks ago when they completely washed their hands of the fact that thousands of these same citizens were denied the basic right to vote in European elections. Why do the Government still insist on a settled status scheme based on, "You apply and we might say no"? And they do say no; far too often, and for no valid reason, they turn down applications from my constituents and others. Why do the Government not go for the scheme the Scottish Government have suggested, which is simply an approach of, "This is your home, thank you for being here, please stay"? Why can we not have a system that recognises residency here as a matter of right, not as a privilege at the whim of the Home Office?

The Secretary of State's letter said that devolved Administrations support his approach. The letter he referred to from Mike Russell finished with the words that EU citizens

"are our friends, our colleagues and our family and they deserve to stay in the place they have chosen to call home without the insecurity that Brexit has created."

If the Government agree with that, why do they not get rid of the insecurity right now, and guarantee unconditionally and permanently the rights of all 3 million EU nationals who currently call these islands their home?

Mr Walker: I recognise the hon. Gentleman's passion to ensure that those rights are guaranteed. If he looks at what we have done in terms of the negotiated agreement and the no-deal paper on citizens' rights as to what will be done, he will see that that is exactly the guarantee that we are providing. He asked an important question about the nature of the settled status scheme and why we feel it needs to be constitutive rather than declaratory. With the best will in the world, a purely declaratory scheme risks causing confusion and difficulty for people

further down the line. We saw that with Windrush. We want to ensure that people have a simple way of proving their rights under this agreement and we think a constitutive system is a better way to achieve that. We are continuing to work on this with EU citizens' groups up and down the country, including in Scotland, to make sure that they have all the information they need to secure that. He says that applications have been refused. There are some applications where people are being asked for more evidence or more detail, but there are no applications that have been refused.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) on the EU/British citizens issue, as it concerns a large number of my constituents and I am very concerned. I commend the Minister for his statement, his response to this urgent question and the work he has done. The Government have made a commitment, but does he share my disappointment that the EU has not been more positive and proactive on such an important issue?

Mr Walker: I do share my right hon. Friend's disappointment that this has not got further at this stage. Interestingly, a number of MEPs have spoken out asking the EU to go further, as have some of the Parliaments of EU member states, including, recently, the Dutch Parliament, which has called for further progress on this issue. We will continue to press the EU to make progress on this matter because we all recognise the benefits of providing the maximum reassurance to our 4 million citizens.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The best way to ensure the rights of EU citizens in the UK is for us to stay in the EU. The very least the Government should do is guarantee that we will not leave the EU until those citizens and UK citizens in the EU are guaranteed the exact same rights and status as they have now. This affects more than one in five of my constituents, and their friends and family, so will the Minister commit to that—or are we at the mercy of the Dutch auction that is the Tory leadership shambles?

Mr Walker: I respect the passion with which the hon. Gentleman makes his arguments, but he must understand that this country had a vote on whether to leave the EU and that vote was decided by the people. We should now make sure that we provide precisely the guarantees he is talking about for our citizens. As I said in my statement, the best way to achieve that is through a ring-fenced citizens' rights agreement or a whole withdrawal agreement. That is better than anything we can do or 27 EU member states can do unilaterally.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Many of my constituents are affected by this issue, either because they are EU citizens in Chelmsford or they have relatives living in other EU countries. I am particularly concerned about women who may have taken career breaks to care for vulnerable relatives and who therefore find it more challenging to provide the paperwork to prove where they have been. Clearly, it is in our interests and those of EU member states to resolve this as quickly as possible. Does the Minister have any further indication from

[Vicky Ford]

individual EU member states of the progress they want to make, now that the European elections are over and as soon as the European Parliament starts sitting?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. We have been meeting a range of EU member states and we always press them on these issues, both in terms of their own unilateral preparations and to make the case for a wider agreement on this front. There are of course a variety of responses. We have seen in the unilateral arrangements of EU member states that every single one has done something to reassure UK citizens, but the level of the response varies. We will continue to press them on this, so that they continue to reciprocate the strong offer that the UK is making.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I find it hard to contain my anger at the charlatans and snake oil salesmen who will again tonight, on television, be claiming that no deal presents no difficulties; it might present no difficulties for them. I wish to ask the Minister a specific question. In response to a letter that I sent to him, the Minister for Europe and the Americas said:

"If the UK leaves the EU without a deal, and there is no agreement with Germany to continue reciprocal healthcare arrangements, UK Nationals would no longer receive coverage through the S1 form."

The advice he gives is for them

"to take out German health insurance."

Can the Minister here today give an assurance to me, and to all UK citizens who might be in that position in any EU country, that the UK Government will pay for their health insurance, rather than them?

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the Minister responds, let me say that I recognise and respect the very strong feelings on this matter, but I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman, a former Deputy Leader of the House, whom we all hold—or I certainly do—in the highest esteem, would not refer to any Member of this House as a charlatan. I am sure he would not do that. If he were doing so, dexterous as he is in the use of language and given the full vocabulary with which he is blessed, I know that he will withdraw that term and substitute it with another.

Tom Brake: I would like to make it clear that I am certainly not referring to any Member of the House present in the Chamber today as a charlatan or buffoon.

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that I detect the sight and sound of a very large shovel, as the right hon. Gentleman is digging himself deeper. He has made his point with force and eloquence, but I appeal to him, a seemingly Member in normal circumstances, to make it clear that he is attacking the views of Members but he would not impugn their integrity.

Tom Brake: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am happy to withdraw; I am not impugning their integrity, but I am certainly attacking their views, which I find outrageous.

Mr Walker: We all want to secure the best possible arrangements on healthcare for our UK citizens overseas. The best way of doing that is through the withdrawal agreement—the citizens' rights agreement—or, failing

that, a ring-fenced citizens' rights agreement. Separately to that, of course, the Department of Health and Social Care has written to every EU member state to look at negotiating individual unilateral agreements with those member states. The Commission initially told EU member states not to respond to that offer because it wanted to make sure that we could have an overall agreement and to focus on that first and foremost, but of course it is our intention to put in place the best arrangements to support UK citizens on their healthcare, wherever they are and we shall do that through whatever means are available to us.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Some 11,000 of my constituents are nationals of other EU countries—that is one of the highest proportions in this House. Not only are they welcome, but they are essential members of my local community. May I commend the Minister for the work he is doing on the rights of British subjects overseas, because I suspect I also represent one of the highest proportions of those? I thank him for the agreements he has made—he mentioned the one with Portugal and the one with Luxembourg just in the last couple of days. Could he point a constituency MP such as me to where all these agreements are held in a central place, so that when I receive inquiries I can immediately check what each of those EU27 countries are doing?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Perhaps I should declare an interest, because during the week I am one of his constituents, and EU citizens live either side of me in his constituency. I would be happy to write to him and to put a copy of that letter in the Library of the House so that all Members have that information. So far, we have reached agreements with Spain, Portugal and Luxembourg. We hope to come to many more agreements in the months to come.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister says that EU27 citizens can apply for settlement, and I understand that, but my EU constituents have seen how the immigration service works when it is at its worst, rather than at its best. They have seen the egregious excesses of the treatment of the Windrush generation and they have seen how asylum seekers have been treated, and they are not confident that their cases will be treated fairly. I hope the Minister can reassure us—he is a trustworthy man, I am sure. What conversations has he had with his colleagues in the Home Office and in particular with the Minister for Immigration about making sure that the immigration system is watertight, so that EU27 citizens can have absolute guaranteed confidence in the system, which they currently do not have?

Mr Walker: I absolutely recognise the concerns that the hon. Lady has raised. I have had my own challenges in dealing with constituency casework on some of these issues in the past. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration shares my determination to make sure that the settled status system is different culturally—it is about helping people to prove their right to stay and making sure that they get the documentation that they need for that—and she and I continue to work closely on that. More than that, we have also been working with the consulates and embassies of EU member states

and with diaspora groups up and down the country to make sure that we take their concerns and needs into account. I absolutely assure the hon. Lady of our determination to get the system right so that it delivers for all of the 3 million. We hope that EU member states will make a similar effort for UK citizens—indeed, we will urge them to do so.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): The hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) has been incredibly patient on this topic, as has, indeed, the whole House. In case the Minister has forgotten, the hon. Gentleman's amendment was passed in February. I genuinely do not understand. We are the ones doing the divorcing. If this matter was a real priority for the Government, why did it take three months for them to reply to Michel Barnier's letter? I have thousands of EU citizens in my South Cambridgeshire constituency, and I just do not see any urgency at all. Might the Minister offer to update the House at least monthly between now and 31 October, so that citizens can have some assurance that their futures are going to be secure?

Mr Walker: We absolutely respect the urgency of this issue. We took the House's vote up with the European Union very shortly after that vote. We then had meetings with British in Europe and the 3 million to make sure that in taking the matter forward we would accurately represent their views. In the meantime, as I have explained, we have had the purdah period for the European elections. It is right that the Secretary of State has been at the General Affairs Council today to press the issue, and that he has sent the letter. We will absolutely continue to update the House as and when progress is made on the matter. The hon. Lady has to recognise that currently the broader negotiations are not necessarily moving forward until we have clarity on the issue of the next Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: What a rum business—I did not see the feller standing before. I call Nic Dakin.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When is this finally going to be sorted?

Mr Walker: The simplest answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that it would have been sorted already if we had all voted for a withdrawal agreement and secured it.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Erasmus programme is probably the most successful student exchange scheme in the world. My local university, Bangor University in Wales, shares in that success, with around 100 agreements in 20 countries. The university sector is devolved, but I note that in his initial response the Minister did not mention any communication with the Welsh Government, although he did mention communication with the Scottish Government. What meetings and communication has he had with the Welsh Government to ensure that Welsh students and staff in the EU27 and the EU staff and students in Wales have equal rights in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

Mr Walker: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we have had meetings with the Welsh Government, and I have met universities in Wales to discuss this issue specifically. As he will know, the Government are supporting

an association with the Erasmus scheme and have provided specific guarantees for funding the scheme, even in the event of no deal. We will continue to discuss the issue with all the devolved Administrations. Just to correct the hon. Gentleman slightly: I did mention the devolved Administrations—plural—in my initial statement.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): I commend the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) for his courage and integrity in securing this urgent question. I notice that the number of Members in attendance from Her Majesty's official Opposition has been somewhat sparse, but we in Her Majesty's unofficial Opposition, the great remain alliance, are happy to defend the rights of our EU citizens. To that end, will the Minister give the House an undertaking that at the conclusion of the exchanges on this urgent question he will go and speak to the Prime Minister's aides and all those who advise her? She is looking for a legacy, and there could be no greater legacy in the next four weeks than for her to secure the rights of our 3 million EU citizens and the 1.4 million British people working in the EU and do the right thing by them. Frankly, after three years, and with only four months to go before we are due to crash out without a deal, this is simply not good enough. This matter must be resolved. Human beings must no longer be used as bargaining chips.

Mr Walker: The right hon. Lady makes a serious point, but first let me congratulate her on having invented yet another name for her grouping in Parliament.

The Prime Minister is already agreed on this matter and we are already taking it up as a matter of Government policy, which is why the letter on ring-fencing has gone to Michel Barnier today.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): A significant number of my constituents in Edinburgh South West are EU nationals, and many have been in touch with me to say that such confidence as they had in the British Government's commitment to their rights post Brexit has been severely dented by what happened, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) mentioned, on 23 May, when many EU citizens throughout the United Kingdom were denied their right to vote. What specific steps is the Minister taking to rebuild the confidence of EU citizens in the UK in the Government's commitment to their rights, given that many of them were denied the basic right to vote in the EU elections?

Mr Walker: The hon. and learned Lady will have heard from Cabinet Office Ministers about the Electoral Commission's work to review all elections and how they were handled. The commission will report back on the recent European elections and we look forward to seeing that report. On the concrete steps, it is important that we are pressing ahead to secure bilateral agreements on voting rights, and we have written to every single EU member state on that. It is important that the Government, reflecting the views that we have heard from across the House, sent the letter on ring-fencing last night.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I stay in close contact with members of the 3 million in my Bath constituency and understand their real anxieties, particularly in respect

[Wera Hobhouse]

of vulnerable and elderly EU citizens who do not have access to computers and are not particularly computer-savvy. The Department has set up a little outlet in Bath to which people can come from across the south-west to get help with their application, but it is simply not good enough. People have to travel a long distance, and many elderly EU citizens do not even know that they have to apply for settled status. What are the Government doing to help elderly EU citizens who do not have access to computers? The Government should commit to ensuring that each local authority will have a centre such as that in Bath and that each local authority has the means to contact EU citizens who are older and do not have access to a computer. Will the Minister make that commitment?

Mr Walker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for acknowledging that there is such a centre in her constituency. Progress has been made on widening the range of centres available. The Home Office has provided additional assistance to community groups, some of which may be best placed to reach out to EU citizens in the UK. Additional assistance to the tune of around £9 million has been allocated to a wide range of community groups, including groups that support people with disabilities and people who are elderly.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Contrary to what the Minister said earlier, the problem for the Windrush generation was not the fact that their status was declared in law; the problem was that they could not access documents to prove their status. Against that background, why do the Government continue to ignore calls from the 3 million to provide citizens with documentary proof of their status, rather than merely digital proof?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that, across Government, there is a move to go digital—to put more online. It is absolutely right that there should be help for those people who may find that most difficult, and that comes to the substance of my answer to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). The view is also that documents, as a one-off thing, can be lost. It is better for people to have a secure and permanent digital status.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Minister said that 750,000 EU citizens have applied through the settlement scheme, but that means that more than 2 million have not yet applied. Having spoken to many of those EU citizens, including many in the academic sector, in the NHS, and in education, I can tell the Minister today that they are not feeling the love. Does he not realise that by continuing to use language such as “prove their rights” with regard to EU citizens, it sets the wrong tone when we are also trying not just to encourage them to stay, but to guarantee the rights of British citizens in the EU?

Mr Walker: We want to keep reiterating the message that these people are valuable and valued members of their communities. They are making a big contribution, whether they are UK citizens living in the EU, or EU citizens living in our own constituencies, and we should

continue to reiterate that, but I make no apology for saying that we want to help people prove their rights under this agreement. That is a good thing to do. We want to secure those rights permanently. The settled status scheme, which was designed to do that, is the best way of achieving that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The worry for people is that this has been going on for far too long. In the highlands, this issue affects families and neighbours and the very sustainability of communities, businesses and services. It is an aberration to ask highlanders to register to apply to stay in their own homes. Does the Minister not realise that the best thing to do is to simply acknowledge and grant the right for people to stay and live in their own homes?

Mr Walker: We want to acknowledge and grant that right, but we also want to ensure that, in the years and decades to come, these people have the ability to prove that they are individuals who are protected by the agreement that we reached with the EU. That is important and it is something with which we should continue to press ahead.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am sure that the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) shares my concern about the vacant Benches opposition and the fact that, on such a serious matter, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) from the Opposition Whips Office had to scurry up the back to bob up and down to ask a question.

On 21 January this year, the Prime Minister committed to a review of the ongoing concerns of Irish nationals under the Good Friday agreement to exercise their Irish and therefore their European rights in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the United Kingdom after Brexit. Will the Minister tell the House whether he has read the Good Friday agreement? Secondly, will he tell us when the Prime Minister will publish the review before scurrying back to the Back Benches?

Mr Walker: I have read the Good Friday agreement. I read it as the Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, and I have read it as a Minister in my Department. I think that it is absolutely right that we should protect all elements of that agreement. Of course the hon. Gentleman will know that the issue of EU citizens and UK citizens sits alongside the common travel area arrangements and the commitments that we made under the Good Friday agreement, which stand regardless. I am very glad that we have been able to work very effectively with the Irish Government to convince all the other EU member states that those issues should be respected whatever the outcome of the negotiations and whatever the arrangements we reach between the UK and the EU.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): I would like to know how many of the affected citizens the Minister has actually spoken to. Does he understand the crippling doubt and uncertainty that is affecting so many hundreds of thousands of people, particularly with the spectre of no deal hanging over their heads? Is there somebody else that the Minister should be speaking to at this particularly crucial moment? I am talking

about the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) whom he should go and speak to right away to find out what on earth he is planning to do, because nobody else seems to be hearing a word from him.

Mr Walker: I have met EU citizens' groups up and down the UK in a number of embassies and at a number of events that we have held across the country. I have met British citizens and their representatives in a number of EU member states that I have been visiting. I continue to listen to their concerns and to ensure that those are reflected at the highest levels of Government. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) can answer for himself, but I will certainly be making the case to whoever takes on the leadership of our party and our country that securing the rights of EU citizens and UK citizens needs to be a top priority.

Hong Kong

2.4 pm

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

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The huge protest march this weekend was a further demonstration of the passionate strength of feeling among the people of Hong Kong about the proposed amendments to extradition laws. The people of Hong Kong have peacefully exercised their rights in recent days to freedom of speech, assembly and expression, all of which are guaranteed by the Sino-British joint declaration of 1984 and enshrined in Hong Kong Basic Law.

The most recent march was, thankfully, free of the scenes of violence witnessed during protests on 12 June. I note the allegations of inappropriate use of force by the Hong Kong police, which should, of course, be fully investigated by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government.

It is positive that, on 15 June, the Government committed to pause, reflect and consult widely before taking further action. However, it is clear that this commitment did not fully address the concerns of the people of Hong Kong. I welcome Chief Executive Carrie Lam's statement today, in which she said that she would not proceed with the Second Reading of the Bill if the fears and anxieties of the people of Hong Kong could not now be addressed.

In considering the way forward, it is vital that Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms set out in the joint declaration are respected in full. Those principles, along with the commitment to one country, two systems underpin Hong Kong's future success and prosperity. As a guarantor of the joint declaration, the UK has a responsibility to monitor its implementation. This is a responsibility that we all take very seriously.

The joint declaration is a legally binding international treaty between the United Kingdom and China, and it remains in force. It is as relevant today as it was at the time of the handover in 1997. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer both raised the situation in Hong Kong and the importance of upholding the joint declaration with Chinese Vice Premier Hu during the UK-China economic and financial dialogue that took place in London yesterday.

The permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office also held a meeting in the Foreign Office with the Chinese ambassador yesterday, reinforcing our view that the joint declaration is an extant document underpinning one country, two systems and it is guaranteed until 2047. It must be upheld. I can assure the House that the UK Government are, and will remain, fully committed to the preservation of Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy.

I am delighted that, in addressing this matter on the Floor of the House for the fourth time in six sitting days, there is such widespread support from all corners

[Mark Field]

of Parliament for the rule of law, independence of the judiciary and the freedoms for the people of Hong Kong.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Minister for that answer and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. There are literally millions of people in Hong Kong who follow the proceedings in this House and who look to us for support in their fight to protect their human rights. It matters to them there that we here remember their position, and it is right that we should recognise your role, Mr Speaker, in getting this issue ventilated in the House.

The news that the Executive in Hong Kong had suspended the legislation for the extradition amendments was welcome as far as it went, but the message should go out from this House that it did not go far enough. We in this House stand with the 2 million people who took again to the streets in Hong Kong on Sunday to say that suspension is not enough. That legislation must be withdrawn for good. Will the Minister make it clear to the chief executive that that is the position of this country and that that is what her Administration must now do?

In recent weeks, the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared that the Sino-British joint declaration was meaningless and that it no longer had any realistic meaning. I welcome what the Minister has said on this today, but will he assure us that that will continue to be put forcefully to the Chinese Government at every opportunity, because for a fellow permanent member of the UN Security Council to take this view undermines the very idea of a rules-based international order. Will the Government now demand of the Chinese Government that they should resile from the view that they have previously expressed in relation to the joint declaration? It is a binding bilateral treaty registered with the United Nations. China cannot be allowed to pick and choose the obligations in international law that it will observe and honour.

People across the world were shocked to witness the violence used against peaceful protesters in Hong Kong last week. Legitimate democratic Governments do not use tear gas and rubber bullets against their own people when they choose to exercise their democratic right to protest. We hear that the Chief Executive is due to make an apology today to the people of Hong Kong for her handling of the affair. Does the Minister agree with me that that apology should extend to those who were harassed and injured as a result of what was done, and can we in this House send the message that we continue to watch what happens in Hong Kong and we will not sit mute as those who protested then are prosecuted when the spotlight of world attention has moved on?

The events of recent weeks in Hong Kong have been horrifying, but they should not have been surprising. For years now, the People's Republic of China has been salami slicing the commitments it gave under the joint declaration. Sadly, the Executive Council has too often been complicit in that, but the commitments that have been broken are commitments to which this country has been a party. Will our Government now send the strongest possible message that we will not stand by and allow that process of salami slicing to continue?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. As the House knows, it is not for the Chair to arbitrate between the Government and the Opposition—between the policies of one party and those of another—and I do not do so, but this question has been granted, and it is the third time the House has treated of this matter in the last week, precisely because I sense that the House of Commons is genuinely shocked and outraged by what is happening. We respect the position of those demonstrators and we utterly deplore the treatment of them. This matter will continue to be aired in this Chamber for so long as Members wish it to be aired here.

Mark Field: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful that the whole House has a similar view on these concerns. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is absolutely right; we are addressing these matters, this debate will be shown in Hong Kong and it is important that we stand by the Hong Kong citizens whose rights are part of the duty that we have to uphold in order to ensure that one country, two systems is maintained.

We have called for the suspension of the extradition Bill and for further consultation. That is the right thing to do for two fundamental reasons. First and foremost, this must ultimately be a matter for the Hong Kong people. It is absolutely unacceptable for the UK Government to dictate terms, as it is for the Chinese Government to dictate terms in Hong Kong or other parts of the world. We are standing by the joint declaration and its terms, but ultimately it must be for the people of Hong Kong to determine. I am very well aware that, in diplomatic terms, it is important that we find a way for face to be maintained; that is important in the part of the world we are discussing. Therefore, the most desirable outcome would be a severe suspension *sine die*, but this is ultimately a matter for Hong Kong. Indeed, any judicial aspects of the matter are for an independent and free judiciary—a system that we believe is being upheld in Hong Kong, in contrast to what happens elsewhere.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point regarding the rules-based order. As he says, given that both the UK and China are permanent members of the UN Security Council, there are opportunities there to raise the specific concerns he mentioned. We have made it very clear that not only do we regard the joint declaration as extant—it will continue to be in place for the period of the one country, two systems approach—but we will also continue to have six-monthly reports. We have made this very clear to the Chinese ambassador to the UK and to other officials. We get criticised every six months and we will make very plain our concerns including that, although we think that one country, two systems is operating fairly well, there is clearly some strain, not least in relation to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. Clearly, the next report will go into great detail once the dust has begun to settle on what has happened. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for continuing to express his strong interest, and I know he speaks for many in the House. The Foreign and Commonwealth office led with a statement last week, and we will continue to keep the House updated.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I hear what the Minister says about this being a matter for the Hong Kong Government, but does he agree that some 2 million

people repeatedly taking to the streets in Hong Kong is a sign of wider concerns about Hong Kong's increasing democratic deficit over the past few years—with booksellers being abducted, democratically elected representatives not being allowed to take their seats and academics being imprisoned over freedom of speech? It is not just about the proposed extradition Bill; there are concerns much more widely about freedoms in Hong Kong. Does the Minister agree that the Hong Kong Government should be initiating democratic reforms to avoid a repeat of such incidents?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Hongkongers are used to having rights, freedoms and the rule of law, but they do not have access to the political levers that citizens of other advanced economies take for granted, so when their Government try to push through a law that the great majority of the public bitterly oppose, they cannot simply vote that Government out of office; and because so many opposition legislators have been removed, they also cannot rely on their elected representatives to block the law. As a result, action on the streets has tended to be the only answer. We think there should and must be another way. Perhaps we will discuss later during this urgent question some of the democratic reforms that might be put in place.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question; I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing it.

Hong Kong is one of the most important international cities in the world, but in the past fortnight it has been plunged into utter chaos. Over the weekend, 2 million people took to the streets to protest against the extradition Bill. That is nearly one third of the entire population of Hong Kong. Although the Opposition welcome the suspension of this disastrous Bill, suspension is not enough. The Bill needs to die. It is an affront to democracy and the rule of law in Hong Kong, and a fundamental breach of the one country, two systems principle. A grovelling apology by Carrie Lam this morning and promises of greater consultation do not change this fact. The Hong Kong Executive now have a choice to make. If they listen to their citizens, the Bill will be scrapped. These protests should also prompt serious reflection on the condition of democracy in Hong Kong, and on the increasing crackdown on dissent and protest. It is time to put democratic reform back on the agenda in Hong Kong.

I am disappointed that the Minister does not feel able to take a view on the contents of the Bill. We do not have an extradition agreement with China, so why should Hong Kong? I raised my next point during the last urgent question on the subject, but did not get a very clear answer, so let me ask the Minister again: if the Hong Kong Executive decide to push on with the Bill's implementation, will the Government review the UK's extradition arrangements with Hong Kong?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady will be aware that extradition issues are a Home Office matter—that is not to try to get out of the issue, but clearly I do not want to step on the toes of another Government Department in making a firm commitment along the lines that she would have me make. We agree very much with her view that

although the proposal is not necessarily in breach of the joint declaration, which is silent on the issue of extradition, it is clearly in breach of the notion of one country, two systems as well as the sense that there should be the rule of law and the idea of the common law system that is in place.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, a noted Sinologist—I call Richard Graham.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Hong Kong Government have suspended the extradition Bill, and may withdraw it altogether, because of the freedoms of expression and assembly. That is the direct link to the joint declaration and its importance. It is a tribute to the people of Hong Kong that they have exercised their rights so effectively. I congratulate the Minister and the Secretary of State on their defence of the joint declaration and on their tone, for Hong Kong is a territory whose future we wish to be very bright. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Chinese ambassador has continued to be wrong in saying that the joint declaration is a document that is effectively past its sell-by date, and will he ensure that when, in due course, a new Chinese ambassador arrives at the Court of St James, this point is made very clear to him or her?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, who is, as Mr Speaker rightly says, a well-known Sinologist and has a lot of experience and knowledge of this matter. He will appreciate that diplomacy requires that I have discussions in private, but I felt it was unacceptable when we heard the ambassador, only last week on the BBC's "Newsnight" programme, make the statement, which has been made in writing in the past, that this was a historical document that had no relevance to the future of Hong Kong. Nothing could be further from the truth. As I mentioned in my initial comments, the permanent under-secretary had a conversation with him in the Foreign Office only yesterday, making very clear the UK Government's position on this matter.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) was right in his sentiments about the importance of this issue and in saying that the UK has a particular responsibility to Hong Kong. To be fair, the Minister has acknowledged that himself in maintaining the commitments in the joint declaration, and also in highlighting the importance of the international rules-based order to us all. I know that he agrees, but it would be good if he could reiterate that citizens of a free society must be able to express their views freely without any fear of violence. We need to send that message out from across this House. No protest must ever be met with violence, and any resolution to this crisis must have the protection of the rule of law at its heart. Does he agree that the rule of law and adhering to the rules-based system is going to be key to Hong Kong's future prosperity as a society, but also to its economy?

Mark Field: I very much agree. I thank the hon. Gentleman, and indeed the SNP, for their very constructive views on this matter. It is very powerful that the House

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holds together on this issue. Of course there will be times when we have disagreements on the way in which we go about this, or other bits of business, but I think we are sending a very powerful message to our friends in Hong Kong, but also to the Chinese Government, about the unity of minds on this. Yes, we will very much stand up for the idea of the rule of law. That is vital for the success not just of Hong Kong but of China.

Let me turn to the economic dialogue. As I think hon. Members will understand, these things are organised many months in advance, and it is a coincidence that at the height of the Hong Kong crisis we were having an international economic dialogue here in London. One of the cases we made very robustly was about the importance for China of Hong Kong as a financial, and indeed professional, services centre reliant on a rules-based system but also on a UK legal system. That has provided much confidence for external investors. Without Hong Kong, the ambitions that China has for the belt and road initiative, and other bits of its infrastructure planning for the future, will be much more difficult to achieve. That is very much the case that we make to our Chinese counterparts—that having this special status for Hong Kong is in China's interests as much as Hong Kong's.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Whether in respecting one country, two systems or the Chinese constitution that supposedly respects and protects the cultural diversity of various regions within China's borders, the Chinese regime, as it has consistently shown itself, is not to be trusted. One need only look at the 1 million Tibetans who have lost their lives since the Chinese invasion, the countless hundreds and thousands more who have disappeared or are languishing in Chinese jails well away from their families with no access from their families either, or the 1 million Uighurs currently in so-called re-education camps. I therefore welcome the robust position that the Government are taking and urge them to go further. Will the Minister also remember that it is not just Hong Kong where we need to have serious concerns about the Chinese human rights record?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his great and long-standing interest in the proactive approach that we take to human rights, and the rule of law, in trying to influence these matters. We will raise, regularly and at all opportunities, broader human rights issues with the Chinese authorities. However, as he will be aware, Hong Kong has a special status. The nature of the joint declaration means that Hong Kong is in a different position. There are two systems as well as a single country at stake. While I very much accept what he says about the broader human rights issues, there are some fundamental, distinctive issues in relation to Hong Kong, and it is right that we take this opportunity to put them very firmly on the record.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Given previous reports of individuals who have disappeared from wherever they were only then to turn up in China facing charges, the whole House understands completely why the people of Hong Kong are so anxious about their rights and so opposed to this piece of extradition legislation. The best thing that Carrie Lam can do is to say that it is being scrapped altogether. What remedy is there if

either of the parties, but in this case China, decides not to abide by commitments freely entered into in the joint declaration to protect the people of Hong Kong and the one country, two systems state in which they thought they were living?

Mark Field: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point about remedy. There is not an arbitration process as part of the joint declaration, but it is none the less a document that is very publicly on the record after two leading members of the international community signed it freely some 35 years ago. On a direct legal remedy, I am afraid that I cannot provide the assurance that he might ideally be looking for. In 2016—he has alluded to this—we called out a breach of the joint declaration following the involuntary removal of the Causeway booksellers from Hong Kong to the mainland. This was, to date, the first and only time that we have called out a direct breach of the joint declaration. As he says, the issue of remedy is a complicated matter. However, at a time when China wishes to be trusted and to play a much broader role economically, militarily and diplomatically in the international community, I very much hope that the sense in which it is directly breaching aspects of a joint declaration made some 35 years ago will make it think twice.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Was the Minister struck, as I was, not just by the sheer size of the demonstrations in Hong Kong but by the incredibly peaceful and responsible way in which people protested, which makes the response of the Hong Kong authorities all the more shocking? Does he agree that the right to peacefully protest is one of those essential, cherished democratic freedoms that we believe in and that we believe should be in place for the people of Hong Kong?

Mark Field: I very much agree with everything that my right hon. Friend says.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As the House is aware, the three pillars of good foreign policy are national security, human rights and trade. Is the Minister completely sure that yesterday's dialogue with Mr Hu, in which the economic relationship was debated, got the balance right between the human rights question, particularly in relation to Hong Kong, and trade? I ask that because we need to be strong with regard to the trade question, despite the position that we find ourselves in domestically, so that we can have the backbone and the strength to have good relationships on all these other matters. We also need to give assurances to the people of Hong Kong that they shall never walk alone.

Mark Field: I very much hope that we have given the latter assurances to which the hon. Lady refers. We do not see this as a choice between securing growth and investment for the UK and raising human rights—we will always do that. There will be a time to do it, perhaps quietly outside the public domain. I think it is respected more by many of our Chinese counterparts if we do not engage in megaphone diplomacy. Our experience, as we make very clear to our Chinese counterparts, is that political freedoms and the rule of law are vital underpinnings both for prosperity and for stability, and that by having a strong relationship with China, including

over Hong Kong, we are able to have the more open discussions on a range of difficult issues, including human rights in other parts of mainland China.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): For 2 million people to demonstrate out of a total of 7 million is a phenomenon in itself, and it would be invidious, in some ways, to pick any one hero out of those 2 million heroes. However, will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the work and bravery of a 22-year-old young man, Joshua Wong, who has spent more than half of the past seven years in prison because he believes in the rights and freedom of the people of Hong Kong? Further, will my right hon. Friend maintain that it is wrong to send him to prison for simply asking for the rights that are enshrined in the agreement?

Mark Field: As my hon. Friend rightly says, it would be invidious to pick out one individual. We do stand up for the independence of the Hong Kong judiciary, so the sense that there was anything improper in the legal proceedings is not something with which I would necessarily wish to associate myself. He makes a good case: there are some very brave people who recognise that this is a crossroads moment—a vital moment. It is one reason why it is important that we are standing up for Hong Kong. It would perhaps be easy for us to step back, and that signal would be misinterpreted by Beijing. We do not wish that to happen. We will stand up for one country, two systems as long as the joint declaration is in place, not least, as I have again said, because we believe it is in the interests of Beijing and China, as much as in the interests of the Hong Kong people.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Minister has quite rightly set out the framework of rights that underpins the one country, two systems approach. Clearly, the reality on the ground is that democratic freedoms have been eroded, as of course has the right to privacy, with increasing covert surveillance. What practical steps can the Minister and the Government take to put democratic reform back on the agenda in Hong Kong?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. He is right—we have mentioned in recent six-monthly reports that we have had a sense, as he said, that there has been an erosion of individual rights. There has not been an erosion of commercial rights. In many ways, the commercial thing continues at quite some pace.

Ultimately, it must be for the people of Hong Kong to determine the way in which they appoint both their Chief Executive and their Legislative Council. I think there will be a move towards reform in that regard. As the hon. Gentleman is well aware, there are safeguards, and within that there is an electoral system for groups. As for the election of a Chief Executive, that is largely led by Beijing. It is worth pointing out that we have worked closely with Carrie Lam. I have met her on a couple of occasions, and she is a dedicated public servant. To be candid about talk about removing her from office, one should be careful about one wishes for, because if someone else were appointed, particularly under the current rules, they could be a much more hard-line Beijing figure.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The words “rule of law”, are much used on both sides of the argument, both in Hong Kong and in the People’s Republic of

China. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the rule of law is only there if one looks at the rules themselves, at how they are made, and at punishments? In addition, they should be underpinned by the universal declaration of human rights. That is what the rule of law means.

Mark Field: I would agree with what my hon. Friend says. He takes these matters seriously, and has dealings with leading figures from Taiwan who are based in London. He will be aware of the constraints that we are under in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence in standing up for One China. Equally, there is a terrific amount of work that goes on in relation to trade and in educational exchanges with Taiwan. Taiwan is succeeding very rapidly as a country, not least because it stands up for the rule of law in the way in which my hon. Friend describes.¹

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Without true democracy there is no real accountability, so protest is all that the people of Hong Kong have. I hope that they feel the solidarity from all parts of the House. What can the Minister tell us about the worrying allegations of police violence? What more can he tell us about his inquiries, or inquiries by his Department, into the nature, extent and possible consequences of allegations of violence and whether any of the alleged victims are UK citizens? What more is he doing to impress on the Chinese that this is not an appropriate response to peaceful protest?

Mark Field: As far as I am aware, there are none who are UK citizens, and clearly there would be consul considerations if that were the case. It is worth pointing out to the hon. Lady that it really is not for us to dictate. We would like the Hong Kong authorities to recognise that it is their responsibility, as they did in relation to the Umbrella protests, in which some police who used brutality were fined and others were imprisoned as a consequence. It really is not for us—it is a dangerous line to tread if, as an outside Government, we try to dictate what should happen in Hong Kong when it comes to what is ultimately a judicial matter. We very much call on the Hong Kong authorities to take the allegations seriously and investigate them properly.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I confess that I have been moved by the passion with which Hong Kong citizens have sought to defend the sacred principle of the rule of law, and they have sent an incredibly powerful message across the world that has certainly been heard in London. The Minister anticipated my question in one of his answers, but does he agree that the one country, two systems principle is beneficial not just for the inhabitants of Hong Kong but for those in mainland China, because the legal certainty in Hong Kong offers them a commercial gateway through which to access the rest of the world? We do not need to find ourselves in conflict with Beijing in defending the territory’s unique characteristics.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right, and that is a message that we try to put across. She will be aware that Hong Kong, along with Shenzhen and Guangzhou, is part of a greater bay area. One hopes that the experience will permeate that part of mainland China, so that people recognise the benefits of a one country, two systems approach. While the guarantee is in place until 2047, it is very much the UK

1. [Official Report, 19 June 2019, Vol. 662, c. 5MC.]

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Government's hope that the benefits of one country, two systems in Hong Kong and perhaps a wider area will exist beyond that time, with benefits for China looking forward. It is important that we make that case to our Beijing counterparts in all that we do in relation to the issue of Hong Kong's unique position.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the urgent question. Does the Minister agree that the reality is that all that the People's Republic of China is seeking to achieve in Hong Kong is the legalisation of what it has been doing for years, which is legally kidnapping people from Hong Kong and taking them to China?

Mark Field: As I have said, and as the hon. Gentleman will understand, we felt that there was a direct breach of the joint declaration in the episode to which he alludes, which happened some three years ago. This is unacceptable. Hong Kong citizens and British national overseas have particular rights that we will constantly stand up for. We feel that it is the wrong way forward—it is not something that we accept, and we feel that such episodes are absolutely in breach of the joint declaration.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will have seen reports from lawyers in Hong Kong that the police in Hong Kong have access to the health authority system to check whether injured protesters have been admitted to hospital. What representations has he made to ensure that the protesters' civil and legal rights are respected?

Mark Field: I am very concerned by what the hon. Gentleman says on this matter. I think we all know there is great concern about what has been happening in Xinjiang state in north-west China. There is a sense that what is potentially happening for 1 million citizens may apply to many others. We are living in a world with more opportunity for electronic and other surveillance by authorities—and that applies to authorities in the west, as it does elsewhere. There are concerns, and we would be concerned if we heard that individuals who found their face on a CCTV camera were quietly arrested in the months ahead. We will keep an eagle eye on that development, and we hope as parliamentarians that we are made aware of any such breaches, because it is something that our consul general, Andy Heyn, and his team in Hong Kong would wish to make clear to the authorities would be totally unacceptable.

BILL PRESENTED

UNIVERSAL CREDIT SANCTIONS (ZERO HOURS CONTRACTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens, supported by Frank Field, Neil Gray, Rosie Duffield, Mhairi Black, Ruth George, Hannah Bardell, Neil Coyle, Grahame Morris, Jonathan Edwards and Steve McCabe, presented a Bill to amend the Welfare Reform Act 2012 to provide that a Universal Credit claimant may not be sanctioned for refusing work on a zero hours contract; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 406).

Domestic Energy Efficiency Plan

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

2.38 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Government to publish a plan for meeting the domestic energy efficiency targets in the Clean Growth Strategy; to make provision for monitoring performance against milestones in that plan; to establish an advisory body on implementation of the plan; and for connected purposes.

Just last week in this Chamber, we committed ourselves to net zero carbon by 2050. That means delivering a core Conservative value and a key manifesto pledge to leave the environment in a better condition than we found it for future generations. It is not only the right thing to do, but it has the potential to unite the nation in a common purpose. The vast majority of people of all ages and businesses from right across the UK support more Government action on climate change. This target is both affordable and achievable.

As the crucible of the first industrial revolution, it is right to maintain our leadership and endeavour to be the first major economy to transition to the high-tech, carbon-free fourth industrial revolution. While growing our economy, the UK is already among the leading economies in reducing our carbon emissions. This bold ambition requires a clear vision and carefully thought-through plans to enable people, business and places to transition and make the most of the opportunities that arise. In practical terms, it means delivering the clean growth strategy—a part of the industrial strategy launched in 2017 and updated in 2018.

While significant progress has been made, especially with consultations and evidence gathering and with investment in innovation, we now need to publish plans to give the clarity and certainty that businesses need if they are to commit investment to deliver change in the goods and services they provide. People want to know how they can make changes over time to play their part in this national endeavour. My ten-minute rule Bill asks the Government to publish a plan for meeting the domestic energy efficiency targets in the clean growth strategy, to make provision for monitoring performance against the milestones in the plan and to establish an advisory body for the implementation of the plan.

Home insulation may not capture the imagination as a standard bearer for the fourth industrial revolution in the way that electric cars and autonomous vehicles do, but it will make a huge contribution to our reduction in emissions from heating our homes. Energy saving is just as important as generating carbon-free and renewable energy, as we will need more electricity for the new cars, buses and trains. As the Committee on Climate Change has noted in its most recent report, a comprehensive energy efficiency programme should be the first and least costly step in getting towards zero carbon emissions.

Research from the Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group shows that energy efficiency improvements to homes could reduce the energy consumed in UK households each year by 25% and knock £270 off the average household bill of £1,100. That is a saving in people's pockets, but it is also a saving of the equivalent of

six nuclear power stations the size of Hinkley Point C. There would be strong economic returns of a similar scale to other major infrastructure projects.

An appraisal based on HM Government methodology has found that the net benefit of this saving would be £7.5 billion, and this excludes the wider health and productivity benefits. It has been estimated that for every £1 invested by the Government, GDP would be increased by £3.20. More jobs would be created right across the UK. It is imperative urgently to develop a framework to stimulate the market among households and businesses that are able to pay for energy efficiency, with a clear trajectory towards the targets set out in the clean growth strategy. The National Infrastructure Commission has made energy efficiency a national priority, and its first assessment has asked for 21,000 insulation measures a week by 2020, which is a sixfold increase on the estimated 3,500 a week at the moment.

The green finance taskforce has made positive recommendations for energy efficiency, including financial incentives for meeting the energy performance certificate band C 2035 target on all buildings, and it has suggested a capital infrastructure plan for the Government for energy efficiency objectives. The Government's clean growth strategy target for EPC band C by 2035 is universally recognised as a good level of ambition, with earlier deadlines for the private rented sector and for fuel-poor homes. Policy exists on new build homes, and the future homes standard announced in the spring Budget is most welcome, as is the industrial grand challenge. However, what is missing is a road map for delivering a plan for retrofitting energy efficiency measures into the majority of homes in which most Britons live.

It has been estimated that an annual £5.2 billion investment from public and private sources will be needed to achieve this ambition. In 2017-18, public investment was £0.7 billion, drawing in very little private investment, with most of the money coming from the energy company obligation. The Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group has estimated that an annual public investment of £1.7 billion would leverage in £3.5 billion of private investment. While the economic arguments for investment in energy efficiency are clear, there will also be huge impacts on the quality of people's lives. As for many of my hon. Friends' constituents, nearly half the constituents of Cornwall live off the mains gas grid, resulting in higher energy bills. Like the majority of people in the UK, they live in homes with low levels of

insulation and energy efficiency measures. Average incomes in Cornwall, while rising, remain significantly below the England average, so we have high levels of fuel poverty.

Over the past nine years, I have been working with Public Health Cornwall on an innovative partnership that has brought together businesses and Cornwall Council, as well as health, care and emergency service professionals and many voluntary sector organisations to help people out of poverty and to live in warm homes. This public health approach has literally saved lives. Cornwall's devolution deal has enabled greater flexibility on the ECO, and it is tackling fuel poverty, too. The partnership's work has been funded by a mixture of public, ECO and business funding and voluntary donations. Over 20,000 people have been helped to live in warm homes, with new heating systems and insulation installed. In addition, independent evaluation shows that the winter wellness partnership has prevented more than 800 hospital admissions and helped 348 households remain in work or make progress towards work.

In Cornwall, we have shown over time that working with people on installing energy efficiency measures improves people's health and wellbeing, as well as the environment. In developing a national plan, I would like the Government to set up an advisory body to draw on this learning and that of other local authorities and organisations. Learning from the first-hand experience of people on the frontline in Cornwall and across the country would enable the Government to take an evidence-based approach and to build on what works. After all, we are talking about asking people to make significant changes to their homes, and we need to be as sensitive to people's feelings as to their finances. It is clear to me and my colleagues here today that we need to turbo-charge our action on home energy efficiency. I hope this motion will be the catalyst for that change, and I very much recommend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sarah Newton, Richard Benyon, Tim Loughton, Antoinette Sandbach, Zac Goldsmith, Maria Caulfield, Vicky Ford, Steve Brine, Peter Aldous, Derek Thomas and Sir David Amess present the Bill.

Sarah Newton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 407).

Church Representation and Ministers Measure

[Relevant document: 238th Report of the Ecclesiastical Committee, HC 2166.]

2.49 pm

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I beg to move,

That the Church Representation and Ministers Measure (HC 2167), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

The Measure and the new rules it contains emerged from the work of a simplification task group established by the Archbishops' Council. The task group's role was to bring forward proposals to remove constraints on the mission and growth of the Church of England resulting from existing legislation and processes. It recommended three major ways in which that could be achieved. First, those processes needed to be made less burdensome to the clergy and laity. Secondly, parishes should be given much greater flexibility over their constitutional arrangements, so that they can operate in the way that is most effective for the mission, life and work of the local church. Thirdly, the administrative burdens for those involved in running multi-parish benefices, especially in a rural context where the number of parishes in a benefice can be considerable, needed to be radically reduced.

The new rules have been completely redrafted and are a great deal easier to understand. They will make it possible for a parish to make governance arrangements that are best suited to the mission and life of the church in that parish. There are some significant safeguards and a small number of the provisions will be mandatory. A scheme for making rules for a parish will have to be approved by the Bishop's Council, which must be satisfied that the schemes make due provision for the representation of the laity and ensure the effective governance of the parish, among other things.

Another major reform is the provision for joint councils. Under the new rules, joint councils can replace individual parochial church councils. Where that happens, the number of local bodies and, most importantly, the number of meetings, will be reduced—in some cases, very significantly.

Rules that were thought to be unnecessary and unduly burdensome have been pruned away. Anomalies have been addressed and doubts about the meanings have been removed.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare an interest as the son of a late vicar who looked after several churches. Will my right hon. Friend give me some assurances? I very much like the sound of less bureaucracy and greater flexibility for the parishes, but will she assure me that this is not a device that will be used to hasten the closure of churches as they are merged within super-parishes, or, as happened in my father's old parish, to sell off old rectories that were owned by the parish rather than the diocese, with the funds going elsewhere rather than to the parish, in which funds were first invested?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The answer to both those questions is emphatically no. I am sure my hon. Friend's late father would have appreciated not having to dash around 12 individual parish council meetings on damp Thursday evenings through the winter and would have found that there was some sensible rationalisation in bringing some of the benefices together. Indeed, clergy who find trying to cope with multiple parishes onerous might then not be tempted to give up before they necessarily need to, and it would generally improve their quality of life.

The rules are intended to be compliant with recent data protection legislation. Church rules need to be updated in accordance with those provisions. They provide for electronic communication and for better representation of mission initiatives in the Church's structure, and they enable parochial church councils to do business by correspondence. They provide that lay people must form a majority of a parochial church council. That might address some of the concern just raised by my hon. Friend.

Clause 2 provides the statutory basis for the General Synod to make provision by canon to extend the range of situations in which a newly ordained deacon or priest can serve his or her title. That is very important for the mission of the Church—to reach out into new environments where there is demand for a place of worship. For example, we are seeing the appointment of curates and ordained clergy to new housing estates where no provision has been made in the original plan for a place of worship. This is about the Church moving to meet the demands and needs of people in new communities.

Tim Loughton: As there are not many other people here to intervene, I thought I might keep this going a little more. Madam Deputy Speaker, you may rule this out of order, but I ask because we have the Second Church Estates Commissioner here. Will my right hon. Friend comment on whether, within all the new measures, the disposal of bureaucracy will enable Church of England churches to bring forward the measures in my Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019 to enable the names of mothers to be placed on marriage certificates, for which the systems have not yet been completed? Almost daily, mothers contact me saying, "Can we put our names on the forthcoming marriage certificates?" Perhaps she would like to comment on that and whether it is included anywhere in the regulations we are now looking at.

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is a little tangential to this Measure, but it allows me to make it clear before the House that we are all waiting for the regulations that go hand in hand with that change in legislation. I had an absolutely heartrending email this morning from a woman whose mother passed away just a matter of days after the change in the law. One would have wished the regulations and the law to be coterminous to have made it possible for her late mother to be on the marriage certificate. Since my daughter has just announced her engagement, I sincerely hope that by this time next year the regulations will be in place.

To get back to the substance of the Measure, I should tell the House that it was carried by very substantial majorities in all three houses of the General Synod, and

that the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament has reported that it is of the opinion that the Measure is expedient.

2.56 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): When I was first elected to Parliament, the then Government Chief Whip said to me, “What would you like to do?” and I said, “I would like to be on the Ecclesiastical Committee.” She thought that was so eccentric that it was made absolutely clear that, in that Parliament, I certainly would not be a member of the Ecclesiastical Committee. I did not achieve those dizzy heights until 2010.

For anybody who wants a crash course in Tudor history, the Ecclesiastical Committee is the place to come. It is the absolute quintessence of the British establishment. It is the linchpin of the establishment; it is the very definition of the establishment. If any Member wants to be reminded about glebe lands or the Court of Arches, they too can come to the Ecclesiastical Committee. I think the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who made so many interventions, has been making his own application for the next time there is a vacancy.

The reason I referred to the Tudor pieces of canon law, which have weighed down the Church of England, is that they have become quite burdensome to parish priests. There has been far too much bureaucracy. The Measure is one of a number that have been driven through by the current Archbishop of Canterbury with the support and help of Synod and working groups throughout the Church.

The object is to modernise and simplify the rules of the Church so that it has more time and energy to do the things that it ought to be doing: running social projects, evangelising, preaching the gospel, comforting the sick, helping people who are grieving and celebrating marriages. Those are all things that we really want priests and the Church to be doing, but too much time has been taken up with ticking boxes and filling out forms.

The church representation part of the Measure gives people flexibility on the way they organise their meetings; the Ministers part enables people to be ordained but not tied to a particular parish. That is going to give the Church a lot more flexibility. The Second Church Estates Commissioner, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), set the case out fully and clearly. I do not wish to say any more, except that we are happy to support the Measure this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Children and Young Persons

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has considered the instrument and has certified that it applies exclusively to England and Wales.

2.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move,

That the draft Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 (Specified Scottish Authority and Barred Lists) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.

This order relates to the process by which an individual may be barred from working with children or vulnerable adults, and provides for greater recognition of barring decisions taken in other UK jurisdictions.

As Members will know, the Disclosure and Barring Service makes considered decisions regarding whether an individual should be barred from engaging in regulated activity which means close regular work with children, vulnerable adults or both in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The DBS also maintains a list of individuals it has barred from undertaking regulated activity with children or adults. This process is vital to protecting children and vulnerable adults from those who pose the greatest risk of doing them harm. It supports employers in making informed decisions about an individual's suitability when they recruit for the most sensitive roles. As Members will know, it is an offence for a barred individual to work or to seek to work in regulated activity.

Paragraphs 6(2) and 12(3) of schedule 3 to the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 provide that individuals previously considered by a “relevant Scottish authority” for inclusion on “a corresponding list” cannot be included in a barred list in England and Wales on the basis of the same circumstances. The order is being made to specify those terms to give effect to paragraphs 6 and 12. The order specifies that the Scottish Ministers are the “relevant Scottish Authority”, and that the lists maintained by the Scottish Ministers under the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 are “corresponding lists” to those lists of barred individuals maintained under the 2006 Act.

As Members will know, criminal records disclosure and barring are devolved matters. As such, it is important that the DBS in England and Wales and their Scottish counterparts work together and mutually recognise each other's decisions. The existing framework provides that an individual who is barred under Scottish legislation is also barred in England and Wales and vice versa. Therefore, an individual who has been barred in one jurisdiction cannot work with vulnerable groups by seeking employment in another jurisdiction. That can only be right.

The order gives practical effect to that recognition, ensuring that effective safeguarding is maintained across the UK. That means that if a person has been considered for barring in one jurisdiction, they cannot subsequently be reconsidered for barring on the same grounds in another jurisdiction. This avoids the possibility of a “double jeopardy” situation for that person, where the DBS might bar an individual who Disclosure Scotland had previously decided not to bar on the basis of the same information. We say that this is a matter of basic

[Victoria Atkins]

fairness. It is already the case under Scottish law that Disclosure Scotland is not required to consider an individual for barring who has already been considered by the DBS. A similar statutory instrument will be made by the Secretary of State under corresponding Northern Ireland legislation to ensure consistency across all three jurisdictions.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I very much support the measure, but will the Minister just comment on this point? The lists have been brought together much more closely within the United Kingdom—I remember being a Minister in the days of List 99, which was a much more complicated system—but what progress has been made on the exchange of information with other countries? There are people who come to this country from the EU and beyond who pose a risk to children, including an increasing number of professionals in education, health and social welfare. Some have also been found guilty of misdemeanours against children. This is not just a UK-wide problem.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am extremely grateful to him for bringing his expertise and experience to the Chamber on this important matter. As to the detail on the exchange of information with other non-UK jurisdictions, I wonder if he would bear with me for a moment. I suspect I will find the answer very quickly. If I do not, I will of course undertake to write to him, because that is a specific point. From my time serving with him on the Home Affairs Committee, I know that we looked at this issue very carefully as part of our discussions on, for example, Europol. I hope to be able to assist the House with that particular query in due course, but if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will return to the main business.

There has already been clarification in Scottish law and I am delighted that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will introduce corresponding legislation to ensure consistency across all three jurisdictions. As a result, each barring body will recognise barring decisions taken by each other. By achieving greater consistency between the jurisdictions of the UK, the order enables Disclosure Scotland and the DBS in England and Wales to continue to work together to protect children and vulnerable adults.

I hope Members on all sides of the House will support the order to enable the valuable recognition of barring decisions, and support greater public protection for children and vulnerable adults. I am going to sit down in a moment, but I very much hope I will have discovered the answer by the time I come to respond to my hon. Friend.

Tim Loughton: Allow me to throw the Minister the life raft of additional time. She might also like to comment on what used to be a real problem, particularly for teachers who were new to a school or newly qualified, which was the length of time it was taking for them to get their DBS clearance. Some teachers, in particular where we had shortages, were not able to take up their positions and that caused huge inconvenience. The situation has improved a great deal—it is less bureaucratic and the measure she is bringing in today will help—but can

she provide an assurance to the House that the amount of time it takes to give clearance to essential public workers in particular is not still an ongoing problem?

Victoria Atkins: I am able to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. I do not for a moment pretend that we have reached perfection. Through his involvement in the Home Affairs Committee, he will be aware of the Public Accounts Committee reports into the workings of the DBS and the length of time that digitisation and so on has taken. I monitor that issue very closely in my capacity as the Minister with responsibility for DBS, albeit that it is an arm's-length body, and I am satisfied that what we call the aged list is reducing at an acceptable rate—I am, however, impatient; I would like it to be faster—and that the DBS in Liverpool has been operating with great efficiency in recent times.

The basis of the order is so important. It is to ensure that children and vulnerable people are safe with the people who work with them. We have seen, with many recent allegations in the context of vulnerable adults, how vital it is that people who work with vulnerable adults, perhaps in care homes, are of suitable character and history to work in such a responsible role.

I am delighted to say that I will be writing to my hon. Friend on the specific point he raised with me, because international data sharing is complex.

Tim Loughton: It has occurred to me that I should have declared my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests before I asked the Minister those very important questions.

Victoria Atkins: As always, my hon. Friend is scrupulous in being transparent. We recognise his expertise and experience in this field.

With that, I commend the order to the House.

3.9 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): We will not oppose this statutory instrument today; we actually welcome its introduction. We must ensure that serious crimes, such as child abuse, trafficking and rape, are not dealt with by out-of-court disposal orders—community resolutions—as those do not appear on basic DBS checks and so are not flagged up on applications to work with some of our most vulnerable people.

If we are taking the safeguarding of vulnerable adults and children seriously, we must not simply pay lip service to this protection. Like many in the Chamber, I am a school governor, and I know that schools, employers and community organisations rely heavily on DBS checks when appointing staff and volunteers. They must be able to trust the systems in place when they are responsible for the welfare of children or vulnerable adults in their care. We have heard too many stories of vulnerable people being exposed or exploited at the hands of criminals who are let off by a system of out-of-court disposal orders that by their very nature are omitted from DBS checks. We cannot allow this to continue.

Question put and agreed to.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Madam Deputy Speaker, I should like to note my disappointment that

we did not hear from our Scottish colleagues. I was looking forward to hearing from them, though I am delighted they agree with the order.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Was that a point of order?

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Despite the title of the motion, it was certified by Mr Speaker as falling wholly within devolved competence and therefore under the English votes for English laws scheme, so sadly the need for us to contribute on the Floor was limited. Given, however, that the Minister was very complimentary about the Scottish authorities, we thought it important that we at least heard her.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. It is always a pleasure to hear from him.

Victoria Atkins: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am happy to concede: I walked into that one.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Excellent.

EXCISE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the Tobacco Products (Descriptions of Products) (Amendment) Order 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 953), which was laid before this House on 21 May, be approved.—(*Mike Freer.*)

Question agreed to.

Backbench Business

Cox Report: Implementation

3.12 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the publication of, and recommendations in, the Dame Laura Cox report on bullying and harassment in Parliament; welcomes the implementation of the recommendation to abandon the Valuing Others and Respect policies; expresses concern about damage caused to the reputation and standing of this House by the lack of progress made on other recommendations on historical allegations and the non-involvement of MPs in Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme cases; and calls on the Leader of the House and the House of Commons Commission to push forward the implementation of all three key recommendations in full without delay.

The Cox report was commissioned a year ago, in July 2018, at what we can only call a low point in this place's history, our reputation having been rocked by allegations of bullying and harassment. Eight months on from the report being published, just one of the three Cox recommendations has been implemented, despite the House of Commons Commission, the body responsible for the employment of staff, stating that it clearly agreed in full with all three of the recommendations made by Dame Laura Cox.

Nothing is more important than the safety and wellbeing of the people we rely on to run this organisation—parliamentary staff, constituency staff, members of the Metropolitan police and Members themselves—and it is completely unacceptable that eight months on, progress in delivering change is so very slow. We rightly consider other organisations that fail to act when serious problems are identified, particularly when it comes to issues of bullying and harassment, and we run the serious risk of undermining the credibility of the House of Commons in speaking out in the future by not having acted swiftly in the wake of the full Cox report findings. This has to change.

There is much more in the Cox report aside from the recommendations, but those specific recommendations call for the abandoning of the valuing others policy and respect policies; for the amending of the independent complaints and grievance scheme, which according to Alison Stanley's six-month report published on 12 June is bedding in well through the inclusion of non-recent allegations that predate 2017; and for consideration to be given to the most effective way of ensure that the process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment by House staff against Members is entirely independent, with MPs playing no part.

It is welcome that one of those recommendations has been put into practice, but that decision was to axe a policy, which is a very straightforward thing to put in place. There has been no change in practice on the other two recommendations. There has been much discussion and consultation—another consultation closed a few days ago—and many plans to set up groups of people to talk to each other and have ideas to bring to the Commission, which could then discuss and think about them and then perhaps do something, but it is unclear when that would be done and who would do it. Let us be clear: there has been no action actively to protect employees in this place.

[Mrs Maria Miller]

Not only has the Commission not put in place the changes demanded by Cox eight months ago, but it was made aware that the current policy with regard to non-recent cases could well be unlawful. In its letter of 16 October 2018, the Equality and Human Rights Commission wrote to the House of Commons warning it—warning us—that the House of Commons Commission’s policy of an arbitrary cut-off date of June 2017 for non-recent claims of bullying and harassment could be unlawful because it unjustifiably discriminated against older employees, who are more likely to have a historical complaint, contrary to section 19 of the Equality Act 2010. Despite that, the Commission has failed to act on behalf of Members to bring our policies in line with the law, let alone in line with the recommendations of the Cox report.

Furthermore, the Commission was warned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission that the House could also be in breach of its public sector equality duty—again, laws that we all passed in this place, not just for ourselves but for those outside. The EHRC has been clear that we could well be in breach of the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act, and that it may actually intervene on the House of Commons and issue a compliance notice. Again, this has not been addressed by the Commission.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): When I sat on the working group that came up with this, there was a strong desire from those of us in that room that historical cases be part of the process. We were assured at the time that that would be in place—or at least starting to be put in place—by now. What the right hon. Lady is saying is incredibly worrying. Does she agree that we should have pressed ahead at the earliest stage so that if there were further challenges we could have addressed and finessed them by now, rather than waiting for an intervention by the ECHR?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady brings up a very important point. It goes even further than that. If an organisation is made aware that it could be breaking the law, it does not wait eight months to do something about it; it gets on with it straight away.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who was Leader of the House at the time, did the most remarkable job on behalf of Members, getting in place the very first independent grievance scheme, and we all owe her an incredible debt of thanks for what she has done, but it was not an easy process, and I am sure that she may make a contribution to the debate today to add her perspective on that. We have to make sure that the Commission, which exists only because Members want it to exist—it is there not by right, but because we have decided it should be—is acting in a way that protects us from the inevitable criticism that will come from being found to be potentially unlawful in the way we treat our employees.

Members of the House have given the Women and Equalities Committee a responsibility to scrutinise the Government’s policy on equality, but I do not think that it is just the Government who need to be scrutinised at the moment, and we are actively keeping an eye on

what is going on in the House of Commons as well. Working with my Committee colleagues, I have established an inquiry into the gender-sensitive Parliament, and we will be looking closely at the procedures that this place is using to ensure that it is actively taking on not just the key recommendations in the Cox report, but the spirit of that report as well.

The way in which the House of Commons Commission is dealing with this matter is unacceptable, and, I believe, risks bringing us all into disrepute if change does not happen soon. However, I also believe that the lack of action on Cox is symptomatic of much wider management dysfunctionality in this place, and I want to raise a couple of issues that are directly related to that lack of action.

The fact that the Leader of the House will be responding to the debate goes to the heart of the problem. The Government do not run the House of Commons; Members do, via the House of Commons Commission, which is chaired by the Speaker. So why is a Minister responding to the debate? I say this with the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who is an extremely capable individual, but he is not responsible for the matter that I have raised today. While I welcome his contribution, he cannot answer directly the questions that I am asking. At the end of my speech, I shall set him some tasks that he might want to undertake were he to wish to assist Members in resolving this issue.

Members established the House of Commons Commission in 1978 to administer, on our behalf, the way in which this place is run. Unlike almost all other Committees of the House, it has no elected members, and because it is chaired by the Speaker—whose impartiality is key to our debates—it is difficult to achieve clear accountability. Quite rightly, the Speaker does not feel that it is appropriate either to appear before the House to answer questions, or, as I found recently, to appear before a Select Committee. I fully understand the rationale for that, but it does leave us with an accountability deficit in knowing why these delays have been so lengthy.

However, I believe that the problem goes deeper than that. Responding to an urgent question on 16 October, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire said:

“In this place, we are all aware that a number of these issues are ‘matters for the House’. That is quite a tricky concept, because nowhere in the workplace are things simply a matter for all those who are involved in that workplace.”—[*Official Report*, 16 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 535.]

That, I would assert, is why the House of Commons Commission was set up. It would be impossible for each and every one of the 650 Members of the House to actively manage it. By definition, we must have a body that is nominated by us to do these things on our behalf, but when there is no clear accountability or report-back mechanism other than the regular questions that are asked, there is no other proactive way of engaging in debate.

Let me now refer to a matter to which I have referred in the House before. I think that it, too, is at the heart of some of the dysfunctionality surrounding management in this place. I speak as someone who spent 20 years in business before coming to this place. It has always struck me that this place has very opaque management systems, which—for me, at any rate—have just reached breaking point because of the lack of progress in delivering

on the Cox report after eight months. I think that that is reflected in one of the key findings in the report. I shall quote verbatim from page 154. This is not my interpretation of what Dame Laura has said; it is what she has said:

“I have...referred throughout this report to systemic or institutional failings and to a collective ethos in the House that has, over the years, enabled the underlying culture to develop and to persist. Within this culture, there are a number of individuals who are regarded as bearing some personal responsibility for the criticisms made, and whose continued presence is viewed as unlikely to facilitate the necessary changes, but whom it would...be wrong for me to name, having regard to the terms of reference for this inquiry...some individuals will want to think very carefully about whether they are the right people to press the reset button and to do what is required to deliver that change in the best interests of the House, having regard both to its reputation and its role as an employer of those who are rightly regarded as its most important resource.”

Unless we choose to change not only the structures but the management of the House and the people in charge of its management, we face the prospect of continued inertia on this and other reforms that are long overdue.

It was difficult for me to quote Dame Laura's words, because they are critical of individuals, but we cannot put our head in the sand continually, eight months after the report's publication. We must stand up and take what I believe to be long overdue decisions. We need the implementation of the report to be completed before the end of the summer recess, in about 10 weeks' time. In the case of any other business, we would expect, after 10 weeks, the completion of a measure to bring people within the law and to create a process for analysing cases that came forward.

Can the Leader of the House assist Members by putting a motion on the Order Paper to that effect? There is no reason why the House should not debate the issue, and agree—I would hope—that the Cox report should be implemented in full within a reasonable period. I suggest that we issue a request to the House of Commons Commission to deliver that, or else to explain why it has not done so.

It is clear that we also need to consider the modernisation of the Commission itself. I think that what has happened recently requires us to consider the way in which it might be run on our behalf in the future. Such a modernisation should include an elected Chair who would be directly responsible to Members, and could speak here on all Commission matters. There should be a transparent agenda for the modernisation of the management of the House and the way in which business is conducted. The current piecemeal approach is not working in practice. Members need to know how wider change is being implemented, and to know that it is not just being talked about.

This needs to be debated by Members. Would the Leader of the House also consider tabling a motion proposing that we begin to discuss the modernisation of the House of Commons Commission, so that we could take account of Members' views and, perhaps, Select Committees could follow them up?

Thirdly, these problems of implementation point to another area of reform. We as a group of people need to take stock of how we shape the role of the individual who runs the business of this place: the Speaker. It is we who have determined that the Speaker is responsible for not only the important procedure and running of the business in this Chamber and elsewhere, but the entire

running of the House of Commons, because as chair of the Commission it is the Speaker who is ultimately responsible for the implementation of Cox, the thousands of staff employed here and the complexities of running an organisation of this incredible scale. I would assert that the two roles are individually challenging; having one person doing them increases the risk of the Speaker becoming involved in matters that are not compatible with the important independent nature of the Speaker's jobs. Any of us who have been involved in employing staff knows that can be one of the most controversial issues we can get involved with; why would we want the Speaker to be involved in something that can be so difficult and controversial?

Will the Leader of the House consider putting forward a motion for debate on the Floor of the House on the role of the Speaker so that the views of Members can be established, and then Select Committees can, if appropriate, take those views forward? If that is not appropriate, perhaps the Leader of the House can advise me on what are the appropriate ways for Members to review and discuss those issues.

It is vital that we find a way forward on all three of the issues I have outlined, because they are all connected to the problems we are experiencing in implementing Cox. But even above that, they are determining how people outside view this place. We must be an exemplar in management, not a laggard. There can be no special pleading for working practices in this place and the fact that they have not changed to reflect the realities of a modern 21st-century Parliament.

The House of Commons is central to our democracy. As custodians of this place we have a clear and unquestionable responsibility to safeguard the effectiveness of the House of Commons, to ensure it is respected and to root out anything that could serve to undermine its standing in the public eye. It can never be an option to seal Parliament in aspic because, as a democratic institution, we have to reflect the country we seek to serve. There is an important place for tradition to root our procedures in precedent, and any change has to be evolutionary, not revolutionary, but we should leave this place better than we found it—more relevant, not less, to those we seek to represent here, our constituents.

There is no lack of good will to change, and the staff of the House of Commons are clearly dedicated to the future of this place, as came through strongly in the Cox report and the research Dame Laura did, but too often that enthusiasm and dedication to change is not forthcoming in practice because of a lack of clear responsibility and accountability. The lack of swift action on the Cox recommendations reflects deep-seated problems with the way the House of Commons is run, and colleagues, it is down to us to change that—no one else.

3.32 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on her speech. She and I work together very closely on these issues, and on issues about this place, Members can often be aligned across parties.

I pay tribute to the staff of the House of Commons: the staff who work for us and the staff who work to make the building work—the staff without whom we could not do any of this. At present, we are the masters of their destiny; we in this Chamber are the masters of

[Jess Phillips]

how well the system works for them, and sometimes we are the people who work against them. For anyone who has ever been involved in any sort of employee relations, such a power imbalance should sit uncomfortably; where there is a power imbalance, there can always be exploitation, and, to be honest, what we have here is an opportunity to give power away, to do the right thing. I think we should do that.

Dame Laura Cox's report was thorough and wide-ranging, and it made clear recommendations that we should absolutely be getting on with, because the people who know that we are not getting on with them are all the people who work in this building. Nothing has changed since we started the whole "Pestminster" thing or even the broader #MeToo movement; it feels as if a moment of blood-letting led to no significant material change in the actual working lives of the people we are here to try to protect.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and an excellent point. Does she agree that we have to see this not as a solution, but as the first step in solving a problem that goes back decades and that, unless we act, will continue to go on for decades?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. This going back decades has been discussed, including the idea of historical cases and whether they can or cannot be heard. If we do not sort out what has gone on before, we will never be able to sort out what goes on in the future, and we have to. This is not about drawing a line and hoping for the best in future. Some of the people we are talking about when we say, "Let's draw a line on the historical cases," still very much work in this building.

This week and last week, I have been reminded that the system still seems not to have changed much on the ground. Actually, I will go back a step and pay massive credit to the Member I cannot now call the Leader of the House, so I will have to learn her constituency: the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)—we were just discussing whether there is a North Southamptonsire. The systems that have been put in place, if used well and seen through in everything that Cox required, can be the solution, but there is currently a blockage in the system. This week and last week, I have in my diary three different incidents where I have to call or meet people. Those people's names cannot even go in my diary, because they are so worried about further complaints and about people who either represent constituencies in this place or work in this building. This is still going on. Even with the new systems being set up, people still feel that I am a person that they should come to find out whether this can be trusted. We are nowhere near the level of trust that we need to be at in this building for people to feel that they can go forward and, without fear or favour, make a complaint about somebody, especially somebody who sits on one of these green Benches.

The argument for an independent system is won—certainly not yet in my political party, but in the system that we hope to see set up here. The Cox report clearly identified concerns about the idea of Members of Parliament sitting in judgment over any of this, and the

public would have a question mark over that. That system and MPs' involvement in deciding how the sanctions might be given out can cause by-elections. It is not an unpolitical system. It is something where politics can very much play a part.

I am really pleased that lay members have a balancing vote in the independent complaints system, but there are still real concerns about the idea that we are the ones who get the say. I have absolutely no reason to doubt the complete and utter commitment of all the people on the current Committee on Standards to doing the right thing, but I personally saw how who goes on that Committee is a political decision, because I was stopped by my political party from going on it. The Whips had put my name forward. It appeared on the Order Paper and then it was stopped. I have no idea why my political party did not wish to put me forward to be on the Committee on Standards, but I can guess. I will take it as a compliment that I am actually independent and that I would act fairly, regardless of the situation.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I place on the record that as Chair of the Committee on Standards, I would have been delighted if my hon. Friend had been appointed a member of our Committee.

Jess Phillips: I thank the Chair and put on record that she very much welcomed the fact that my name went forward on to the Order Paper—before it was withdrawn—so that I could have been appointed to that Committee.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Is not one of the ironies that although we have elections in our political parties for all the positions on all the other Select Committees, we do not have elections for these places? If there had been an election in the Labour party or, for that matter, across the House, I do not doubt for a single instant that my hon. Friend would have been elected.

Jess Phillips: Indeed. It seems that we are sometimes democratic within my movement and sometimes not.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As someone who serves on the Women and Equalities Committee with the hon. Lady, may I say that I, too, would be very happy to vote for her to serve on the Committee on Standards?

Jess Phillips: Oh my gosh! It is like a "get out the vote" moment. I am going to stand for something now, because it would seem that I have the will of all the House behind me.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): If only there was an election.

Jess Phillips: Indeed.

What I find about the people who want me to be involved in their cases is that they do not usually have anything to hide. It is a small thing that this is about me, and it is a pleasure that everyone is offering me their kind regards, but this highlights an issue in the system—namely, that the way in which bad behaviour, harassment and bullying are handled in this building can be controlled by patronage, power, friendships and politics. That cannot

be ignored, and while it is the case, people will still come to people like me and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke and tell us their stories. Until we get this right, no system that we put in place will ever have the trust of the people who work in this building or of those who interact with them.

I also want to highlight the issue of historical cases. In the end, Dame Laura Cox said the exact opposite of what came out of the systems that we created around historical cases. She said that it would be beneficial for historical cases to be heard, and not that it would be legally difficult for people to be held accountable for a code of conduct that they had not previously signed up to. I do not personally need to be told not to sexually harass anyone. I do not need it written down that I should not murder people in the House of Commons. That is not what stops me murdering people; there are many other things that do. The trouble with the issue of historical cases is that it immediately puts aside some of the issues and challenges that would have been cleared up, had those cases been able to be heard. We have to open up the idea of historical cases. I am perfectly comfortable with the idea that historical cases concerning people who are no longer here, for example, are much more difficult. We have no sanction over people who are no longer here or who have died, and I can see that there is nervousness about going back to the beginning of time in that way.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I might well vote for her if there is an election. On historical cases and the point about people no longer being here, is there not a danger that the longer we leave this, the more chance there is of people no longer being here?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. That is certainly a concern. This place has a way of reminding us how welcome we are at the moment. I have absolutely no doubt that there are people here whose processes have been in the long grass for a very long time, and that they will be allowed to go off to pastures new. Any constituency MP will know how a constituent feels when that happens in the police force, for example, when complaints are made and people are allowed to be retired off.

Lord knows we are doing an absolutely terrible job of convincing people that we are even equal to the value of the British people. Politics stinks at the moment, but we have an opportunity, in trying to do what Cox has asked of us, to show that we do not think we are above the people, that we are better than them, or that our jobs and the employment system are just too complicated for us to be able to do anything about this. We have to deal with complicated stuff all the time; our job in this building is to deal with really complicated issues. We cannot keep falling back on the idea that this is too difficult, simply because some people work for us, some people work for Parliament, some people work in this bit of the building and some others are journalists, for example. We have to deal with people when they behave badly.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right that if we do not deal with this, people will get away with things, which will breed a culture in which such things are acceptable if someone is a Member of Parliament and in which Members can behave in such a way towards their staff or to staff across the estate.

Although not many Members are involved in all this, if we do not have an independent system, it is that breeding of distrust that will allow this culture to develop, to fester and to continue to grow over years to come.

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. I want Members in all political parties—let us not pretend that this is not happening in all parties—and all the institutions of Parliament and politics to know that a truly independent system should protect us from the charge that we can do whatever we want and that we will stitch things up for our own benefit. At the moment, it does feel a bit like we can still do that.

Speaking specifically about my party, I do not know why there is ever any pushback against the idea of complete and utter independence when it comes to complaints, certainly those around sexual harassment, bullying or racism. When we stand up and speak or go on Twitter or go to work, we should be held to account, but not by somebody who can give us a job or who we can give a job to, because independence protects both the claimant and the person making the claim. I honestly do not understand why we are so afraid of it.

The other issue that constantly comes up when discussing how we handle such systems is the idea of a third-party complaints system and how we can take up complaints on the behalf of people who are vulnerable and/or terrified to come forward. Such a process has still not been ironed out in this place. If a Member sees something in the bar or somebody comes and tells them something—it happens to me a lot, and I have to struggle with the things that I know, which I often wish I could unknow—it is unclear what to do in those circumstances. The response is often, “There is not very much that we can do unless somebody comes forward, and they will have to make statements,” but there needs to be something in the system that is better for third-party complaints.

I have worked with the FDA throughout the whole process from the original complaints to the Cox report and all the different elements. I share the frustration of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke about there being another consultation with another group of people, because there seems to have been endless different reviews into different sorts of people who might come into this building. The FDA’s response to the Cox report included designs for perfectly reasonable independent systems with appeals processes that are completely fair and balanced for people both within and outside this building.

This argument goes around a lot, but there is an idea that we MPs have unusual lives, that we know best and that how systems work cannot be understood without MP involvement. I suppose that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is the example that is always given. It is a good one, so I can understand that argument. I am not suggesting for one second that there is any design that will not have built into it the idea of vexatious complaints, which are plentiful—I have had them from other Members of Parliament, for example. I understand that that has to be built into the system, but we should want to give up some of the power over the decision making.

Turning to the House of Commons Commission, I am quite heavily involved in all this stuff—I am knee deep—but I do not really know what the Commission is and/or does. I do not know whether there is meant to be a Back-Bench representative on it, or whether it is just

[Jess Phillips]

party political. Somebody once told me that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) was the Back-Bench representative, but, meaning no offence to him, I did not elect anybody to that role. I have no idea how the Commission works and how I could work with it, and I think we need to look at the level of transparency. We also need to look at how the Commission works with the Committee on Standards and the Procedure Committee. Having all these different things makes normal people who want to do the right thing think, "I can't be dealing with this."

We have a real opportunity, as has been said, to leave the House in a better place than we found it by creating clarity on the structures and power lines to get this right. No matter who our friendships are with and who holds power in this place, we should never fear making and/or supporting complaints against those we like or those we think do a good job in other regards. We have to be honest and fair.

The Cox report is clear and does not beat about the bush in what it asks for. I am not entirely sure what has caused the delay. It certainly was not caused by the will of the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire, and it was not even caused by the will of the House. The House, although sometimes with clever planning, has largely voted through the report's recommendations. I am not sure why it is taking so long, and we have to ask ourselves what we will do about it and how we will speed it up. It definitely needs speeding up.

I absolutely love the House of Commons, and I think parliamentary democracy is the greatest form of democracy in the world. We have the best democracy because we are directly linked to our constituents. There are very few countries in the world where, on a Friday, a person can go and have a chat with their representative. Unlike in Ghana or India, say, we can genuinely have a cup of tea and listen to what is going on in people's lives. It is precious, and it needs to be protected against the very dark forces we see at the moment.

We should never give those who wish to damn our parliamentary democracy the argument that we are somehow stitching things up and that we are an elite establishment force who do everything to line our own pockets. We should never give those arguments any credence, because I will not be told by the likes of Nigel Farage that he cares more than I do about the people and about the people who work here. If we do not do something, he will have every right to say those things.

I urge the new Leader of the House to do something to make this happen, and to make it happen quickly.

3.53 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) have secured this debate, and I am proud that this is my first speech back on the Back Benches. Hopefully, I have the freedom to shed a little light on some of those dark spaces.

Before I do that, I want to agree with the hon. Lady. I, too, love this Parliament. I feel incredibly optimistic that, between all of us, we will make this change. Right now, we are still in a difficult place, and I will go through some of that before setting out some recommendations of my own.

I pay tribute to the officials in the office of the Leader of the House and to all the members of House staff who worked so hard to get the independent complaints procedure in place. If anyone is at fault for the lack of progress, it is definitely not them.

As I said, the picture is very complicated. This all began back in November 2017, when the appalling allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment hit Parliament. Having already hit Hollywood, the allegations soon came to Westminster. So the independent complaints and grievance procedure was established and voted on by this House in July 2018. It was a cross-party agreement, with many colleagues from across the House working hard together to achieve something that is different and ground-breaking.

Then of course we had the Cox report, which was specifically on the bullying of House staff by Members of Parliament. That reported in October 2018, after the independent complaints procedure had already been set up. Subsequent to that, we now have the inquiry by Gemma White, QC, into the bullying of MPs' staff by MPs, and vice versa, which is due to report later this month. Finally, we have the inquiry by Naomi Ellenbogen, QC, into the bullying and harassment of peers' staff by peers, and vice versa, which will report later this year. A number of complicated inquiries are going on, and I can well understand people saying, "It is all too complicated. I can't get my way through it." Nevertheless, it is all headed in the right direction; people are genuinely being given the opportunity to speak out and have their say, which is so vital.

The independent complaints procedure was set up following the July 2018 motion that was agreed by this House, and Alison Stanley, the independent reviewer of the complaints procedure, has just finished her review of the first six months of the independent complaints and grievance scheme. I wish to quote one statement in her report, as it gives us hope:

"both the Behaviour Code and the policies represent in some aspects leading edge practice, such as the unequivocal language used in the Behaviour Code. From my own experience of introducing change across diverse organisations, the fact that the Scheme has now been largely introduced across the Parliamentary Community is an achievement and, from survey results, has been seen as a positive sign of a change in the culture of the Parliamentary Community by some."

That is on the good side, but of course there is another side. Throughout my time as Leader of the House, both officially, through the working group, and unofficially, as a private Member of Parliament, I have heard some truly terrible stories. These were stories of victims being quietly moved on, rather than the bully being challenged in any way; of young women and, in some cases, young men being taken advantage of, on and off the estate; of complaints left entirely unaddressed by those who are supposed to be addressing them; and of mental health issues suffered by those who have been subjected to bullying, day in, day out, for long periods, by senior people who should be ashamed of themselves.

Alison Stanley's report on the complaints procedure makes for difficult reading. The start of the culture change to embed the need to treat everyone with dignity and respect has been far too slow and it has not been well enough resourced. That is the conclusion of her report. She talks specifically about the speed of investigations being too slow, and speed is crucial both for the complainant and for the respondent. Where someone is accused of

something and they then have to wait for several months not knowing whether it is going to be taken up, it can, in some ways, be as difficult as the situation is for the complainant, who has plucked up the courage to come forward and just does not seem to be making any progress. Issues associated with confidentiality were raised. Unfortunately, as we live under the spotlight in this place, there are accusations made in the press which mean that people who want to come forward with a complaint do not really know whether their complaint would also then find its way into the press. That gives the complainants serious concern about being re-victimised. We have not yet managed to achieve enough confidence in that aspect.

We also face issues associated with the qualifications and processes for investigations—for example, on the understanding of the investigator as to whether the case deserves investigation or not. Alison Stanley makes some very strong recommendations on this, which will go a long way to also addressing concerns about historical allegations. As Leader of the House of Commons, I was concerned that when we look at day-to-day allegations of issues that are ongoing now we find that they are in some cases more easily understood than something that happened eight or 10 years ago, where most of those involved at the time might no longer be around. The complexity can be much greater, although not necessarily so. So the quality and experience of the investigators are vital.

Mrs Miller: It is incredibly useful for the House to have my right hon. Friend talk about her experience in this debate. She mentioned the assertion in the Stanley report that the roll-out of the grievance procedure had been under-resourced. With reference to what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said, it is difficult for us to know who is responsible for that, but we need to know, because we Members need to ensure that that changes in future.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. One thing that I found fascinating about the independent review was to see somebody with real experience, as Alison Stanley has, of implementing these kinds of change processes, because one could really see where the rubber hits the road. It is all very well all of us sitting and standing here making representations as to how we want change to happen, but it has to be workable on the ground. There have to be proper resources and service-level agreements, so that people turn investigations around fast enough for them to be meaningful. My right hon. Friend is exactly right that resourcing is absolutely key.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the right hon. Lady agree with another of Alison Stanley's recommendations, which is about trying to ensure that there are no further cases of bullying and harassment? She recommends that all Members should go on the Valuing Everyone training course, which I am pleased to say I went on yesterday and would thoroughly recommend to all Members.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I had the great pleasure of going, with my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), to one of the first prototypes of the Valuing Everyone

training. I join him in thoroughly recommending that all colleagues undertake that training. It is quite insightful and extremely helpful.

Let me move on to address further points made in Alison Stanley's report that should inform the roll-out of the responses to the Cox inquiry. Alison Stanley talks about independence. Quite often, people who want to come forward with a complaint will be concerned that they do not want it to be discussed with somebody whom they may then come across, whether in a corridor, a Select Committee or, indeed, the Terrace café. They do not want to feel that they are going to bump into the person, so the scheme's true independence is vital, and Alison Stanley makes strong recommendations in that regard on which we should focus.

I wish to focus my remarks on the final point, which is about the ownership of the scheme. This goes right to the heart of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley said: who owns this scheme? We want to see things happen—we all say that it is not happening fast enough and ask why. The reality is that the recommendations in the Stanley report set out the problem rather than the solution. Using her best efforts, she has in effect sought to use current parliamentary processes to try to find a little scrap of accountability somewhere. I am afraid we are going to have to change that, so I shall focus on some specific recommendations.

First, the House of Commons Commission has struggled to tackle issues—not only this one, but others—at pace. The Commission should meet every week, not every month, and should have a much shorter, more focused agenda. The Clerk of the Commons and the director general should be voting members, not people who just sit there giving comments and are then overruled. They are clearly the two humans who are accountable for many issues, including the roll-out of this scheme and of changes to the culture, so it is right that they have a say on the House of Commons Commission.

The Commission's meeting times should be fixed, and if the chair is unable to attend, as is often the case, an alternative—I suggest it should be one of the external commissioners—should step in and chair the meeting instead, rather than it being cancelled or delayed, as happens now and is often a problem for the other attendees. The minutes of House of Commons Commission meetings should be circulated promptly within a couple of days, in line with best practice in the business world, not with the agenda for the next meeting, as so often happens now.

On the point of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley, MPs should be elected on to the House of Commons Commission. Colleagues are saying, "I don't know how the House of Commons Commission works. What does it do?" The reality is that if Members were elected to it, they would find out. In the House of Commons, we should be electing the members not only of the Commission, but of the Standards Committee. It should not be the case that somebody who might be dangerously independent is muzzled.

Chris Bryant: It is almost a shame to see the right hon. Lady on the Back Benches—no, it is a shame to see her on the Back Benches not least because she was taking this matter forward with such verve and energy and I applaud her for that. She knows that I completely

[Chris Bryant]

agree with all the recommendations that she has made thus far. We should be electing people on to the Commission, and the Commission should be meeting far more frequently so that it can transact more business more swiftly. Should we not also be electing all of the House Committees so that they can feed into the Commission more effectively?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman and I have had lots of conversations about this. We are in complete agreement, and I am quite sure that he and I would make a good fist of proposing a wholesale set of changes for the House of Commons Commission, including for the Finance and Administration Committees, but that is not the subject for today. None the less, what the whole issue of culture change in this place highlights is the need to change the way that we manage it, which is why I want to focus specifically on our recommendations for changes to the House Commission.

The final point on which I would like to focus is that, in dealing with culture change, we really have to do so in a bicameral way. I will not go through the sequence of events, but, essentially, we approved our report in July. The House of Lords approved theirs in November of that year. It was only in May of this year that they changed their standards Committee, so we are completely out of step. What they have agreed is not the same as what we have agreed, and this issue is absolutely integral to the point about sanctioning. I want to talk briefly about that before I draw to a close.

I am delighted to see that a number of members of the working group are here today and I thank them all again for what was such a fantastic cross-party collegiate piece of work. Let us be clear: this is not all about MPs. Members employ staff, the House employs staff and there are many, many contractors here. There are 15,000 people who work in the Palace of Westminster. Although this is not all about MPs, there are some really important considerations for them.

The working group wanted to ensure that a member of staff and/or an MP or a peer could be sanctioned even if they resign or, in the case of an MP, step down or lose their seat. This is very important. In all cases, the working group felt that records of bullying and harassing behaviour should be kept so that a member of staff or a Member of Parliament could be sanctioned should they ever return to either House. In this way, an MP who was given a peerage might be rejected outright potentially by the Lord standards Committee for their previous record in this House of bullying and harassment. A member of House or MPs' staff, or, indeed, a contractor could be sanctioned by being ineligible for a security pass should they seek re-employment in either House. These are really important points. I do not want to labour this, but I really do think that this has to be bicameral. We cannot have this going down two separate tracks so that someone can step down as an MP, go and get their peerage and then sit pretty at that end—as long as they do not repeat their nasty behaviour, they can get away with it scot-free. That point is key.

I was delighted by recent visits that I received when I was Leader of the House from Canadian and Australian delegations and by my own trips to visit the Llywydd in Wales and the presiding officer in Scotland to talk

about our complaints procedure in the UK Parliament. They are looking closely at what we are doing here. What I really hope and pray for is that this old and very much loved Parliament can demonstrate real change and can provide a genuine role model for other Parliaments right around the world. If we can achieve that and truly get to the point where we treat all who work and visit here with dignity and respect, we will have achieved a lasting legacy from this generation of UK parliamentarians.

4.9 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I apologise for being just two minutes late for the opening remarks of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). However, I enjoyed listening to the bulk of her contribution. Maybe it was because I arrived a bit late, but at times I felt that she was saying that no action had been taken on Cox. I agree with her that belated action has been taken on many aspects, but some progress is being made, although perhaps not as swiftly as any of us would like. Part of the reason that I referred to the Valuing Everyone course was that it is an example of action that is being taken. As I said in my intervention, all Members of Parliament should be required to go on that course. I suspect that that would not be popular among Members, many of whom will feel that they know perfectly well how to value others, but if we want to get to the bottom of this cultural change in practice, we should require each and every single Member of Parliament to attend the course.

Mrs Miller: This debate is very tightly drawn on the Cox report. There were only three recommendations from that report, two of which have not been put into practice, particularly the ability to look at non-recent cases—some people call them historical, but they do not feel very historical to me—as well as the implementation of an independent system of reviewing cases. I have been on the Valuing Everyone course and, although it is very important, attending it was not actually one of the three recommendations that I cited in today's motion.

Tom Brake: I will come to those recommendations, but if the purpose of what we are doing is to ensure that there are no future complaints about bullying and harassment, that course is part of the answer. Having attended the course yesterday, it is very clear that bullying and harassment is going on now, and that there are members of staff in particular who do not yet feel able to have that behaviour addressed and do not feel confident in speaking out openly. I would therefore suggest that the more Members who go on this course and the quicker that happens, the better.

Justin Madders: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for plugging the course because I certainly was not aware of it. I did, however, get an email last week advising me about a compulsory fire safety training course. Apparently the email was sent in error because I had already done the course, but my point is that if we are saying to Members that fire safety courses are compulsory, why can we not say that the course to which the right hon. Gentleman refers is compulsory as well?

Tom Brake: I do not want to get diverted on to fire safety, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that it is a matter that we discuss at the House of Commons Commission. Having been on the fire safety course,

I am very much in favour of naming and shaming the other 600 Members of Parliament—that is probably the number at this point in time—who have not been on it. I recommend that people attend that course because we are in a position of responsibility towards our staff. Therefore, if we have not been on the fire safety training course, we are not in a position to help them should an incident occur. But I need to focus, rightly, on the three critical points that came out of the Cox report.

The first recommendation is the termination of the Valuing Others and Respect policies. I hope that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke would agree that that has been acted on. The second recommendation is access to the independent complaints procedure for historical complaints. I agree that that has not progressed particularly quickly. However, the right hon. Lady may or may not be aware that the consultation on that closed on 14 June, and the Commission expects to consider its outcome on 24 June. We hope that the Leader of the House, who is very much new in his role but who I know will take these things very seriously, will ensure that any recommended proposal is brought before the House before the summer. I agree that it is not as quickly as we wanted—

Mrs Miller *rose*—

Tom Brake: And I am sure that is the point that the right hon. Lady is about to make.

Mrs Miller: I hope the House can forgive me for intervening again on the right hon. Gentleman, but he is actually the person who is most likely to be able to give us answers to questions because, unlike the Leader of the House, he is our representative on the Commission. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of making progress on the second recommendation. May I gently remind him that not making progress is potentially unlawful? Surely the Commission does not need a consultation; it should simply be telling us what legal advice it has sought following the Equality and Human Rights Commission's letter saying that it could be unlawful to block these non-recent cases. Might we actually be falling foul of our own law?

Tom Brake: I thank the right hon. Lady for that intervention. She will be aware that there has been legal advice of a different nature about what action we can take. However, I agree that we need to take action. I very much hope that the meeting on 24 June is the point at which a very clear way forward will be taken and that the House will then act on that before the summer recess. I do not want to get too political, but frankly we are not doing very much else in terms of the parliamentary timetable, so we have lots of opportunities to get the matter resolved, and I hope that we will do that before the summer recess.

The third point relates to an independent process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against Members of Parliament. I agree that we have not acted quickly enough. There were some quite engaged discussions, if not to say arguments, at the Commission about how to take it forward. I think that a satisfactory way forward has been determined: a staff team are going to look at it. We hope that we will be in a position to consider the output from that and choose a preferred option on which there will be a consultation in the autumn.

Again, I agree with the right hon. Lady that not enough action has been taken so far. However, there are things that are in train, including, as the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), mentioned, the Alison Stanley report that is flagging up actions that we should be taking. In terms of a timetable, I agree with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke that we need an action plan with precise dates on which the Commission can then be held to account on. The Commission is going to agree an action plan in response to the Alison Stanley report by 24 June. There are timescales available for some of the things that the right hon. Lady is worried about, and rightly so. Yes, the House has not moved as quickly as it should, but the Commission is taking action. It has agreed at least some timescales to which we are going to report.

A number of Members have rightly flagged up some concerns about the way that the Commission operates. We have heard that it is perhaps not as efficient, accountable, open or transparent as it should be, that it could come to conclusions more quickly, and so on. I have already mentioned to the Leader of the House the initiative suggested by the lay people, Jane McCall and Rima Makarem. When the previous Leader of the House was still in post, there was the idea that the Commission should collectively sit down and work out whether we are working as efficiently and effectively as we could be—how we could streamline the Commission's processes and look again at the way it operates to ensure that it is meeting more frequently; that there is more clarity about the way that the decisions are taken; and that it becomes—much more businesslike in the way that it operates. That is certainly what I would like to see—

I am sure that the Leader of the House would want to support that initiative. I think there is a collective desire—

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride) *indicated assent.*

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab) *indicated assent.*

Tom Brake: The shadow Leader of the House is nodding as well. I think there is a collective desire to ensure that we run the Commission more effectively than has perhaps been the case so far. I am sure that all the players on the Commission will want to support that initiative.

I agree that, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke said, action has not been taken as swiftly as it should have been in relation to the Cox recommendations. However, there are some challenging deadlines, some of which I have mentioned, and they are on the record. We are meeting on 24 June, and there is an undertaking from the Commission to take decisions and agree action plans at that point. We are therefore very close to having to take some of these critical decisions. This is all on record and in *Hansard*, and many Members are here and have listened to this. I am sure that they will therefore want to know the outcome of the meeting on 24 June, and have assurances that the Commission will actually take the decisions that it has undertaken to take there in order to start to address the concerns that the right hon. Lady and, indeed, others here have about the lack of speed with which some of these decisions and actions are being taken.

4.19 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Everyone is entitled to work free from harassment and abuse in an environment that promotes dignity and respect, yet sexual harassment and violence against women in politics is a long-standing phenomenon in the UK and in many other countries. I am proud to chair the all-party group on women in Parliament, the women's caucus that works to encourage more women to come into political life and to support one another when they do. In the past couple of years, there have been a number of inquiries into the nature and extent of sexual harassment in Westminster, and the inquiry by Dame Laura Cox was pivotal in shining a light on the scale of sexual harassment, intimidation and bullying in Parliament.

The women's caucus held a meeting in February with Dame Laura, and we were delighted that the then Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), was able to attend and reaffirm the commitment of the House to driving forward meaningful change in this area. We welcomed, and continue to welcome, the lead that the House has taken in ensuring ongoing reform and making Parliament a place where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. While the allegations of bullying and harassment in Parliament shocked all of us we were glad to see progress, with the new complaints and grievance policy now up and running. However, while there were welcome changes, such as the appointment of a new director of HR and a cultural transformation director, along with some interim changes on the Committee on Standards, Dame Laura conveyed to the group issues that have been raised with her by members of staff in both the Lords and the Commons about the implementation of her report. As chair of the all-party group, I would like to set out some of her concerns, bearing in mind that it is nine months since the publication of her report.

There were particular concerns about transparency and the rate of progress in implementing the recommendations. Dame Laura has received requests for amendments to the new independent complaints and grievance scheme to enable members of staff to bring complaints relating to historical allegations. Members of staff often find it difficult to make such complaints. There have also been suggestions to make sure that the processes for determining complaints brought by members of staff against MPs will be entirely independent and that MPs will play no part in those processes. I urge the new Leader of the House to look at those two specific suggestions and make sure that progress is made on those issues.

Dame Laura expressed concern about her recommendations becoming bogged down in process through, for example, the setting up of working groups and advisory panels. The feedback that she received from staff was that they were concerned about knowing who is responsible for what, and the dates by which action should be taken. The problem of becoming bogged down in the process and detail, rather than seeing the big picture, was holding back progress.

We need better communication both to members of staff and to members of the public on the parliamentary website about what has been done and by whom. It was good that the House of Commons Commission published a statement on the way forward last week, but much

more regular communication is needed for transparency. The biggest concern expressed to Dame Laura by staff was that some MPs and senior management—and, indeed, some very senior MPs—are prevaricating and delaying. It has even been suggested that that is with the aim of attempting to water down the recommendations. Delay can only exacerbate the lack of trust and confidence of members of staff that there will be fundamental change and that recommendations will be carried out. Any delays can only worsen the level of public confidence in the House's ability to correct past errors and implement fundamental change. As I have said, these accusations were passed on to Dame Laura by members of staff.

We know from research by the Fawcett Society that the level of public concern about the nature and extent of allegations is very high, with 73% of both men and women believing that there needs to be change in how unwanted sexual harassment is dealt with in politics. If there are delays, they will only continue to undermine the legitimacy and authority of our own Parliament. There must be greater transparency and greater accountability. These recommendations are important, and progress needs to be seen.

I have a couple of other points to make. Having worked in politics for a decade both in Europe and then here, I see how it is very stressful. We in this place face very difficult decisions. We are living at a time of great change, with great challenges. We are living in the middle of an industrial revolution—the digital revolution—with huge demographic changes putting great pressure on our public services. We see the generational challenge of addressing climate change, which we must get on top of now, or the next generation will not have a planet as we know it for the future. On top of that, we in this place of course face the overlaying challenge of resolving Brexit.

It is therefore not surprising that politicians are under great stress and can be snappy. However, there is a difference between being stressed and snappy and continual harassment of staff, which is the allegation laid in front of us. There is work we could do to alleviate the level of stress in this place. I have talked about the lack of predictability of the parliamentary day, and other Parliaments have managed to find ways to resolve that, which does destress the working environment. I was very pleased to take part in the gender-sensitive Parliament audit last year, which made many recommendations about how to make this Parliament a more welcoming and sensitive place for Members, staff and those who work here, especially those with families or other caring responsibilities. I am very pleased to be on the Sub-Committee of the Women and Equalities Committee that is looking at implementing those recommendations.

I really feel strongly that I do not want to leave the impression that women are not wanted in this place. There are more women on these Benches in Parliament than ever before. Women make a huge difference in their constituencies, and they make a huge difference in Westminster. We need more of them here, and we must support them. In the news today has been the need to make sure we are supporting women, especially when they are expecting a baby or when they have a baby. No woman should have to choose between having a family and standing for political office, and I am very sorry to hear the concerns of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy).

However, I have been in touch today with a number of women MPs who have recently had a baby or are expecting a baby very soon, and some have commented on the great support they are being given by their colleagues, constituents and staff. Indeed, the Minister with responsibility for the constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), who is currently on maternity leave, has commented that proxy voting is a good start. She has been in touch digitally today on these matters to remind us, at the same time as she is breastfeeding, that it is National Breastfeeding Week. We are introducing measures to make sure that our women and our men can have such flexibility. Again, I thank the former Leader of the House for her efforts in introducing proxy voting.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is making a really important point. It is really important that the message that goes out from this place is that women should be MPs. Having children should not be an impediment to having a career in Parliament. My youngest was three when I joined—Madam Deputy Speaker, you have probably got a better story than that. Even back then, in 2005, it was very possible to do that. I would want to offer every support to any Member who felt that it was difficult.

Vicky Ford: I thank my right hon. Friend for that valuable point. I say again that there are more women in this place than ever before and they make a hugely valuable contribution. There are many women in this place who have just become mums or are soon to become mums—on that point, I note my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch), most fondly. We must make sure that mums and dads have the flexibility to take parental leave and to be supported during the time when they are expecting a baby. Every constituency in this country is different and every Member of Parliament represents their constituency in a different way. We need to make sure that each MP has the flexibility to make sure that their constituents continue to be represented when they are taking parental leave.

I want to make one final point about harassment. Harassment of politicians and our staff does not just happen in the physical world. It happens increasingly online, and there has been exponential growth in that online abuse. Action must be taken to stop the online harassment of women involved in politics—and it is women who are harassed more.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady is making a very important point about online harassment. Does she agree that dealing expediently with the report, being transparent about it and getting on with it would set an example that might help to break the logjam of inaction on online abuse elsewhere?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We must move on with the Cox report. It must be implemented and there must be transparency. For the future, we must also deal with other areas where women, and men, are harassed, although it affects women particularly. There is a level of intimidation that is turning women off standing for public office, and that is therefore a direct attack on our democracy and on the democracy of the future. Britain needs to take a lead. The rest of the world is watching us. We must make sure that this Government do not allow this to continue into the next election.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), I would say that the hon. Lady is absolutely right. There are a small number of women here in Parliament who have become mothers while being Members of Parliament. Those of us who have done it know that it is a challenge, but it is far from impossible. It is very worth while, and it is really important that we encourage more of our sisters to follow this path, and that we do not let them be put off by anything.

4.33 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This place has a culture of

“deference, subservience, acquiescence and silence, in which bullying, harassment and sexual harassment have been able to thrive and have long been tolerated and concealed.”

Those were the words of Dame Laura Cox when her report was published in October 2018. Let us be honest with ourselves: if we received that report about any employer in our constituency, we would be on the phone to them straight away demanding action. That is why we have had so many Members making similar points today.

Such was the shocking extent of those revelations, just nine days later the House of Commons Commission agreed to implement the recommendations of the Cox report in full and without delay. There was agreement across the House that something should happen as soon as possible. House of Commons staff bravely came forward, shared their stories and gave evidence to Dame Laura. They felt that they had been listened to and that their efforts had not been in vain. There was a sense that we were beginning to see a real change in the culture of this place.

Like many Members, I am frustrated that, nearly a year since the House adopted the independent complaints and grievance scheme and nearly nine months since the House accepted Dame Laura’s three principal recommendations, we still have a long way to go. It should be to all our shame that we are not much, if any, further along than where we were seven or eight months ago. There is little or no evidence that the culture of acquiescence and silence is being actively challenged. The sense of urgency has, I feel, dissipated from this debate.

The House of Commons Commission is responsible for the implementation of Dame Laura’s recommendations, so it is right that the commission should answer to this House about the lack of progress, engagement and information to date. We are told that things are happening, but they are clearly not happening quickly enough. I wholeheartedly agree with the motion. The reputation of the House has been further damaged by the lack of progress made. I came to this place to fight for better working conditions for everyone in this country. That includes people who work in this place. It is only right that we get our own house in order.

We should be an exemplar of best practice. We should be the standard that others look up to and try to emulate. We are so far from that at present and I feel very frustrated about that on a personal level. More importantly, I am frustrated for all those who contributed in good faith to Dame Laura’s report, particularly those who have been the victims of bullying and harassment. They have shown such bravery in coming forward to take part in the inquiry, even under the condition of

[Justin Madders]

anonymity, to record their experiences in the hope that by coming forward they would change things for the better. Men and women, former and current colleagues, have been let down again and again by this House, and we are still being let down now. People who have waited years are still waiting to see the changes we need to come forward.

Sometimes I think people do not appreciate just how debilitating, damaging and distressing it is to go into work every day not knowing what it is you are going to face. I was an employment lawyer before I came to this place, so I saw clients every day who faced intolerable workplaces, but at least there was a way forward. What my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said earlier about the power imbalance is absolutely right. Every workplace has power imbalances, but the difference here is that our power is pretty much absolute. She is absolutely right that we need to give away some of that power to get a sense of fairness and balance in this process.

We were all clear when we met here in November that we needed to move forward quickly and that people had waited long enough. Swift action on the two outstanding principal recommendations—the historical cases and the independent process—is needed immediately. We all seem to agree that that is needed, so I have to ask: what is stopping that happening much sooner? I am aware that there has now been a consultation on historical allegations, which concluded last week. The proposals, which set out that non-recent cases will be treated in exactly the same way as the current independent procedure, with the same assessors, steps and decision-makers, will, I hope, ensure that whoever brings a complaint will have an equality of process moving forward. Given that what has been consulted on is exactly the same as the current procedure, I do not know why it took so long for the proposals to come forward. If we are to have the same system, we should have been implementing it a long time ago. It is only when the system is up and running for all complaints that trust will be restored and we can begin to take those crucial steps, which are desperately needed, to change the culture.

I am also deeply concerned about the lack of progress towards meeting the priority of non-involvement of MPs in the independent complaints process. This was in response to the specific recommendation that the House considered the most effective way to ensure the process for determining complaints on bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against Members of Parliament would be an entirely independent process in which Members of Parliament play no part. That is pretty clear—we all know what it means. The Commission agreed last December that a small working group should be set up to examine and report on that recommendation, but seven months on and it was only last week that any progress was made. A staff team is to be set up that might report in the autumn—a year after the initial recommendations—and only then would the Commission consider its proposals. Goodness knows when it will come back to the House for us to vote on implementing any changes.

There are serious questions to be asked about what has been happening for the last seven months. How can staff have faith that further announcements will be forthcoming? It feels like someone is dragging their feet. We need to move this on much more quickly. How can

we give the impression that this is a priority for people in this place? There is no legislation coming forward at the moment, and we know that the Government are in a holding pattern until they sort out the leadership. We could be using this time to implement these recommendations, to have a proper debate in here and to get them on the books sooner rather than later.

The culture identified in the Cox report as widespread, enduring and profound is still preventing progress. Many Members have rightly expressed concern about the delays, and we are told that there are working groups and so on. The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), is right that the nub is the lack of clear accountability—it is not clear who is responsible for implementing the recommendations. Well, we are all responsible, and we all have to do a bit better. We need concrete action. We need much more frequent updates. There is no reason it should take any longer.

We have to get this right. Staff feel this is being kicked into the long grass. This does nothing to reassure them that the problems with the culture identified in the Cox report will be addressed. We are not asking for the earth; we are asking for something that is commonplace in every working environment up and down the country. In accepting Dame Laura's report and agreeing to implement the recommendations in full, we have already agreed what needs to be done—the clue is in the title: it is an independent procedure. Why can we not get on and get that independent procedure in place? The failure to act swiftly only damages further the reputation of this place.

One way to instil confidence in this system is to make sure people know that what is happening is effective. I am not suggesting we name individuals who have had complaints lodged against them, but if we at least knew that those complaints had been upheld or dealt with and that offenders had been sanctioned, we would know that something was happening.

I want briefly to return to the issue of having a truly independent system of adjudication for complaints. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned this. All political parties should look at their own internal processes at the same time as this work is ongoing. If we ever finally have independent processes in this place, we could find ourselves with different processes being operated against Members for essentially the same types of complaint. As far as we know, the new independent procedure covers everyone working in both Houses, whether paid or not, and anyone with a parliamentary pass, and it covers bullying and harassment committed while on the parliamentary estate, in constituency offices or when carrying out parliamentary work.

The third of those is a bit vague. What covers parliamentary work? Someone wanting to bring a complaint of sexual harassment might have to go through an entirely different process depending on where the offence took place. Where does an act committed at a party conference come into it? Is that parliamentary duties? What if the victim is not a passholder but is harassed in the course of parliamentary duties? Where do we draw the line? We want to avoid having different processes depending on where the offence takes place and who the victim is. We have an opportunity to get consistency across the board.

Sadly, there is ample evidence that political parties are prone to be tempted to make decisions about such complaints on a political basis, rather than on the basis of whether that behaviour needs to be dealt with. That has applied to all political parties for as long as politics has been in existence, but that does not make it right. If we do not get our own house in order and deal with bullying and harassment in our own parties, whoever has done it, we have no right to lecture other employers about how they treat their staff. That is why I believe that there needs to be a root-and-branch review of all political parties' complaints processes and an acceptance that we need total transparency and total independence. If we carry on as we are, we shall run the risk that members of our parties will not be dealt with impartially when serious allegations are made—that they will not be dealt with as they would be dealt with here—or, at the very least, that there will be a perception that they are not being dealt with impartially. That could be as corrosive as not dealing with the allegations at all.

We have to think about the message that the low attendance in the Chamber is sending to staff. Where is this issue on our list of priorities? We should be fighting to ensure that everyone who works here, and everyone in every workplace in the country, is treated with dignity and respect, free from bullying and harassment. We need to accept that we have a long way to go, and that we really must find an answer and move this forward as soon as possible.

4.45 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), for not being able to be present at the start of her speech. I was able to catch up with her remarks, and I think that she spoke on behalf of all of us in the House.

I thank Dame Laura Cox for leading an extremely important inquiry, and for producing such a comprehensive report containing such sensible and achievable recommendations. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), the former Leader of the House, for her work in beginning to implement those recommendations. She was clearly right when she highlighted the need for a significant culture change in this place. I also pay tribute to her for her acknowledgement that it will not happen overnight, but it needs to happen, and to happen without delay. The time that has already passed has been too long for those who work in this building, who work with us and who support us, but who may be subject to behaviour that would be clearly unacceptable not only in this Parliament, but in any other workplace.

Bullying is vile and horrid. Unfortunately, it appears to be becoming more and more of an issue—a visible issue—in wider society. Across society, there seems to be, in many cases, not only a breakdown in what might previously have been thought of as common courtesies, but a breakdown in basic decency. It is a question of fundamental values: how we should treat each other, and what is the correct way in which to work with not just those to whom we are close, but those with whom we have professional contact.

As Members of Parliament, we clearly have a particular role in setting an example of—I was going to say “good behaviour”, but behaviour that is acceptable. We should

not be expecting thanks or congratulations merely for not doing things that would be rightly condemned if they were done by anyone in any role in almost any business, any school, or any workplace in any other organisation anywhere in our country.

When we talk about bullying in the context of schoolchildren, we refer to the devastating effect that it has on their mental health and development, but bullying is an issue that affects people at all stages of life, regardless of their backgrounds, and it is increasingly affecting people's mental health. Technology and social media seem to be increasing the prevalence of bullying, but it is even more noticeable that the reach of that bullying and abuse continues to expand so that, in many instances, victims cannot feel safe, whether in the workplace or at home. If a person cannot feel safe from being abused by someone who—as other Members have said—has an improper power advantage and is abusing that imbalance in the relationship, how can that person be happy and continue to function on not only a professional level but a personal level? So, yes, we in this place must be setting an example to people in the wider country, not showing people how to belittle and undermine others.

As has been said, politics is a very peculiar environment. It clearly attracts people with high passions and people who feel very strongly about their beliefs. It arouses those passions. People get hot under the collar. It makes people's blood boil. People rarely end up agreeing with each other. But high passions and strongly held views cannot be an excuse for unacceptable bullying and abusive behaviour. It is not acceptable for my children at home and it is not acceptable for those of us who claim to represent our constituents here in the mother of all Parliaments.

If we are to resolve the issue of bullying and harassment in Parliament, the recommendations in Dame Laura's report must be embraced. The report needs to be implemented wholeheartedly and we must enact a seismic shift in culture. We must develop that culture of respect that we speak of for our society. We must embody a culture of respect in Parliament because everybody who works in Parliament—whether Members of Parliament, staff, Officers of the House, contractors, journalists or anyone else who has reason to work in this place—has a right to be able to go about that work and their lives without fear of abuse or risk of bullying and harassment.

In many ways, we see a parallel now with the stories around the expenses scandal a decade ago, very different though those issues are. Both cases threaten to completely undermine what remaining respect and confidence people have in our democratic structures, institutions and political system. In both cases, it is simply unacceptable to try to appeal to some peculiar culture in Parliament, saying “People outside just don't understand what it's like. It's always been that way.” Whether or not it has always been that way, if it should not be that way, we have to make sure it is not that way, and that means we need to take action now and to make sure that processes are in place so that the victims or potential victims of this behaviour can be protected and those who are guilty of this unacceptable behaviour can be held to account.

As with the expenses scandal, it is clearly inappropriate for Members of Parliament to think that they can mark their own homework. That is why the independent nature of this body is so important. That is such an

[Mike Wood]

important recommendation from Dame Laura, so I hope that the Commission will ensure it is implemented swiftly.

This has been a painful and unpleasant experience for Parliament as an institution, but it has been a far more painful and unpleasant experience for those who have been the victims of bullying and harassment here, and whether that is from other MPs or from staff should not matter; they should have that level of protection. And it has been painful, unpleasant and unacceptable regardless of whether it happened before or after this new code of conduct came into place. That is why it is essential that the issues of historical abuse and bullying are properly addressed. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) talked about retrospective regulation, and we must be wary of the risk of retrospective regulation and rules coming in that hold people to a standard they could not reasonably have expected to be held to, but this is not the situation on the whole: most of these cases do not involve some obscure administrative or procedural requirement that we are expecting people to sign up to that we would not have expected them to meet a decade ago. In almost all cases, this is about basic standards of decency, where, regardless of whether the code of conduct was in force at the time, it is perfectly reasonable to expect Members to have abided by those standards. Those who did not should expect to answer for that, and whether what happened was 18 months ago, three years ago or longer, those who have been the victims of abuse, where the evidence is there to support those allegations, should have the right to have their claims heard and, where appropriate, there may be arguments for redress.

We really need these recommendations, including for an independent body and for an effective system to handle historical cases, to be implemented without further unnecessary delay. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House feels strongly about these issues, as his predecessor did. We all call on the House of Commons Commission to do everything possible to make sure that the changes are introduced, implemented and enforced, so that we can all come behind the report and the recommendations made by Dame Laura, endorsed by the House and so badly needed by so many people who work for us in the Houses of Parliament.

4.56 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), and I apologise for missing the opening speech, as I was attending a polling station at that time.

Like many in the Chamber, I very much welcome the good work undertaken by Dame Laura Cox and the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). She was emphatic in her support for Dame Laura's report and eager to see its recommendations implemented. I am sure that her successor is equally keen. While a fundamental change in policy will always require time and patience, I feel very strongly that we must prioritise its implementation, as has been said so often this afternoon. I believe that that is essential if we are to regain the trust of the House staff and, equally importantly, the wider public. Indeed, I am convinced that it is also key to regaining public trust more generally in politics and politicians.

The implementation delays are unacceptable. As Members, I am sure that we all agree that the staff of this House do an absolutely remarkable job for all of us, often under intense pressure. Much of what goes on in this place involves some level of stress or pressure—not least time pressure—whether that is on the shoulders of parliamentarians or House staff. Often, it is indeed a shared pressure. We are all fallible as human beings, but what we must avoid, and what Dame Laura sought to highlight in her report, is the almost casual manner in which this wicked sort of bullying, harassment and behaviour seemed to have become endemic in this place. I imagine that this was sadly supported by a blind-eye policy adopted by those around them. Stress and pressure are no excuse for an underlying culture of bullying and harassment. As Members, we must remember that the tentacles of bullying and harassment go beyond the workplace to the domestic environment, social lives and general wellbeing of the individuals who are subject to bullying and harassment. We must never, ever condone any such activity.

It is clear that there was little confidence in the erstwhile Valuing Others policy, introduced as far back as 2007, or the Respect policy of 2011, however well intended they were. In fact, it is frankly astonishing that there was no formal avenue for dealing with complaints before these policies came into effect, or indeed, that even after their introduction, it seemed that the somewhat old-fashioned and antiquated “quiet word” in one's ear here or there was sufficient. That is not acceptable any more. We can hardly be surprised, therefore, that there was little confidence in the policies or their implementation. However, by swift action we must be satisfied that the staff of this House—they are so important—will have confidence in the implementation of the Cox recommendations. There are indeed only three; there is not a raft of important recommendations to implement. The introduction of the independent complaints and grievance scheme marks a positive first step, but we must not lose our momentum. We must overcome the inertia that we have experienced to date.

Earlier this month, the House of Commons Commission confirmed that agreement had been reached on the implementation of the Cox recommendations. I am, however, concerned about the treatment of historical cases before June 2017. I see no acceptable justification or reason as to why it is impossible to assess historical incidents with similar accuracy as recent cases, and I hope that that decision will be reconsidered or revisited.

Bullying and harassment have no place in the House of Commons or, indeed, in any area of public life whatsoever. It is abundantly clear that we have failed the staff in the past, and we must not fail them in the future. However, the solution lies not just in the implementation of the Cox recommendations but more fundamentally in the behaviour of ourselves as parliamentarians. In closing, I suggest that we as parliamentarians we would do well to listen to the wise words of Robert Burns, who wrote as follows:

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us!”

5.1 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a rare pleasure to follow immediately after my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant),

especially when he quotes Burns so beautifully. I, too, must apologise to the House and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for missing the start of this debate—for pretty much the same reason, I am afraid—but had I waited until after this time, I might have missed the ballot, so I hope that the House will forgive me.

I would also like to repeat the sentiments of many who have spoken today by offering my gratitude to Dame Laura Cox for her tireless work in putting together this report. Her dedication to making this House a better, safer and more respectful place for everyone who works here has been indispensable, and I am glad that she will continue to be consulted by the staff team that will lead on producing options for implementing the recommendations in her report. In addition, I would like to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on securing this debate and on their impassioned speeches—at least those that I managed to catch. I would like to commend my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), as we are getting used to having to call the former Leader of the House. She was instrumental in the progress we have made as a House on this issue during her service as Leader of the House. I commend my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for her leadership on this issue, and I would also like to wish the current Leader of the House all the very best in his efforts to progress this matter further.

Parliament is about much more than MPs and peers. Thousands of people work on the parliamentary estate in a whole host of roles, and the Cox report is about making sure that all of us who work in this place can go about our work with dignity and free from bullying or harassment of any kind. This is an important goal in itself, but it is also vital if Parliament is to do its duty as a democratic institution and have the faith of the public. A House where the powerful exploit their position to mistreat their colleagues, not necessarily on purpose, is neither an accessible House nor a truly democratic House; it is a House that will quickly lose the confidence of the people it is supposed to represent.

I am glad that Members on both sides of the House share an aspiration to make things better, but we must do so as quickly as we can, and in a manner that is thorough and robust and that properly safeguards staff on the parliamentary estate for years to come. I therefore welcome the progress that has been made so far on implementing the Cox report's recommendations, including the abandonment of the Valuing Others and Respect policies. I am disappointed that more progress has not yet been made on the other recommendations—on historical or non-recent allegations, in particular—but it is my hope that those recommendations will be implemented in a rigorous manner in the very near future.

It is vital that we act on the recommendations because I firmly believe that Parliament must be accessible. Between the cases of bullying and harassment on the parliamentary estate and the ongoing proliferation of online abuse, such as the kind described by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), towards not just MPs, but people who have the temerity to appear online in support of their MP or other MPs and all those who work in wider politics, I fear that more and more people may come to the conclusion that

politics, whether that means holding office or working on the estate or in a constituency office, may not be for them. That could have profound consequences for the health of our democracy.

We must therefore continue to work together, quickly and thoroughly, to make Parliament and politics truly accessible again, and that includes delivering on the recommendations of the Cox report. It is clear from this debate that there is genuine commitment from all sides to achieve that, but it is vital that we put today's words into renewed action tomorrow and every day until we have achieved the objective of making these Houses of Parliament a safer and more respectful place for everyone who works here.

5.5 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this important debate. I also thank other parliamentary colleagues for contributing to what has been an excellent debate that has given us the opportunity to kick around some issues that now go back almost two years.

The major theme is that there seems to be some slowness in execution or a paucity of action around some of the conclusions and recommendations of Dame Laura Cox's report. I do not take great exception to that, because the report was produced in October and its conclusions were accepted in a debate in November, and it is now only June of the following year, which is not particularly unusual. I am pretty used to the glacial pace that this House operates under and to the speed at which things get done, so I do not find it at all unreasonable that we have waited some seven or eight months to get to this stage.

I want to go through conclusions one by one to see what progress we have made. As everybody has said, Dame Laura made only the three recommendations. I think we have established that the first has been dealt with, which was to abandon the Valuing Others and Respect policies. The second recommendation was, of course, that the independent complaints and grievance scheme should be amended to ensure that historical cases can be heard, and we have heard a few contributions, most notably from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who represents the House of Commons Commission, that progress is being made on that.

I declare an interest in that I have been involved in the ICGS since its inception, and I have just recently been appointed to the House of Commons Commission—an august body on which I look forward to serving. The members of the ICGS group take things seriously when we are presented with them, and it was important that the second recommendation was considered with full intent, which is what we have done. I have seen the shadow Leader of the House shaking her head about all that, and we had a series of meetings just to see how to respond. We said that we would move forward, so we had a consultation, and we are trying to ensure that we move forward and that the recommendations on that specific point are accepted by the House.

The matter will be debated further at a forthcoming meeting of the House of Commons Commission, which will be my first, and I hope that there will be progress. I therefore do not see any big issues with the second recommendation, but if I am missing something, I am

[Pete Wishart]

more than happy for the right hon. Member for Basingstoke to intervene and tell me where the drawbacks are and where something is being lost.

The third recommendation is that the process for determining complaints should be independent and free from any involvement from Members of Parliament and, again, I have seen progress there. There is a complicated issue relating to how we deal with historical cases, and there were delicate negotiations with the Committee on Standards as to how things would be progressed. I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who chairs the Committee, is not here, because I am pretty certain that she would reiterate that it is important to get things right when making really important decisions about how we operate. I know that there were real issues with how to do that, and that legality and other things had to be considered. I think we are making steady progress, and there is a view that independence will be created—no one in this House would deny that.

I see progress in all these things. It might not be fast enough for the right hon. Member for Basingstoke and other Members, but I am ticking all these recommendations. I am ticking the top recommendation, with two thirds of a tick for the other ones. I understand there is a real desire to get things going, but we are not doing all that bad.

Mrs Miller: Would the hon. Gentleman be satisfied if employers in his constituency reacted so glacially, to use his term, to important recommendations about the safety of his constituents? I am not sure he would. I also think he needs to reflect on whether the two-thirds ticks he is giving those two elements actually make any difference to staff in this place. It might make a difference to him and to members of the Commission but, if we were to ask staff, they will not have noticed a blind bit of difference.

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Lady makes an important point, but what is more important to me when it comes to these things is that they are done right for the constituents I represent, for the staff I employ in this House and for my obligations and responsibilities as a Member of Parliament.

It is important that we get this right, which is why some of the conversations and negotiations that are required have to be played out so we get to the right solution, and I believe we are getting there. We owe it to the House to get to the right place. We have to make progress, and we have to deal with this.

I remember when all this started. There was a huge flurry of activity, with party leaders getting together under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister. There was an urgency about it. Something had to be done.

The energy seems to have been sucked out of that initiative, and I do not know why. The Chamber is a bit busier now but, at its busiest, I counted only 15 Members here to discuss these important issues. At one point during the debate we were down to seven Back-Bench colleagues listening to these important proceedings.

I suggest that somehow we are not getting the message out to other colleagues, and I am grateful to everyone who has been here. The contributions have been sincere

and heartfelt, but we are not exciting the House with these proposals. We have to do more to ensure that Members are engaged with this process, because it is about us. It is about our behaviour and how we respond to staff and to the parliamentary community.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that perhaps one way of getting the attention of Members would be to act on my earlier suggestion—in fact, it was recommended by Alison Stanley—that all Members should be required to do the Valuing Everyone programme? That would draw people's attention to it.

Pete Wishart: I will address Alison Stanley's recommendations, which are important. The six-month review of the ICGS is important, and we are all grateful for her contribution and the sterling leadership that she offered. Again, I see the shadow Leader of the House nodding her head in agreement, because Alison Stanley demonstrated real leadership on these issues.

One of Alison Stanley's main recommendations, and one of the things that was changed in the scheme—this is why these things are so important to get right—is that the training will now be compulsory for all Members. In the early stages of the working group's report, it was suggested that the training would be voluntary. We tried to do as much as possible to encourage Members to undertake the training, but now it is to be mandatory. I know the right hon. Gentleman did the training yesterday, because he did it with two of my staff. I brought them all the way down from Perth to ensure they would be among the first to be properly trained in the scheme. My staff's recollection of the event is that he was an assiduous and energetic collaborator in the exercise, on which I congratulate him.

Along with the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House, I was supposed to be the first to undertake the training, but I had responsibilities elsewhere. I say today—I will be held to account for this—that I will undergo the training at the earliest opportunity. Every Member should ensure they do the training, because it is important. We have 15,000 people working on this estate. We have huge obligations and responsibilities to ensure that everybody who enters it, be they those who work here or visitors, is treated with respect and dignity. Regardless of everything else that happens in this place, the one thing we can all agree and unite on is that there should be zero tolerance of any inappropriate behaviour by anybody who works on this estate, be they people who work for Members of Parliament or others working in any capacity across this House.

I served on the ICGS group, and I join in the tributes to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)—I always find it curious when “south” and “north” are in the same constituency name, but I think I said that about right. She, too, was really dedicated to this and provided inspired leadership for the report. Her determination and sheer willingness to get this through ensured that we got to this stage. If anything is going to be her legacy, it will be the fact that we have been able to progress to this stage on the ICGS.

We have just had Alison Stanley's six-month review, and I have already said how highly I regard her and the work she has done. All of us on the ICGS group are eternally grateful for all that. She made important recommendations, and it was right that the ICGS was

reviewed at six months. There is another commitment, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, to have it reviewed again in 18 months. I will say again today that I am happy to continue to serve. I will just talk about my association with the work that has been done so far, but I look forward to serving that committee and coming back in a year's time just to see where we are on it.

The most important recommendation was the one mentioned by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, which was that training will be mandatory. We had a look at some of the processes that have been set up, for example the independent helpline. There is a general conclusion that it is working satisfactorily. The number of people who have sought help and advice via the independent line is really encouraging; so many people have now seen this as a feature they can go to in order to secure the assistance that they feel they require, so we know that it is working. All the way through the ICGS process, we have looked at things to do with confidentiality, with the involvement of Members of Parliament—the so-called “marking your own homework”—and with ensuring that we make progress on historical cases. We have had countless debates and sometimes even arguments about all these features. We have got to a place where we are reasonably okay.

On the historical cases, I believe we are getting there. I think we are going in the right direction. We were probably shaken a little by legal advice we got about how a new scheme would be applied to people who had not signed up to it. We all questioned the quality of that legal advice and opinion—initially we had advice we were prepared to accept, which said that it could not be. Dame Laura Cox could not care less about that, and, as a former High Court judge, she is probably right; opinions probably do not come greater when it comes to this thing. She said that she was having nothing to do with that and historical cases would have to be looked at. That was a clear recommendation to the independent ICGS group to look at this and incorporate it. As I have said, there is a real and absolute commitment to do that.

I will not go through the progress on the other issues on which Dame Laura makes recommendations, because, as I have said, I think we are getting there, although I know we might not be doing so with the speed that some in this House would like or to their satisfaction. I think we will get there, and I believe that within a short period we will get to the point where we will have implemented all the recommendations made by Dame Laura.

There is one feature I do not think we have made enough progress on, and I continually come back to this. I am referring to the culture of this place and how this House operates, how it appears, how it feels and what it expresses about dynamic power relationships and arrangements. We have to do more work on this. Banning alcohol in the Members' Tea Room and in the cafeteria was to be it—that is utterly ridiculous. We are talking about one small bottle or glassful of wine, but a ban was seen as attacking the culture in this place. I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it is almost laughable that that was the only positive and concrete proposal that was implemented. That is just nonsense.

We have to look more at how this place does things, and we have a blueprint for that in Sarah Childs' guide, “The Good Parliament”. If Members have not read it, I ask them to please have a look at it, because it suggests a number of things we could do, even down to how we

light the place and how we arrange and put together meeting spaces. This place practically oozes patriarchy out of its statues, paintings and walls. The new types of arrangements that we need to put in place to become the modern Parliament that we need to be are almost impossible to design because of the way we arrange this place and the way the House is structured.

I have suggested a number of proposals. The way we address each other in this place is ridiculous. I cannot call people by their first name. In how many other places in the world can people not do that? I was born with a name and I am quite happy for people to use it. I have to wear a tie in this place and be dressed in a suit like this. The Speaker of the House is responsible for dressing me. The last person to have been responsible for dressing me to go out was my mum, yet we allow the Speaker to define a dress code for male Members of Parliament. It is utterly ridiculous. I know that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington would tell me to dispense with the tie, because he is an example of doing that, but how long did that change take? We have all these weird things and gentlemen of this House are expected to dress in a particular way that serves no purpose whatsoever, other than to try to suggest a sort of authority.

Tom Brake: The hon. Gentleman has just noticed that the tie was perhaps not a good example to go for, but I encourage him and his colleagues, who have been assiduous in pushing the idea that the new temporary Chamber that is to be established in Richmond House should be used to test some of the different arrangements in this Chamber that he and I would like to see.

Pete Wishart: The tie example was a bad one, even though that change took a long time, as I said. The right hon. Gentleman is a proud exponent of the non-tie arrangements and decorum of this place. I do support the idea that there are things we could do. If we are to move out of this place, why are we moving to a temporary place that does exactly the same things and looks, feels and appears to be the same place? Why not try to do something different? I know the right hon. Gentleman has been paying attention to my clear and detailed agenda to replace the current Speaker. The proposals I have put forward include things such as electronic voting. Let us try to bring this place into the 21st century—

Tom Brake: And they are related to the Cox recommendations.

Pete Wishart: As the right hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position, my proposals relate to the Cox recommendations. Can we please do more to look at how we do business in the House, how this place feels and how it looks to people who come into the House? For goodness' sake, we still have a place down the corridor called the Lords. The forelock tugging and cap doffing goes on, and there are still people called Lords and Ladies. What does that say to the people who come to this place from throughout the country? That somehow these are our betters—these are people who are titled, and they run the country.

Mrs Miller: Earlier in his remarks, the hon. Gentleman alluded to the fact that he is a member of the House of Commons Commission. It will be noticeable to people listening to the debate that the two individuals who are

[Mrs Miller]

members of the Commission are far more positive about the progress that has been made on Cox than the rest of us are. Will the hon. Gentleman remind me and other Members who put him in his position on the House of Commons Commission? It would be helpful for the House to be aware of that.

Pete Wishart: Ah, that is a very good point, and I will answer it fully and comprehensively. I do not know who said it, but of course people should be elected to the House of Commons Commission, and that is what we should do for everybody in the management of the House.

I would go further than that, because a key feature of the ICGS was the fact that staff members and trade union representatives were involved—representatives of the general staff of the House—and they did two important things. First, they gave a voice to the members of staff who work in all parts of the House. They made probably the most useful and positive contributions throughout that whole experience. Secondly, they had a restraining effect on the Members of Parliament who served on the group. We were somehow better behaved because members of staff were part of the group, and it did not feel like a bunch of MPs getting together and shouting at each other in the most appalling and useless way.

I make this appeal: as well as reforming the Commission to include elections for Members of Parliament, we should also have staff members on it. The Commission is responsible for the management of the House, and therefore it should include people from the whole House community. As I look around the House, I do not see a great deal of agreement on that point, but I hope that Members of Parliament might actually give the idea some thought. Let us run the House in a way that represents the people who work in this place. I think that is a reasonable suggestion.

We will have a debate about the future of the Commission, and I look forward to being part of it. I say to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke that, unfortunately, I cannot be held responsible for any earlier decisions—I have not been to a meeting yet. I am looking forward to going to my first one on 24 June. She is looking at me as if I were responsible for some of the decisions that have been made, but I cannot claim that responsibility yet. If she wants to come back in a few months' time, she can blame me for all the terrible things that are going on in the Commission if we have not managed to get some of the reforms through.

I am all for reforming the House of Commons Commission. It would be good to have a positive debate about the type of management structure that we want in this House. Perhaps it would be an idea to include the Backbench Business Committee in this, as it seems to be getting all the business just now. The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) might as well be the Leader of the House rather than the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), given that he practically determines and dictates everything that is going on, including this debate. Perhaps it would be useful to encourage him to hold a debate on the House of Commons Commission. We would be able to hear the range of opinions about how we can make this House a more effective, democratic and useful type of organisation. One thing that we have

to conclude is that this organisation has issues and difficulties. Is the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire the man to fix them? Probably not. We need everybody in the House to be involved and engaged in that debate, and I hope that we have it.

Finally, there is the ownership issue. This is a very important issue, and it might get to the heart of some of the frustrations and difficulties that Members have expressed throughout the course of this debate. It is about who owns what when it comes to the plethora of initiatives—I say plethora because, in my view, we have too many things going on. I have been a member of the ICGS group, so I am familiar with that work and I know what we are doing in that regard. I also have a good sense about the direction that we should take and the type of service that we should deliver. Obviously I know Dame Laura's report, because I have read it and attended these debates on it, but then there is also Gemma White's review. Another review is also going on in the House of Lords. We have four initiatives, which seem to be happening simultaneously with different terms of reference. Although most of them seem to be working quite collegially with each other, we are creating confusion and difficulties. We need to look at how we can bring these initiatives together under one work stream, which will make it sensible not just for Members of Parliament but for people across the House.

If there is something that we can take away from today, it is how we can start to combine these initiatives. Then we must decide who owns this. It looks as though it will be the Commission—I accept my responsibilities and obligations when it comes to that—but perhaps the Commission is not the best place to look at the ownership of all this. This is just a thought—it is not a thought-out suggestion or proposal—but perhaps we should be looking at some sort of Select Committee, some sort of new elected authority, that would have ownership over these initiatives and be charged by the House to look specifically at these issues. I think this is important enough for us to do that. I know that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke chairs the Women and Equalities Committee, but perhaps we need something beyond that, which could possibly include our friends from that high and mighty place to which we always have to pay due deference—that is if they deign to be part of something with us humble directly elected Members. I put that forward as a suggestion. I will think more about it and see whether I can come back with a firmed-up proposal.

I say to colleagues throughout the House that they should not despair. We have come a long way. We need to do more to reactivate interest from colleagues across the House, and the mandatory training will help to do that once people are asked to do something that is perhaps part of a more general package. Steady progress is being made. I do not share the great sense of disappointment that the right hon. Lady and others have expressed about whether we are getting there, because I am confident that we are.

It has been an absolute pleasure, privilege and humbling experience to have been involved in the conversations and debates on this issue. [Interruption.] I see that the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) has returned to the Chamber; I did pay tribute to her for her leadership in all this. I think we all bear the scars of the past year and a half when it comes to these matters, but it has been an excellent experience

to work with others across the House, including the shadow Leader of the House. We are getting there. I would appeal for just a little bit more patience, because the most important thing is that we get it right.

5.30 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire; I am going to break with tradition by calling him “Mr Wishart”.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady cannot do that. This is not fair because I am now obliged to call her to order, so the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) will call me old-fashioned, which I am not—just because I approve of the tie he is wearing, on behalf of his mother.

Valerie Vaz: You are a lovely Deputy Speaker, Madam Deputy Speaker. Things go past you, and you call out some things and not others, but we are very grateful to have you in the Chair.

I apologise to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). I was a bit late trundling over from Norman Shaw South, and the preceding statutory instruments finished quicker than I had anticipated. I thank the right hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for applying for this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee—chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns)—for granting it and finding time for it. I also thank the new Leader of the House. He has just got the job and has been thrown in at the deep end, having to respond to something that has been going on for quite a while. However, he is very welcome and I have appreciated all the discussions we have had so far.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke wondered about who makes appointments to the Commission. As she will know, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) replies to questions; time is made available for him to be held accountable for what the Commission does in the House.

Tom Brake: What the shadow Leader of the House has just said is quite important. My role as spokesman for the House of Commons Commission is to provide a factual response to the queries that Members raise with me, not to drive the policy of the House of Commons Commission.

Valerie Vaz: The right hon. Gentleman also makes press statements when requested to do so.

Jess Phillips: I would like some answers about how the decision is made on who is the Commission’s spokesperson. I do not know whether it is a paid role.

Tom Brake: No.

Jess Phillips: I can hear the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) saying no. I do not know how this is the House being accountable. How is it decided that the right hon. Gentleman is the person we have to go to with our questions about accountability?

Valerie Vaz: I was just coming to who appoints us to the Commission, so maybe I can answer my hon. Friend’s question. As a member of the shadow Cabinet, I am appointed by the Leader of the Opposition; the Leader of the House is in the Cabinet, so he is appointed by the Prime Minister. We serve on the Commission because the Commission is responsible for the House staff, and this is related to the business of the House.

I think that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington was appointed before I was. It was appropriate to have him as the voice of the Commission because he is not a Member of a main party. Obviously, there is a staff to support him and, no, he is not paid. I hope that clarifies the situation. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley has a lot of power, as she is a deputy editor of *The House* magazine. I do not know whether or not she was elected to her post. Anyway, I look forward to being in the magazine because I have not been in it for a while.

Tom Brake: To complete the clarification of my role, there have in the past been requests to hold an election among the Liberal Democrats for this post. When a party has a relatively small number of MPs, the competition for the posts that are available is not usually very extensive, and therefore the probability of an election is quite restricted. If two Liberal Democrats had wanted to perform this role, there could have been an election that Members of the House could take part in, but there was no competition.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Also on the Commission are the Chairs of the Finance Committee and the Administration Committee, plus two non-execs.

The Commission appointed Dame Laura Cox to do the report as a result of the “Newsnight” allegations. Because it was very clear that the Commission did not want to be involved as elected members—as you will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker—we tasked the non-execs, Dame Janet Gaymer and Jane McCall, to draw up the terms of reference for the report and to find someone of the stature of Dame Laura Cox who was willing to produce it. It was a completely independent process both in terms of the report and picking the person—it was not interfered with at all by the Commission.

Dame Laura Cox published her report on 15 October. She made three fundamental recommendations that we on the Commission felt merited urgent consideration. We did that at our 24 October meeting and issued a statement on the same day agreeing to all the recommendations. Dame Laura Cox chose not to come to the Commission—not to answer questions, because we did not want that, but just to say what she wanted to say. She said that she had written her report and that was the end of it. I was therefore pleased when the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) said that when Dame Laura came to her APPG, she was able to talk about details of the report. The Commission confirmed that it was then up to the House to take forward these recommendations, to which we were all fully committed. Part of our statement said that we would expect to see them progress as quickly as possible.

The Clerk of the House then worked with members of staff to ensure that the recommendations were put in place. Dame Laura did not say in her report how she

[Valerie Vaz]

wanted the various strands set up—that had to be done from scratch. It was down to the Clerk and the staff he worked with to work on how the three recommendations would be implemented. The House of Commons debated the report in the Chamber on 5 November and agreed to the Committee on Standards report, “Implications of the Dame Laura Cox report for the House’s standards system: Initial proposals”, on 7 January 2019.

We all take this seriously and we all take responsibility for it. Every Commission meeting—the minutes are available on the parliamentary intranet—has been dominated by the deliberations that we have had on this. We appreciate that these are complex matters. Progress has at times been slower than we would wish, but I consider that we are now making good progress. It could be faster, and we will monitor that.

The first recommendation was that the valuing others policy and the revised respect policy should both be abandoned as soon as possible. That decision was taken immediately and they were suspended immediately.

The second recommendation was that the new independent complaints and grievance scheme be amended to ensure that House employees with complaints involving non-recent allegations can access the new scheme. That is because the Commission had made the clear recommendation that, for simplicity and consistency, recent and non-recent cases should have exactly the same process. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley made that point. We were advised by Speaker’s Counsel, the Commissioner for Standards and the trade union side. The public consultation closed last Friday. The responses will be reviewed, and there is an excellent prospect that this will be in place very soon. Dame Laura Cox said that she wished that we had waited until the publication of her report before the ICGS was in place because she had some recommendations to make about that. She felt that it was important that everything should be taken together.

The third recommendation was that steps should be taken, in consultation with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and others, to consider the most effective way to ensure that the process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against Members of Parliament will be an entirely independent process in which Members of Parliament play no part.

In paragraph 379 of Dame Laura’s report, she said that there was a

“general reluctance of Members to judge the misconduct of other Members, or even to assist in the investigations”.

The Commission considered how to take that forward, and the previous Clerk, David Natzler, came up with a form of consultation that included Members. Her Majesty’s Opposition agreed which of our Members would serve on that group. A general agreement was required among all parties through the usual channels that the people on that group should, as we say in equity, have clean hands—they should have no involvement whatsoever with the Commissioner for Standards or the Committee on Standards or any other involvement; that was the sticking point.

As a result, on 10 June, the new Clerk announced that a staff team would be created to take the lead on producing options on implementation. That team will

include people with procedural and legal knowledge, as well as expertise on the operation of the ICGS. I, too, want to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who will know that all the groups in which we were involved had a wider spread, as alluded to by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). The trade unions, the Members and Peers Staff Association, and lay members all made an important contribution. Different voices were heard. It was hard work, but it was good that we could produce a report that we all agreed and signed up to.

The group that will take forward the third recommendation will talk to the union side, lay members of the Committee on Standards, party whips, Dame Laura Cox and the Chairs of the Select Committees on Standards and on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, as well as the Chairs of the Women and Equalities, Liaison and Procedure Committees. There will be a wide view, and a wide consultation. I know Members feel that the Commission or individuals have to drive things forward, but it is important to consult staff, Members and anyone who wants to make a contribution, so we should widen it out and hear those voices. Consultations do not take place quickly. People have to be given time to be consulted, but there is a way to push things forward.

The options will be presented to the Commission, then a consultation will be opened. The House authorities were quick to appoint Julie Harding, who took up her post as Independent Director for Cultural Transformation on 18 February 2019, and has been appointed for a one-year fixed term. Her new role was established to set a transformation strategy for change. She has met many of us. I do not know whether she has met the Women and Equalities Committee, but it would be worth her while doing so, as well as meeting other Committees.

Steps have been taken to change the culture. The House Service launched a new diversity and inclusion strategy on 26 March 2019. Responding to the recommendations of the Cox report is a key element of that strategy. As the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said, over 1,000 staff from the House of Commons and the Parliamentary Digital Service have attended or booked to attend the valuing everyone training, including 49% of managers. The aim is that all staff and Members should complete the training by June 2020. Thirty-three Members, and 147 of their staff have attended or booked to attend the training sessions. I agree with the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington that the training should be compulsory. As a lawyer, I had to undertake continuous professional development. The Bar Council did it as well, so I would see venerable, elderly QCs attending those training sessions. When I first became a councillor in Ealing in 1986, we had to undertake equalities training. Whenever I conducted an interview as a member of the civil service, I went through training, so it is really important that training is compulsory.

Sarah Davies, our new Clerk Assistant, is also now Managing Director of the Chamber and Committees Team. It has adopted standards of service for all Select Committees, ensuring that all Select Committee members know what they can and cannot expect from staff. A staff member now sits on the Strategic Estates Team board, ensuring that staff issues are heard at the highest level. The Commons Executive Board—the board just

below the Commission that manages the House—has undertaken a 360 degree feedback exercise and coaching from Julie Harding on behaviour as part of its broader commitment to cultural change.

The ICGS is supported by two helplines—the independent bullying and harassment helpline and the Independent Sexual Misconduct Advisory Service—and all their details are published on Parliament’s website. The most recent figures show that, between 1 January and 31 March, there were 293 calls and 10 investigations were launched. I suppose it would be a tribute to our success if behaviours change and there are fewer and fewer investigations, and we hope that will happen with changes in all behaviours.

As has been reported, Alison Stanley was absolutely remarkable in the way she conducted her six-month review, which was very important for us to have. That review was put in place, and there is also an 18-month review of the processes. We need to have these reviews because we must constantly monitor and improve our processes. The Commons Executive Board and the Commission will consider the review.

Dame Laura highlighted the gendered and racist dimension to bullying and harassment. Paragraph 123 states:

“Some areas of the House were described as having a particularly bad reputation for sexist or racist attitudes”.

Of the 200 people who came forward to give information to the inquiry, the majority—nearly 70%—were women. We know there will be other reports that will steer future decisions and change. We are awaiting the report from Gemma White QC, who I am sure will make further recommendations, and it is right that the House has time to debate them.

I have only two minor asks of the new Leader of the House, who I know has a very big in-tray. May we have a debate on the forthcoming report and Alison Stanley’s recent six-month review before the House rises? During the debate on the Cox report on 5 November, I asked the then Leader of the House what discussion she had had with Government

“to ensure the allocation of proper resources and extra staff to make this work”.—[*Official Report*, 5 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1287.]

Will the Leader of the House say whether further resources will be available for the further recommendations of the Cox report and the other important reports?

Every time we talk about delay, we must remember that, down below, staff have been working incredibly hard. In the last eight months, they have made some major moves forward, and we should always remember that. I know that when we first set up the review of the ICGS, staff were actually doing other jobs as well as doing the job of ensuring that we came to our proper conclusions. I particularly want to thank everybody who has worked on producing those reports and those—whether House staff or in the special unit—who are continuing to do that work. I also thank Dame Laura Cox for her report, and Alison Stanley.

Everyone who works here, in whatever capacity, knows that they play a vital role in ensuring that our Parliament and our democracy thrive. It is essential that everyone who works in a modern Parliament knows the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in a safe and secure workplace. Her Majesty’s Opposition’s position is very clear: we

will work with the Leader of the House and the House of Commons Commissions to push forward all the key recommendations in full.

5.49 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I congratulate those who brought forward this afternoon’s debate, most particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller)—I thank her for sitting down with me, prior to this debate, to talk through some of her thoughts on the very important issues that she has presented this afternoon—and of course the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). I thank all the speakers who have contributed in such detail and such thoughtful ways on an issue that I know is of great importance to everybody right across the House.

We are privileged to work and legislate in the cradle of our great country’s democracy. As a legislature, we expect the very highest standards among all organisations in our lands—among all businesses, public organisations and so on. So if there is any one place where we should set the standard, it is here, and that standard should be a culture of respect and dignity.

At a time when the country is so divided and there is so much anger—we have heard from one or two contributors this afternoon about what is going on online—it is doubly important that we set the bar as high as we can, particularly when it comes to our own. All those who work in the Palace of Westminster, whether they report to line managers as part of the House staff or report to Members of Parliament, and all those who are visitors to this place, should experience the very best when it comes to a culture of dignity and respect.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have a very small request. I was in the Scottish Parliament the other week. In the toilets, they have posters that give contact details to report behaviour if someone feels that they have not been treated with dignity and respect. Could something like that happen in this building, and could it happen quickly?

Mel Stride: I will certainly take that specific point away, although I know that the behaviour code has been distributed widely across the estate. I will take the representation seriously and will come back to the hon. Lady on that specific point.

I pay tribute, as many have, to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who has been right at the heart of much of the progress that has been made. There has been a debate this afternoon about whether that progress has been too fast or too slow, but progress has been made. It is fair to say that, wherever we are today—satisfactory or otherwise—if it were not for her we would be a long way behind where we are.

In a sense, that is not surprising. As many Members have pointed out, we all operate in a historic, rather stratified environment, steeped in traditions, which tend to change extremely slowly. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley referred to us being the masters of other people’s destiny and she makes an important point. She speaks an important truth. There are inevitably power dynamics in a place such as this.

[*Mel Stride*]

There are many different strands of employment. There is the employee who works within the House administration, and there may be various sub-divisions within that, and there are those who work for Members of Parliament. There is also the fact that this is a very public place and that those who come forward and make complaints about how they are treated may expect that that will end up in the press and might identify them publicly. Those are additional stresses and complications with which this place has to grapple.

In that context, while we have not moved fast enough and I accept that, we should not overlook the progress that we have made. We have a code for ourselves and for the other place. We have a process that affords anonymity to those who need to come forward, with sometimes extremely serious concerns, and that has also been rolled out not just across this place but across the other place. That has been achieved through cross-party, cross-House work. I thank my opposite number, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), for coming to see me and sharing with me a lot of her valid and important insights into the current situation. I will come on to the House of Commons Commission in a moment.

What today's debate shows is that we still need to do more. That is what the Cox report tells us. Of course, it is not just Cox. Understandably, Members have strayed beyond the terms of the debate this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) talked particularly about online abuse. As Leader of the House, I feel particularly strongly about that. I raised it in my opening remarks in my first outing at business questions, and it is an area that I intend to lean in on quite hard. Of course this is an element that affects women in particular, sometimes in the most wicked and appalling way, but actually it affects all of us, too. As a father, I can tell Members that to have one of your children come home in floods of tears because they have been told things in the playground about you that may be entirely false, makes one, whether you are a man or a woman, feel pretty miserable. So I take that extremely seriously and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for choosing to raise it.

I pay tribute to Dame Laura Cox for a very thorough and detailed report, which came up with some very important recommendations. We must not forget the background to the report, which came about when my predecessor pushed for an inquiry around the allegations in March 2018 of extensive bullying and harassment in this place. We must not lose sight of where we have come from. There are some very, very serious allegations that relate to Parliament, both this House and the other place.

I want to touch on the issue of where responsibility lies for how we move forward. The question posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire was: who owns the scheme? That is a good way of phrasing this particular conundrum. There is the sense that there is something we are trying to grasp here, but we are not quite sure who owns it or where the responsibility lies. Clearly, the House of Commons Commission is responsible for House administration and, in a sense, is therefore responsible for the Cox recommendations, but ultimately it is for us—not on a party basis, but as individuals Members—to push matters forward. Neither I as the Leader of the

House nor my the shadow Leader of the House speaks directly for the Commission. That is why I was so pleased that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) was able to join us today as the official spokesperson for the House of Commons Commission.

To get to the heart of the accountability issue, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke termed it an accountability deficit. She in particular and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire raised the issue of the Commission and directly the way in which it works; whether it is representative enough; whether it should have members who are elected; whether it is transparent enough; whether, when the chair is not able to attend the meeting, the meeting should be postponed or chaired by somebody else; whether the minutes should be circulated more quickly; and whether there is an overall sense that the Commission is sufficiently functional for the challenges it faces. In that context, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke called for a series of motions on the Floor of the House on the delivery of Cox to address issues around the Commission, including the role of the Speaker in the Commission. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) suggested that it might be replaced by a Select Committee and run on those lines.

My message this afternoon is that I do not think anything should be off the table. I am not saying that we should necessarily jump instantly to conclusions and start to shake everything up, but we should be prepared to look at everything carefully and in the round. I say that as someone, like the hon. Gentleman, who has not yet attended a Commission meeting. I look forward to attending my first meeting on Monday 24 June. It may be that I go there and find that it is incredibly functional, very well run, very transparent and that nothing needs to change at all. I have an entirely open mind on the direction we should go in, but debate must be facilitated on exactly these matters.

Tom Brake: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that I raised an idea put forward by the lay people on the Commission that we should as a Commission go away—I dare not call it an away-day because of the connotations of everyone wearing a patterned jumper for that purpose. Would he support that sort of set-up, where we go away, look at how the Commission is operating now, and come up with some suggestions and recommendations for how it can operate differently?

Mel Stride: I would certainly be prepared to consider that, but let me consult and discuss it with others. In answering that intervention, may I also thank the right hon. Gentleman for spending time with me in my early days as the Leader of the House and for sharing that thought, among others, with me on that occasion?

I will turn now to the three main recommendations of Cox. The first, as we have heard, was to terminate the Valuing Others and Respect policies, and that was, as many have pointed out, done relatively swiftly. It is fair to say, however, that of the three challenges set by Cox, that was by far the easiest. It is much easier to abolish a policy than to bring something in from scratch. None the less, it should be recognised that that has been done.

The second recommendation was about ensuring that historical complaints could access the scheme. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke raised the

issue of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and her view that the current scheme is discriminating against older employees. She also raised the view that the House may in that sense be in breach of the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act. That, plus the legal advice that had to be taken when considering what should replace it and ensuring that the new scheme would itself not be open to legal challenge for being unfair and unreasonable, in contradiction of other statute, is one reason these things sometimes take a bit of time, to echo perhaps the sentiments of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire.

That is not to say that, because something is complicated and takes a bit of time, it should drag on forever—that is certainly not the case—but, in pressing for things to move forward quickly, it is still important to get things right in terms of our approach. We now have a new proposal that was agreed by the Commission in February. It has been consulted on—the consultation finished on the 14th of this month—and it will be on the agenda, I believe, for the meeting on 24 June. I for one look forward to working with others, including the shadow Leader of the House, to push that to its conclusion as quickly as possible.

The third recommendation of the Cox report recognised the importance of limiting Member involvement at the point that any cases reach the Standards Committee. That is an important point because throughout the rest of the ICGS system this particular matter does not come into play. There will have been important decisions or considerations about the fact that we are elected representatives, and constitutional issues will also have had to be taken into account. I am pleased that, in the past week or so, agreement has been reached to move forward with a taskforce that will, as the hon. Member for Walsall South eloquently set out, liaise with the Chairs of the various Committees she listed, and which I will not relist, to ensure we move that on with a view to reporting as soon as possible—certainly, I would hope, no later than the autumn.

This has been a crucial debate. Right at the start of the Cox report, there is a quote from a member of staff who in essence says that this is an institution worth fighting for, but that a seismic shift is needed. That encapsulates everything in a nutshell. We have made progress to date, but this is a beginning, not an end. There is a journey to be continued. The House has my personal commitment, although I am but one member of the House of Commons Commission, to work collaboratively right across the House. My door is open. To those who have contributed in the debate today, I say: please come and see me to talk everything through. Let us gather everything up together and do what we can collectively to make progress.

6.4 pm

Mrs Miller: The motion is crystal clear. It says we have to push forward the implementation of all three recommendations in the Cox report “without delay”—perhaps I should have used the word “forthwith”, which is a bit more parliamentary. Not one hon. Member who is not a member of the House of Commons Commission has spoken against this motion. That sends a loud message to the House of Commons Commission, including those right hon. and hon. Members here today, that they must bring forward policies and procedures to

ensure that non-recent allegations are dealt with now and that independent processes, as described by Cox, are put in place. I have recommended that there should be motions on the Order Paper to ensure that progress is made. If others do not table them, I will seek support from the Backbench Business Committee to do so, because this is important. We cannot continually push things into the long grass because it is convenient for others to do so. We have to act.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the publication of, and recommendations in, the Dame Laura Cox report on bullying and harassment in Parliament; welcomes the implementation of the recommendation to abandon the Valuing Others and Respect policies; expresses concern about damage caused to the reputation and standing of this House by the lack of progress made on other recommendations on historical allegations and the non-involvement of MPs in Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme cases; and calls on the Leader of the House and the House of Commons Commission to push forward the implementation of all three key recommendations in full without delay.

Business without Debate

PETITIONS

Climate Change

6.5 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The House has declared a climate emergency, and we all recognise the necessity for swift and effective action. During my four years in the House, I have been a consistent advocate of Britain’s global leadership in tackling climate change. That is why the petitioners of Eddisbury

request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that

the United Kingdom

hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

I am also presenting petitions in the same terms from the Newbury and Truro and Falmouth constituencies.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Eddisbury,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002468]

6.6 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I, too, wish to acknowledge the climate emergency declared by the House. I also wish to convey the sentiments shared by the good people of East Worthing and Shoreham, 123 of whom have presented this petition. It

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

It further declares that the UK has a leading role to play in tackling climate change in the future.

[Tim Loughton]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

I think that some good news may be heading their way very shortly.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of Residents of the constituency of East Worthing and Shoreham,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002464]

6.7 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 624 constituents, hundreds of whom are from two secondary schools, Priory School in Lewes and Seaford Head School.

The petition of Residents of the constituency of Lewes,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002465]

6.8 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The residents of Mid Worcestershire also declare

that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention.

I therefore present this petition from constituents young and old.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Worcestershire,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002469]

6.9 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On behalf of the residents of Chelmsford, who also care passionately about the planet, I would like to present a petition in the same terms. The petition has 228 signatures, 203 from the Chelmsford constituency and 25 from the wider Essex area, and I particularly thank the staff, parents and pupils of Our Lady Immaculate primary school in Chelmsford, who gathered an impressive 122 signatures.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Chelmsford,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world; further that the UK has a leading role to play on tackling climate change in the future.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure the UK hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002466]

6.10 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I too rise to present a petition from the residents of the constituency of Witney and West Oxfordshire. There are 1,469 signatures, and I particularly want to thank the parents and pupils of the following schools: Ducklington Primary, Enstone Primary, Marlborough School, Kingham Hill School, Wood Green School, North Leigh Primary School, Copethorpe School, Great Rollright Primary School and Bampton Primary School.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of the constituency of Witney and West Oxfordshire,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world; further that the UK has a leading role to play on tackling climate change in the future.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure the UK hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002467]

Bank Holidays in 2020

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

6.11 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this important issue before the House; it concerns many of my constituents and many other people around the country. Since being elected in 2015 I have secured a number of debates in Parliament, all triggered by someone from west Cornwall and Scilly raising an issue with me that deserves proper scrutiny and representation. The issue of the early May bank holiday next year is no exception.

I am here to add my full support to the decision to make the 75th anniversary of VE Day on 8 May 2020 a bank holiday and a national day of celebration and commemoration. Victory in Europe Day, generally known as VE Day, is a day celebrating the formal acceptance by the allies of world war two of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender of its armed forces on 8 May 1945.

It is worth remembering how we celebrated that momentous event all those years ago. At 11 am on 8 May church bells rang out across the nation signifying the end of the most destructive war Europe had ever seen. More than 1 million people took to the streets of London to celebrate. Crowds filled Trafalgar Square and up the Mall to Buckingham Palace, where King George, Queen Elizabeth and Winston Churchill stood on the palace balcony, waving and cheering the crowds on. Around the country, millions gathered in villages, towns and cities, marking the end of war in Europe with street parties, dances and parades. Social norms were abandoned as strangers hugged and danced with one another, and bonfires were lit in the street—I cannot imagine what local councillors would do about that these days. Despite rationing and years of economic strife, communities came together to cook sweet treats for children and shared meals with what food they had, and pub licensing hours were extended. Buildings and streets in major cities were illuminated for the first time since the start of the war, after years of blackouts to prevent German bombings.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and add my support to the bank holiday idea. I recently read through the biography I wrote of my grandfather, who was a 17-year-old paratrooper—they used to lie about their age—in northern France and Germany in 1945; it addressed that time and when he came home. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not unusual to mark the end of wars and major events in this way? For many years we marked Trafalgar Day and even the accession to the throne of Queen Elizabeth I.

Derek Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The days that he has referenced are really good opportunities for MPs to take part in the commemorations that happen right across the country, which I enjoy. I make a point of taking part in them and taking my children along as well, so that they can learn about our great heritage and our great service.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says about the 75 years, and about the 50 years. I have been a trade

unionist for 30 years, and the only day of action I took was for the bank holiday to remain as a traditional May Day bank holiday. It must remain. Give us the extra day for the 75, but the traditional May Day bank holiday on the first Monday of every May is for workers and trade unions, and it must remain as well.

Derek Thomas: That is the argument I will be making as I remind the House about the incredible event that took place on VE Day and explain why it is absolutely right that we set aside time to celebrate that next year, so that the whole of Great Britain can take part.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and if he needs any advice on bonfires in Northern Ireland, we would certainly have lots of information. We do them every 11 July, by the way. I attend one in Newtownards and it is always very well attended. There have been almost 1,000 people there in years gone past. Does he not agree, however, that it is difficult for businesses and even community groups to accept this roll-out of a new bank holiday date? I support the principle of what he is saying, but the proposal is not even for a year's roll-in. Does he share my dismay at the news of calendar makers losing hundreds of thousands of pounds due to the short roll-in? Does he share my concern at the environmental aspects of the wastage of perfectly good material because the Government, in this case, did not pre-empt the change in the same way as was done with the last change to a bank holiday, which was announced in 1993 for a roll-out in 1995?

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention, and I would be happy to apply for a Westminster Hall debate with the hon. Gentleman if he chose to speak on that further.

I want to make the point that I am not a fan of the way in which the Government have come to this decision, but it is really important for me, knowing what a great thing it is to remember the sacrifice made by the millions of men, their families and all the people involved in working and fighting for peace in Europe, that we spend a little bit of time remembering the great event that took place when that finally came to an end. For me, seeing the footage of crowds in the streets celebrating this momentous occasion—for them, a bittersweet moment after years of hardship, loss and fear—it is right that we should put aside all else and commemorate and celebrate that day on 8 May next year. I hope that we will be able to re-enact many, if not all, of the activities in our towns and villages. I would not need to go far, as I have a couple of sons in my own home who would be quite happy to tell me how to light fires, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned.

As I have said, I have no problem with the decision to move the bank holiday to 8 May. My problem is the cack-handed way in which the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy went about reaching this decision. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what impact assessment the Department did on the lateness of making such a substantive change to the bank holidays in 2020 before announcing this decision. What was the Department thinking when it decided to give just 11 months' notice of the cancellation of the early May bank holiday?

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the hon. Gentleman is going to talk about this, but I will pre-empt him. At least two people have written to me to say that that was the ideal date for them to get married, and that they had invited people for the whole weekend. Their plans are now in tatters. We cannot just let people down in this way. It is not fair. People plan these things years in advance, based on the dates they know. Why do we not just have an extra day?

Derek Thomas: I am glad that I have support from around the House, because Adjournment debates are often poorly attended. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I completely agree with him. The Secretary of State announced the change to the early May bank holiday, and it was an enormous decision for large numbers of small businesses, for the tourism industry—which I particularly want to focus on—for the people who have already, for good reasons, booked their holidays next May, and for the people who have decided to use that weekend because they would be able to take their children away without interfering with their schooling.

I am disappointed that the Secretary of State himself is not here to respond to the debate, because the late notice of the announcement demonstrates a tin ear towards the tourism industry. For those in any doubt about the meaning of the expression “tin ear” and its use in relation to the Department’s attitude towards small businesses and many other people, it is defined as “a deafened or insensitive ear”. However, I want to make it clear that I do not include the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has been asked to respond to this debate, in that definition, because he has had nothing to do with it.

I received a letter from a businessman on the Isles of Scilly a day after the announcement, and he put his concern across much more diplomatically, saying:

“I have to say whichever government department decided at this late stage, 11 months before, to change the dates really does need to wake up to the reality of the holiday market. This change has the potential to create many upset guests unable to change their booked dates.”

I know that I am not alone in receiving correspondence and representations from constituents and businesses, and I have selected a few extracts that help to express the various implications of the decision being so late. One constituent asked the following question of the Secretary of State in an email to me:

“Have schools been considered in this late announcement about the changes to the May bank holiday? This will cause problems especially as holiday dates are already issued, residentials and school trips will have been planned, and this is the Friday before the important Y6 SAT tests”.

Another wrote:

“Hello Mr Thomas,

I have also been affected by the change of the bank holiday. I have booked my Hen Do”—

we have already had a reference to weddings—

“for the bank holiday weekend, paying more to go on these dates so that more people could make it as they wouldn’t have to take the day off work. As the date has now changed, people are not able to make my Hen Do, and I am forced to pay to cancel the holiday booked for us all losing over £1000.

I hope you can help in this issue by asking the government to not take away our original bank holiday date.”

Another constituent wrote to me to say:

“Dear Sir,

I am extremely pleased that VE day is to be celebrated as a priority in 2020.

However, I do not believe that the decision yesterday to change the date to 8th May 2020 provides a suitable length of time for the country to adapt.

My family are now left with the option of losing financially to cancel our annual May Day Bank Holiday as our children will be required to attend school.

The tourism industry is just one example where 11 months’ notice is not suitable.

I would expect that more foresight would have been given to this scenario.”

Someone who is not a constituent—I will leave the House to work out where they are from—wrote:

“Dear Mr Thomas

I understand you are bringing up the cancellation of the May day holiday in Parliament.”

A small group of us, they continue, organises

“the annual bikers’ event and May day Morris dancing in Hastings. It is by far and above the biggest weekend in the annual calendar. Not only will it affect our events badly, it will also be a massive blow to local tourist businesses who rely on that weekend after a hard winter and tell me it’s their biggest earner of the year...Currently, Morris dancers and bikers from across the country”—

this is something that we can all look forward to—

“are planning a protest at Parliament on July 23rd. This is something we would rather not have to do”—

although I think we would welcome it.

“We fully support a commemoration of VE Day, but we do not support having our events that have already been booked and paid for, plus all those who have already booked hotels, disrupted with so little notice.”

Returning to my constituency, many will know that the world gig rowing championships take place on the Isles of Scilly on the early May bank holiday every year. It is a momentous event in my constituency’s calendar, and it takes a considerable amount of time to get all the gigs over to Scilly. However, it is currently unclear what changes will need to be made if the Government stick to their decision. Moving on to other disruption that I am aware of, we have all seen the story in the national press about the small business that is set to lose £200,000 having just printed next year’s calendars.

I am sure the Government do not need me to say how disruptive this decision is given how late in the day the announcement was made. The only possible, practical and pragmatic response is for the Government to keep the bank holiday to commemorate VE-day and to reinstate the early spring bank holiday on Monday 4 May. I make it clear to the Minister, to the House and to business that I have no appetite to create extra cost and disruption for small businesses, and I have never previously supported the idea of extra bank holidays. However, the fact remains that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has left the decision far too late and has caused far too much disruption and potential expense to far too many people. The appropriate response must be for the Department to reinstate quickly the bank holiday on 4 May.

There is support for that proposal, which may not surprise the House. The British Beer & Pub Association sent me a letter:

“For clarity the BBPA does support the extra bank holiday that Mr Thomas is proposing. Based on the four-day bank holiday weekend for the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in 2012, we predict that the extra bank holiday would provide a boost to Britain’s pubs and brewers, with an estimated 10 million extra pints sold. This would also support the taxman and the economy—the taxman would receive £4.5m in extra duty revenue and VAT and it would provide a £30m boost to the economy.”

All of us, particularly those of us with rural constituencies, know the importance of small rural village pubs and how such opportunities really help them to continue their business of providing a community hub and keeping an eye on those who are otherwise often left at home on their own.

Hugh Gaffney: The hon. Gentleman mentioned earlier that people book holidays for that weekend, and sometimes it is the only time that families get together because they have to work through the school holidays to keep a roof above their head. The UK has the fewest bank holidays in the G20. Does he agree with Labour, which wants to increase the number of bank holidays? Let us start next year with VE Day and then look at each country’s patron saint’s day.

Derek Thomas: The hon. Gentleman will realise that I do not fully support everything he has just said, but I support what he says about next year. That is the whole point of this debate.

We have left it too late. There is no question but that we need 8 May, but we should reinstate and keep the 4 May bank holiday, because that is what people have planned for, expect and, in many cases, have paid for. Tourism is a significant part of my constituency’s economy, and people have booked in advance because there has been real growth in staycations. People are staying in the UK for holidays, and Cornwall is obviously their No. 1 choice, particularly west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

I have always maintained that I represent the most beautiful, precious and wonderful part of the country. If people have any concerns about their wellbeing, they should come down for a well-deserved rest and therapy. I hope I have been able to get that across in this short commercial break.

I agree about the extra bank holiday for next year, but I do not have it within me, as a former businessman, to impose further bank holidays, particularly on small businesses, unless there is a good reason to do so and the Department handles it much better than it has on this occasion.

The British Beer & Pub Association’s letter continues:

“Furthermore, the BBPA have already called on the Government to grant extended hours to pubs, so pubs can make the most of the celebratory weekend.”

That is what happened 75 years ago, and I hope the Government follow suit.

In summary—I am reluctant to keep people away from any activity they might want to pursue in the beer industry later this evening—I have no appetite to create further cost and disruption for small business. That is clear, and I spend my time trying to do what I can to support small businesses. In fact, I have spent a lot of time over the past four years arguing that the Government should improve the lot of small business by simplifying the tax system—scrapping business rates, for example—creating training opportunities and ensuring that businesses have affordable access to credit.

I have a record of wanting to support and promote small business, and I am not one to disrupt it any further, but I believe we should give the extra bank holiday on this occasion. The Business Secretary has given too little notice of the changes to the early May bank holiday. The Government should reinstate the bank holiday on 4 May and keep the planned bank holiday for 8 May that was recently announced to celebrate the 75th anniversary of victory in Europe.

I completely support the proposed bank holiday. The challenge for businesses, particularly in tourism, is that the Government have given just 11 months’ notice of this change, as if the 75th anniversary has come as some sort of surprise. I sincerely apologise to business, which can ill afford another bank holiday, but it is too late to scrap the 4 May bank holiday. The Government should reinstate it, and reinstate it quickly—hopefully in the next 15 minutes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call the Minister, I welcome the Assistant Serjeant at Arms, Nick Munting, to his position.

6.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): May I echo your comments about the new Assistant Serjeant at Arms, Mr Deputy Speaker? I wish to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this important debate and on his interesting and informative speech, which covered everything from morris dancers to bikers. I also thank other Members for their interventions, particularly the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who never misses an Adjournment debate. I would be delighted to hear more about his expertise at bonfires. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, not in this building.

I share the views expressed in the House that VE Day is an important opportunity to reflect on the sacrifices of a generation. The Government believe it is important to commemorate the sacrifices made by our servicemen and women in the second world war on the 75th anniversary of VE Day, as we did for the 50th anniversary in 1995, when there were celebrations and street parties across the UK. My hon. Friend talked so eloquently about that.

Moving next year’s early May bank holiday to VE Day itself has been seen to be a right and fitting tribute to our heroes of the second world war. The sentiment of celebrating on VE Day itself cannot be monetised for the veterans who served in the war. The Government gratefully acknowledge the responsibilities that our country’s armed forces assume on behalf of the UK Government and our people.

Hugh Gaffney: While we respect the men who fought for us and gave us our freedom today, we must also remember that there is a traditional May Day. So this is not about moving it; it is about keeping both of them. Workers have a traditional May Day holiday, celebrated every year, in the exact same way as the men who went to war.

Andrew Stephenson: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will come to address that point.

The sentiment of celebrating VE Day is something that everyone in this House would agree with. As well as marking the allies’ great victory in 1945, the bank

[*Andrew Stephenson*]

holiday on Friday 8 May is an opportunity to pay tribute to members of the UK armed forces who have served and continue to serve our country to this day. On this historic occasion, the Government want to ensure as many people as possible have the valuable opportunity to pay a fitting tribute. This is part of a wider package of celebrations the Government have supported, including the commemorations to mark the 75th anniversary of D Day, which recently took place across the UK. The 75th anniversary of VJ Day is also a significant commemoration in its own right and will be marked appropriately.

My hon. Friend has been a consistent champion of the tourism sector, which thrives in his constituency, drawing from his own experience of running a small business. Since his election to this House, he has prioritised supporting small business owners. Having served as a district and parish councillor, he has shown a deep commitment to his local community through his work at Westminster. I recognise that the Government's decision to move the bank holiday from Monday 4 May to Friday 8 May next year will have an impact on the impressive May Day festival in his constituency, which I believe dates back to 1573.

Tourism has driven development in my hon. Friend's constituency over the past 150 years and is an essential part of the area's day-to-day life, impacting significantly on the economic activity of the local community. An estimated 2,850 jobs in St Ives are supported by visitor-related spending and 42% of jobs directly depend on tourism, so I understand the importance of this sector to his local area. These celebrations will have others like them across the country, and reorganising them will be a real challenge. I hope that plans can be adapted during the next 11 months to ensure minimal disruption. I also hope that other events planned may benefit from the change; I particularly hope that the St Ives literary festival, which begins only a day after the VE Day bank holiday next year, will attract even more tourists, due to the long weekend.

As we have heard, there are additional impacts on other specific sectors and planned events throughout the country. As we are moving the bank holiday rather than creating an additional one, we anticipate that the overall cost to business will be relatively low, but I genuinely recognise that the benefits and costs will vary from area to area and from sector to sector.

Jim Shannon: In my intervention on the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), I referred to the massive £200,000 cost to a calendar business. Does the Minister have an idea of how we can help to compensate that business in some way for its massive loss? That small business cannot absorb that cost.

Andrew Stephenson: I think I have read about that example in the newspapers. It is obviously a significant blow to that business and something that I feel is regrettable. I wish the decision could have been made in a more timely fashion and do genuinely appreciate the concerns expressed by firms throughout the country. As I shall say later in my speech, the impact on different sectors of the creation of an additional bank holiday, of which there would be even shorter notice, could have an even bigger impact on our economy and on some

businesses. I appreciate some of the concerns expressed about this decision, but we need to strike a balance in our approach to the creation of additional bank holidays.

Let me reflect on some more of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives made about the importance of small business. First and foremost, we need to ensure that the decisions the Government take reflect the needs of small businesses, because small businesses are the backbone of our economy. In 2018, small and medium-sized enterprises accounted for 60% of UK private sector employment and had a combined annual turnover of £2 trillion. We try to support small businesses through my Department's industrial strategy, and on an almost weekly basis I meet the Federation of Small Businesses and the British Chambers of Commerce to hear about their concerns and how we can best support them.

In May, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who is responsible for small business, held the first ever small and microbusiness engagement call, to allow the Government to engage with hard-to-reach businesses. The next call will be on Monday, alongside the regularly scheduled SME advisory board meeting.

I appreciate what my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives said about the Department having a tin ear on this issue, but I reassure him that we regularly engage with businesses small, medium and large throughout the country. I have been in post for only two months, but in the past month I visited 22 businesses throughout the UK, from Kent to Derby and up to Burnley—I had to do some visits in Lancashire, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Government are proceeding rapidly with discussions with the industry to deliver a tourism sector deal. Ten sector deals are currently part of our industrial strategy, and I very much hope that the 11th will be a tourism sector deal, which we hope to launch in the coming weeks. The deal will look to harness the opportunities that the UK has to offer and further boost our tourism sector.

My hon. Friend asked about parents having booked holidays on the date of the original bank holiday, which will now fall as a school term day. As I understand it, it is within the gift of headteachers to grant permission for children to be absent during term time, under exceptional circumstances. Given the rationale behind the moving of the bank holiday, a compelling argument could be made that the circumstances are indeed exceptional.

I accept that the decision will have a negative impact on some people, but moving the bank holiday remains a right and fitting tribute to mark such a watershed moment in our nation's history.

Hugh Gaffney: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Stephenson: Let me continue a little.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives acknowledged, we all know the history: in Cornwall, 4,786 casualties were identified as the result of world war two, including the deaths of 54 sets of brothers and nine sets of fathers and sons. I expect that the people of St Ives will understand the importance of honouring those who served in the war, as my hon. Friend rightly said, and pay tribute to the brave people of Cornwall who served or laid down their lives in conflict.

In the light of the lateness of the decision, my hon. Friend asked the Government to create an extra bank holiday to avoid disruption. The Government regularly receive requests for additional bank and public holidays to commemorate a variety of occasions, such as cultural history and military and religious events. My ministerial colleague, the Minister for Small Business, took a House of Commons petitions debate introduced by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) relating to holding public holidays on religious occasions last year, in which the merit of bank holidays for important religious occasions, such as Eid and Diwali, was debated.

It is the duty of any responsible Government, however, to judge impacts on the overall economy and the economic impacts on all sectors. Although an additional bank holiday may benefit some people and some sectors—my hon. Friend made a good point about the benefit it certainly has for our pub sector—the cost to the economy of an additional bank holiday is considerable. The impact on the economy of the one-off bank holiday for the Queen's diamond jubilee in 2012 was estimated at

£1.2 billion. The cost falls heaviest on the manufacturing sector, with the burden being twice as big as that on the service sector. We need to take into account not just the fact that there are different impacts on different sectors—some gaining and others not—but the size of those impacts. The Government considered these issues carefully and it was judged that moving the bank holiday, rather than creating an additional one, is the most appropriate way on this occasion following the precedent set by the 50th anniversary.

Friday 8 May next year will be a valuable opportunity for people across the UK to take time to commemorate the historic occasion of victory in Europe and pay tribute to those who sacrificed their lives in the second world war on behalf of us all. I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me the opportunity to discuss the Government's position on the significance of bank holidays in 2020.

Question put and agreed to.

6.41 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 June 2019

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

International Humanitarian Law: Protecting Civilians in Conflict

[Relevant documents: Twelfth Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Global Britain: Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention, HC 1005, and the Government Response, HC 1719.]

9.30 am

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the continued importance of international humanitarian law in protecting civilians in conflict.

I am pleased to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

I applied for this debate to mark the 70th anniversary of the 1949 Geneva conventions and the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council first putting the protection of civilians in armed conflict on its agenda. The UK is the penholder at the Security Council for that mandate.

This debate allows us to convey appreciation for what has been and is being done to protect civilians by a wide range of actors that adhere to international humanitarian law—which I will now abbreviate to IHL—and to interpret its provisions to prioritise civilian protection in armed conflicts. It also provides us with an important opportunity to highlight the terrible price that civilians continue to pay in such conflicts the world over, and to suggest what should be done—what must be done—including by the UK Government, to alleviate their suffering.

IHL, as detailed in the 1949 Geneva conventions, sets out the specific protection that civilians are entitled to in armed conflict. IHL requires that parties to a conflict must distinguish at all times between combatants and civilians, and must direct attacks only against combatants and other military objects. Constant care must be taken to spare civilians and civilian objects, such as schools, hospitals, and water treatment and sanitation facilities, from the effects of the fighting. IHL also calls on parties to authorise impartial humanitarian assistance to populations affected by the conflict. In addition, a number of key human rights such as the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of life, or the prohibition of torture and slavery, cannot ever be suspended.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The right hon. Lady mentioned the preservation of water treatment facilities. In Europe, unfortunately, we have a prime example of the corruption of IHL in the Russian-occupied bits of Ukraine: Russian forces targeted the Donetsk water plant in order to destroy it, and attacked 42 schools. Will she join me in condemning that?

Ann Clwyd: Absolutely. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's experience on the Council of Europe, given the kind of discussions that take place there. Unfortunately in so many areas of conflict, we are all aware of examples of such attacks on what should be protected people, facilities and so on.

Despite the frameworks in place that are meant to protect civilians in armed conflict, and their further development and consolidation, including through the UN, civilians continue to suffer in armed conflict. According to the May briefing paper of the Overseas Development Institute, "Twenty years of protection of civilians at the UN Security Council", a century ago civilians represented about 10% to 15% of total casualties in armed conflict; by the second world war that had risen to 50%; and by the 1990s civilians accounted for between 80% and 85% of such casualties, a trend that has unfortunately continued and possibly even intensified into this century. What is going wrong?

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does she agree that as the UN penholder, the UK has significant leverage to pressurise countries such as Iran? Does she find it as chilling as I do that a former British military officer said that without US and UK assistance Saudi Arabia could not wage war on Yemen, yet four years on we still sell arms to the Saudis? Does she agree that that should stop?

Ann Clwyd: My hon. Friend obviously knows that I totally agree with her. In fact, I have joined in the argument on that particular point at various stages. I am a member of the Committees on Arms Export Controls, and that is an issue that we certainly continue to discuss.

Last month, the UN Secretary-General published his annual report on this subject. Why, as he set out, do "civilians continue to account for the vast majority of casualties in conflict",

and suffer from a variety of "short and long-term" impacts, "including forced displacement", forcible

"starvation...unlawful denial of humanitarian access; attacks on humanitarian and medical personnel, hospitals, and other medical facilities; sexual and gender-based violence; and intentional damage and unlawful destruction of civilian infrastructure, property and livelihoods"?

The first thing to recognise is that armed conflict has changed in many ways, some of which have put civilians in greater danger, such as a massive increase in armed groups, including non-state armed actors. Research by the International Committee of the Red Cross shows that more armed groups have emerged in the past six years than in the previous 60 years. The proliferation of armed groups, backed by a variety of partners, allies and arms providers, often leads to a dilution of responsibility, fragmentation of chains of command, an unchecked flow of weapons, and longer and more intractable armed conflicts. All that results in greater danger to civilians. In addition, there is increased use of explosive weapons in urban areas, where populations are highly concentrated, and of so-called precision weaponry which is not precise enough.

I argue, however, that the changes in the way that armed conflicts are carried out do not mean that international humanitarian law is no longer fit for purpose, but that greater efforts must be made on three fronts: to adhere to IHL; to interpret it with civilian protection at the forefront; and to ensure that those responsible for serious violations are held to account. I cannot emphasise that last one enough. As one who collected evidence on Iraqi war crimes over a period of years, I know how important it is to document such crimes, because a time will come when it is possible to prosecute people for those crimes.

[Ann Clwyd]

There continue to be too many instances of IHL not being respected and, worryingly, a determination at times to flout legal obligations to protect civilian populations.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing this debate and on her continuing interest in this matter over many years. Does she agree that one of the issues that comes up frequently in the civilian population is particular to children? Some of those involved in conflict situations across the globe make forcible use of child soldiers. That is another transgression that must be highlighted and, I hope, resolved in the near future.

Ann Clwyd: I absolutely agree. To my knowledge we have raised that issue in this Parliament on many occasions, but we still have not come to any resolution apart from to condemn it.

We can all think of armed conflicts where armed parties have deliberately targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure to try to terrorise the population into submission, such as in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Other hon. Members will no doubt highlight such shocking and despicable crimes in their contributions. It is important to keep in mind that it is not just non-state armed actors such as IS that carry out such crimes; IHL violations are committed equally by state and non-state armed actors. In addition, states always have the primary responsibility for protecting and meeting the basic needs of the civil population.

The second failing putting civilians at greater risk is armed parties not prioritising the protection of civilians when implementing IHL. IHL leaves room for interpretation, particularly as regards its application, as while it sets out what armed actors are supposed to do, it does not necessarily detail how those responsibilities are to be exercised. I have visited armed conflicts in various parts of the world, but in Iraq in particular I remember talking to American military personnel and emphasising to them the importance of the Geneva conventions, but being met with a blank look because they had no idea what those were. That was a great difficulty when trying to persuade them to do something differently.

All armed actors must incorporate the protection of civilians into their core military missions and strategies and must actively seek to do everything possible during military operations to ensure civilians are properly protected. They should do that in recognition that success in armed conflict is not just about fighting to control territory but about the need to ensure the safety, dignity and wellbeing of affected populations, so they are not driven to support radical and extremist ideologies and groups, further fuelling conflict, and so they are better able to contribute to sustainable peace-building and reconciliation efforts when the armed conflict is over. To do that requires a much better understanding by armed actors of how their operations could and have had an impact on civilians, as well as much more investment in more accurate recording of civilian casualties and tracking of civilian harm.

I must highlight my concern about the Ministry of Defence's ludicrous claim that there was only one civilian casualty resulting from its operations in Mosul and Raqqa

in the fight against IS, despite the RAF dropping over 4,000 munitions, of which over 70% were 500 lb bombs, primarily in urban areas. That figure indicates the UK's inability to accurately record civilian casualties and track civilian harm, and the lack of a baseline for assessing civilian harm.

The UK wants to be a global champion on civilian protection—obviously, we would all commend that. We will not, however, be credible on the international stage until and unless we are first accountable for our own operations. We therefore need a dedicated civilian casualty mitigation and investigation team with proper resources, to understand the impact of our operations and accurately record civilian harm. We need to appoint a dedicated military chief of staff to co-ordinate civil-military issues, and a civil-military focus in all major military headquarters with a centralised role in planning and decision making, to represent the interests of civilians.

In addition, the UK must do more to uphold our positive responsibilities under IHL and clarify the British position when assisting and working with partners, whether sharing intelligence and assets, providing weapons and materiel support or training and giving advice to local forces. We sometimes still fall short, so I urge the Government yet again to rethink our support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) mentioned, to ensure that any support provided is, at the very least, more explicitly conditional on a proactive policy of adherence to civilian protection.

More generally, the Government should adopt a dedicated process of operational end-use monitoring—again, in the Committees on Arms Export Controls we have had in-depth discussions about end-use monitoring, taking examples from other countries, to analyse the operational outcomes of UK assistance, work with partners through training and education to build a foundation for civilian protection before conflict begins, and build capacity in all relevant areas, including security sector reform, neutrality of humanitarian actors and targeting. I emphasise the need for more vigilance in preserving the space for, and enabling the capacity of, neutral dedicated humanitarian actors, who work hard in extremely difficult circumstances to fill the gaps in civilian protection. We must ensure that their neutrality is not repeatedly compromised, as that opens them up to attacks; counter-terrorism measures must not risk criminalising their essential activities; their funding must remain adequate and not be tied to unreasonable or overly bureaucratic conditions; and they and their facilities must not be targeted.

Last but not least, we need to do more to address the accountability crisis. Impunity for serious IHL violations simply fuels further violations and puts civilians at even greater risk. The UK needs to support referrals to the International Criminal Court, champion ad hoc fact-finding mechanisms—including commissions of inquiry and the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission—and the establishment of local courts and transitional justice mechanisms, and it must consider adopting targeted measures against those who commit such atrocities.

All Governments need to step up their efforts to protect civilians in armed conflict and recognise and adopt best practice, such as that of NATO, which is making significant efforts to make civilian protection a

key element of operational planning. That is essential if we are to see a dramatic reduction in civilian casualties and harm in the next decades.

For the UK really to make its mark on the global stage, I urge the Government not only to take the action I have called for, but to ensure the current review of its protection of civilians strategy is the beginning of a longer term process to adopt a cross-departmental strategy and whole of Government approach, so the protection of civilians is formalised as a top-line priority in UK operations and UK assistance to partners. The Government should also appoint a dedicated ambassador to champion protection of civilians on the global stage, to better utilise the UK's position as chair of the informal expert group on protection of civilians and to work with the broadest possible range of states and relevant actors, as well as increase our influence in the UN, including through increased support and involvement with peacekeeping operations, UN missions and relevant UN agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Now more than ever, armed conflicts in other parts of the world can no longer be, to paraphrase slightly, quarrels in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing. We need to care about how civilians are affected by armed conflicts, because the horrific violations carried out against them are a stain on all humanity, and their effects are long lasting and widespread.

9.51 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). I thoroughly agreed with much of her speech, and I will comment on some of the things she said.

As the right hon. Lady pointed out, we are trying to deal with the effect of the Geneva convention and the protocols aimed at protecting civilians in conflict, but I was fascinated to read a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross that seemed to take that one stage further. I was actually quite shocked by the report, but it may reflect the reality of the situation. It stated that there is a level of harm to civilians that is acceptable. It set that out by reference to three key principles, including proportionality and precaution, but the idea was that there is a level of civilian casualties that is, as the report described it, acceptable “collateral damage”.

The idea that a civilian building can have a military use as well as a civilian use brings me to my first point, which is related to the situation in Gaza. What do Israeli forces do when Hamas deliberately sets up its rockets in hospitals and schools? Do they simply turn away and do nothing, or do they accept, following the doctrine I have just set out, that they can take retaliatory action, in the full knowledge that there will be collateral damage—that real people will be killed? That is the first issue, which I raise to show that this whole business is not as simple as it should be.

The second area I want to deal with is Africa. In the past 20 years, there have been armed conflicts in Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda—that is probably not an exhaustive

list—but where are the African participants in the IHL debate, and where are the African participants at the UN trying to take this forward?

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making a lot of sense, especially in what he says about collateral damage. War is war. Unfortunately, a lot of innocent people are caught up in it. Surely, the message must be that the sanctions that are applied to countries that carry it out need to be enforced. Rather than condemning, we should do something about it.

John Howell: I agree. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, which I may come to if I get that far in my speech.

Between 1990 and 2007, 88% of conflict deaths internationally happened in Africa. That may have changed subsequently, with a rise in the middle east, but it is significant that 88% of deaths happened in a continent that does not really participate in the IHL debate. Of course, that is mixed up with genocide—I think Rwanda was in that list of countries, and of course we saw a massive genocide there—but the idea of genocide developed at the same time as the fourth Geneva convention, so there is an opportunity to try to revise IHL to incorporate that and to recognise that things have developed in parallel over the years.

On the middle east, the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley mentioned Yemen. We debated Yemen recently in the main Chamber, so I will not cover it now, except to reinforce the points she made. However, I do not blame the Saudis alone; Iran has a lot to answer for with respect to its funding of the Houthis. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said

“there are no good people in this conflict.”—[*Official Report*, 23 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 849.]

That is very true.

The last area I want to comment on is Europe. Europe is not exempt from violations of IHL. In my intervention on the right hon. Lady, I mentioned a prime example of defiance of IHL in the Russian-occupied area of Ukraine. That needs to be stated time and again. We in the Council of Europe need assistance from the Foreign Office so we can take a stand against the Russians and ensure, at the very least, that they give back the Ukrainian sailors they took. In the occupied bits of Ukraine, the Russians have attacked the Donetsk water filtration system, as I mentioned, which goes against everything the right hon. Lady said about trying to protect that for the benefit of individuals, and they have attacked 42 schools. Those were not schools where the Ukrainians were hiding rockets. This is not a Gaza situation. That was a deliberate attack on 42 schools, which we need to acknowledge.

What do we do about all this? First, we need to encourage more work by academics across Africa. I am aware that there is some activity in South Africa, but we need to encourage more Africans to carry out research and projects, which the Department for International Development may need to help fund. Above all, we need to ensure that the Geneva convention is enforceable. At the moment, it is characterised by a huge amount of non-compliance. We sit back and cross our arms and say how terrible that all is, but we do very little about it. We need to do something about it if we are to stop it happening.

[John Howell]

Lastly, we need to boost the amount of UN peacekeeping. Peacekeeping plays a vital role, and having peacekeepers on the ground is a good way of tackling this problem. I would love to see us argue for more peacekeeping, and more effective peacekeeping, throughout the world, wherever we can play our part.

9.59 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on initiating this debate. As Members will know, she chairs the all-party human rights group, and I am vice-chair of the all-party group on drones. We made a joint bid to the Backbench Business Committee, and I am pleased that we secured this debate.

Before coming here this morning I dropped in on Richard Ratcliffe. I recommend that people do that; he is outside the Iranian embassy, which did a good job of suddenly deciding its front needed painting and that it therefore needed some screens, which obstructed Richard Ratcliffe, or the view of him. I am pleased the police were not willing to move him on, which is apparently what the Iranians asked them to do. I encourage Members to visit him. In some respects, he and his wife are civilian casualties of an unofficial—well, there is not exactly a conflict or war between the UK and Iran, but there are certainly casualties.

It is right to debate this topic in the year of the 70th anniversary of the fourth Geneva convention on the protection of civilian persons in time of war. This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the protection of civilians agenda at the UN Security Council, for which the UK is currently penholder.

The protection of civilians must be a priority, and the right hon. Lady set out many reasons why. Save the Children says at least 420 million children globally are now living in areas affected by conflict, which is more than ever. That has an impact across the board. Before coming here this morning I met an organisation that campaigns on education in the Lake Chad basin—an issue that particularly affects girls in that area of conflict—including in Nigeria and Cameroon. Children are a priority, as is education, and we must ensure that, where they are lacking, appropriate protections are put in place for civilians and children.

The right hon. Lady referred to the figure for RAF casualties, and the claim that there was only one civilian casualty after 4,000 munitions were dropped in the war against Isis. In future, we should perhaps require independent confirmation that there have been no civilian casualties, and use that as the basis. In circumstances where there is no independent confirmation for whether there have been civilian casualties, there must be a question mark over that issue. The RAF is effective and efficient and has tight safeguards over the use of munitions, but to suggest that there was only one civilian casualty after 4,000 attacks is challenging in terms of credibility.

We know that warfare is changing and that we are moving away from large-scale ground interventions. Airstrikes are becoming the primary means of achieving military objectives, and as we saw in Syria, they are increasingly used in urban areas. Drones are an added element of that. People attempt to portray drones as

highly precise in their targeting, but there must be a question mark over that. We must ensure that issues of legality, transparency and accountability in the use of drones are monitored and built on. This is a developing area of military intervention, and the legal safeguards around drones must grow at the same time as their use.

We must focus on civilian protection during our own operations, but we must also consider the role that the UK increasingly plays when working with its partners—Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Yemen are often mentioned as an example of where UK personnel are not involved in directing attacks, but they are in command centres. The role the UK should play in civilian protection should be enhanced to cope with scenarios where the UK is an active partner in conflicts. Unfortunately, evidence is overwhelming that attacks have taken place in Yemen, from both sides, that are in breach of IHL. As parliamentarians, we should be worried that, while we have a role in expressing a view and voting on whether the UK should or should not take part in armed conflicts, we do not have one regarding whether the UK partners with countries that are in conflicts, such as that in Yemen. Perhaps we should look at whether we as parliamentarians should have an enhanced role when such partnerships are established.

It is not just when the UK is involved in a partnership that there are perhaps risks around whether we might be—either actively or at a distance—involved in matters that affect IHL. For example, the current US campaign in Yemen is separate from the conflict, but we must consider the use of drones. The same is true in places such as Pakistan and Somalia. The all-party group on drones set up an inquiry into the use of drones, and there are concerns about British involvement in US strikes in Yemen. It has been reported that there has been UK assistance with intelligence sharing, information triangulation and the tracking of informants, via the base in Yorkshire.

The German High Court recently found that at least some of the US drone strikes are unlawful and that Germany has an obligation to protect the Yemeni plaintiffs' right to life. The German Government also have a legal obligation to establish a mechanism to ensure that any assistance to the US adheres to IHL. I therefore hope that, when the Minister responds to the debate, he will say whether the UK Government have looked at the German High Court ruling on the US strikes and at whether they need to develop a policy or position on that. Are the Government comfortable that we could not be in the same position, given our role in Yemen?

I have three precise asks for the Minister. First, will the Government assure Members that they have considered the German case and assessed its legal implications for the UK? Secondly, as part of the forthcoming UK protection of civilians strategy, will there be a clear mandate and commitment to the protection of civilians, and specific guidance on the use of explosive weapons in urban areas and in partnerships? Finally, through our position as a penholder on civil protection at the UN, we have a unique opportunity to lead a global recommitment to civilian protection in UN forums—I know that is something to which the Minister would wish to commit.

We have a crisis of great magnitude on our hands. When up to 85% of war casualties are civilians, it is clear that the laws of war—distinction, proportionality, necessity and precaution—are being disregarded on a large scale. The time to act is now.

10.9 am

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak for the first time under your benign sway, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on securing the debate and on her wonderful speech. There are many issues that are before us today where there is a political division, but I submit that on humanitarian issues, the House of Commons ought to be absolutely united on what the ground rules are. Today gives us an opportunity to honour and thank those who so often put their lives in harm's way when trying to help in the humanitarian space that we are discussing.

It is worth remembering that before the second world war, there was no specific international legal norm that aimed to protect civilians in conflicts. Philippe Sands's outstanding book "East West Street", which was published last year, sets out clearly the way in which history was changed after that. The horrors experienced by civilians all over the world during that war prompted the international community to adopt, in 1949, the fourth Geneva convention on the protection of civilian persons in time of war.

My submission is that today, 70 years on, our generation is facing its own crisis of civilian protection. Gareth Evans at the United Nations made great progress on the responsibility to protect—R2P—in the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda and, indeed, events in Europe. My submission today is that the responsibility to protect remains an absolutely critical international doctrine, but that it is a skeleton, and there is far too little flesh on the bones of R2P and what it means to protect civilians.

Recently, in what was widely regarded as ethnic cleansing, we saw the appalling events that took place for the Rohingya in Rakhine state. The Minister, who we are glad to see in his place, has taken a leadership role in trying to protect the people caught up in that. Threats to civilians are worsening and becoming more complex, more urban and more protracted, but perhaps the major challenge facing civilian protection today is the rise in deliberate identity-based targeting of civilian populations, not as a by-product of war but as a distinct objective. Those crimes and atrocities are abhorrent in their own right, and they can also lead to the outbreak of armed conflicts. The eight-year crisis in Syria, for example, was propelled by the deliberate perpetration of atrocities by the state, leading to protracted armed conflict and a hellish cycle of intentional violence against civilian groups by different perpetrators.

Many hon. Members will have seen the work being done by Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, a distinguished former military officer. I had the opportunity to hear from him today, just after his return from the middle east where he advises the Idlib Health Directorate of the most up-to-date circumstances in Syria and particularly Idlib. He says this:

"Nearly 700 civilians killed this year and 500,000"

internally displaced people

"in Idlib many without homes living in the open and off scraps and evidence of another chemical attack. There have been 29 attacks on hospitals by Russian and Syrian aircraft with many now out of commission. A handful of hospitals and doctors are now trying to care for 3 million civilians...Because we have done nothing to prevent this atrocity the crimes against humanity of attacking hospitals and the use of chemical weapons, this will haunt us much longer than the Syrian conflict. People in Idlib, who I speak

to on a regular basis, feel completely let down by the West—we might be prepared to act against Iran for attacking an oil tanker but nothing to help the humanitarian disaster in Idlib?!"

I submit that we should be seeking to name and shame the aircraft attacking those hospitals, and provide evidence to the International Criminal Court for future prosecutions. As the Minister knows, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has sought to protect evidence of breaches of international humanitarian law in Syria. The advent of mobile phone technology means that we can collect evidence of the atrocities. In Khartoum, Sudan, mobile phone pictures have been taken of individual soldiers committing atrocities, breaking international humanitarian law. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us that in Syria, where there is a long-standing FCO operation, and in Khartoum, Sudan, we are collecting that evidence and we will make sure that it is used to bring international justice to those who have perpetrated those atrocities.

On that point, I remind the Minister that General Bashir, currently in jail in Khartoum, has been for many years the subject of an indictment through the International Criminal Court. We expect the British Government to do everything in their power to ensure that that warrant is executed.

Tom Brake: With regard to Syria, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the UK Government should also be keeping records of the Russians involved, so that they too may be held to account?

Mr Mitchell: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman; he is quite right, and the Minister will have noticed what he said.

Of today's major and emerging crises, the vast majority—Syria, Yemen, Libya, Myanmar, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Venezuela and Xinjiang—are driven, at least in part, by the deliberate violent targeting of civilian groups by political elites. Just as the decision was taken 70 years ago, in recognition that modern war was changing, to create a convention that aimed to protect civilians during the time of war, so we must admit today that more is needed.

Mr Bone, you will have heard the Queen's wonderful words in her toast at the banquet for President Trump. She said this:

"After the shared sacrifices of the Second World War, Britain and the United States worked with other allies to build an assembly of international institutions, to ensure that the horrors of conflict would never be repeated. While the world has changed, we are forever mindful of the original purpose of these structures: nations working together to safeguard a hard won peace."

It is incredibly important to support international structures, particularly the UN—I draw the Minister's attention to the comments in the House yesterday on the urgent question on Iran—and to use international bodies that were built up in the aftermath of the second world war.

The Government's ongoing review of the UK's protection of civilians strategy provides a welcome opportunity to ensure that British policy is fit for the challenges of modern conflict. It is, as the Minister will appreciate, an opportunity to ensure that any new strategy is in line with the substantial progress made in related areas since the previous strategy was published by the coalition Government in 2010 and last reviewed in 2012—namely, the UK's growing commitment to the prevention of mass atrocities.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that in developing the strategy, it is important that the UK shows clear leadership—for example, by appointing an ambassador in that area to deliver Britain’s message to the UN and globally about the protection of civilians?

Mr Mitchell: That is true. Of course, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Britain has a highly effective ambassador who can do that work.

Introducing a concept of “preventing while protecting” into national frameworks of civilian protection would raise the ambition from not targeting civilians to an active commitment to save lives. Any modern protection of civilians framework should prioritise the capacity to assess emerging and long-term risks of atrocities, including horizon scanning, the mapping of actors and interests, and contingency planning.

Any commitment to protect civilians from armed conflict and atrocities must be consistent. I have spoken out on many occasions against what is happening in Yemen and the role of the British Government, which I think is not in the right place. I greatly welcome the Foreign Secretary’s change of emphasis on Yemen, and the fact that his first act as Foreign Secretary was to go to both Tehran and Riyadh to try and bring that appalling conflict to a close. Nevertheless, the British Government are complicit in what is happening in Yemen, and we await the judgment of the Court of Appeal—probably on Thursday—on the issue of arms sales by Britain to Saudi Arabia.

I have never called for an arms embargo, because I understand that Saudi Arabia is a country surrounded by enemies, with the wealth to purchase arms, and a British arms embargo will not protect the children who suffer from the aerial bombardment of Yemen by the Saudi air force—at least, not any time in the near future. However, the way in which Saudi Arabia has pursued its policy against Yemen has united huge numbers of us against what is effectively the bombardment and blockade of a nation, which is causing a medieval famine, with the break-up of infrastructure leading to the prevalence of diseases that we have not seen in Europe for generations. Of course, that is radicalising thousands of young Yemenis, who know from where that appalling destruction is coming.

It was a low point in a low war when, last year, we saw that school bus hit by coalition bombs. Some 40 children were murdered, and we saw the pictures of them in their UN blue smocks and satchels. I stood, some time ago now, in the funeral parlour bombed—during a funeral ceremony—by coalition aircraft; 180 people were killed, with the plane coming around again for a second attack. That was a breach of international humanitarian law, and I hope the pilot responsible for that will be held to account in the same way as the others I have mentioned.

While the UK can and must play a role through all its internationally facing Departments to help prevent these dreadful crimes and innocent loss of life, we can and must uphold the same values here at home. The UK must never be a haven for those who commit atrocities, war crimes and genocide. We must uphold our responsibilities to victims and prosecute subjects who reach our shores. In that context, I wish to draw the House’s attention to the fact that five alleged Rwandan genocidaires

remain free, wandering around the British Isles, three at least claiming British benefits. They have not been held to account for the alleged crimes that they committed and perpetrated during the Rwandan genocide. Britain’s judicial system, which of course is entirely separate from politics, declined to extradite those five back to Rwanda, where they could have faced justice along with hundreds of thousands of others. There is therefore an onus on the British judicial system—our laws—to ensure that those people are held to account in this country if they are not to be extradited.

I draw that to the Minister’s attention. It is not a direct Foreign Office matter, but I can tell him this: it is not the Rwandan system of justice that is in the dock today, but the British system of justice, for not delivering justice to the many people in Rwanda who allegedly suffered at the hands of those five genocidaires. I hope it will not be too long before the British judicial and legal system holds them to proper account, for their sakes, as well as for those in Rwanda who allegedly suffered at their hands.

10.22 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. I thank the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) for securing this debate. I associate myself with the words of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who gave a clear and precise overview of the dreadful conflict in Yemen and the impact on civilians, and with those of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who talked about the impact of technology—especially drones. I agree, as I usually do on this matter, with the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who spoke about Ukraine and the Russian state’s interference in and occupation of Donbass.

An example of how we need to review IHL in the context of the changing nature of warfare is the targeting of the infrastructure of the Estonian state through cyber-warfare in 2007. Government institutions were unable to deliver civilian—public—services after that direct attack on the civilian population. However, I do not think that could happen today, given that Estonians are leaders in the field of cyber-warfare.

It is important to commemorate and remember those who brought about the fourth Geneva convention. We should be thankful that we are able to be here today to discuss its 70th anniversary and the work that was done in the light of the horrors of the second world war. It is clear that IHL is a solid and extensive legal framework for protecting civilians in conflict. Nevertheless, the protection it affords is in many ways inherently qualified. It is clear from the evidence that the failure is due not to the law itself, but to the persistent failure to comply with those obligations. IHL has proven to be a practical, durable and adaptable framework for providing passive protection for civilians in the midst of conflict, but that inherent qualification means that we must review it in the light of changing technologies and methods of warfare.

There have been elements of failure. The genocide in Srebrenica in 1995 and the genocide of the Tutsis in 1994 made it clear that we need to ask ourselves consistently how valuable and effective the framework is. In the light of the increase in civilian casualties, which was well documented by the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley,

we must redouble our efforts proactively to protect civilians in a range of spheres. I hope the Minister will say something about that later. Civilians must be protected not just on the frontline in Syria or Idlib, but in the cyber-sphere. I am a member of the Defence Committee, and I note that NATO has thankfully recognised the importance of making civilian protection a key element of operational planning, and has published a protection of civilians strategy.

I have three questions for the Minister. First, although the UK seems to have been slow in following NATO's moves on the protection of civilians in operational planning, will he assure Members that the Government are moving in the same direction as our NATO allies? If he is unable to furnish us with that answer, will he ask the Ministry of Defence to write to Members?

Secondly, do the Government recognise that investment is required to respond to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of different groups—specifically, women, children, the disabled and the elderly? Finally, does the Minister agree that the continued abuse of the Security Council veto undermines not just IHL but the rule of international law itself?

10.26 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Bone. I thank the Members who brought this fundamentally important issue to the Chamber. I have known the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) since I came to this place in 2001, and she has done phenomenally well in holding our consciences to account. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who represents the royal borough of Sutton Coldfield—

Mr Mitchell: Town.

Mr Mahmood: The royal town of Sutton Coldfield—it is close to Birmingham; that is as far as I will go. The right hon. Gentleman certainly made a great contribution during his tenure as Secretary of State for International Development. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) was the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for international development from 2002, and has done great work since then, particularly as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on drones.

Today, we are celebrating the Geneva convention, which was created almost 70 years ago. It was a skilful piece of drafting of international law that sought to move forward from the severity of what we had suffered during the two world wars. We decided to bring nations together to look at how we could continue to operate. It was adopted by the United Nations Security Council, and everybody welcomed that.

I am not sure people realised when it was put together 70 years ago how much worse the situation would become. The implementation of that international law was a great achievement, but who knew how tragic things would become in the past 50 years? Certainly, since the start of the century, that great legislation has been set aside and people have suffered. We must address that. Great speeches have been made today by all the Members who took part, and they raised valid points. What we must consider is how to move forward and get implementation. Members have expressed positive ways

of looking at the issue, and it has sometimes been the collective failure of Governments that means we have not moved far enough forward.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley set out a clear understanding of the convention of 70 years ago, with its definition, purpose and importance. The protection of children is fundamentally important, and that has been true for my right hon. Friend in the work she has done. As to how we move forward, she raised interesting issues about attacks on civilian facilities and other acts counter to the convention, which need to be considered. She rightly said that attacks have intensified since 2000 and continue to do so, and referred to the non-state actors that have increasingly played a part in the past almost 20 years. I hope that we can try to address those issues and how they arise.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) raised a key point about Ukraine, on which he does a phenomenal amount of work—as well as on eastern Europe generally. His role is important, because sometimes, when there are wider issues such as what is currently happening in places such as Yemen and Syria, there is a need to recognise what is going on in our back yard. The hon. Gentleman raised the complex issue of Gaza and how to resolve that and move forward. He made a fundamentally important point about conflict in Africa—the number of deaths, and the part to be played by African nations and individuals. He also mentioned the conflict in Yemen, and the roles of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Sometimes we tend to pick sides in conflicts but, if we are to serve the people and be bound by the Geneva convention, we must not be bound by individual preferences as to what side we are on. We should be on the side of the victims.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington has played a huge role, particularly with the all-party parliamentary group on drones. He believes in the importance of that work. It includes the issue of accountability in the use of drones, and the way people see them—sometimes we put such things to the back of our minds—as being part of a military mechanism. That suggests to me other areas where we take action and may say, “If we just have air attacks and nothing on the ground, that is much safer.” It is not. When strikes begin to be made from above there will be mistakes, because those concerned will not know in which building or area people are concentrated. There have been attacks on Syria and Iraq where a huge number of people have been lost, and people have been killed in Yemen, because of air attacks alone. We go into such arenas and it is always said that technically we can do whatever we want and that it will limit casualties, but we must realise that, as has been said, that is not accurate. We need to take a serious look at how to deal with that issue and whether such action, or any action perpetrating additional acts of war, makes sense. We must look at our role and how to move forward. The right hon. Gentleman also raised the German legal action, and it is a great example that I am sure the Minister will address.

I think that the Minister has taken note of the issues raised by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), and particularly what he said about women, children and people with disabilities, which is important. It is the purpose of the Geneva convention to resolve those things, and we have not done enough to address some of them. There are some issues that Save the Children want to encourage the

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

Government to look at, to see how they can be dealt with. They include the importance of child-specific expertise in peace support and military operations. How can we cater for that, and record those issues? Several Members have referred to committing to avoiding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, which is another key thing we should continue to push for when we take sides and support military action. Members have also mentioned what Save the Children says about creating civilian harm tracking procedures, and we should strongly focus on that.

As for improving and championing accountability for violation of children's rights, it is difficult for us to get full accountability and a full assessment of what happens on the ground. However, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield said, where there are people—in particular the people in question from Rwanda—who have committed genocide and have still not been held accountable, and who are still walking around in the United Kingdom, never mind anywhere else, we should be looking to hold them to account, and thinking about how to do that.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will obviously want to make it clear that those are allegations, but that it is in the interest of those who are accused, as well as everyone else, that they should have their day in court so that justice can take its course.

Mr Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who makes a valid point. That was perhaps a slip of my tongue, which I should clarify, and I thank him for correcting me.

Save the Children also advocates a commitment to share expertise. In a conflict area we must be able to address some of the issues it has raised.

I declare an interest as I begin the next section of my remarks, about Kashmir—a region that has not been mentioned by many speakers in the debate—and human rights. The situation there has continued for 70 years, over the period we have been considering. Protection is given by the Indian state to the military and it cannot be held accountable in a court of law within the civil structure of India. Abuses happen day in, day out, and mass graves have been found. Torture is commonplace—including of children, women and people with disabilities. We need an open arena where the issues can be discussed, rather than just pointing fingers. However, people must be held accountable. The country that purports to be the largest democracy in the world should be held to account for the way it treats its people. My constituents from Punjab in India raise significant issues in that respect and we should be keen for development and progress on those issues.

It is also important to reiterate the role of the United Nations. The hon. Member for Henley mentioned peacekeepers in relation to the United Nations, and it is important that we consider that, but the United Nations should be not just a peacekeeper, but a peacemaker.

Part of the failure of the United Nations is due to the partisan issues that have arisen in the Security Council and the inability to get resolutions through. There should be a far greater presence of the United Nations in these conflict areas, to avoid further escalation of violence there. That would certainly help. There has

been too much political side-taking by different nations and countries—again, I point to where that has happened in the Security Council—but, if the purposes of the United Nations are to be fulfilled, the organisation must be fit for purpose. Over the 19 years of this century, at least, we have seen huge conflicts escalate.

We, as countries and nations, must also understand that when we put arms into an arena, when we do not like someone and want to support the fighters against them, we add additional weaponry to that arena. We have no guarantee who gets hold of that weaponry and no say over what they will do with it. It is important to recognise that fact in terms of Syria. The US needs to learn some lessons on this and perhaps we, in some instances, need to learn lessons on it: if we are prepared to put more arms into those conflict areas, they will get used, and we cannot be guarantors of who gets to use them and how things move forward.

I have asked the Minister a lot of the questions that Save the Children has raised and other hon. Members have raised. In addition, we need to understand that, after 70 years of this great legislation that we are here to support, it would be far better for countries and nations to have more jaw-jaw and less war-war.

10.41 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful, as I am sure we all are, to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) for securing this debate, and to all other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I shall try, in the course of a slightly longer speech, to respond to all the points raised.

As the right hon. Lady said, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) reiterated, this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Geneva conventions, which were designed, after the terror and the horror of the second world war, to serve as a founding pillar of what we know today as international humanitarian law. They represent a clear affirmation that the principles of international humanitarian law are both neutral and universally recognised.

Today's motion rightly highlights the central place of IHL in international efforts to protect civilians affected by conflict in our world today. There is little doubt that, as conflicts become increasingly complex, IHL will become ever more important and will expand as a body of law. Its underlying principles—the distinction between civilians, those hors de combat and combatants; the principle of necessity and the prohibition on the infliction of unnecessary suffering; the principle of proportionality; the observance of precautions in attack; and the principle of humanity—are all clear and unambiguous.

However, as many speakers have rightly pointed out, the nature of conflict is changing. Too often, the distinction between combatants and civilians, between a target that is legitimate and one that is not, has become blurred. Too often, civilians, including aid workers, are deliberately targeted. In almost all modern wars, it is not the combatants who suffer most, but the civilians. Indeed, as a number of hon. Members brought up, current patterns of violent conflict worldwide show that 90% of all casualties today are civilian. As urbanisation increases, the International Committee of the Red Cross has reported that there are

“some 50 million people worldwide affected by armed conflict in cities.”

The changing nature of conflict presents challenges for states such as the United Kingdom and our allies, who seek to provide humanitarian assistance and make a positive contribution to preserving international peace and security, and to ending conflict, including, where necessary, through military action. The UK Government are committed to facing those challenges, because we all take very seriously our commitments to international humanitarian law and to the protection of civilians in our operations and in the humanitarian contexts where we provide assistance.

Adherence to IHL is a paramount consideration in our approach to conflict, and when we encounter potential violations, we strongly support engaging the appropriate mechanisms to deal with them, while ensuring that we have a domestic legal framework that makes certain that our armed forces are fully accountable. A number of hon. Members will recognise that the Ministry of Defence has an important part to play in some of the questions I will come to in a moment or two, and those really relate to that Government Department.

The UK military is at pains to operate to the highest standards. It closely monitors and verifies the impact of our military activity. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield rightly pointed out that the increased use of social media provides a mechanism for not only the long-term maintenance of evidence, but, on a day-to-day basis, a recognition of where military or other individuals have gone beyond what is acceptable.

The protection of civilians is and will remain a central pillar of the UK's approach to our humanitarian efforts and to managing conflict. It has been pointed out that we have played a leading role in the UN Security Council over 20 years in developing that international approach. If I might respond to what my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said earlier, South Africa is currently the African nation on the Security Council, but Tunisia will join, and I very much hope it will play an important part in this, given the recent conflicts that have taken place there.

My hon. Friend will perhaps be aware that the Asian nations currently on the Security Council—Indonesia and Vietnam—have made questions around peacekeeping and the rights of combatants and civilians in war an important part of what they hope to achieve. I hope we will work together with those countries and others in the UN Security Council to raise the profile of many of those issues during the next two years and beyond.

To coincide with the 20th anniversary of the first resolution on this issue, we are undertaking a review of our approach to the protection of civilians in armed conflict, to ensure that it is fit for purpose in the context of modern conflicts and that it addresses all civilians, including children and other particularly vulnerable people, which goes to the heart of the point made by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: West.

Mark Field: Sorry—West Dunbartonshire. The hon. Gentleman might well become the leader of the Liberal Democrat party if I am not careful.

Tom Brake: Nominations are closed.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I think I'll pass.

Mark Field: I think the hon. Gentleman has a supporter in the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake).

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire made a good point about recognising issues around disability, children and other groups. We do not want simply to look upon civilians as a single group, and part of what we are trying to achieve here is focused on what I think is a public demand on all these matters.

Our approach to the review embraces a cross-Whitehall consultation, as proposed by the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley, as well as consultations with civil society—we have made reference to Save the Children, but a number of other charities will play an important part in the review. When completed, we hope it will contain an agreed Government-wide position that will take account of all Government Departments.

To demonstrate what that means in practice, I will focus on three main areas: our international engagement, our work on international peacekeeping, and our domestic activity to promote and uphold international humanitarian law. On the international stage, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, our permanent seat on the UN Security Council bestows on us an important responsibility to protect civilians and uphold IHL, whenever and wherever international peace and security are under threat. We have not shied away from those responsibilities.

John Howell: In terms of the review, is the Minister aware that the World Bank has changed from a system of trying to put out today's fires to one of trying to identify what fires will occur tomorrow and to prevent them? Should we not adopt something similar for the UN?

Mark Field: To an extent, I agree. Obviously, predictions of the future are always fraught with difficulty; a number of the conflicts I am going to touch on now might have been predictable 10 or 15 years ago, but others have arisen unexpectedly. We need a flexible system, but there is some sense in having that forward-looking approach at the UN as well as at the World Bank.

In Iraq, the UK has been at the forefront of efforts to ensure accountability for the crimes committed by Daesh, the so-called Islamic State. Through a Security Council resolution adopted in 2017, we helped to establish a UN investigative team to support the Iraqi Government in the collection, preservation and storage of evidence linked to Daesh crimes.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield pointed out on Syria, we co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution in December 2016 that established the international impartial and independent mechanism for Syria, which was designed to deliver accountability for horrific atrocities, including the deliberate targeting of civilians and the use of chemical weapons.

On Myanmar, the UK was the penholder at the UN Security Council that co-sponsored the creation of the UN fact-finding mission, which concluded that ethnic cleansing had been carried out against the Rohingya by the Myanmar military and could amount to genocide. We worked in the UN Human Rights Council to establish a unique investigative mechanism to collect and preserve evidence of atrocities for future prosecutions, recognising—tragically, I am afraid, in certain cases—that those who need to be brought to account will possibly remain in

[Mark Field]

office for many years to come. None the less, we have a reliable and legally watertight mechanism to hold them to account. I would like to think that our country has played a leadership role, but, of course, we do not do this alone; we work with like-minded partners to address conflict situations, such as in Sudan, Yemen, Libya and the horn of Africa.

Let me come on to some of the contributions made in the debate. Risks around serious or major violations of international humanitarian law, or abuse of human rights, are a key part of our assessment against the IHL consolidation criteria. In relation to arms exports, a licence will not be issued to any country if so to do would be inconsistent with any provision of the mandatory criteria, including where we assess that there is a clear risk that arms might be used in the commission of a serious violation of IHL. The situation is kept under careful and continual review. We examine every application rigorously, on a case-by-case basis. That applies in Yemen, with Saudi Arabia, but also in many other walks. The test is designed to be forward looking. A licence will not be issued to Saudi Arabia or any other country if to do so would be inconsistent with any provision of the consolidated EU or national arms export licensing criteria.

Ann Clwyd: On arms exports, unless there is proper end-use management—which we do not do—we cannot be confident in the assertions that the Minister makes.

Mark Field: I was coming on to that very point. I know it is one that the right hon. Lady made earlier.

Mr Mitchell: While the Minister is collecting points to come on to, does he agree that it is not a good idea for investigations into breaches of international humanitarian law to be undertaken by one of the parties to the conflict, namely Saudi Arabia? Is it not better to agree that, under UN auspices, any such inquiries should be neutral? Otherwise, it is akin to a student marking their own homework.

Mark Field: I wish I had homework that I could mark these days—it is more my children's homework that I have to do that with now. My right hon. Friend makes a valid point. Above all, the issue is less to do with whether that is desirable, and more about the credibility in the international community of such outcomes. He makes a fair point.

To return to the point made by the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley, the operational end-use monitoring and the establishment of a dedicated civilian casualty mitigation and investigation team are an MOD lead. I will ensure that her speech is passed to my friends over in that Department, although I am sure they are well aware of the concerns raised here today. The issue relates to operations in the field and is therefore an MOD matter. From our side, we are trying to improve data collection, as I referred to, in other parts of the world. We feel that that may have an important part of play. There is project underway with the University of Manchester looking at many of these related issues, and I hope the right hon. Lady will be able to feed into that.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), who is no longer in his place, made a point about child soldiers. The UK is firmly committed to ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers and to the protection of all children affected by armed conflict. We are an active member of the United Nations Security Council working group on children and armed conflict. I believe it will be an important part of the Indonesian presidency next year that they want to address this terrible issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley talked about Africa, and I have discussed the Security Council issues a little. Uganda, Senegal and Ghana—I am not sure they are all on his hit list, and I have put them in reverse alphabetical order—are working with the US and other countries, looking at positive reform of the International Criminal Court. We would obviously like to see more activity in Africa, given the prevalence of concerns that have arisen from that part of the world, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington made an important point about drones, their legality and the implications of the German High Court ruling. The MOD leads on this, but we will look closely at that German High Court ruling. Upholding IHL is already integral to any assistance that we would provide to other states. This matter is under review at the moment through the MOD.

Tom Brake: On that point, I and other Members here today would like something in writing from the Minister, once those discussions have been completed.

Mark Field: I am happy to undertake to do that.

I want to talk about the challenges that our UN peacekeepers face. In today's modern conflicts, missions are facing increasing asymmetric and physical threats, and they can be targets themselves. The importance of finding political solutions remains paramount. We are committed to improvements in peacekeeping. We will continue to call for support to improve the three Ps of peacekeeping—planning, pledges and performance—as we, along with 63 nations, set out in a communiqué at the 2016 UN peacekeeping Defence ministerial meeting in London.

I realise that time is getting tight, and if there are matters that I have not been able to bring up, I will respond in writing. I will make sure my team looks through the *Hansard* transcript.

A key approach is that there should be no impunity. Primary responsibility for investigation and prosecution of the most serious international crimes rests with states themselves, but where those states are unable or unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities, other justice mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court, have an important role to play. The UK remains one of the foremost contributors to the ICC, and we will work to ensure that the court undergoes the necessary reforms to enable it to fulfil its mandate as the court of last resort, as intended under the Rome statute. We have been strong advocates of ad hoc and hybrid international tribunals, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and its successor, as well as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone.

UN peacekeeping is an important aspect of the protection of civilians, and we will continue to work with the international community on it. In addition to our international efforts, we are working domestically to ensure that we are doing all we can to uphold IHL in the interests of protecting civilians. We have established a centre of excellence for human security, which will deliver extended training on the protection of civilians; women, peace and security; human trafficking and sexual exploitation; and cultural property protection. Ours is the first military in the world to have a dedicated national defence policy on human security. The centre will help other militaries. We have also had a safe schools declaration, to support the continuation of education during armed conflict, and the publication of our “Voluntary Report on the Implementation of International Humanitarian Law at Domestic Level”.

Mr Bone, I appreciate that you want to ensure that the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley has a moment to speak at the end of the debate, but, if I may, I want to conclude by saying that our support, recognised, I think, by everyone in the House, for the principles, rules and instruments of international humanitarian law remains unwavering. The robust framework is designed with the protection of civilians in mind. We take our responsibilities seriously, and I am glad that the House feels as strongly as we do. The review is under way, and I am convinced it will be a great success, not least because it will have input from Members here and from a range of bodies with these interests at heart. I hope we can discuss these matters again in the House before too long.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Does the right hon. Lady want to wind up?

Ann Clwyd indicated dissent.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the continued importance of international humanitarian law in protecting civilians in conflict.

Diplomatic Representation in Wales

11 am

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered attracting diplomatic representation to Wales.

I am delighted to have secured this debate, which is of huge interest to me, as I am sure it is to any hon. Member from Wales. This matter has gained in importance in recent times, thanks in part to the turbulent situation in which we find ourselves—a political context that has made Wales’s place in the world more uncertain than ever. However, the development that triggered—or, dare I say it, inspired—the application for the debate was the decision earlier this year of the Irish Government to reopen their consulate general in Cardiff, which was rightly heralded at the time as a promising development for Wales.

The reopening of the consulate, following a 10-year leave of absence, offers a valuable opportunity to strengthen the cultural, economic and social ties that have woven together the histories of our two nations for centuries. It may also provide some impetus to other nations to follow Ireland’s lead and develop their diplomatic presence in Wales. Given that we live in such turbulent times, with Brexit uncertainty lingering into the foreseeable future, this endeavour is worthy of serious and sustained effort. The question before us is how we build upon this and encourage more Governments to develop their presence in Wales, to deepen social and cultural links and to encourage companies from across the world to invest in Wales.

After all, Wales is no stranger to the diplomatic sphere; indeed, in the middle ages, France’s efforts to increase its influence on the island of Britain were often manifested in diplomatic overtures to Welsh leaders. Such efforts continued well beyond the death of Llywelyn Ein Llyw Olaf in 1282, perhaps exemplified most famously by Owain Glyndŵr, who sent diplomats to the French court and who, in his Pennal letter of 1406, sought to strengthen the cause of Welsh independence by aligning himself with the French king, Charles VI, on the pressing matter of the papacy. Although his efforts to charm the French were ultimately unsuccessful—indeed, I do not think he ever received a reply from the French king—they nevertheless serve as useful reminders that there is precedent, albeit historic, for the idea of Wales nurturing its own diplomatic connections, and of doing so for a higher purpose; for in the Pennal letter, Glyndŵr set out his plans for establishing a Welsh Church and two Welsh universities—an enlightened vision of a prosperous and autonomous Wales.

Fortunately, and unlike the exertions of Owain Glyndŵr, any new effort to develop Wales’s diplomatic links will have strong foundations to build on. The Welsh Government already have offices across the world, from Belgium and France to Japan and the United States, and recently appointed Eluned Morgan AM as a Minister with some responsibility for international relations. This can be seen as part of a wider trend that in recent years has seen stateless nations increasingly becoming important actors in diplomacy—or perhaps paradiplomacy, the term more usually applied to the diplomatic capacity of sub-state Governments.

[*Ben Lake*]

Without doubt, EU membership has exposed Wales to opportunities to increase its international standing, through such institutions as the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the Welsh Government's office in Brussels. However, with our relationship with the rest of Europe perhaps more uncertain than ever, we must now look to other ways of strengthening these international relationships. One way of doing so would be by encouraging greater foreign diplomatic representation in Wales itself.

There is currently an extensive network of honorary consuls in Wales, which is organised as the Consular Association in Wales, which was formed over 100 years ago and whose current president, Mr Michael Rye, has set a sterling example as a champion of promoting consular representation to Wales. By way of background, honorary consuls differ from ambassadors, in that they are not usually employed by their respective nations, even though they do undertake quite a lot of work on their behalf, but are more honorary appointments under the terms of the Vienna convention on consular relations. Their role is broad-ranging, encompassing such tasks as co-operating closely with embassies to co-ordinate official visits to Wales; providing background and contextual briefings to enable closer bilateral relationships to be formed; and assisting nationals of their country who require aid, such as in cases of accident, illness, injury or the loss of personal travel documents. They also serve an important role in validating those same travel documents.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am very interested in what my hon. Friend says and greatly appreciate that he has been able to secure the debate. Does he agree that any means of strengthening the contact between Wales and Argentina should be welcomed, particularly given the ongoing diplomatic quandary of finding a way of transporting Eisteddfod chairs from Y Wladfa back to Wales? It could also facilitate visits between Wales and the Welsh community in Patagonia.

Ben Lake: I thank my right hon. Friend—this is the first occasion I have had to greet her as such—for that important point. It is not always well known, but Patagonia, in southern Argentina, and Wales share a very close history. People can be found there called González-Jones, who speak both Spanish and Welsh, which is a pretty unique situation. There are also shared cultural links, most notably with the matter of the Eisteddfod, and if we were to have closer diplomatic links we might be able to facilitate the transportation of those important Eisteddfod chairs back to the homeland.

While embassy personnel tend to change every three to five years, honorary consuls have their accreditation renewed every three to five years, unless they retire or if their respective country changes its attitude to the particular individual. In that sense, consuls can provide much-needed continuity, with their longer terms allowing for deep and long-lasting relationships with civic, political and business leaders to be forged, regardless of any political turmoil or changes. Simply put, as a collective, honorary consuls help bring the best of the world to Wales, as well as the best of Wales to the world. While their work is vital for diplomatic relations, it would be unrealistic and grossly unfair to expect them to undertake the full range of duties associated with staffed diplomatic missions.

For this reason, we should be enticing Governments to set up consulates general in Wales, as Ireland has done, with paid personnel tasked with developing ever-closer links between Wales and the rest of the world. The benefits of doing so are not solely cultural and social. Stronger diplomatic representation could help boost inward investment, the rate of which has been steadily reducing in recent years, with Wales attracting 57 inward investment projects in 2017-18, compared with 85 in 2016-17. No data is yet available for 2018-19.

The development of a thriving international quarter in Cardiff, with consulates general from all over the world, underpinned by an even broader network of honorary consuls, could offer a substantial boost to the Welsh economy. Before coming to this place, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) used to do a lot of work with the rural development board of Wales, as well as the Welsh Development Agency, which in some form acted with quasi-diplomatic status in attracting those closer links with companies from across the world and was very successful in bringing companies from as far afield as Japan and America to locate themselves in Wales. So there is economic potential in this endeavour.

There are many examples that we could follow. We could look to countries such as Catalonia, Quebec and the Basque country, which have all worked proactively in recent years to encourage Governments to establish a presence in their capital cities. The Public Diplomacy Council of Catalonia, known as Diplocat, offers a useful model for Wales's efforts overseas, and perhaps a potential strategy for all those overseas offices that the Welsh Government have opened.

Diplocat is a public-private consortium, formed by representatives from different Catalan authorities and organisations, including chambers of commerce and universities. Through active engagement with the international community, Barcelona has established itself as an international hub for businesses and organisations. Barcelona has 38 consulates general and consulates, while Bilbao, in the Basque country, has seven. Montreal has 42. The UK Government have an office in all those cities, so why not start our efforts to reintroduce Wales to the world by encouraging those nations to replicate Ireland's example by opening an office in Cardiff?

With a slightly different focus from the strategy pursued by Barcelona and the Catalan authorities, the Quebec Government's international policy has at its heart a desire to attract international organisations, diplomatic and consular offices and international students and research conferences to Quebec. That has in recent years led to several international organisations establishing themselves in Montreal, most importantly, perhaps, the International Civil Aviation Organisation—a United Nations specialised agency that works to make the civil aviation sector safe and efficient worldwide and to ensure that the sector develops in a more economically and environmentally sustainable manner. Other major international organisations located in Quebec include the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the International Air Transport Association, the World Anti-Doping Agency and the Institut de la Francophonie pour le développement durable—apologies for my pronunciation.

In Wales, the onus would of course fall, to some extent at least, on the Welsh Government, who I believe should be sending frequent delegations around the world

to establish closer links with businesses and international organisations. The honorary consuls whom we already have in Wales are ideally placed to facilitate the process. However, I fear that the Welsh Government have still to realise the true potential of the Consular Association in Wales to strengthen cultural, economic and social connections around the world.

Therefore, an important first step for Wales's re-entry into the diplomatic theatre would be the formalisation of the relationship between the Welsh Government and our existing honorary consuls. Only then can we look to build on that by enticing larger diplomatic missions to establish themselves, and to co-ordinate with Wales's existing overseas officers to put into action an international strategy for Wales that focuses, perhaps, on certain key objectives or themes. Those could include becoming global leaders in the protection of minority languages, for example, or promoting the incredible potential that we have in the realms of renewable energy technology and research and the benefits that their development would deliver for the entire world as well as for Wales.

Of course, it cannot be denied that the UK Government have a role to play, too. In Quebec, we have a fine example. The Government of Quebec and the Government of Canada work closely together to establish favourable conditions for hosting in Montreal some of the most important international organisations. Might there be an opportunity, I wonder, for the UK Government to look to offer more opportunities for the Welsh Government to co-locate their overseas offices with those of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—I know that already happens to some extent—and likewise to facilitate diplomatic delegations from London to Cardiff, perhaps by raising the prospect of shared office spaces or hubs, or even just trade delegations, which could come from time to time to meet representatives of Welsh industries and businesses at first hand?

The Irish consulate general is a first step towards developing a more visible international presence in Wales, but that will require putting aside old-fashioned notions of diplomacy and will require the realisation that in an era of multi-track diplomacy and para-diplomacy, all levels of Government, as well as businesses, universities, civic organisations and non-governmental organisations, have a role to play and must be involved.

My only ask today is whether the Minister will consider working with the Welsh Government and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to encourage more Governments to open consulates in Wales, so as to boost Wales's international presence. I reiterate that the Consular Association in Wales seems to me a natural starting point. Its knowledge and connections can be harnessed to revolutionise the way that Wales is seen by the rest of the world.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing the debate. I thank hon. Members for their valuable contributions and particularly for the trip that we had through the diplomatic history of Wales in the medieval period, which certainly helped to expand my knowledge.

Attracting diplomatic representation to Wales is an important issue. I particularly welcome, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion did, the recent announcement of the Republic of Ireland reopening its consulate in Cardiff. That is a step to building closer relationships—particularly given the key trade routes between Holyhead and Fishguard—with the Irish Republic.

It is important that we take this opportunity to pay tribute to the network of more than 20 honorary consuls in Wales, who work tirelessly to strengthen, build and maintain our relationships with the rest of the world. Those include honorary consuls from our more traditional European partners, such as Italy, Germany and France, but the network has recently expanded to include countries such as Lesotho and Tunisia. Further expansion of the network is a matter for the respective countries, based on their individual national interests, but I am sure that Argentina will have heard the passionate plea for a representative in Cardiff, given the strong links with Patagonia. The cultural traditions are important as well. This is not just about the economy and, shall we say, hard power; it is also about some of the great cultural links between the nations.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has already spoken to the new chair of the Consular Association in Wales about how the UK Government can work closely with the honorary consul network in Wales in the future. In addition, I have met the Jordanian ambassador at the Wales Office to have a conversation about how links could be strengthened and improved.

Ultimately, attracting greater diplomatic representation is about forging greater links between Wales, as a strong nation within the United Kingdom, and countries around the world. It is critical that we capitalise on the opportunities that EU exit presents us with in this regard. Of course we want to maintain our strong links with our European partners. The issue of the EU's presence in the UK after exit day is a matter for discussion and agreement between the UK Government and the EU. I would like to assure hon. Members that those discussions are ongoing, particularly in relation to what presence it may have in Wales in the future.

Ben Lake: I have been remiss: I do not believe that I have welcomed the Minister to his position in the Wales Office, but I do so heartily now. On the matter of a European presence in Wales post Brexit, does the Minister agree that one idea that European nations might think of looking at is co-location? I know that they do that in other countries across the world. What comes to mind is New Zealand, where different European nations share buildings to reduce costs. Does the Minister think that European nations might do well to look at that as a possible idea?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive intervention. Of course countries can sensibly look at how they can work together, either to reduce costs or to provide better opportunities. I remember a visit to Reykjavík, where the same building houses both the British and the German embassies. They have separate parts of the building; there is a clear divide, but that has brought opportunities for closer working—better opportunities—when we are arguing, probably, on the same types of issue. At the same time, we maintain a distinct and separate presence that is easily recognisable to those who visit. Certainly we would be only too

[Kevin Foster]

happy to talk with countries, if they wanted to look at this in Cardiff, about how it could be supported and what opportunities would be available to them. Let us not forget that it does not necessarily have to be Cardiff. There are other great towns and cities in Wales where they may look to have or may have economic interests, particularly in the north of Wales, that they need to service and where they need to provide support to their citizens.

We want Wales, all parts of the UK, and the UK as a whole to be open and outward looking, building new relationships in Europe and beyond. As foreign affairs are a reserved matter, the Government represent the interests of the whole United Kingdom, and we will continue to deliver for Wales and all parts of the UK overseas.

We believe that Wales approaches EU exit from a position of strength and continues to be an attractive location for business and investment. Last year, more than 3,000 jobs came to Wales through foreign direct investment, from 57 projects. The Office of the Secretary of State for Wales will continue to work closely with the Department for International Trade to support that work and attract new opportunities.

Welsh businesses continue to export their products across the globe. I was pleased to note that the value of Welsh exports for the year ending March 2019 was up £1.2 billion over the previous year, with growth in exports to EU and non-EU countries alike. Our exporting success is testament to our great exporting businesses. I am thinking of businesses such as Babi Pur, based in Gwynedd, which has grown to be one of the leading retailers in fair trade and organic children's products, selling all over the world—it was ably promoted to me by the two local Members of Parliament, the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), when I met them to discuss the North Wales growth deal—and Llanllŷr Source, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ceredigion, selling spring water globally.

Alongside the strong economic links with other countries, it is important that we recognise the cultural ones. I welcome plans by the Thai embassy to hold the first Thai festival in Wales next month to help to raise awareness of the links that exist between Thailand and Wales. We should be clear that organising events with another nation to promote the country does not automatically mean organising events in London; that can happen across the rest of our United Kingdom as well. I am particularly pleased that the Thai embassy has decided to hold this event in Cardiff.

The Secretary of State for Wales has regular meetings with overseas diplomats, to discuss opportunities to strengthen the links between Wales and countries across the globe. He also promotes Wales abroad and has done so recently in Hong Kong, Japan, the US, Qatar and elsewhere. These trade missions are vital in ensuring that our long-term aspirations for the Welsh economy are secured. He has also worked extensively with the Department for International Trade to launch the Wales portfolio at MIPIM—*le marché international des professionnels de l'immobilier*—the world's largest property and investment event, in March. The six projects in the portfolio, from across Wales, showcase our potential.

In response to the specific query that was made, we want to continue working closely with the Welsh Government in marketing Wales to the world. The Secretary of State has a positive relationship with both the Welsh Minister for Economy and Transport, and the deputy Minister with responsibility for international relations in the Welsh Government, and has invited them to join him on trade missions in order to demonstrate a joined-up approach to our prospective partners.

Businesses in Wales rightly have access to support in 108 markets globally through the Department for International Trade. I would be happy to look at how we can expand that sort of work further, so that Welsh businesses are heard in our international trade work. We are also working with the Department of International Trade to consider how best they can boost their resource and presence in Wales. DIT is a Department for the entire UK, and basing key staff in Wales, to work with stakeholders and the Welsh Government, can help grow our exports.

All of that is important, because, after we have left the EU, the UK will have an independent trade policy for the first time in more than four decades. I know that you will particularly welcome that, Mr Bone.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. While I sit in this Chair, I have no views on anything.

Kevin Foster: I am sure you would merely welcome the fact that this was a thorough debate, Mr Bone.

We will play a full and active role on trade policy on the global stage, working closely with friends old and new. That freedom will allow us to deploy all the tools at our disposal, tailoring our trade policy to the strengths and requirements of the UK economy, and supporting the industrial strategy. The voice of Wales will be heard at all stages of these negotiations, from mandate design to the final agreement.

The Government are making good progress in preparations for the UK's independent trade policy, including ensuring continuity for our current trading arrangements. Just last week, the UK Government and the South Korean Government announced the transitioning of the existing EU-South Korea free trade agreement.

While the UK Government will negotiate trade deals on behalf of the United Kingdom, we have been clear from the start that the devolved Administrations should be closely involved throughout the negotiations process. That is already happening. Last year, I was in New Zealand with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. A delegation was there from Wales, already engaging on some of the challenges and opportunities that a free trade agreement with New Zealand may present to the Welsh economy, particularly in relation to agriculture.

Indeed, the Prime Minister committed to an “enhanced role” for the devolved Administrations in the next phase, respecting their competence and vital interests in these negotiations, along with the devolved Assemblies, which we will need to engage with, too. We are working closely with the devolved Administrations to deliver this, and Ministers from the UK, Welsh and Scottish Governments regularly discuss how this would work in practice, in meetings such as the ministerial forum on EU negotiations. To be clear, we would include an executive from Northern

Ireland, if the devolved Government is restored. At the moment, the Northern Ireland civil service represents Northern Ireland there. We hope that, in the near future, we can engage with a Northern Ireland Administration again in relation to these issues.

In conclusion, we want Wales to be part of a strong, outward looking United Kingdom outside of the European Union. The UK's departure from the EU provides significant opportunities to foster and strengthen links, both diplomatic and economic, with countries around the world. In doing so, I believe we can attract significant global representation into Wales, to help to develop those links and support the whole drive to ensure that the United Kingdom, with Wales at its core, is a prosperous and successful country post Brexit.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

History Curriculum: Migration

[SIR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered teaching migration in the history curriculum.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Gary. At the end of last year, I joined a group of young students, members of the brilliant Advocacy Academy in my constituency, in a protest outside the Department for Education. They were delivering a letter to the Secretary of State, and their message was simple:

“Our history is British history.”

Their history—that of a diverse group of young south Londoners—is the history of our nation, and the history curriculum taught in our schools should reflect that.

I was extremely disappointed with the Minister's response to that letter. It did not really acknowledge any deficiency in the current curriculum; it pointed to flexibility within the curriculum as evidence that there is no problem, and confirmed that the Government have no plans to change it. I am pleased to have secured this debate, because the Minister's response ignored some really significant issues.

In preparing for the debate, I have drawn on research by the Runnymede Trust and the Royal Historical Society and on engagement work undertaken by the parliamentary digital engagement team. I thank everyone who took part in the online survey on this topic, the results of which I will return to later.

More than one in six children aged nought to 15 in England and Wales is from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. BAME young people make up more than a quarter of state-funded primary and secondary school pupils in England, but despite Britain's increasingly diverse classrooms, and notwithstanding some recent changes in the options available in the curriculum, the history taught in schools remains focused on narrow and celebrated accounts of “our island story”. As one young person who responded to the Runnymede Trust's consultation said,

“it's the Tudors and the Tudors and the Tudors”.

The approach that predominates in history teaching often results in an understanding that is incomplete and inaccurate. Students struggle to connect different periods in our history, to connect British history to the wider global story, or to place themselves within the narrative. Yet British history is the history of migration to these islands. None of our families was always here. Whether our ancestors were Roman invaders, Normans from northern France, Huguenots fleeing persecution or Irish immigrants fleeing starvation during the potato famine, whether our family story is rooted in the painful, shameful history of the colonisation of parts of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, or whether our forebears came to the UK as freed slaves in the 19th century or as Commonwealth citizens after the second world war, all of us can find our story in the history of migration. Teaching that history from every possible perspective helps us to find that story.

[Helen Hayes]

Migration has shaped not only individual family stories, but places and communities. The town where I grew up, Ormskirk in Lancashire, has a Viking name. We have Roman cities such as Bath; cities such as Liverpool and Bristol with links to the shameful history of slavery; and Spitalfields, which has been formed, shaped and sustained by successive generations of migrants, as is powerfully illustrated by the mosque on Brick Lane, which was previously a synagogue and, before that, a Huguenot chapel. Every community, as well as every family, has a migration story.

A migration-focused approach to British history both globalises it, placing it within a wider international context, and localises it, opening up previously marginalised and untold stories about specific times and places, yet the history curriculum is struggling to engage students from all backgrounds. The Royal Historical Society's race, ethnicity and equality report, which was published in October 2018, highlights the low uptake of history as a school subject by BAME pupils and the low levels of undergraduate history admissions for BAME students.

Racial and ethnic inequality affects history more acutely than most other disciplines. What we were taught in history lessons in school has a huge impact on our understanding of history, yet history is not a science; it is never complete and is never completely objective. Sources and perspectives matter. Whose story is told, and from which perspective, informs our understanding of who was important and powerful, who contributed, who were the heroes and who were the villains. A partial telling can leave people and communities entirely invisible and leave stories that affected hundreds of thousands of people completely untold. The way in which history is currently taught contains too many artificial binaries, such as world versus British history, or BAME versus British history. World history is British history, and BAME history is British history too.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that, to genuinely recognise the contribution of communities that have come to the United Kingdom, we need to teach an honest history of Britain, including the repression and exploitation that has occurred in its name, alongside the positive and progressive parts?

Helen Hayes: That is exactly the argument I will go on to make: a migration-focused articulation of British history is also a more accurate, rigorous and—as my hon. Friend rightly says—honest version of British history. That is a really important point.

The understanding that we derive from history lessons in school informs our sense of national identity. It informs the internal narrative that runs in each of our minds when we hear the word “British”—who is included in that term, and who is not. Too often, what we are taught in school leads to a characterisation of Britishness that is only partial. During the Windrush scandal last year, Ministers had to be reminded again and again in the House of Commons Chamber that the citizens who had been denied their right to be in the UK by the Home Office were not foreign nationals whose status was in doubt, but British citizens. They had come to the

UK as British citizens as a consequence of the British Nationality Act 1948, which granted citizenship to Commonwealth citizens—itself a consequence of the long and painful history of British colonialism.

The current history curriculum offers some opportunity to teach migration, but there is little explicit focus on internal racial and ethnic diversity within Britain. It also tends to downplay our internal diverse histories; in addition to race, they include gender, class, sexuality and religion.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this subject to Westminster Hall. When we talk about migration, we cannot ignore the fact that our great nation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, came together with the integration of the Ulsterman and the Ulsterwoman from Northern Ireland, the Scots, the Welsh and, to a lesser degree, people from the Republic of Ireland. All those five nations coming together as one—surely that tells us how we can do things if we do them the right way. It is unfortunate that none of our Scots Nats friends is here to hear this, because it is important that we say it and say it often: we are better together.

Helen Hayes: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point.

In 2016, two new OCR and AQA exam board units on migration to Britain were introduced at GCSE level, both of which include some coverage of empire. They offer exciting and innovative opportunities to engage with important British histories, but they remain optional, and there are some structural barriers to take-up that I hope the Minister might address.

Over the past 10 years, in partnership with Manchester and Cambridge Universities, the Runnymede Trust has led a number of projects to engage young people and teachers with more expansive, representative and inclusive histories of Britain. The lesson from that work is that there is a strong appetite among young people from all backgrounds for history teaching that reflects a broader range of voices and experiences, and there is interest among teachers in engaging with more representative histories of Britain. But there is also a lack of confidence, support and resources for teachers who want to embed those histories in their practice, and teachers feel constrained by the increasing demands on their time and energies in a fast-changing teaching climate.

The appetite for change is also evident in feedback received by the parliamentary digital engagement team in response to a survey posted ahead of this debate. Joanne, a teacher, wrote:

“This would enrich the curriculum by demonstrating that migration had a key role to play in the formation of a more inclusive national identity. It would also offer opportunities for a wider range of voices and perspectives to be heard and valued within our history teaching—crucial for us as a nation moving forward.”

Nick, who is also a teacher, wrote:

“I find that students are usually interested in migration but it is often very new to them, reflecting a wider lack of knowledge about migration in wider society. It helps students realise the connections between history and geography and provides a glimpse of the big answers about the composition of modern society, culture, language and food.”

Interest also extends beyond the teaching profession. John, an immigration solicitor, wrote:

"It's amazing to think how little we are taught about our awful past relationship with the colonies and indeed our closest neighbouring country, Ireland. Had more people been educated about the colonies and Ireland, there may be more understanding now of the issues we face in modern times, including the Windrush scandal and the Brexit disagreements over the Irish border issue. Forgetting our past is a real failing."

Following the work of the Runnymede Trust, a web-based resource called Our Migration Story was launched in 2016, in direct response to requests from teachers for classroom-ready materials on histories of empire and migration. Our Migration Story was built in collaboration with more than 80 academic and local historians; local and national museums and archives, including the Imperial War Museum, the National Archives, the Black Cultural Archives, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Migration Museum; and exam boards, teachers and professional history associations.

Our Migration Story is a one-stop shop on Britain's long migration history, from Roman invasion to the present day. Through a series of case studies driven by historical research and primary source material it presents the stories of the people, ideas and objects from near and far that have travelled to and then shaped the British Isles over the last 2,000 years.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again; her speech, including its introduction, is excellent. Does she agree that it is essential that our children understand the importance of how migrants have flocked to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for years and have integrated well into our systems? It is important to understand that not all immigrants wish to have "their" country and "our" country; indeed, our country is made up of those who live here, integrate and raise their children to be British, and who have made this nation as great as it is today. In my constituency, there are Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Indians, Chinese, people from eastern Europe, and people from Nigeria and Kenya. All those people together have made this nation great.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and his point is very well made. If we teach our history with a migration narrative, everybody in our society can understand exactly the diversity of which he spoke so well.

Our Migration Story challenges us to rethink British history by capturing the histories of ordinary and otherwise marginalised Britons; by charting histories of welcome and inclusion, as well as those of rejection, exclusion, inequality and violence; by placing histories and conditions of global connectedness at its core; and by making mainstream British identity inseparable from 2,000 years of migration and settlement. The site connects its content with the national curriculum, and it has received several awards. It adopts a rigorous and academically recognised approach; in fact, it reflects the way that history is already often taught at universities.

Even in some of the most diverse communities, such as those in my constituency, our understanding of the history of migration is often limited. Lambeth Archives has just opened a fantastic exhibition at Lambeth town hall called "Before and After Windrush: 350 years of

Black People in Lambeth". It has been curated in response to the assumption that many people made during last year's celebration of the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush that there had been no black people living in Lambeth prior to 1948, and it charts the area's history from the first record of a black person living in Lambeth in 1661 to the present day. That longevity is so significant for our current community. We have always been diverse; people from across the world have always contributed to community life in Lambeth. People from everywhere belong here. As the Windrush anniversary logo, which was designed by young people from Brixton, reflected, the Windrush generation are part of our DNA, but long before 1948 our DNA was international.

My plea to the Minister today is not to dismiss this research, as he did back in January, but to engage with it. In our society, which is both diverse and riven with divisions, we need the teaching of history to be inclusive, we need everyone to be able to find their place in it and we need our definition of "British", based on our understanding of history, to be inclusive. That means not only making migration content available, but signposting it effectively and considering making more of it compulsory. It also means making additional training and continuing professional development available to teachers to equip them with the confidence to teach new material. To return to where I started, it means working to realise a vision in which everyone in our diverse country, whatever their heritage, can say with pride and confidence: "Our history is British history."

2.45 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), but I will take a slightly different approach to her on this issue. Before I do so, however, I should declare an interest; I am a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and I state that now because I will use examples from the Royal Geographical Society as I continue.

The point I want to make is essentially this: what the hon. Lady has described as "history" is really "geography". I know that we could argue for ages about the difference between the two, but I agree that what she has described is appropriate for teaching. I just think that it should be taught under a geographical syllabus rather than under a historical one. I will also give some examples of what the Royal Geographical Society already offers, which schools are already taking up to take forward the teaching of these issues.

The first example is an international one, which is material that is made available to answer the question, "Why has unprecedented migration occurred in the Mediterranean in recent years?" The sort of material that the RGS has produced is related to the work of Professor Heaven Crawley, who has done a lot of work with 500 migrants; that is the actual physical work of interviewing them and talking to them. They have shared their experience of what has driven them to migrate, and of how they went about migrating. That is a valuable lesson to be learned from migrants. Professor Crawley has concentrated a lot on the UK, so let me turn to some of the things on offer from the UK.

[John Howell]

One of them is about migration and the skills and job market. What it sets out to do is to get students thinking about who is migrating, about the impacts that migration has made, and about how the current financial crisis may affect patterns and volumes of migration. That brings the course right up to date, to include a lot of the political aspects of migration, because geography is about the current politics and sociology of the situation.

I will give another example. Our Migration Story has made available to schools a series of courses that answer the question, “How has our local area been shaped by migration?” That includes a lot of the historical background that the hon. Lady mentioned, and the sort of questions that it asks include, “How might migrant groups change the local area?” It also asks, “What evidence is there to show how migrant groups have changed the local area over time?” And it goes on to ask, “How has that changed over time and how can we identify the different parts of it?”

Our Migration Story also looks at the background of migrants, including the fact that many of them have come from a small number of countries over the years, although that number is now increasing. So, comparisons can be made between the two—that is, between the UK and other countries.

Another example that I think will appeal to Opposition Members is “Migrants on the margins”. That too is produced by the Royal Geographical Society and includes a range of posters, podcasts, animations, videos, factsheets and lesson plans for teachers. It has been funded by the global learning programme, and provides the context for the idea of migrants on the margins, covering things such as how cities are changing, the causes of migration and why people move. The materials being produced by the Royal Geographical Society are very good and should not go unnoticed.

Jim Shannon: Does the Royal Geographical Society take cognisance of the persecution of those with religious beliefs across the world, in particular Christians, and of how they have migrated because of that? Is that part of the background that the society uses? If it is not, may I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he proposes, as a member of the society, that it should be?

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I have not seen in any of the material any detailed work on that, but I suspect that it is included as part of the thinking that goes on to produce the result. The subject that he identifies is valuable in teaching, in understanding not just how things have happened historically but how they are still happening to Christian groups around the world. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point.

The last Royal Geographical Society project is a complex one, but it starts from the position that although migration to Britain in the past has been overwhelmingly the story of a small number of nations, recent immigrants have come from a larger number and the numbers of immigrants who were born in the Caribbean and, indeed, in Ireland—traditionally key migrant groups—have fallen and the numbers of others have risen in their place.

In summary, why do I think that this is more part of geography? We have seen the historical context in all the modules put forward by the Royal Geographical Society,

but migration is about place. It is about spatial relationships and it is also about social science, and I think that the issues about place and spatial relationships are more appropriate to a geographical course, given that those modules are already being offered.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): With apologies to the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), I call the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans).

2.52 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Streeter. I, too, apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). She has been in the House a lot longer than I have and perhaps should have been called first.

I am passionate about history—one of my proudest boasts is that I am a history graduate—and I want to talk about how history is taught in schools, about how a subject about the human life story is often seen as boring and dry. It amazes me that we are so narrow in our curriculum, in how we speak. I did GCSE history, and I could sum it up like this: there was Adolf Hitler’s Germany, which I studied in depth, then crime and punishment, which was mainly about Jack the Ripper, and then we did the Arab-Israeli conflict, and that was it. I then did my A-levels and we did the Tudors and the civil war, and even when we talked about people we talked about them as great people. We talked about Elizabeth I, yet we did not talk about her persecution of Catholicism. We talked about Oliver Cromwell and the new model army but we did not talk about the terrible events at Drogheda. We smooth over those awful events while we are talking about great men.

When we are talking about such things, we also seem to forget about the growth in family history. Right now, people who study history in their spare time, through the various family history websites, want the answers to two questions: who am I, and where did I come from? It is time to do that in schools. I want to use the example of when I visited the Fleur-de-Lys local history society and spoke about a former Member of this House, S. O. Davies. He was deselected by the Labour Party in 1970, was then re-elected as an independent and died in 1972. He was the first person to introduce a Bill to bring in the Welsh Parliament. After the lecture, we started talking about oral history and its importance. There were so many people in that room.

Jim Shannon: I want to reflect on what the hon. Gentleman said about when he was at school. In my early years at school—long before he was at school of course—our religious and history teacher gave us the opportunity to learn Irish history along with British history, and also about other religions, thereby giving us a perspective on the rest of the world. It is good to know that that did not make me less of a Unionist, by the way—I would just like Members to know that. It is important to have that.

Chris Evans: That is very interesting. The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point. I did not study Irish history until my third year. I hold my hands up that I did not know who Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera were. I knew nothing about the cause of the troubles. When I was growing up, the troubles were just something that

happened over the Irish sea in places I did not recognise but if I had been taught about it I would have understood where the troubles began. That, essentially, is what I am getting to.

Coming back to my upbringing in south Wales, on every street corner there was a Bacchetta, a Gamberini, a Sidoli; the Italian community migrated into south Wales and set up cafés, ice cream parlours and other things. The story of south Wales is also the story of migration. Many of the pits and steelworks came about from people migrating in for the work, yet we never talked about that. Interestingly, I grew up in Lower Bailey Street in Wattstown in the Rhondda but I did not know who Bailey was. He was a guy called Crawshay Bailey, a landowner from Northumberland who had never visited south Wales.

What is so important about these migrant stories—we see this with the Windrush generation as well—is the question of how many of us sit down with a relative or an elderly friend and record their experiences. Their experiences are the experiences of Great Britain, and that is what I am talking about in my example of the Fleur de Lys local history society. We were sitting there just as Tower colliery was closed—the last deep mine in south Wales. The number of people who remember the mines and have experience of working underground is getting smaller, and we need to sit down and record those experiences, because once they are gone they are gone forever. I urge everyone here to sit down with a friend or relative and talk about their experiences. I direct this to the Minister: this is something we should seriously look at having on the curriculum. We should get schoolchildren to speak to their relatives, and ask them to keep an archive of those relatives' experiences, especially as they are now getting old.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an interesting point about migration and the history of those coming into communities in south Wales. Of course, many from south Wales went to Chile and other parts of the world, to mine there. So we have had migration out of the country, when people have been seeking employment.

Chris Evans: My favourite fact is always that in Pennsylvania in the 1920s there were more Welsh speakers than in Wales. That came from Welsh migrants going to West Virginia and Pennsylvania to work in the mines. We also have the famous colony in Patagonia, which was set out in the famous novel "How Green Was My Valley".

We need to be a bit braver about our history, about our history as an island race, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said. We have to accept that slavery happened. We talk about it a lot when we talk about American history. We touched on it a lot when I was at university—

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman indicated that we should be a bit more brave in remembering our history. Does he agree that it is sometimes regrettable that in recent years we have seen student campaigns in a small number of educational establishments to remove links to Rhodesia, for example, because of the perception of what happened there? Is it not much better to recognise and acknowledge

that those things happened, whether we agree or disagree, rather than trying to obliterate them, particularly in seats of learning?

Chris Evans: That is the whole point of this debate: we cannot whitewash our past. These things happened; we should recognise them, and we should learn lessons so they never happen again.

The Department for Education itself said in 2014 that the teaching of Britain's involvement in the slave trade was considered patchy. We should accept that for well over 300 years, whether we like it or not, Britain played a leading role in forcing Africans on to slave ships for transportation across the Atlantic ocean. It is not just America that has to take the blame for the slave trade; it is this country. When Britain abolished slavery in its colonies in 1830, it paid the slave owners financial compensation. The enslaved people themselves received absolutely nothing—okay, that was a long time ago, but there were 46,000 slave owners, and 3,500 lived in Britain. Those are truths that we should not be afraid to address.

In response to the earlier intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I made a point about not understanding history until I got to university and studied it in more depth. I understand Dr Deana Heath, who teaches southern Asian, imperial, colonial and global history at the University of Liverpool, when she says:

"I face an uphill struggle at the start of each new academic year. Many of the undergraduates who greet me know virtually nothing about any of the subjects I teach."

When I went to university to study history, I was one of those undergraduates. It was not just Irish history that I did not know about; it was British history, and the terrible record of the colonies.

This issue is really important, so I have two asks of the Minister. First, I hope that he takes seriously the idea of putting oral history at the front and centre of the curriculum. Secondly, although we have a great history, we should also shine a light on those things that are uncomfortable for us, because if we do not learn from those mistakes, we run the serious risk of repeating them. I urge the Minister, who I know is a good and thoughtful man, to take those points on board.

3.1 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and it is a real honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who made a passionate and pertinent speech. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing today's debate, and for her superb opening speech.

Three of my four grandparents were Irish, and my much-loved brother-in-law is of Jamaican descent. Without him, I would not have my very beloved niece. Migration is central to who we are as a family, and it is also central to who we are as a nation. Only by understanding where we come from can we truly understand where we are going and where we are now. Including stories about migration in our history lessons is a central part of that, and I am proud that Labour has committed to creating an emancipation educational trust to support that work.

[Lyn Brown]

It is hardly news to many of us that migration has shaped our country for centuries, because we have grown up in diverse communities and have ourselves been shaped by that history. However, the history of different types of migration is not taught as widely as it should be. So many people do not know that there were hundreds of free African people living and working during the Tudor period, and some were even at Elizabeth I's court. We seem to think that migration is only a very recent thing, but that is a nonsense. We need to embrace and understand our history much better than we currently do.

I am going to take a different approach from that of the other Members who have given speeches so far, because I will talk about West Ham. In my maiden speech in 2005, I talked about one example of how migration has helped in Newham. In the 1980s, we were suffering from the dying docks and the ravages of Thatcherism. Green Street was dying on its feet; the only two things that were doing well were West Ham United football club—which had its best ever season in 1986—and, sadly, the local jobcentre. However, a few traders got together, who were overwhelmingly Asian and African-Caribbean, and took a risk. They got some money together and started rejuvenating the area through their businesses. First they sold food, then fabrics—things that the big chains would not touch—and then businesses focused on designer fashion and jewellery came slowly on to Green Street.

Now, Green Street is a one-stop wedding shop, serving not only the local community but people from all over the country and, indeed, much of Europe. Without migration, those community-spirited and canny traders would not have been in Newham, and our local economy would have suffered an even worse decline. My kitchen would have certainly declined, because there was nowhere that I could buy turmeric, chillies, coriander, cumin or the other exotic items in the new cookbooks that were stocking my shelves at that time. On Christmas day, I remember having to pop out a number of times to grab that thing that I had not managed to put in my basket before. That is a recent history, but none the less an important history, and one that risks being lost unless we make an effort to ensure it is remembered and celebrated.

Whenever I think about stuff like this, I think about Eastside Community Heritage, led by the redoubtable Judith Garfield. Eastside has always been clear that letting people own and tell their stories is the best way of collecting testimonies and engaging communities in their past, and that is exactly what they do. Unsurprisingly, many of their projects are focused on the contribution of migrants—people such as Kamal Chunchie, who was born in Sri Lanka and served in the Army's 3rd Middlesex Regiment during the first world war alongside members of my family, witnessing horrifying conditions in the trenches. He was gassed twice and shot once, and served right up until the end of the war. After the war, he came back to Canning Town and served that community for the rest of his life. He established the Coloured Men's Institute and provided solidarity and means of support for black and Asian families living around the docks. Disgracefully, racism was common at that time, and many living in and around those docks were denied a home and a living. Kamal's institute became a community

centre that served all the poor and needy in Canning Town, providing shelter, regular meals, Christmas celebrations and toys for children. Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, his work prevented destitution, alleviated poverty and built solidarity. For that, he was greatly and rightly loved.

Eastside has created a number of projects, including those on the Ugandan Asian community; on the role of nurses from the Caribbean in building our NHS, such as my brother-in-law's mum, Lucy; and on historic communities in Newham, such as the Chinese and Bengali communities. I have attended lots and lots of Eastside's events, which are wonderfully informative, telling stories that would otherwise be simply forgotten. Several of those projects have been created in collaboration with our schools, including Sarah Bonnell and Forest Gate, so that our children understand the rich diversity of their history. Students helped create exhibitions about African and Caribbean fashion and the role it has played in the local economy, our culture and our lives. I would have loved to take part in projects like that, growing up; I was always really excited by the beautiful clothes that my Asian friends wore, and I remember learning how to dance in the sixth-form common room. Such projects bring our history alive for children from all backgrounds, and help us to understand the current social problems that we have.

One pressing social problem today is that across the world, we are witnessing a resurgence in far-right politics—a politics of hatred and division, which offers only scapegoats, not solutions. All too often across the world, migrants—even asylum seekers, the most vulnerable of us all—have been targeted. I do not have to remind people in this Chamber about Trump, whether it is his nonsense about Sadiq Khan, his attempt to enforce a Muslim ban, or his constant scaremongering about central American families fleeing to safety. I do not have to remind people in this Chamber about Netanyahu, who describes African refugees as,

“illegal infiltrators flooding the country.”

Brazil's Bolsonaro described the residents of a black settlement as,

“not even good for procreation.”

It happens in so many ways in so many places, and all of it is linked. It is more important than ever that our young people understand the bits of this country's history that we do not celebrate enough and the rich diversity of our home's past and future. We need all of our citizens to understand the contributions and the lives of the people that migration has brought, and we have to build solidarity among the different parts of our communities, just as Kamal did in the 1920s.

In my constituency, Newham Council has done wonderful work to counter and prevent the rise of the far right. It has done it for decades and it set up a holocaust memorial exhibition as a response to the rise of the far right in the 1980s and '90s. It celebrates Black History Month and still makes sure that the children's education focuses on Holocaust Memorial Day.

Chris Evans: As usual, my hon. Friend makes a powerful speech. Will she join me in encouraging everybody to visit the Mary Seacole statue, which is just across the road outside St Thomas' Hospital, to see the wonderful contribution that she made as a British Jamaican woman to nursing in this country?

Lyn Brown: Mary Seacole is somebody that Lucy, my mother-in-law, speaks of regularly, and she does not understand why she is not recognised as fully as Nurse Nightingale. So, yes, I would encourage people to explore and discover parts of our history that are not as prevalent and as in your face as some of the other stuff.

The work of the council continues today. As we all remember, the theme for the previous Holocaust Memorial Day was “Torn from home”. Schools in Newham not only used it to reflect on the experiences of the Jewish community who were forced to leave everything behind, incredibly important as that absolutely is, but used it as a theme for creative inspiration—for the writing of poetry, performances of plays and the composing of songs about the lives of their families and the communities that they had come from, which, in many cases, had also been torn from home. Their experiences today are reflected sadly in our history.

Many have forgotten that Irish migrants were subjected to terrible xenophobia and discrimination during the 19th century and into the 20th. We forget that Jewish migration was represented as a real threat. We have learnt not to think of the Huguenots from France as refugees. The world did not come to a stop when those communities joined us; our world was enriched instead. What I am trying to say is that we sometimes fail to make the connections that we should because we have simply forgotten our history—or our geography.

John Howell: I will not pick the hon. Lady up on that point, but has she seen the BBC’s “Born Abroad” pages, which take a fantastic look at diversity in Wembley?

Lyn Brown: I have not, but I certainly will. As soon as I get back to my office, I will have a quick butcher’s.

Constituencies such as mine have been blessed with diversity. We include Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Indians, Africans, Caribbeans, Irish and many others in our number. When we hosted the Olympic games—it was not a London Olympics, but a West Ham Olympics—we believed that we had a resident representative from every participating country living right there in West Ham. Many in my community have immigrant backgrounds, as do some of my closest and dearest family. It simply would not be the place that I love so dearly without them; and we would be much poorer, not only economically but creatively, in terms of the ideas and perspectives that we can draw on. We would be able to communicate so much worse if we did not have those communities living with us, talking with each other and learning from perspectives. Imbibing the cultures and the stories helps us to communicate so much better as a society. That is why it is really important to me that children are taught to see migration for what it is—not just economically beneficial and not just a charitable act, but unreservedly good for our communities and absolutely essential for our future.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench wind-up speeches, after which Helen Hayes will have the final two minutes.

3.15 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for

Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate. She made an absolutely barnstorming speech, as is her custom, on teaching migration in the history curriculum. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), although I am not sure I agree that migration should be taught as human geography or ethnographic studies. I think it enriches our history when we talk about migration, and it should sit within the history curriculum.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) made powerful points about how the mining community of south Wales has influenced North and South America, but we have to remember how the South Americans have also influenced West Ham. The Chilean, Manuel Pellegrini, and the Argentinian, Pablo Zabaleta, led West Ham to one of its best seasons in many a year, although I would say they were mainly immigrants from Manchester and Manchester City.

I am pleased to be able to respond to the debate, whose subject is close to my heart. Manchester, where I am from, has a rich tradition of inward migration. It was originally founded in AD 79 by the general Agricola, a Gallo-Roman immigrant to Britain, who some said was black. My city has a long history of welcoming migrants from around the world. I am a Mancunian son of two Irish immigrants who settled there as part of a large Irish community in the north-west of England. Britain’s second largest Jewish community calls Manchester home. We have a large Somali community, and Wythenshawe and Sale East, which I represent, has a thriving Chagossian community. We de-populated the Chagos Islands in the late 1960s to give the land to the Americans for the Diego Garcia airbase—the mother of all injustices inflicted on any settlement on the planet in modern times. We recently had an International Court of Justice judgment against the UK, so we are still seeking justice after 50 or 60 years, but the Chagossians bring a rich tapestry to life in south Manchester.

More recently, we have had immigration from India, and the Keralan community has come to populate our hospitals with nurses. Suddenly, on a huge council estate in Wythenshawe, we have Keralans who believe that St Thomas the Apostle directly proselytised their people when he left Jerusalem after the ascension of Christ. Thousands descend on our community to decorate our church and parade in our streets, and they make a huge contribution both culturally and to our NHS.

I have seen at first hand how important it is to teach a curriculum that represents and is relevant to our children. When I was a primary teacher in a school on the banks of the Bridgewater Canal, where I was the history co-ordinator, we did not teach the industrial revolution; we taught the Manchester revolution. We taught about the Duke of Bridgewater building his canal in 1661 and about how that brought coal from the Cheshire plain to Manchester city centre to power Arkwright’s mill on Miller Street 20 years later, which changed the face of the world. I was also the history co-ordinator who introduced Black History Month when it came into being, and we dedicated the month of October to it. A tailored, local approach to history teaching needs to include an accurate and representative British history and the important part that migration has played in the development of our country.

[Mike Kane]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said, 27% of BAME students in state-funded schools currently have a low take-up of history at key stage 4 and beyond. Research by the Royal Historical Society shows that racial and ethnic inequality affect history more acutely than most disciplines. As has already been said, the Runnymede Trust has shown that, although the national curriculum in theory offers a broader range of diverse histories, in practice there are constraints on what is taught. Labour has pledged to ensure that schools teach black history—we celebrate Black History Month in October—and that would give us an important opportunity to understand the role and legacy of the British empire, colonialism and slavery. The British history taught in schools needs to move beyond binaries of black history versus British history. As has been said, black history is British history. To allow a full, accurate and representative British history to be taught, we must lift the structural constraints holding back teachers. They need to be given access to the resources, teacher training and support necessary to teach a complete version of our national story.

I was pleased to be able to sponsor one of the great consultants in my local hospital, Binita Kane, who was a star in the show about partition that some Members may have seen. The BBC did a show on the 70th anniversary of partition and its impact on the nations of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Imagine, Sir Gary, that you had been in Manchester on Sunday. Oh my word, there were only 26,000 tickets for the global show of India versus Pakistan—the most globally viewed sporting event ever, we think. On the night of the local government elections, I was at the place where we hold them, in Trafford, chatting to the chief executive of Lancashire Cricket Club, and he said that 1.2 million people had applied for tickets for the game. But how many of our young people know how the conflict was driven and what happened to millions of people in the area during partition?

To allow a full, accurate and representative British history to be taught, we must lift the structural constraints. Labour's schools policy would tackle that. We announced at the National Education Union conference earlier this year that Labour will scrap key stage 1 and key stage 2 SATs, replacing them with a more flexible and practical primary assessment system. The new system will free teachers up so that they can better deliver a rich and varied curriculum. We also committed, in our manifesto, to launching a commission on the curriculum, which will give politicians a chance to listen to everyone. The commission will allow input from experts across all subjects, including on issues such as the one we are debating. It is not good enough in this day and age that the way to change society should be for MPs to raise curriculum change in this place. That is how change was made to the sex and relationships curriculum—on the back of an amendment to the Children and Social Work Act 2017. We have to do better than that when it comes to designing the country's curriculum. Evidence shows that when children are taught a wide-ranging curriculum and encouraged to be creative and to develop their imagination, they do better at the core elements of literacy and numeracy too.

We cannot ignore the pressures of the Government's sustained funding cuts. The figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies could not be clearer: they show an 8%

real-terms cut since the last Labour Government. We cannot expect teachers to be able to teach the curriculum they want, including a more diverse history of migration, when they face such huge pressures. Labour's national education service will re-fund our schools, ensuring that all the fantastic teachers have the resources they need to give our children a proper, world-class education. It will also provide practical help for today's migrants. It will end cuts to English for speakers of other languages—a vital resource for refugees who have sought asylum in Britain. The Government talk about the importance of ensuring that everyone has the chance to learn English, but over the past decade funding for ESOL has been drastically cut. More than £100 million has been taken from the budget—a real-terms cut of almost 60%.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) has noted, victims of trafficking and modern slavery who are freed in Britain—the Prime Minister must be thanked for her work on that—are often denied access to education by the Government's rules. We must learn the lessons of the Windrush scandal. Denying the victims an education is both cruel and senseless. The Windrush scandal has been a shame on our country. It was born as a result of the Home Office's hostile environment—this Government's policy. It is a story of injustices and migration that highlights the importance of teaching migration in schools so that the Ministers of the future do not make the same mistake. In Labour's national education service, every child will have not only access to a world-leading school system, but the opportunity to engage in a wide-ranging, accurate and reflective curriculum.

3.24 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing the debate and on an excellent opening speech. I am aware that she has a deep interest in the topic of migration, and that her interests also extend to teaching and schools.

Migration has been a part of our country's history as long as we have been able to record it. The different waves of migration to these islands have helped to form our national identity and created and developed distinct regional and local identities, as we have heard in some excellent speeches. There are many opportunities within the scope of the framework of the national curriculum for teaching about migration and its causes and effects, both within the history curriculum and in other subject areas. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) pointed out, it can come within geography.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood cited a pupil who complained that the history curriculum was focused on

“the Tudors and the Tudors and the Tudors”.

I share that concern about what is a consequence of a skills-based rather than knowledge-based history curriculum, introduced in the revision of 2007. However, that approach was also predominant before the last Labour Government in the 1990s and it is probably the reason the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) was not taught about de Valera, whereas I had been taught, of course, about him and about the whole issue of Ireland. We have sought since 2010 to ensure that the

curriculum is knowledge-based and does not just focus on a narrow range of knowledge as a vehicle for teaching a range of so-called historical skills.

The hon. Member for Islwyn talked about key stage 3 and said we only teach the good. At key stage 3 there are some non-statutory examples in the history programme of things that are not necessarily—or definitely not—good things. For example the transatlantic slave trade and Ireland and home rule are in that curriculum. The development of the British empire is also an example of an in-depth study.

I listened carefully to the hugely interesting speech of the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) who gave examples of the effect on her community of different phases of immigration over the years. That gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to Sir Robin Wales who, when he was the directly elected Labour Mayor of Newham, did so much to raise education standards in Newham's schools. It is now one of the highest-performing education authorities, particularly for the teaching of reading and phonics. I like to take an opportunity to praise Sir Robin whenever I can.

The Government believe that all children and young people should, as part of a broad and balanced education, acquire a firm grasp of the history of the country in which they live, and how different events and periods relate to each other. The reformed history curriculum has been taught since September 2014. It sets out the core knowledge that will enable pupils to know and understand the history of Britain from its first settlers to the development of the institutions that help to define our national life today. We have also included history and geography in the English baccalaureate school performance measure. Since the EBacc was introduced in 2010, the proportion of pupils taking history or geography GCSE has increased from 47.7% in 2010 to 78.3% last year. Provisional entry data recently released by Ofqual indicate that that trend will continue in 2019.

The programmes of study for history set the framework for the teaching of the subject in schools in terms of the broad time periods to be taught. Within that framework, the Government have ensured that decisions about the detail of what will be taught, and choices about teaching approaches and resources, are for schools and teachers to determine. One of the key aims of the history curriculum is to ensure that pupils know and understand how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world. That aim supports teachers to teach about migration and to teach pupils about how different cultures and different groups have contributed to the development of Britain at key stages of our country's history.

Let me highlight examples of where teaching about migration might be included within different key stages of the national curriculum. At key stage 1, pupils should be taught about events that are significant nationally or globally; about the names and lives of significant individuals in the past who have contributed to national and international achievements; about significant historical events; and about people and places in their own locality. An example of migration in that framework is that teachers can teach the life stories of refugees.

Within key stage 2, pupils should be taught about the changes in Britain from the stone age to the iron age; the Roman empire—including Agricola—and its effect on Britain; Britain's settlement by Anglo-Saxons and

Scots; and how the Vikings affected Britain and its development. Teachers can teach pupils about the connection between migration and those aspects of the curriculum. At key stage 3—that is secondary school—pupils should be taught about the history of Britain from 1066 to the present day, and the effect over time of the migration of people to, from and within the British Isles. The end of the British empire, and social and cultural change in post-war British society are given as specific examples of what can be taught at key stage 3. As part of a compulsory unit on a broad aspect or theme in British history, 11 to 14-year-olds may study an aspect of social history. That could focus on migration as a particular area to help to understand key changes in our history.

At GCSE, specifications in history should support students to learn more about the history of Britain and the wider world, and to deepen their understanding of the people, periods and events studied. There are clear opportunities to include migration as part of the rich subject knowledge that we expect pupils to be taught. Awarding organisations and exam boards have flexibility to offer a greater focus on particular knowledge areas within the GCSE subject content, and modules on migration form part of the GCSEs offered by a number of exam boards. The influence and effect of migration locally can also be explored within the curriculum.

As part of the new GCSE history syllabus introduced in 2016 by OCR and AQA, there are now modules on migration in Britain. That gives teachers the chance sensitively to explore the fact that migration to Britain is not new but has evolved over centuries, largely because of people's desire to have a better life for themselves or, in many cases, to seek refuge from war or hostile situations. Within the OCR GCSE, the British thematic study, "Migration to Britain circa 1000 to circa 2010", focuses on patterns of change and continuity over a long period of British history. The study is divided into three eras. Those eras are divided into broad sections that have been chosen as vehicles through which pupils can gain knowledge about a number of key themes.

Examples of those themes include: "The reasons for immigration—differing political, economic, social and religious reasons", and "From circa 1500: ideas of national 'identity'—how we have come to define 'Englishness' and 'Britishness' over time". Examples of content are time-period specific. For example, in the era circa 1000 to 1500 students should be taught content including, "Immigrants in England during the middle ages; their treatment by the authorities and the population generally; the extent to which they integrated". For the period 1900 to around 2010, students should be taught content such as, "Immigration as a political issue circa 1990 to circa 2010: the debate over a 'multi-cultural society'; attitudes towards, and treatment of, political refugees and asylum seekers; the issues raised by EU 'open borders'". Those are only some of the topic areas available within that module.

As OCR highlighted, there was an unprecedented high take-up of that option when it was introduced. In 2018, 25% of schools chose to offer OCR's GCSE History A, and nearly 1,500 students took migration as an optional topic with OCR on GCSE History B. The AQA GCSE includes an option for a thematic study on, "Migration, empires and the people: circa 790 to the present day". The study will enable students to gain an

[Nick Gibb]

understanding of how the identity of the people of Britain has been shaped by their interaction with the wider world.

There are many opportunities for teachers to teach about migration within the framework of the history curriculum, and as such migration could be seen as already part of the national curriculum—I hope that reassures hon. Members. The Government have also committed to making no further reforms to the curriculum, or to GCSEs and A-levels for the remainder of this Parliament—however long it may last—beyond those already announced. We have recently reformed GCSEs and A-levels to establish a rigorous suite of new qualifications that are in line with expected standards in countries with high performing education systems. That followed a review of our national curriculum, and we believe that those extensive changes will need time to settle in, because schools and teachers want stability.

The Government welcome high-quality resources and materials being shared with teachers to support them in this subject, and more resources are becoming available for teachers. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley pointed out some good resources on migration from the Royal Geographical Society—people will no doubt read his speech with interest and google them. As the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said, the recent collaboration between the University of Cambridge, University of Manchester and the Runnymede Trust has developed the free resource called Our Migration Story, which supports history teachers, and features video and text summaries of significant events in each era.

The Runnymede Trust has developed the History Lessons Project, and a guide for teachers called “History Lessons—Making British Histories” provides teachers with the content needed to navigate parts of the new history curriculum. It also offers resources to help teachers use the local history element of the history curriculum. As I stated previously, the local aspect of understanding history is a common thread across all key stages of the national curriculum. Significant migration points are supported by resources such as those that highlight the experiences of the Windrush generation. For example, the Windrush Foundation has developed the definitive Empire Windrush education resource for key stage 2, and an e-book about the 70 Windrush pioneers and champions. The Historical Association offers a wide collection of resources on migration, spanning different areas and stages of the curriculum.

I have picked out just a few examples, and no doubt there will be more. As the hon. Lady highlighted, the Runnymede Trust plans further to develop its work on

supporting teachers to teach migration and diversity, including by supporting continuing professional development. I have focused on history in my speech, but the issue of migration features in other parts of the national curriculum such as religious education and citizenship education. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley pointed out, it could also be included in geography lessons.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for raising this important matter, and I welcome the opportunity to set out how migration is already supported within the national curriculum. As a truly diverse country it is important for children and young people to gain knowledge about how Britain has migration at its core. Our global outlook has both shaped the world and been shaped by it.

3.37 pm

Helen Hayes: I am hugely grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. We have heard powerful examples of untold migration stories in the communities of those who have spoken, which include West Ham, Welsh mining communities, and Wythenshawe, and all those examples serve to emphasise the importance of this agenda. As the daughter of a geographer, and someone who is married to a geographer, I will not argue with the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who said that migration is an important prism through which to teach geography. However, this is not about either/or—our whole curriculum should be inclusive within all the different disciplines on offer to students today, and the resources that he mentioned are welcome.

I am a little disappointed that the Minister did not acknowledge the need for change, which is illustrated most powerfully in the low take-up of history as a discipline by students from BAME backgrounds at GCSE, A-level and degree level. Will the Minister reflect on the need for further promotion of migration curriculum content for history, on the need for more training and CPD to give teachers confidence to teach this curriculum, and on possibly making some of that content compulsory? I hope the Minister will continue to listen to the voices of young people across the country, and to the rigorous academic research from organisations such as the Runnymede Trust, which clearly states that there is a need for change, notwithstanding some of the changes made in recent years.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered teaching migration in the history curriculum.

Transport Infrastructure: Redditch

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport infrastructure in Redditch.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to raise this issue. As the MP for Redditch, I have one simple aim: to work with my colleagues in local government—in town hall and Worcester city hall—to unlock Redditch. I want to unlock the full potential of our great town. Naturally, that aim is multifaceted. I welcome the recent cut in business rates and investment in housing stock, and I am actively promoting the regeneration of our town centre, but a critical part of our strategy to truly unlock our town is improved transport infrastructure.

These are exciting times for Redditch. Growth is good and the future is bright. Our manufacturing businesses, such as Mettis Aerospace, are second to none, but new commercial enterprises are developing all the time, too. Now is the time to invest in our town's future, boost productivity, drive prosperity, create new jobs, increase people's earning power and ensure that our town remains a great place to live, work and raise a family.

With respect to transport, my vision is of a cleaner, greener Redditch with upgraded rail infrastructure, improved bus services and better pedestrian facilities. A considerable amount of work is already taking place, thanks to the local enterprise partnership, Worcestershire County Council and Redditch Borough Council. Due to their hard work and the strategy they have put in place, plans are already under way. The local Conservative council has secured investment for the upgrade of Redditch station, with possible plans including a second platform, additional parking and a better link into the Kingfisher centre. That is a really positive development for our town's future. Currently, as people arrive at the station, they do not get the optimal impression of the kind of place Redditch aspires to be. We want to make that first impression on people. Momentum must be maintained, and I urge the county council to continue to pursue its strategy apace. I raise that regularly in my meetings with county councillors.

I am pleased that the rail strategy recognises the need for better connections with Birmingham in the longer term. Does the Minister agree that towns such as Redditch rely on regular, fast commuter connections into the city, because many of our residents work in Birmingham or travel there for shopping and leisure, and that we should continue to look at how to provide those connections? Surely, connectivity across all our metropolitan regions is vital to boosting our economic growth. We have already seen investment in HS2, which will provide connectivity between London and Birmingham, but secondary links with urban centres outside the main city centres are vital to jobs and investment too.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that bus services are key to a multi-modal approach? At the moment, the attitude of county councils around the country is to try to take away subsidy for bus

services, which has left the vulnerable unable to get about. What does she want to do in that respect for Redditch?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for making that good point. I will come on to bus services, but I certainly agree with him. We all know that local authorities' budgets are under pressure, which means that they find it difficult to maintain services that are loss-making but are vital to constituents in remote rural areas. That is especially true for elderly and vulnerable people, who rely on those services to take part in day-to-day activities, with all the benefits for an independent life that they bring. I thank him for making that point, and I am glad he agrees with me. I will come on to bus services directly, so his intervention was timely.

I receive a lot of correspondence from constituents about bus services in Redditch. I hold a bus tour to Parliament—to this very room—once a fortnight. A number of constituents come to see me, and we do a question and answer session. We always start with Brexit, but we go straight from that to buses. My constituents are really interested in bus services, and they are desperate for a better service.

The service in Redditch is run by Diamond Bus. I thank it for its constructive approach to criticism—it takes the time to look into the issues we raise—but, as my hon. Friend said, local bus services should be a higher priority for support from central Government. That would enable local authorities to commission improved services, especially in rural areas, that they cannot deliver with the funding that is available at the moment.

I therefore call on the Government to recognise our local authorities' challenges and support them. Many bus routes do not make a profit, but they are an absolute lifeline. My constituency covers not only the town of Redditch, which is an urban area, but the rural ward of Wychavon. For elderly residents who cannot drive, the lack of bus services hinders their capacity to live an independent life, which is what we all want for our elderly constituents.

In the west midlands generally, the West Midlands Combined Authority has invested more than £100 million in upgrading its bus fleet, which now includes brand-new buses with some of the cleanest engines on the market. Unfortunately, areas such as Redditch do not have the critical mass of such a large transport authority, so we do not benefit from the same level of investment. Andy Street, the West Midlands Combined Authority Mayor, has called for buses across the entire metro area to meet the latest Euro 6 emissions standard. Will the Minister please outline the Department's thinking on supporting cleaner vehicles for smaller areas such as Redditch?

We are all aware that air quality is a critical issue, and that dangerous small particles emitted by vehicles penetrate deep into people's lungs and cause harm in the long term. I welcome the Government's commitment to reducing emissions to net zero, but they should focus too, hand in hand with that, on the quality of the air we breathe. We know that polluted air can cause long-term health conditions, and our citizens—especially our children—should be protected from that. Of course, public transport must play its part in achieving that objective.

As well as addressing issues with public transport and longer commutes, we should focus on improving shorter journeys, so I wholeheartedly welcome the

[*Rachel Maclean*]

Government's ambition to make cycling and walking the natural choices for shorter journeys by 2040. Of course, a lot of work has to take place to make those realistic options for people. Redditch is perfectly placed to take advantage of that—we have beautiful green spaces around every corner, plus a network of easily accessed routes—but much more can be done to encourage more residents to leave their cars behind and take to two wheels or two legs.

The benefits are immense. We know that investment in walking and cycling can improve people's access to green space, tackle loneliness and reduce health inequalities. The Government are rightly prioritising cycling and walking, and have allocated £476 million for cycling and walking infrastructure from the local growth fund for local enterprise partnerships. An important component of that is the requirement for local government to invest around 15% of local transport infrastructure funding in cycling and walking infrastructure. That kind of investment can really help to integrate communities, improve people's access to green space, tackle loneliness, improve social housing and reduce health inequalities.

I pay tribute to the Church Hill Big Local group, which has launched a programme of weekly local walks. People from across the area join the group for a walk around the neighbourhood, often visiting hidden beauty spots, enjoying an hour outside in a green environment and making new friends. It is simple, free and open to all. It is growing in popularity and building a genuine, strong sense of community in the area, which is welcome. We know that if people are not accustomed to taking walks and do not know the area well enough, they may lack the confidence to go out. Going out with a group or with family, turning off the TV and leaving the screens behind—even for only an hour—has huge benefits for mental and physical health, which we all need in our busy lives these days.

There is such an opportunity to join up the initiatives with the new focus on social prescribing by GPs. Simple steps, such as walking and cycling, have a positive impact on mental and physical health. There is an opportunity to harness technology. We can have more apps on phones to direct local residents to their quickest cycling and walking routes. There is an opportunity to work with Ordnance Survey, especially in a new town such as Redditch, where mapping has not always caught up with house building programmes. Technology can play a part in opening up opportunities for local residents who have newly moved to the area to access green space and all the benefits that that brings.

I want to touch on the future of driving. The Government are committed to ending the sale of conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040, but there is a lot of work to do to ensure that we have the infrastructure and technology to enable people to harness cleaner, greener vehicles that are better for the environment and cheaper. Recently, we have had discussions with the local borough councils about how they will ensure that we have enough charging points for electric vehicles in a town such as Redditch. How do we develop the batteries to ensure that the cars are fit for purpose and can genuinely replace a petrol or diesel car? Colleagues may be interested to know—I learned this just this week on one of my bus tours—that people with pacemakers cannot recharge

electric cars. I was not aware of that, and clearly we need to look at that if we want people to use electric cars. Those fitted with a pacemaker cannot approach a charging point, so we need to change something to help people take advantage of the technology. There clearly are enormous opportunities that will bring enormous benefits to my constituency of Redditch and to others up and down the country.

We all need transport to live our daily lives, and at the same time we need to look to the future and make long-term plans. We have the comprehensive spending review coming up. Sometimes transport is seen as a poor relation. Everyone thinks that other priorities such as policing, schools, education and hospitals are top of the list, and I cannot disagree with that, but we need to think about these more mundane—pedestrian, perhaps—projects that are so important day to day and make a real difference to people's quality of life. I very much thank the Minister for coming to respond to my debate, and I look forward to his remarks.

4.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate on transport infrastructure in Redditch. She is a doughty campaigner and constituency representative for Redditch, and I commend her work in that regard. She is absolutely right that transport infrastructure is seminal and of considerable importance, not only because it helps people to get from point A to point B, but because it helps our economy and our health and wellbeing, and it helps our entire society to function.

Redditch sits right at the heart of a dynamic region that is key to the UK economy. The midlands is home to more than 10 million people, more than 815,000 businesses, 21 universities and two international airports. Its economy is worth £237 billion to the UK as a whole, and it generates more than 13% of the UK's gross value added. Her area and region are of extreme importance.

There is a lot going on in the midlands. There are the 2022 Commonwealth games. Coventry is our 2021 city of culture, which I had something to do with as Culture Minister. To capitalise on the region's strengths, the Government have established the midlands engine partnership, with the goal of creating a midlands engine that powers the UK economy and truly competes on a world stage. We want to make the midlands an even better place to live, work, study and do business, improving opportunities and quality of life for the people of the region.

My hon. Friend's region sits at the heart of our transport network. Investment is not just critical for regional success, but is key to our national success. That is why, among other things, we are building High Speed 2, which will be the new backbone of the national rail network, improving capacity, connectivity and growth. The midlands will be the first region to benefit from that new railway.

That covers rail, but we are also investing £1.8 billion in the region's roads, motorways and trunk roads. We are investing £1.7 billion from the local growth fund, which includes investments in transport schemes across the midlands region. Our £1.8 billion investment in

strategic roads includes a major investment on the M42, which my hon. Friend knows provides Redditch with vital connectivity to the wider motorway network. That investment will create a smart motorway at the interchange of the M42 and M40, helping to ease congestion and smooth traffic flows. Work is expected to begin on that important scheme as soon as next March.

My hon. Friend will not need me to tell her that local transport and local issues more generally are often at the front of people's minds. The local highway network is one of the most valuable national assets and an essential component of our economy. To that end, the Government are investing more than £6 billion in local highway authorities outside London between 2015 and 2021. The £6.6 billion of funding includes nearly £300 million for a pothole action fund, which is being allocated to local highway authorities between 2016 and 2021 to help repair potholes or stop them forming in the first place. Funding from the pothole action fund is enough to repair, or stop from forming, more than 5.9 million potholes on average. That funding is not ring-fenced; its use is entirely at the discretion of highway authorities, based on their local needs and priorities. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, Worcestershire will receive more than £85 million to help maintain its local road network alone. That includes more than £12 million for small-scale transport improvements.

With the creation of the major road network—comprising around 5,000 miles of our most important A roads—the most important local authority roads are now in scope for new funding from the national roads fund for upgrades and improvements. Regional prioritisation of improvements to such roads is the responsibility of some sub-national transport bodies. Roads that serve Redditch—the A448, A441, A435 and A4023—are part of the major road network and could be eligible for that funding. I encourage my hon. Friend and her local authority to look into that, because that funding, subject to regional prioritisation, could apply to those roads.

As my hon. Friend will know, Redditch forms the southern terminus of the cross-city line, which provides a regular train service from Redditch to Birmingham New Street and on to Lichfield Trent Valley. I am sure she has used the service more than once. Local rail users are now benefiting from the £100 million Redditch branch enhancement, which was completed in late 2014. That has allowed for a more frequent train service, rising from two trains each hour to three trains each hour in each direction. Passenger numbers at Redditch have since grown from just below 900,000 in 2014—889,366, to be precise—to nearly a million in 2018.

Rail services to Redditch are now operated by West Midlands Trains, which started running the franchise in December 2017. As part of the franchise agreement, it has committed to deliver £700 million of investment in new and refurbished trains, which matters a great deal to commuters and rail passengers. That includes 400 brand-new carriages, of which 100 will be for the cross-city line, which serves Redditch. Those carriages will offer metro-style services, with increased space to carry more passengers, and wider doors for quicker access.

The existing class 323 trains on the cross-city line are currently undergoing a major overhaul to improve the experience for passengers. Customers will benefit from accessibility improvements, upgraded passenger information

screens, new seat covers and a deep clean of the interior. Thanks to Government investment, those improvements will make travelling on routes relevant to my hon. Friend's constituency more enjoyable and easier for those requiring accessible facilities. The improvements will bring the inside of the units up to modern standards, after 25 years of operating on the route.

As part of its franchise, West Midlands Trains will also invest more than £60 million in station improvements, which will deliver more than 1,000 new car parking spaces and thousands more cycle parking spaces, as I announced in the last couple of days. West Midlands Trains will also deliver more than 800 new digital information screens, provide realtime journey information and free wi-fi, introduce compensation for delays of more than 15 minutes, and invest more than £70 million in new and existing depots to improve train reliability. Redditch will also benefit from earlier and later services to and from Birmingham, as well as more frequent Sunday services from 2021 onwards. The Government are investing in transport infrastructure in the Redditch area and across the country. We see that in both road and rail improvements.

Alongside rail, local bus services remain central to people's transport choices, accounting for around 59% of all public transport journeys. My hon. Friend asked for acknowledgment that Redditch relies on regular, fast commuter connections. I, of course, acknowledge that. The Government remain committed to improving bus services. Each year, my Department provides a quarter of a billion pounds in direct revenue support for bus services in England via the bus service operators grant scheme. Of that sum, more than £43 million is paid directly to local councils outside London to support buses that would otherwise not be commercially viable, but which local authorities and services consider socially necessary. The rest goes to commercial bus operators. Worcestershire County Council—my hon. Friend's local county council—receives more than £530,000 in that grant. Without that support, I venture to say that fares would certainly increase and marginal services would disappear.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for that information. The subsidies that he describes are essential. Are there any incentives or grants in operation to enable bus operators to upgrade their fleets and exchange them for greener and cleaner vehicles?

Michael Ellis: Government funding supports the approximately £1 billion spent by local authorities on concessionary bus passes every year, and the Government have committed to protecting, at first, the very popular national bus travel concession, which is of huge benefit to around 10 million people, allowing free off-peak local travel anywhere in England. On the clean environment, the Government want the UK to be the best place in the world to build and own electric vehicles, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and have already supported the installation of more than 100,000 home charge points. So we are investing in all manner of ways to support such things.

The bus concession is something we have been investing in. It provides older and disabled people with greater freedom, independence and a lifeline to their community. Local authorities are best placed to decide how to

[Michael Ellis]

provide support for bus services, reflecting local needs within available budgets. The deregulated bus market works well across much of the country, although in some areas the deregulated market has not always responded effectively to the changing needs of the population. However, to answer my hon. Friend's question directly, the Government have spent nearly a quarter of a billion pounds—some £240 million—on greener buses since 2010, when we came into office. That is of course very positive.

I am pleased that Worcestershire County Council plans to launch a public consultation, with a view to developing a new passenger transport strategy that meets the needs of residents in Redditch and the wider region. The Bus Services Act 2017 contains a range of options for local authorities to improve local bus services and drive up passenger numbers. In addition to franchising, there are new and improved options to allow local transport authorities to enter into partnerships with their local bus operators, with a view to improving services for passengers.

Accessible information powers in the 2017 Act will require all operators of local bus services to provide audio and visual route and next stop announcements on board their buses across Great Britain, helping to remove barriers to bus travel, particularly for those with disabilities or accessibility needs. We are also pioneering technology such as our forthcoming bus open data digital service, to overhaul bus services across England and give passengers the information that they need to travel with confidence.

I am pleased that Swift, the west midlands travel smartcard, now has more than 3.5 million users, and has transformed how people use public transport in Redditch and the west midlands. Data from Transport Focus, the independent transport user watchdog, shows that congestion and roadworks are among the top factors that passengers think affect the length of their bus journeys. Together, local authorities and bus companies can identify the congestion hotspots that disrupt bus journeys and, through partnership commitments, do something about them.

I hope that I have assured my hon. Friend of my, and my Department's, strong commitment to transport in Redditch, Worcestershire, the midlands and this country. I commend her for her work and advocacy on behalf of her constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

Colombia Peace Process

4.28 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Colombia peace process.

It is a pleasure to see you again in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. Colombia has suffered one of the longest civil wars in history—more than 50 years of armed conflict, with thousands of people tortured, disappeared and slaughtered, and millions displaced. It remains the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist, and human rights defenders and social leaders have been, and still are being, murdered with impunity.

The armed conflict was a result of a deep-rooted social and political conflict. Despite the country's huge natural wealth, many Colombians live in poverty. Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a very few people who wield enormous political power. They also own large sections of the media. These people are concentrated in urban areas that represent a tiny proportion of Colombia's landmass.

The Colombian state, right-wing paramilitaries and guerrillas waged a decades-long war that none could, or would, ever win. When the peace negotiations began in 2012 and were overseen by the UN, there was a glimmer of hope. As someone who has campaigned on behalf of trade unionists, human rights defenders and social leaders for well over a decade, I felt that there might finally be a small chance of the Colombian people living in safety in the future.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, and commend her campaigning on this issue over many years. Does she agree that there is a real concern at the moment, as we read and hear about the killing of community leaders in rural areas? This must stop, and peace must be enforced. The peace that we have is precious and must be continued and secured.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The spike and increase in the number of civilians being murdered, and the lack of any prosecutions or convictions, is one of the reasons why the peace process implementation is so fragile at the moment.

No one doubts the challenging circumstances in which those negotiations took place. Through work by the non-governmental organisation Justice for Colombia, politicians from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland helped share their knowledge and experience of the Northern Ireland peace process and the Good Friday agreement with the Colombian Government and FARC, so that they could benefit from the lessons that had been learnt. After four years of negotiation, the Colombian Government and FARC announced the final peace agreement in August 2016. A bilateral ceasefire took place; then there was disarmament by FARC, which became a legitimate, legal political party.

The peace agreement was put to a vote of the Colombian people. One of the most outspoken critics of the deal was former President Álvaro Uribe, who had been in power between 2002 and 2010, when some of the worst atrocities against trade unionists and human rights defenders were committed by the state and state-backed right-wing paramilitaries.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): One of the groups of victims at that point included people who had suffered sexual violence in conflict. I know the British embassy in Bogotá had started a human rights programme. Has the hon. Lady assessed how successful that has been in dealing with people who had suffered sexual violence in conflict?

Jo Stevens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. It is something on which I hope the Minister will be able to elaborate in his response to the debate, because the UK and Colombia are friends. We wield enormous influence over what goes on in Colombia, and that is one of the programmes that I hope will continue, so that we can ensure that that particular group of victims does not suffer further.

In 2013 President Uribe co-founded a new political party, the Centro Democrático or Democratic Centre, largely to oppose the peace process in the 2014 Colombian elections. Despite the extremely narrow rejection of the peace agreement in that plebiscite, a revised agreement was ratified by the Colombian Congress shortly afterwards, in December 2016. That final agreement, for which the UK is the penholder on behalf of the UN Security Council, was structured around six areas. The first was comprehensive rural land reform. The Government promised to provide 3 million hectares of land to the landless or land-poor peasants, and to formalise legal property titles on another 7 million hectares, in addition to heavily investing in infrastructure projects and state-building in previously FARC-controlled areas.

The second area was political participation. As I said previously, FARC became a legal political party, and was guaranteed a minimum of five seats in Congress and five in the House of Representatives for two legislative terms, starting in 2018. After that point, FARC will have to win seats competitively in elections.

The third area was the ending of the conflict, disarmament of FARC, transition to civilian life and reincorporation, and guaranteed security conditions for former combatants and communities in UN-monitored reincorporation zones. In August 2018 I visited one of those zones, a specific camp in Filipinas in the Arauca region on the north-eastern border with Venezuela. I saw what little progress had been made in establishing those zones and getting former combatants to a position in which they could make a living and fend for themselves.

The fourth area was ending the drug trade, which will obviously have an impact on drug consumption in the UK—cocaine is a particularly topical point at the moment. The crop substitution programme with the Government and FARC will help farmers to stop growing coca and instead grow legal crops in order to make a living and grow their local economies.

The fifth area was justice for victims of the conflict, which the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) touched on. A transitional justice system called the JEP would be established. Special tribunals would adjudicate war crimes and other atrocities committed by Government security forces, paramilitaries and guerrillas, with reduced sentences for people who came forward. The emphasis of the HEP would be on restorative justice and ensuring the rights of victims.

The sixth and final area was the implementation and verification of the peace agreement, which is a really critical part. The UN special political verification mission

would take an oversight role, and a commission would be set up to follow up the implementation process. It would be known by its Spanish abbreviation, CSIVI, and consist of three senior Government members and three senior FARC members.

At first, the peace agreement implementation seemed to be working. There was a significant drop in violence in 2017, Colombia's safest year since 1975. However, there was a very significant change in direction in 2018 with the election of Iván Duque as the new President. He is a protégé of Uribe, and ran on a platform of dismantling parts of the agreement, particularly in relation to political participation by FARC and the work of the JEP. Since his election, he has systematically attempted to undermine the JEP, despite its being recognised by the international community and, most importantly, by the victims of the conflict as a way to provide truth, justice and reconciliation for victims on all sides and an end to the impunity that has operated for decades. That has resulted in a significant stalling of the process, which is threatening the very existence of the peace agreement.

After the United States, we are the second-largest investor in Colombia. As a penholder to the peace agreement, we play a particular role in the process. The UN Security Council warned on 16 April that the peace process

“stands at a critical juncture”.

All sections of the peace agreement are crucial, but I want to focus a few remarks on three of them—ending the conflict, political participation and the role of the JEP. One third of the peace agreement's 578 stipulations have not even begun to be implemented, and an estimated 1,700 former guerrillas have returned to armed struggle. The arrival of President Duque in London yesterday is very timely. I know the Minister is meeting the President later today, so I hope Opposition Members have questions for the Minister and issues that he can raise with President Duque when he sees him.

I now turn to the armed conflict. Colombian human rights organisations estimate that 591 social leaders have been assassinated since the signing of the agreement, and 236 of those assassinations have happened in the 10 months since the President took office.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that I went on delegations to Colombia in 2007, when Uribe was still in power, and in 2012. We heard widespread evidence of human rights abuses, and I am really disappointed to hear that slow progress has been made with the peace progress. Does she agree that it is time for our Government to step up and work with human rights defenders to bring about a country-specific plan to protect human rights defenders in Colombia?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the questions I have for the Minister is on the help that we have been giving to the Colombian Government and their Ministry of Justice and Law in training their lawyers in investigation and disclosure. It does not seem to be working, because impunity continues.

An estimated 135 former FARC combatants have been murdered since they laid down their weapons in the disarmament process. One of the most recent victims was Dimar Torres, who is alleged to have been murdered

[Jo Stevens]

by Colombian soldiers. The local community found his body next to a recently dug grave, raising suspicions that the soldiers were attempting to make his body disappear, which is what we saw over years and years, prior to the signing of the peace agreement.

A recent statement by the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions and the UN working group on enforced disappearances urged the Colombian Government to

“cease inciting violence against demobilised individuals of the FARC...and to meet the guarantees that were made to them during the negotiations in Havana, most importantly respect of the right to life.”

The Minister responsible for peace implementation, Emilio Archila, reacted by responding that the statement was “badly intentioned” and rejected the conclusions, while former President Uribe attacked the UN on his Twitter account.

That follows revelations from *The New York Times* in late May that the army has reinstated orders to soldiers to show results of the killings of armed groups, with performance-related pay. That is a chilling reminder of the military’s involvement in the “false positives” scandal under Uribe’s Administration, during which thousands of civilians were murdered by the military and dressed up in army fatigues as though they had been guerrilla fighters killed in combat. After a huge outcry, the Colombian Ministry of Defence said that it would amend the orders, but concerns remain. Last week, the Senate voted to promote General Martínez Espinel, even though he was second-in-command of a brigade accused of murdering 23 civilians in that way between 2004 and 2006.

The Colombian Government recently claimed that there had been a 32% reduction in killings of social leaders, but that is in direct contradiction of the evidence from the many reports of human rights organisations on the ground. Uribe recently said that 5,000 FARC members had returned to the mountains—a coded reference to their taking up arms again. That claim is completely fake, with no evidence to substantiate it. It is not supported by anyone involved in the monitoring of the peace process and is a deliberate strategy by Uribe—the figurehead of President Duque’s party—to undermine the implementation of the peace process and the UN verification mission. In turn, that undermines Britain’s role as penholder for the agreement. At his presentation at Canning House yesterday, President Duque made no reference to human rights abuses and the targeting of social leaders in Colombia.

My second point is about the JEP. Its implementation has been resisted by Duque’s Administration, which sees it as too lenient and as treading on the toes of the criminal justice system. In March, the statutory law providing the legal framework for the JEP was stalled after President Duque refused to sign it off, citing concerns about six articles. After a lengthy legislative battle, it was eventually signed into law this month, after Congress and the Constitutional Court rejected President Duque’s changes. Duque’s resistance to such a fundamental part of the peace agreement should be a worrying warning to our Government about his attitude and disdain towards the agreement.

The case of Congressman Jesús Santrich, in which the Minister knows I have taken an active interest, perfectly illustrates the genuine concerns in Colombia and internationally about President Duque’s commitment to the agreement and to the JEP in particular. There has undoubtedly been political interference in the JEP by the Colombian Government, most notably by the actions of former Attorney General Néstor Humberto Martínez, who recently resigned following the long-awaited release from prison of Congressman Santrich.

Jesús Santrich was a key negotiator of the Colombian peace agreement, a member of the FARC delegation to the negotiations, and an architect of the agreement. At the time of his arrest in April 2018, he was a member of the CSIVI, the implementation committee that I mentioned earlier. He was due to take his seat in the House of Representatives in July 2018, as part of the FARC’s 10 representatives in the Colombian Congress, which was a specific part of the peace agreement. However, in April 2018 he was arrested on the order of an international arrest warrant requesting extradition, issued by a New York court. It alleged that he had conspired to smuggle 10 tonnes of cocaine out of Colombia in an aeroplane. He categorically denied the accusation, but was imprisoned in solitary confinement in La Picota high-security prison in Bogotá.

Last August, I visited Santrich in his prison cell. He is blind, suffers from a degenerative eye condition so severe that his sight is almost non-existent, and has other major health problems. He spent 13 months in La Picota prison, during which time he undertook a lengthy hunger strike to draw attention to his plight. When I met him, he was extremely frail, in declining health, and was being refused access to essential medical care. No adjustments were made to accommodate his disability. When I returned to the UK I met the Minister, and I am pleased to say that shortly afterwards, some disability aids were provided for Congressman Santrich. At no point was any evidence disclosed to his lawyers to back up the allegations against him, the basis on which the extradition warrant had been issued.

Santrich has since presented his case to the JEP, arguing that it had jurisdiction, rather than the Colombian criminal court. The then Attorney General challenged the case and lost. The Attorney General was asked by the JEP to provide evidence to substantiate imprisonment and the proposed extradition, but none was forthcoming. The US Department of Justice did not provide any evidence, either. On 15 May this year, the JEP gave its ruling, guaranteeing that there would be no extradition. It ordered that Jesús Santrich be freed. The Colombian Procurator’s Office appealed the decision, but the JEP insisted on Santrich’s release. The Attorney General refused to sign the order for release and has since resigned, saying that he is not prepared to sign the order. Santrich was kept in prison until 19 May, and on his arrival outside the prison gates, he was immediately re-arrested and taken to the Attorney General’s building by helicopter. Ten days later, on 29 May, the Supreme Court ordered his release and eventually, on 11 June, he was sworn into office.

I went into detail about that because the entire process has been carried out in the context of strong opposition to the JEP by the Government party. There has been a deliberate attempt to diminish the authority of the JEP that has wide-ranging consequences for its proper

functioning and authority. Unsurprisingly, the case has caused huge concern among defenders of the peace process, which adds to the considerable concerns about the lack of implementation of the process, the rise in murders of civilians and continuing impunity.

As a key member of the negotiating team who was due to occupy one of the 10 seats in Congress guaranteed to FARC, Santrich has become symbolic for the peace process. That is why I hope that the Minister will tonight seek an explanation from President Duque about his Government's conduct in this case—the conduct of the former Attorney General in particular—and ask what reassurances can be given about Jesús Santrich's freedom and ability to carry out his democratic role in the future.

Finally, I will return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) about the UK's role in assisting in Colombia. It has been mentioned in past debates that we have given support to the Fiscalía to help it learn about investigation and disclosure. If we are still doing that, why are we doing so when the JEP is being politicised and abused in such a way?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate may last until 5.30. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench speakers no later than seven minutes past 5, and the guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition, and 10 minutes for the Minister. If the Minister would be kind enough to allow Jo Stevens three minutes at the end to sum up, that would be appreciated. Until seven minutes past 5, it is Back-Bench time, and I have one hon. Member seeking to contribute: Jim Shannon.

4.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is always a pleasure to speak in these debates, but I will try not to prolong my speech beyond the time that you have so kindly given me.

The hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) has presented the case for the Colombian peace process very well. She referred to my colleagues, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and the former Member for Foyle, Mark Durkan. They were, individually and collectively, involved in trying to progress the peace process—I, too, am a member of the Parliamentary Friends of Colombia group. Both my colleagues were invited to Colombia to speak and to tell their story about Northern Ireland. The reason was obviously what we—I say “we”, because everyone together made it happen—have done in Northern Ireland, although the political process has stalled at the moment. We ended the violence, started a political process and found a methodology to take that process forward. It was an example for the rest of the world, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley has spoken about it in many countries, one of them being Colombia.

I have a deep interest in Colombia, and I hope that its people will see the peace we have in many places across the world. As my party's spokesperson on human rights and equality issues where they pertain to religious persecution, I am aware that some groups in Colombia—those who are Christians—have been targeted because

of their religious persuasion. Peasants have also been targeted, although I use the word “peasants” in a general sense; it is meant not as a marker for anything, but for the people who live on the land and depend on it for their survival, livelihood and income.

Some of the things that have happened in Colombia are quite unbelievable. I have an interest in the country, which I believe has real potential and an appetite for change. With a bit more effort from the Government and everyone involved, Colombia could move from where we are to a peace process that can actually do something. My hope, prayers and ambitions are for that to happen. I believe in prayer—I say that because it is true—and I have prayed for peace in Colombia and across the world.

About this time last year, I asked a written parliamentary question:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what discussions has the Minister had with the Colombian Government on progress on the peace process in that country.”

I received a full answer from the Minister present. He always responds well, and I am not just saying that because he is here—he does, and he has a deep passion for and interest in Colombia, as is the case with many other countries of the world. He is keen to see progress, peace and prosperity. His response was:

“The UK has assisted the peace process since 2012, contributing over £28m in Conflict Stability and Security Funding since 2015 and holding the pen in the UN Security Council. I have had numerous discussions with the Colombian Government during that time on progress, most recently with the Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs on 21 June.”

Clearly, the Minister and our Government have made a financial input, have an interest in the process and have regular discussions with the Colombian Government. This nation—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—has made clear attempts and taken strides in the past to be a help and a guide in such scenarios, but equally clearly, almost a year down the line from that question, the journey to peace still needs a wee knock-on or a nudge—perhaps a detour—and more to be done.

To say that Colombia is a war-torn nation is an understatement. The national victims unit, which was set up in 2011, and which records crimes that have occurred since 1985 in the context of the armed conflict, registered almost 280,000 killings, the majority of them involving civilians. That number is horrific, and it gives an indication of a genocide that has taken place—the slaughter of innocents. More than 46,500 people have been forcibly disappeared. By 1 November 2016, more than 7 million people had been forced to flee their homes. The actual figures are expected to be considerably higher; these are guesstimations of what has taken place, but they indicate the magnitude of the issue.

Over the years, I have had the chance to have direct contact with people with the friends of Colombia group. We have had meetings in London, here in Westminster, and elsewhere on such matters. We have had meetings in Belfast, back home in Northern Ireland, and people wanted to have an idea of how the peace process worked and was taken forward. Such meetings gave me an insight into what took place. Some of the people we met told horrific stories of what had happened to their relatives and friends—some had disappeared and never been found.

[Jim Shannon]

The nation of Colombia needs peace, medical care, education systems, social welfare, housing and initiatives to take people out of poverty. We have an advisory role, and perhaps even a clear practical role, in helping to achieve that. A fair and democratic process, and a commitment to that process, are needed. I do not want to be unfair, but I sometimes feel, looking at the situation from the outside in, in an observational way, that the commitment of all those involved in the process has not as been as transparent as it perhaps could be. However, I believe that we are not that far away from moving things forward. In Northern Ireland, when the process moved forward, it was by small steps—but those steps then led to big strides. That is what we need.

We need to see an end to the land grabs—to the theft of land from people who depend on it for their living. The killings that have taken place need an explanation and an investigation, because those who carried them out should be accountable for their crimes. No one can carry out crimes and expect to get away with them.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On justice and holding those who have committed horrendous crimes to account, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the establishment of the unit to dismantle the paramilitaries is a particular priority, and should be brought forward with due haste by the Duque Administration?

Jim Shannon: I agree with the hon. Lady. Clearly, paramilitary groups think that they are above the law, and they are carrying out atrocities. They need to be accountable and to stop that; if the peace process is to go forward, we need to ensure that those who have the power are doing their best to stop these things.

There have been kidnappings, and people have gone missing. In Northern Ireland, we always wished for the remains of those who were kidnapped, murdered or disappeared to be found and returned to their families. It is important to have that in place—for families to have the final resolution of being able to bury their loved ones in graves, and to have time to grieve for people who had disappeared. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central referred to many examples of people being disappeared, although in one case the person was found because the security forces were still trying to dispose of his body.

I am my party's spokesperson for human rights, and they feature at the top of my agenda, in whichever country they are being abused. We need action to stop women being sexually abused and horribly tortured by security forces. We also need to help those activists—we have been aware of some of them for a number of years—who have been kidnapped and disappeared. Some journalists, who are spokespeople for human rights issues and who have made the world aware of what is going on, have disappeared and never been found—any dissent has been trampled on right away.

I am not any smarter than anyone else—far from it—but coming from Northern Ireland and having a personal knowledge of the country, I perhaps understand more than some others in this place the emotional trauma that is passed from generation to generation of those who have suffered at the hands of paramilitaries, as well as the impact and lasting legacy the hon. Member

for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) referred to in her intervention. That can only be dealt with in two parts. First, we must allow time for wounds to heal over without anyone picking open the scabs. That means an end to violence and the threat of it, so that people can grieve and learn how to exist in a new nation where everyone is equal. Secondly, opportunities are required for things to be different—for children to be educated and get paying jobs, for skills to be taught, for work to be made available so that people can earn a wage, and for communities to recover.

We should do more, while not overstepping. I look to the Minister, whom I respect greatly, and who understands my passion for these issues, to explain the view of the Department, in particular, and the steps that can be taken so that we can play a small but valuable part in this process for peace.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I have two observations to make. First, rarely can a country-specific debate have been held immediately before a presidential audience to which the Minister of State responding has been invited. Secondly, we have a little more time available for the Front-Bench speeches than we thought. As long as the process is not abused, I am prepared to be flexible with the guideline limits for the Front-Bench speeches.

4.59 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone; as always, your advice is extremely diligent and welcome. I will not speak for desperately long because this is the second debate on Colombia that we have had in recent months, after the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) secured a full debate in September. I declare an interest in this subject because, at the time, he and I had just returned from a visit to Colombia hosted by ABColombia, which is a platform made up of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Trócaire and a couple of other organisations to provide research and advocacy of the human rights situation in that country. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), whom I congratulate on securing this debate, also contributed to that debate back in September.

This debate has proven to be a welcome opportunity to reflect on how things have changed since then, particularly in the context of the President's visit. As the hon. Member for Cardiff Central laid out in considerable detail, the situation has changed even in those few months: progress towards peace has become slower and pretty precarious, and there is a risk of the situation deteriorating. The case of Jesús Santrich is emblematic of that.

The bombings that have taken place have led to further deterioration of that peace process, particularly the bombing of the police academy in Bogotá on 17 January that claimed 20 innocent lives and is just one example of sporadic but increasing violence and tension across the country, particularly in rural areas, where poverty and the legacy of conflict are most acute. That is perhaps exemplified most significantly in the dramatic increase in the number of killings, threats, and instances of intimidation of human rights defenders.

During our visit, we had the privilege of meeting several human rights defenders in different parts of the country that we travelled to. The Minister will be aware

that the hon. Member for Rhondda and I have written to him about a couple of specific cases of individuals we met who received direct threats of intimidation, violence and death. I hope he will be able to respond, if not directly in his speech then in writing, and will look up that letter in advance of his meeting with the President this evening.

The lack of security for human rights defenders, especially those working in rural areas on the implementation of the peace accord and on practical aspects of land restitution, environmental issues and crop substitution, are incredibly concerning. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) outlined in detail some statistics that should worry and alarm us all. As we all know, Colombia is the worst country in the world for the killing of human rights defenders. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, more than 110 were murdered in 2018, and that trend has continued into this year, with an average of three defenders killed a week.

Colombia is also one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. There has been growing global attention to the hugely important role that those members of the community play in speaking up and defending the rights of others who they represent. They take huge personal risks to speak out against injustice and abuse of human rights in their countries, often by their Governments or by other non-state actors. It is hugely important that we recognise around the world the particularly acute situation in Colombia.

The Scottish Government remain committed to protecting human rights worldwide. As part of that commitment, last year they saw the launch of the Scottish human rights defender fellowship, which offers human rights defenders the chance to work with the Scottish Government, Scottish universities and civil society organisations to share expertise and work together to protect fundamental rights across the globe. I believe it may be of interest to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who is sitting next to me, that it is hosted at the University of Dundee. We echo Amnesty International's support for human rights defenders across the world and support its call for a flagging system to facilitate visa applications and allow them to travel more easily to the UK for work or respite and relief.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is clear research that Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade union activist?

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I was going to reflect on that towards the end of my remarks. I know that he met the general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress last week, and had a full debrief of the Justice for Colombia peace monitoring delegation that visited the country towards the end of May, which included the STUC general secretary and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). The role of our civil society to hold both Governments to account is hugely important.

It is important that we take the opportunity to engage appropriately with President Duque, especially while he is here. I fully endorse everything that the hon. Member for Cardiff Central said about the special jurisdiction for peace; related to that is how to deal with land

restitution, which is a key issue for sustainable peace across the country. There have been attempts to undermine the amount of land that should be up for restitution by the Government, despite the effort of many non-governmental organisations. That law needs to be fully extended, so that time is properly available to reconstitute the land to those who need it.

We should welcome the UK Government's efforts, through its embassies, to support the JEP programme and to highlight its centrality as a pillar of the peace agreement. It is important that they continue to guarantee the rights of victims to truth, justice, reparations and non-repetition. The two important UN mandates that are operating must be renewed this autumn to their full strength and for as long as possible, so that their important work can continue. I finish by echoing the points about the importance of ensuring that civil society is fully engaged. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

5.6 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is very nice to see you in the chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this timely debate, and I thank Justice for Colombia for organising my visit at the end of May. In Bogotá we met members of the Government and members of the Opposition and civil society, but we also went out into the countryside. We went down to Cauca in the south-west, which is a very troubled area, and up to the north-east. When we got to Cauca, we went to a village and I was shocked: on the wall they had pinned up photographs of 30 human rights defenders who had been killed. The reason I was shocked was that they had all been killed in the past year.

That speaks to the first challenge: in the areas that the FARC have vacated, the Government have not put sufficient resource in to build up the criminal justice system. That is why paramilitaries and criminals have come in. For example, we met an old lady who said that people walked around her house at night with guns, and she had no idea who they were. The UN says that last year, 116 human rights defenders were killed; this year, it thinks that the number will be even higher. The first thing that the Colombian Government need to do is strengthen the criminal justice system in the rural areas.

The root of the problem, as hon. Members have said, is land. What has happened in Colombia in the 20th century is akin to what happened in the highland clearances in the 18th and 19th century. First, we saw people taking land from the campesinos to build sugar and banana plantations, but now that has shifted, and people are stealing land from indigenous people for very aggressive mining. We met people who had not been given what they had been promised as part of the peace settlement—coca farmers who wanted to switch but were not being given the capital and equipment to do so. It is really important that the August deadline that was set for achieving that change is extended, because the promises have not been fulfilled. In Tierra Grata in the north, one of the zones where things were supposed to be going so well, we went to a village where there was no running water, no connection to electricity and no roads. That is also extremely problematic.

The third challenge is about the Government's lack of respect for the transitional justice process, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central described

[Helen Goodman]

in some detail. Building on experience in Northern Ireland and South Africa, it was decided to right past wrongs through the JEP, through a truth commission and through the unit for the disappeared. The under-resourcing of the JEP by the Government is so severe that lawyers who work there have a caseload of 600 cases. It is not working as it should do.

I know that the new Government face a situation that is intrinsically difficult and complex; they have been in power for only 10 months and they have to cope with 1.5 million refugees from Venezuela. That is not straightforward. It is important that those people who gave up their weapons—the UN oversaw the process of disarmament; it says that it was done properly, and that people did it truthfully—are rewarded, so that there is an incentive for the FARC people who have yet to join the peace process to join in and for the ELN, which is a more extreme group, to get on board with it. That will happen only if the Government fulfil their promises. It is important that the international community continues to support them.

I will tell the Minister the things that I think the British Government could do that would be helpful. First of all, they could send election monitors for the local elections in the autumn. That is very important, because they have privatised the electoral roll. Secondly, the UK is the penholder. The UN Security Council will make a visit in July, and it is really important that when its representatives are there, they meet trade unionists and human rights defenders and go out into the countryside. Thirdly, it is really important that the mandate and the budget for the UN is extended beyond October, in order to have that neutral, impartial and fair overview of what is going on.

Fourthly, I would like the Government to include case studies from Colombia in the two forthcoming conferences that they are organising, on journalism and on sexual violence in conflict. It would be worth studying Colombia in that. Fifthly, they should maintain the work that the embassy has done on minerals and the environment, and co-operating via the OECD. Sixthly, they should deliver the messages to the Colombian Government that I set out—the three key points.

Finally, the Government should remind the Americans that they too sat in the Security Council, supported and agreed the peace process and are signed up to it. They should not undermine it, as they do when they take away the right to visas of judges in the JEP who make judgments that they do not like. That is interfering in another country's judicial process and is extremely unhelpful.

I do not know whether you have been to Colombia, Mr Hollobone. It is a very beautiful country. The people we met were extremely welcoming. They deserve better. We cannot do everything for them, but I think that we can help, and I hope that the Minister will do so.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Thank you for chairing our proceedings, Mr Hollobone. I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) for securing the debate, which, as she says, is impeccably timed to coincide with

President Duque's two-day official visit. It allows me to recognise the hon. Lady's longstanding engagement with the issue and her obvious, genuine and passionate commitment to justice in Colombia, which we all applaud.

I welcome the opportunity to give the Government's assessment of the direction of the peace process. The majority of the commitments made by the FARC and the Colombian Government as part of the peace accords are being implemented. FARC is no longer an armed group—it has laid down its weapons—and, for their part, the Colombian Government have made the constitutional and legislative changes necessary to enable the peace process.

In 2018, the FARC took part in elections that had a record turnout and were noted as being the safest for decades; it now has members serving in Congress. The Colombian Government are setting up the legal structures that will govern the Special Jurisprudence for Peace—the JEP. This should pave the way for a transitional justice system that can offer justice for the victims of the conflict.

In the context of a five decade-long armed conflict, all of this is hugely significant, but it is also difficult. Inevitably, there have been, and there will continue to be, bumps in the road, particularly around transitional justice. This is a contentious but critical part of the peace process and it is crucial that it enjoys both political and public legitimacy. We were pleased that President Duque signed the legal basis of the transitional justice system earlier this month.

Some of the wider and more practical aspects of the peace deal are yet to be fully implemented. New momentum is now needed, for instance to bring greater security and prosperity to post-conflict areas, especially in rural districts. As the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) said—I commend her for her best ever speech—the UN and observers should focus properly on the rural areas; I find that argument compelling. It is important that all Colombians, particularly those living in rural areas, see that the peace agreement is being consistently applied, and know that they will all benefit from it.

Reintegration of former combatants, on the scale necessary in Colombia, is another challenging issue. More than 13,000 former FARC fighters and militia have registered for civilian reintegration. Regrettably, slow progress with training, fear of reprisals and long waiting times have led many to join dissident and criminal groups. The murder rate in Colombia has fallen to its lowest level in over 40 years, but the delay in reintegrating former combatants risks undermining that positive record. Indeed, we raised our concerns about killings by criminal groups at the UN Security Council in January, and at the UN Human Rights Council in March.

Tragically, as we have heard, those who speak out for the rights of local communities are often singled out for attack. The UN reports that at least 115 human rights defenders and community leaders were killed last year, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland mentioned in her speech. Amnesty International has described Colombia as the most dangerous country in the world for human rights defenders.

The Colombian Government accepted all the UK's recommendations to improve the protection of human rights defenders at their universal periodic review of

human rights in May 2018. We welcome this, but much work remains to be done. We are supporting that work. We regularly meet with human rights defenders and have spent more than £3 million since 2011 on projects to support them. Those projects are making a real difference to the lives of human rights defenders, social leaders and, importantly, victims of sexual violence.

The ELN perpetuates insecurity in Colombia. We should not forget the 20 innocent people killed in the ELN attack on a police academy in Bogota in January. The ELN was not party to the 2016 peace agreement. It is a cause for regret that it rejected President Duque's conditions for a return to peace talks in September. It is perfectly clear that the ELN and other criminal gangs are more interested in conducting a campaign of violence, extortion and intimidation in order to control illegal mining and profit from the record levels of coca production. We urge the ELN to reinstate its ceasefire and end its campaign of violence.

We have supported the Colombian peace process every step of the way, and we will continue to do so. We are proud to be the penholder at the UN Security Council. We are the largest donor to the UN fund that supports the implementation of the peace agreement and a significant donor to the UN Office for Human Rights and the Organisation of American States peace monitoring mission.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his contribution and other hon. Members for what has been a good debate. Will he acknowledge in particular the role of women human rights defenders in Colombia? I know that Amnesty International in particular has been doing some fantastic work, and they are often those under particular threat.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will acknowledge them very fulsomely. We particularly support the women's network, which assists women who have been victims of sexual violence, which is often the most repulsive and hideous aspect of the violence that they suffer.

Returning to what we are doing, through our conflict, stability and security fund alone we have spent over £40 million since 2015 on projects and programmes that help to cement a lasting peace. President Duque's visit this week has been an important opportunity to strengthen our relationship with the Colombian Government across the board—he has many Ministers with him for the two days of his visit. The Prime Minister expressed her full support for implementation of the peace accords in her meeting yesterday, as did the Foreign Secretary when he and I met the President earlier today.

Our discussions of course went much further than that, covering the full range of co-operation, from climate change and trade to security and human rights. It is a sign of how our relationship is evolving towards a genuine strategic partnership through which we will work together to address the shared challenges we face.

Later today, we will announce a memorandum of understanding for a sustainable growth partnership, through which both countries will commit to meeting ambitious targets on halting deforestation and environmental crime and to working together on the low-carbon transition. President Duque was clear at his Canning House lecture yesterday: deforestation in Colombia must stop. I am confident that our new sustainable

growth partnership will be an important weapon in Colombia's arsenal with which to fight deforestation and environmental crime.

It is worth noting the programmes that the UK undertakes in rural areas of Colombia, which directly benefit communities there and their environment. UK-funded programmes in Colombia work across the country, at national, regional and municipal level. Recovery of post-conflict rural communities is a priority focus for the cross-Government conflict security and stability fund programme that supports the peace process throughout the country. It directly supports 18 organisations working in rural parts of the country, while the cross-Government prosperity fund also works with six local rural partners. Our international climate finance programmes work with partner organisations in rural areas, and directly with farms and indigenous communities.

On the wider issue of business and the environment, honourable Members may wish to be aware of UK action in the extractive sector in Colombia. The UK has sought to address human rights risks in the Colombian mining industry by encouraging compliance with the OECD's due diligence guidance and by fostering partnerships between the private sector and international organisations, local government and civil society to support responsible mining practices.

Helen Goodman: That is very important, because it is the new source of conflict in Colombia. I would like the Minister to consider that we perhaps need to have some sanctions on people who do not abide by the OECD guidance; I do not think there are any at the moment. Could he possibly take that away?

Sir Alan Duncan: I must say that I found the hon. Lady's thesis about the importance of land very well thought through, very important and very significant. In terms of sanctions, as she well appreciates, from the legislation—

Helen Goodman: Not those kinds of sanctions—penalties.

Sir Alan Duncan: To complete my logic, at the moment we do actual sanctions with the European Union, although we will be able to do that soon, but I understand what the hon. Lady says about penalties; removing impunity for bad behaviour and bad conduct is, I think, what she is saying.

We funded a “train the trainer” project in the country on due diligence guidance for responsible supply chains. In addition, the UK has funded a project to support the engagement of the private sector with Colombia's Truth Commission in its work as part of Colombia's transitional justice process. The project developed methodologies, tools and recommendations aimed at addressing and promoting the role of the private sector in the transitional justice process.

Our £25 million prosperity fund programme also supports projects to help to develop Colombia's national infrastructure and to build capacity in agritech and local government. This work will have important knock-on benefits for the Colombian economy and environment and for the peace process.

I also want to put on record, as has been mentioned today, our appreciation for Colombia's generosity in hosting more than 1.5 million Venezuelans who have

[Sir Alan Duncan]

been forced to flee their home country. We are playing a part in the regional response by supporting it with an £8 million contribution to the global concessional financing facility.

We commend Colombia for the progress it has made following the peace accords, but we recognise that more needs to be done to implement them in full, to bring security and prosperity to all areas of the country and, crucially, to protect human rights. As an international partner and an old, long-standing friend of Colombia, the UK will continue to support the implementation of the peace agreement and to work with Colombia across a broad range of issues to promote prosperity and opportunity for all its people.

5.25 pm

Jo Stevens: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I think that we have covered off all six areas of the peace agreement in detail. I thought all the contributions, whether speeches or interventions, were made in a very thoughtful and knowledgeable way, and I am very grateful to colleagues

for their participation. I also thank the Minister for his response. There were some very helpful and useful suggestions from the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), which I hope the Minister will take up with the Colombian Government, although I might have got my timings wrong about when the Minister was seeing President Duque today—

Sir Alan Duncan: Twice today, and again tonight.

Jo Stevens: That is good. That is excellent. So he will be able to raise with the President the points that we have raised today. We all have a shared interest in the peace process and its success, so when we raise our concerns it is because we are genuinely concerned about what will happen to Colombia in the future. I thank, again, all colleagues for participating in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Colombia peace process.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 18 June 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

CMA Loyalty Penalty Report

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our competition, legal and regulatory frameworks are fundamental to our future economic success. We have a reputation for a world-leading competition framework and independent economic regulators with duties to protect the interests of consumers. However, where markets are not working for consumers, we will ensure that they are treated fairly. Today I published the Government response to the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) loyalty penalty report. It is my intention that the UK's competition and markets regime is firmly focused on delivering improved outcomes for consumers. That means ensuring that significant sources of consumer detriment, such as the loyalty penalty, are tackled quickly and effectively.

Following concerns raised by Citizens Advice in a "super-complaint", the CMA uncovered harmful business practices by firms, which exploit consumer loyalty. The CMA investigation looked at the five markets highlighted by the super-complaint—cash savings, mortgages, household insurance, mobile and broadband—and found that there is a total loyalty penalty of around £4 billion a year in these markets. It also found that vulnerable people, including the elderly and those on a low income, may be more at risk of paying the loyalty penalty.

Our response to the CMA's loyalty penalty investigation sends a strong signal that poor practices by suppliers will not be tolerated and sets out the following:

our intention to establish an administrative model of consumer enforcement for the CMA and to consult on how to do this as part of the forthcoming consumer White Paper

that the CMA and the economic regulators must do more to stop business practices that lead to the loyalty penalty, and that we are prepared to legislate to give our enforcers new tools to do so where necessary

that targeted price interventions, where proportionate, should be considered by regulators to tackle the loyalty penalty. Although pricing interventions should be a matter of last resort, it is vital that all potential interventions are considered to protect those who are most vulnerable

reiterates the commitments we set out in our smart data review, including creating an "open communications" initiative and establishing a vulnerable consumer challenge.

This builds on our consumer Green Paper, as part of our modern industrial strategy, published in April 2018, which tackles areas where markets are not working for consumers and businesses. We believe that all of these measures will help create the conditions for more effective competition and improve day to day outcomes for consumers.

I will place a copy of our letter to the CMA in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1629]

TREASURY

Inheritance Tax Relief: Kindertransport

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

The Government are proud to continue to support victims of Nazi persecution. Earlier this year, the German Government set up a compensation scheme for Jewish individuals who were transported from Germany on the Kindertransport. Under the previous rules, these payments would be treated as part of the individual's estate and liable to inheritance tax. The Government will legislate in Finance Bill 2019-20 so that compensation payments made as part of this scheme will not be subject to inheritance tax considerations.

[HCWS1634]

EDUCATION

Disadvantaged Children in Education

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi):

Education should give every child, no matter their background, the opportunity to reach their full potential. To this end, we are announcing the conclusion of the children in need review, delivering the Government's manifesto commitment to better understand how we can improve the educational outcomes of children who have needed a social worker.

Through our reforms to social care and across Government, we are already taking action to improve safety and stability for these children: strengthening families and tackling domestic abuse, poor mental health and substance misuse, which are prevalent drivers of need. Through our action to drive up the quality of services in local authorities and to develop a highly capable, skilled social work workforce, we have seen the number of local authorities judged inadequate decline by around a quarter since 2017—providing consistently better services for thousands of children and families across the country.

We have also delivered significant work to raise the educational attainment of our most disadvantaged children. This includes the Timpson review of school exclusions, reforms to alternative provision, delivering on the 2014 SEND reforms, and ensuring a system of advocacy and support for looked after children.

Children in need are those who need a social worker for help or protection, including children on a child in need plan or a child protection plan, looked after children, and disabled children. The children in need review set out to assess the educational outcomes of this group of children and what actions and interventions are needed to improve them. As part of the review we have developed new data and analysis, conducted a broad programme of qualitative evidence gathering, including a call for evidence and literature review, and engaged with practitioners working in education and social care, as well as children and young people with experience of being supported by social care.

The review has evidenced, for the first time, the prevalence of children who have needed a social worker currently or previously, and the extent of these children's lasting poor educational outcomes. We now know that 1.6 million children have needed a social worker at some point, equivalent to one in 10 last year. This group do significantly worse than others at all stages of education. Of young people who needed a social worker in their GCSE year, by age 21, half had still not achieved level 2 qualifications (which include GCSEs) compared to 12% of those not in need.

The review has developed four priority areas for action, and identified where we can start work immediately. These are: promoting visibility and recognition, not only for the purposes of safeguarding but in education; keeping children in school, making sure education is a protective factor against abuse, neglect and exploitation; raising aspiration to believe that more is possible of this group of children; and finally, supporting schools to support children themselves—recognising the consequences of childhood adversity on attendance, learning, behaviour and mental health.

The immediate action we will take includes:

Clarifying and strengthening our expectations around information sharing between and within schools and social care;

Continuing to improve our national data on this group;

Improving clarity, timeliness and transparency around in-year admissions;

Developing much-needed new research on tackling absence;

Consulting on strengthening the role of the designated safeguarding lead in schools, and exploring whether there is a case for extending and adapting the scope of virtual school heads;

Building on reforms to mental health support, by identifying and sharing best practice around responding to the lasting impacts of childhood adversity;

Working with What Works for Children's Social Care to analyse which

interventions, trialled by the education endowment foundation, are most effective for

children with a social worker.

This action aims to ensure that every child can benefit from their education, ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to fulfil their potential, and the resilience they need for future success. However, it is only a start. To support families and communities, the whole of Government will continue to work together in preventing and tackling the causes of need, from the early years through to adolescence.

The report "Help, Protection, Education: concluding the children in need review" has been published alongside a companion data and analysis document on gov.uk. I will place a copy of the documents published in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1635]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Bilateral Voting Rights

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Today, I can confirm that the Government have reached a bilateral agreement with Luxembourg that will secure the rights of UK nationals living in Luxembourg, and Luxembourgish citizens living in the UK, to stand and vote in local elections in both a

deal and no-deal scenario. This agreement builds on our close ties and reinforces our commitment to the future relationship between our two nations.

Citizens have always been our priority in the negotiations for our departure from the EU, as has protecting the interests of British expats. 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. Throughout this process 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, Portugal and Luxembourg and we are continuing our discussions with other member states.

UK nationals will be able to continue to vote, and in some cases stand, in elections in member states where their domestic legislation allows this and they meet the requirements set out, for example on length of residency. This includes: Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden.

I will be depositing a copy of the latest agreement in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1633]

General Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I will attend the General Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 18 June 2019 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member state and continue to act in good faith.

The provisional agenda includes:

Multiannual financial framework 2021-2027

Ministers and the Commission will discuss progress on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) negotiations. The intention is for member states to reach an agreement on the negotiations in autumn 2019.

Preparation of the European Council on 20-21 June 2019: Conclusions and European Council follow-up

The Council will discuss preparations for the June European Council. The agenda includes: adoption of the 2019-2024 strategic agenda for the European Union; MFF; climate change; the European semester; and the disinformation and elections report prepared by the Romanian presidency in co-operation with the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Ministers will also discuss progress in implementing previous European Council conclusions.

Enlargement and stabilisation and association process

Enlargement is the process whereby European countries are able to join the European Union. Ministers will discuss and adopt conclusions on the 2019 enlargement package which was presented by the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and other EU institutions on 29 May.

European semester—Horizontal report on country specific recommendations

The European semester provides a framework for the co-ordination of economic policies across the EU. Ministers will discuss the Commission's horizontal report on the macro-economic position of the EU, which draws on country specific recommendations. The report will be passed to European Council ahead of its meeting on 20 and 21 June.

[HCWS1632]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firearms Licence Fees

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Today, I am publishing the Government response to the consultation we launched in January 2017 on new fees for applications for firearms licences administered by the Home Office and the Scottish Government. These licences are:

licences to possess firearms that are prohibited under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968. Such licences are issued to, for example, dealers or manufacturers of prohibited firearms and are distinct from police-issued certificates for civilian firearms, shotguns, and those issued to registered firearms dealers who deal in civilian firearms and shotguns;

licences for museums that hold firearms as part of their collections; and

licences for approved target shooting clubs.

The Government introduced measures, through the Policing and Crime Act 2017, to enable new fees for these licences to be set on a cost recovery basis, through secondary legislation. The fees will apply in England, Wales and Scotland.

I am very grateful to those who responded to the consultation. We received almost 5,000 responses.

The Home Office has reviewed the levels of fees set out in the consultation document, and we discussed our proposals with representatives of fee payers. The levels of fees now set out in the Government response are significantly lower than those originally proposed, due to both revised estimates of Home Office costs and a fresh look at the costs that it is appropriate to recover through the new fees.

An important issue raised by fee-payers' representatives was the potential impact of the proposed fees on museums with firearms collections. Given that the museums involved are publicly funded and act in the public interest, the Government has decided to maintain the current museum firearms licence fee level of £200 for the grant and renewal of these licences. This is set out in more detail in the impact assessment accompanying the consultation response. The Government response and the impact assessment will be published on gov.uk, and I will arrange for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The new fees will be introduced by statutory instrument as soon as parliamentary time allows.

[HCWS1630]

JUSTICE

Female Offenders

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Today, I am publishing the Farmer review, which was commissioned as part of our female offender strategy in June 2018.

This work builds on Lord Farmer's 2017 review of family ties for male prisoners, which concluded that good relationships are vital to reducing reoffending. For women, relationships are the most significant factor to impact directly on the likelihood of reoffending. More so than men, women in the justice system are in relationships that are abusive and/or criminogenic, and therefore supporting female offenders to strengthen and develop relationships is not straight forward.

We also know that women are more likely to be primary carers than men when entering the criminal justice system. Whereas children of male prisoners will often remain at home with their mother, children frequently have to leave their home when mothers go into custody. This tells us that incarceration of women disproportionately impacts families and children, and could increase the risk of intergenerational offending.

This is why I am immensely grateful to Lord Farmer for undertaking this important review.

Building on his original review, this review looks at his earlier recommendations through the lens of the needs of female offenders, including the distinct complexities in their relationships.

The Farmer review for women investigates how supporting female offenders to engage with their families can lower recidivism, aid rehabilitation and assist in addressing the issues of intergenerational crime. It does this by looking across the whole system—not just within prison—following the vision of our strategy to support women and improve outcomes for them at all points of the justice system.

The review finds that there is a lack of information on the personal circumstances of women, including of dependent children, which poses a fundamental barrier to supporting women to maintain those relationships. It draws practical proposals to help women communicate better with their family and dependents when at court and in custody, as well as proposing how prisons can better facilitate more frequent, safe, and private family visits.

In line with our strategy, the review represents a preference for women to be managed, and to manage their own relationships safely, in the community where possible.

The review can be found online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farmer-review-for-women>

I am pleased to welcome this report and to share my commitment to take forward this important area of work. We will look closely at the findings and recommendations from Lord Farmer's review for women and how we can best give effect to these in both the short and longer term.

In doing so, my Department will build on the good work we have been taking forward following Lord Farmer's original review. My officials will also work closely with other agencies, partners and Government Departments to ensure the importance of strengthening family and relational ties for female offenders and their children is reflected across the criminal justice system.

[HCWS1631]

Petitions

Tuesday 18 June 2019

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Climate change

The petition of residents of the constituency of Gloucester,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Richard Graham.*]

[P002472]

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Walsall Arboretum: park organisation

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom

Declares that Walsall MBC's decision to restructure the management of Walsall Arboretum in Walsall South constituency was made with no consultation with the public; further that the changes leave the Arboretum with no onsite management and no dedicated management team; further that these changes return the management of the Arboretum to the situation it was in prior to investment by the Heritage Lottery; and further notes a related petition on this matter on change.org with over 1200 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge Walsall MBC to consult the public about the changes and restore the posts of Arboretum Manager

and Events Co-ordinator dedicated to ensuring the activities, events, care and maintenance of the Arboretum continue.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[*Presented by Valerie Vaz*, *Official Report*, 4 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 107 .]

[P002457]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):

The Government recognise the value of parks and green spaces in providing vibrant and inclusive locations for communities to socialise, volunteer, work, and exercise. They recognise that green spaces foster health, well-being, integration, and social engagement. The Government are committed to working to safeguard the future of parks and green spaces.

Ultimately spending on parks is a matter for local authorities; where local authorities have prioritised the protection, and indeed expansion, of Green Spaces they have found the funds to do so. We will not dictate to local authorities how they should allocate spending.

Local authorities act independently of central Government. Ministers have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities, except where specific provision has been made in an Act of Parliament. Local authorities are ultimately accountable for their actions to their electorate.

Councils must, of course, comply with the legislation that governs them, including their decision-making process, as well as complying with their own standing orders and constitution. Where a member of the public has a concern about a decision, action or service of a local authority, our advice is that first and foremost they make a formal complaint using the local authority's formal complaints system.

In the last six months my Department has invested £15 million in the parks and green spaces agenda with £9.7 million to local authorities to improve their green spaces; £3.75 million to the Pocket Parks Plus programme and £1.2 million to the Heritage Lottery Fund and National Trust "Future Parks Accelerator" programme to support improvements to parks and green spaces over the longer term. In addition, £500k to the Parks Action Group has helped deliver a co-ordinator role, research into green infrastructure, promotion of a skills event and a new community empowerment work stream.

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 18 June 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

Inequality and Social Mobility

The following is an extract from the response given to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) during a debate on Inequality and Social Mobility on 12 June 2019.

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.

[Official Report, 12 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 738.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova).

The correct response should have been:

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 **over £5 billion** more on disabled people than was spent under the **previous** system.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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**not later than
Tuesday 25 June 2019**

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