

**Wednesday
3 July 2019**

**Volume 662
No. 324**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 3 July 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Northern Ireland Centenary

1. **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): When she will announce a schedule of the events that will mark the centenary in 2021 of the creation of Northern Ireland. [911624]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I hope, Mr Speaker, you will allow me a slight indulgence at the beginning of proceedings to wish the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) a very happy birthday. Today is, I believe, the feast day of St Thomas, but none of us is in any doubt about the joy he brings to this House.

My Department is exploring the options to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021. The centenary represents an excellent opportunity to reflect on the past, to celebrate the present, and to build a united Northern Ireland for the future. It needs to be undertaken in a spirit of historical accuracy, mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. Does she agree that people across Northern Ireland will want to enjoy, celebrate and commemorate the centenary at the events in the 18 months leading up to it but, more than that, they will want to do it in a spirit of generosity and inclusiveness, remarking upon our history, our culture and our heritage for the next 100 years of Northern Ireland within the UK?

Karen Bradley: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. He is absolutely right in the way he describes how the 2021 anniversary should be marked. I reflect on the work by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on the world war one commemorations, which had an inclusive nature that fostered reconciliation and brought great joy to the people of Northern Ireland.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Would it not be a good idea for the Secretary of State to declare, or to get the relevant organisation to declare, a bank holiday on 5 May, which will be the exact date, 100 years ago, that Northern Ireland was founded?

Karen Bradley: That is a matter for my colleagues in the Cabinet Office, who will have heard my hon. Friend's question. He will know that we are changing the date of the early May bank holiday next year to mark VE-day. Perhaps they would want to consider using the subsequent bank holiday for a similar purpose.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The 100th anniversary of the establishment of Northern Ireland is an opportunity to look at the history of Northern Ireland in its times of darkness and of light, and particularly to build on the tremendous progress of recent years. Last week, commemorating the sad passing of Ivan Cooper, the Archdeacon of Derry quoted Lord Carson, who said in 1921:

"From the start be tolerant to all religions, and, while maintaining to the last your own traditions and your own citizenship, take care that similar rights are preserved for those who differ from us."

Will the Secretary of State be liaising with her Irish counterpart and other interested parties to make the most of this opportunity, as she said, to learn from the mistakes of the past and promote the Northern Ireland of the future?

Karen Bradley: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. We should all reflect on the words that she quoted. She will be pleased to know that, at the last meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office raised exactly those points with his Irish counterpart. It is important that we do mark this in a spirit of reconciliation, mutual understanding and looking to the future.

Devolved Government: Restoration

2. **Mr Gavin Shuker** (Luton South) (Ind): What recent steps she has taken to facilitate the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland. [911625]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): There has been significant engagement over the past nine weeks with the political parties in Northern Ireland, considering a range of important and difficult issues. Progress has been made, but there are a number of areas of disagreement between the political parties.

Mr Shuker: The Secretary of State's mapping exercise on the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland revealed 96 areas directly underpinned by or linked to EU law. After Brexit, obviously, these will need to be replaced and shaped by the institutions of Stormont. Given that, does she believe that it would be irresponsible to pursue a no-deal Brexit while the devolved Administration is not in place?

Karen Bradley: My focus is on getting the devolved Administration back together and getting all the institutions that were agreed in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement working—in particular, the north-south institutions, which are incredibly important. Having those, and also having representation of the Northern Ireland Executive on the Joint Ministerial Committee, are both very important points in making sure that Northern Ireland's voice is heard in the Brexit debate.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Both sides of the border are willing and praying for success in the talks in which my right hon. Friend is involved. The absence of devolution is now tangibly and negatively impacting upon the lives of too many people in Northern Ireland. Will she commit to ensure that the summer recess is not an excuse for pausing the talks and keep parties in the room—by force, if necessary—to ensure that, by the time we come back in September, we are on the cusp of seeing devolution return?

Karen Bradley: May I start by congratulating my hon. Friend on his appointment to the role of Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee? I have not had an opportunity to do so in the Chamber before now. I am sure he will make an excellent Chair, following his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who is now a Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

I want to reassure my hon. Friend that I am doing everything in my power to ensure that the parties continue to talk. They are all still in the room. I will be returning to Northern Ireland straight after questions, to continue talks over the rest of the week. I want the talks to succeed and will do whatever I can to ensure that they do.

12. [911636] **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): I obviously hope that the devolved Administration is restored as soon as possible but, in the absence of devolution, can the Secretary of State examine how this House can scrutinise the decisions of officials in the Northern Ireland Departments—for example, by tabling parliamentary questions on the key issues that affect people in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, he was the last direct rule Minister in Northern Ireland, and I very much hope that he continues to be. He will understand the constitutional implications of the independence of the civil service in Northern Ireland and the fact that it reports to the Executive Office, not to this House. I am determined to get the institutions restored because then the question that he asked will become irrelevant.

11. [911635] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What fresh approaches have been pursued by the Department in recent months to try to secure a breakthrough in these talks?

Karen Bradley: We have, of course, ensured that all parties are in the room. These have been talks with the five main parties in Northern Ireland—those that are eligible to form an Executive and the Alliance party—and they have all made a valuable contribution to the discussions. We have done so through working groups, chaired by five independent facilitators. Good progress has been made, but we have not had any institutions in place for two and a half years because of some very difficult issues, and those difficult issues remain.

13. [911637] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): With no governance in Northern Ireland accountable to the public, what steps will the Secretary of State take to improve this?

Karen Bradley: I am trying to get the institutions restored. It is vital for the people of Northern Ireland that the politicians they elected make decisions on their behalf, so I am doing everything I can to ensure that those politicians are able to do what will be very difficult for all of them to find a compromise and an accommodation and go back into Stormont.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the measures she has taken thus far. There is clearly a need to compromise on all sides in order to bring the talks to fruition. What compromises is she prepared to make?

Karen Bradley: My role is to help the parties but, clearly, if they are able to reach an agreement, I am sure that they will want things from the UK Government, and I will consider those when we are at that stage. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, we are at a delicate stage in the negotiations and I would not want to compromise anybody's position at this point.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): One of the issues that has to be addressed in the talks is justice for victims. The Secretary of State will be aware that the late William Frazer, who was laid to rest this Monday, devoted his life to fighting for victims; I pay tribute to him and his work. Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the biggest issues must be addressing the definition of a victim, so that innocent victims are entitled to the pension they need?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman refers to a number of issues, and he is right to do so. He refers to dealing with the legacy of the past. He will know that we have consulted on the institutions agreed at Stormont House and will publish a response to the consultation in due course. He also mentioned pensions for severely injured victims, which have been promised to them for far too long. I am determined to make progress on that matter.

Nigel Dodds: Another issue that is causing real problems across the community in Northern Ireland, in the absence of devolved government, is the atrocious waiting lists in the health service, with cancer victims being made to wait a horrendously long time and targets being missed. Surely in the last days of the Prime Minister's tenure, she will address that point and ensure that something is done to bring waiting lists under control. It is not good enough that the Government sit on their hands while this is happening.

Karen Bradley: I do not accept the right hon. Gentleman's comment that the Government are sitting on their hands; the Government are absolutely determined to see these matters addressed and the best way to do that, as he knows, is through devolved government in Stormont. I pay tribute to him and his party for the willingness that has been shown and their determination to engage in the talks very constructively and to make progress. I very much welcome that, particularly from the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, Arlene Foster, whose attitude has been exemplary throughout.

Istanbul Convention and Northern Ireland Law on Domestic Abuse

3. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on ensuring that the law in Northern Ireland is consistent with the Istanbul convention in relation to domestic abuse; and if she will make a statement. [911626]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I am sorry to report that, while the UK has signed the Istanbul convention, we are one of only a handful of signatories that have not yet ratified it. So, in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice are working closely with the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland to establish how this can be progressed for Northern Ireland, perhaps in the upcoming Domestic Abuse Bill.

Diana Johnson: The Minister is absolutely right. If it was the will of Government to include Northern Ireland in the jurisdiction covered by the Domestic Abuse Bill, that would allow the Istanbul convention to be ratified, so I ask the Government to do that, as did the prelegislative scrutiny Committee on the Domestic Abuse Bill in one of its recommendations.

John Penrose: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the prelegislative scrutiny process by the Joint Committee made that recommendation. That has opened the door and it is certainly one of the things that are therefore being considered. Obviously, we need to work through the detail, but that door is certainly now open and we are considering it carefully.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the extraterritorial jurisdiction required under the convention will be included in the Domestic Abuse Bill and therefore enable us to ratify that?

John Penrose: I cannot yet categorically confirm any of those measures to be in or out, but it is certainly one of the points that was addressed by the prelegislative scrutiny Committee. It was one of the things it recommended, so it is one of the things that are being considered very carefully.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister of State acknowledge that the fact that every two minutes there is a phone call to abuse charities regarding domestic abuse means that it must top the agenda when the Assembly reconvenes? Further, will he pledge to raise the matter with local parties and be assured of the DUP's support to make that happen?

John Penrose: I am delighted to hear that there is broad support for the measures that we have just been discussing. I am sure that, when the Stormont Assembly reconvenes, it will be one of the most important issues. There are others, of course, but I am glad to hear the hon. Gentleman's support.

Leaving the EU: Talks on Restoring Devolution

4. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the progress of talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland. [911627]

5. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the progress of talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland. [911628]

9. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the progress of talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland. [911633]

10. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the progress of talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland. [911634]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The Northern Ireland parties have made it clear that they want to use the limited window ahead of us to make a success of the current talks process. I agree with them that restoring devolved government cannot wait. I remain determined to do what is necessary to make this talks process a success.

John Mc Nally: The future Prime Minister held a private meeting with the leadership of the DUP yesterday. For over two years now, the Conservative party has been beholden to one political party in Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State seriously believe that there is no connection between this narrow and self-interested relationship between these two political parties and the continued absence of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I reject that entirely. The institutions collapsed well before the confidence and supply arrangements between the Democratic Unionist party and my party and, as the Northern Ireland Office, we are rigorously impartial. I pay tribute to the Democratic Unionist party and the attitude that it has brought to the talks. I pay tribute to all other parties in that respect.

David Linden: All of us in this House would want to see the restoration of a functioning devolved Government in Northern Ireland. Clearly, one of the things that is most important about that is transparency. In the interests of transparency, will the Secretary of State's party in the months ahead be offering another Brexit bung to that lot behind us?

Karen Bradley: The matter of transparency is very important. It has been a matter for one of our working groups, which has been working and making good progress on how we improve transparency within the institutions established under the Belfast agreement. I look forward to seeing the parties going back into government and seeing those transparency measures being enacted.

Stuart C. McDonald: Would it not quite simply be a constitutional outrage for the UK to leave the EU in October with Northern Ireland having been without an accountable and elected devolved Parliament for the entirety of the article 50 process? Is that not all the more reason why we cannot and must not leave in October?

Karen Bradley: The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and we will leave the European Union as one United Kingdom, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to see restored devolved government in Northern Ireland and that is what I am working to achieve.

Patrick Grady: Did the Prime Minister consult the Secretary of State before appointing Lord Dunlop to conduct a review of devolution? Brexit is already driving a coach and horses through the devolution settlement on these islands, and it will not be helped if the two arms of Government do not know what the other is doing, so will the Dunlop review extend to Northern Ireland and the effects of Brexit on devolution?

Karen Bradley: I do not comment on leaked briefings.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): While we listen to all the rhetoric and the excuses about talks not proceeding—we have heard that Brexit is one of them—surely it is in our interest, I am sure the Secretary of State will agree, that we make an even better Northern Ireland, a perfect Brexit and a frictionless border for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: I agree, and we will have a better chance of doing that if we have the devolved institutions restored. That is what we are working to do.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is likely to have promised the Secretary of State's position to about six or seven people, this may well be her last appearance at Northern Ireland questions. Having now spent considerable time in Northern Ireland and knowing the damage that a no-deal Brexit would inflict, will she commit to voting against a no-deal Brexit if the House is given the opportunity to do so? Will she commit, as the Chancellor did yesterday, to doing everything she can to avoid no deal?

Karen Bradley: I assure the hon. Gentleman that this will not be my last appearance at Northern Ireland questions; I will absolutely be at Northern Ireland questions for many years to come. I believe that the right way for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union as one United Kingdom is with a deal, and that is what we are working to achieve.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, may I make the point to this House, which has known the murder of its own Members, that it must condemn threats to Arlene Foster? Democratic politicians are entitled to operate in security without such threats of violence.

The Secretary of State knows, because she has voted in a way to prevent it, that a hard Brexit would lead to a hard border across the island of Ireland, with the threats of terrorism that the former Chief Constable has invoked and with increased unemployment and all the difficulties that that would cause. The Secretary of State has taken a different view in the past. Will she make it clear that a no-deal Brexit would be massively damaging for the people of Northern Ireland and that she will continue to oppose that step?

Karen Bradley: I join the hon. Gentleman in condemning threats against any politician. Those of us who are democratically elected put ourselves into public service because we believe in public service. We are all entitled, no matter our political persuasion, to have protection and not to receive death threats. I join him in condemning those death threats.

With respect to Brexit, I have been clear throughout that I want to see the United Kingdom leave the European Union as one United Kingdom. I believe that the best way to do that is through a deal that enables us to leave in an orderly fashion, protecting jobs and the economy. I have also been clear that a no-deal Brexit would be longer lasting and more acute in Northern Ireland, but I am doing everything I can to ensure that we leave with a deal.

City Deals: Scope

6. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What comparative assessment she has made of the scope of city deals in Northern Ireland. [911629]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): The hon. Gentleman will know that, in line with our 2017 manifesto commitment, we have already announced two city deals in Northern Ireland, with £350 million for Belfast and a combined package of £105 million for Derry/Londonderry and Strabane. Early-stage discussions have also begun with other councils in the mid, south and west, as well as Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council.

Mike Amesbury: On a recent visit to the wonderful city of Derry, I spoke with those involved in shaping the education offer in the city. They told me that a central aspect of the city deal is the establishment of a riverfront university, medical centre and innovation hub. Will the Minister update the House on the timeline and progress of this much-needed facility?

John Penrose: The timeline for that is the same as the timeline for the rest of the city deal. Business cases have to be worked up and the business cases for all the projects have to work well. Incidentally, for any business cases that do not shape up, there are many other ideas that can also be brought through. They will then get approved and will proceed, particularly once the—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Emma Little Pengelly.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The Belfast city deal has huge potential to bring investment and economic growth to Belfast and the wider region. Will the Minister outline in a little more detail what discussions he has had with the head of the civil service and with the city councils about getting those projects to implementation stage? When does he anticipate that the first project will be rolled out?

John Penrose: The difficulty is that city deals are by definition local initiatives. We can lay foundations, but they need to be taken forward by local partners and local councils. Also, ultimately, as soon as we get the Stormont Executive re-established, they will have to have an essential role in this. Although we are making progress as fast as we decently can—so are local councils—we are ultimately also dependent on the progress of the talks.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I say to the Secretary of State how grateful I am for her kind wishes? If she would care to join me in Strangers for a small sweet sherry later on, she would be most welcome. She will be aware that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who aspires to be the father of the nation—to be fair, he does have some expertise in the field of paternity—has announced his intention of creating a Monaco-style tax-free zone in Belfast, with, presumably, a border around that fair city. Does the right hon. Lady consider that proposal to be risible and ridiculous, or the product of an unfocused mind with no knowledge of Northern Ireland?

John Penrose: I join my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in wishing the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) best wishes for his 21-and-a-few-months birthday. I am afraid I cannot answer for my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson); that is a skillset I do not have.

Being Part of the UK: Benefits

7. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What assessment she has made of the benefits to Northern Ireland of being part of the UK. [911630]

8. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment she has made of the benefits to Northern Ireland of being part of the UK. [911631]

14. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What assessment she has made of the benefits to Northern Ireland of being part of the UK. [911638]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): May I address the invitation I have just received, Mr Speaker? Of course I enjoy a sweet sherry, but I am afraid I will be on my way to Belfast by that point.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I'll drink yours.

Karen Bradley: I'm sure he will.

As this Government have made clear on numerous occasions, Northern Ireland benefits hugely from being part of the Union. Our steadfast belief is that Northern Ireland's future is best served within a strong United Kingdom. This Government will never be neutral in expressing our support for the Union.

Vicky Ford: Northern Ireland is home to beautiful scenery and stunning beaches. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government should leave no opportunity unturned to promote tourism in Northern Ireland, especially great events such as the Open Championship, which will be held in Portrush next month for the first time in over 60 years?

Karen Bradley: I agree wholeheartedly. I had the honour of visiting Portrush and Royal Portrush last week, and saw the beaches at their best in the sunshine. Mr Speaker, you will be delighted to know that the Open starts after Wimbledon finishes, so I hope that you will be able to enjoy it.

Sir Desmond Swayne: And city deals, surely?

Karen Bradley: Absolutely!

Jeremy Lefroy: One of the successes of the United Kingdom is in attracting foreign direct investment. Could the Secretary of State update the House on recent FDI to Northern Ireland, and the jobs that it has created?

Karen Bradley: My Staffordshire neighbour has announced that he will not be standing at the next election; I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done for the people of Stafford, and will, I know, continue to do until the next election. He is quite right to refer to foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland; it increases year on year. It increased by 25% last year, creating nearly 1,500 new jobs.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Surely one of the benefits of Northern Ireland being in the UK is that people who live in Northern Ireland enjoy the same rights as the rest of us. If the opportunity arises—say, through an amendment to legislation—to extend equal marriage to Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State and her Government finally support it?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman knows that personally I would like to see equal marriage extended to Northern Ireland. It is a devolved matter, and it is right that politicians in Northern Ireland deal with it, but if there is a vote on that matter in this House, it will be a free vote for Members on the Conservative Benches, as has been made clear.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Would the Secretary of State, having attended Armed Forces Day events in Lisburn this year, agree with me about the importance of Northern Ireland's contribution to the armed forces in the first and second world wars, and in subsequent conflicts? Will she lobby for us to hold the national Armed Forces Day events in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: That sounds like a very good idea. I very much enjoyed my visit to Lisburn for Armed Forces Day. As the hon. Gentleman will know, because we had a discussion on the day, I then went with my family to visit the Somme Museum, and of course I was in Belfast on Monday for the commemoration of the Somme, as were many of his hon. and right hon. Friends. The contribution that the armed forces have made is very significant, and does need to be marked in Northern Ireland.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In assessing the benefit of Northern Ireland being in the United Kingdom, can the Secretary of State advise the House of the participative role it has played in the review ordered by the Prime Minister of the rights of those in Northern Ireland, based on their rights as European citizens who identify as Irish? If Northern Ireland has not participated, why not?

Karen Bradley: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Northern Ireland Office has very much participated in this, and we are determined to find a way that we can resolve this, in a way that is sensitive to the rights of the people of Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's claim that this Government are no longer neutral on Northern Ireland, which sets aside what was previously said about "no selfish, strategic... interest" in Northern Ireland. Will she put together promotional literature, and a promotional programme, that expresses the economic, social and cultural benefits of the Union that can be promoted not only in Northern Ireland but around the world?

Karen Bradley: I just point out to the hon. Gentleman that I am a member of the Conservative and Unionist party; I have never been neutral in my support for the Union.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [911709] **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 3 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): While offering our commiserations to the England Lionesses following last night's semi-final, may I say that they have inspired millions and made us all very proud?

I am sure the whole House would want to join me in congratulating Rose Hudson-Wilkin on her appointment as Bishop of Dover. I know she will take on that new role with the same dedication and care that she has shown to all of us during her time as Speaker's Chaplain.

We offer our best wishes to all those taking part in this Saturday's Pride. Yesterday, 10 Downing Street hosted a reception to look back with pride on everything that generations of campaigners have achieved, to celebrate the contribution that LGBT people of all backgrounds make to our national life, and to look forward to a future where the bigotry and discrimination that LGBT people still face is a thing of the past.

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

Neil Coyle: I add my thanks, and those of everyone in Bermondsey and Old Southwark, to the England women's football team, who have inspired the next generation of girls and boys to get involved in football.

In March, the Prime Minister told this House that we had to back her damaging Brexit plans so that she could focus on domestic issues like knife crime. On Sunday, an 18-year-old was stabbed and killed in Walworth in my constituency. Can the Prime Minister explain to that teenager's family why she has overseen a Government of paralysis who have failed to tackle violent crime?

The Prime Minister: We are all concerned by the incidents of knife crime that we have seen. We are all concerned with the incidents that we saw over the weekend, and our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of the victims. Too many lives of potential are being cut short, and those individuals and their families are being cruelly robbed of those futures.

We have not been failing to act on this; we have been acting on this. We have ensured that we are working across the board, because it takes all of society to work on this issue. It is not just an issue of policing. We have

made more powers available to police—[*Interruption.*] Some Labour Members say it is just an issue of policing. No, we need to ensure that young people do not carry knives. We need to ensure that young people are taken away from a route into crime. That means dealing with drugs; it means dealing with gangs. We have provided more funding to police. We have provided extra powers to police. Sadly, the Labour party voted against that.

Q2. [911710] **Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): What message does the Prime Minister have for the people of Hong Kong at this difficult time?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. I have been shocked, as I am sure Members across the House have been, to see the scenes from Hong Kong on Monday and the use of violence at the Legislative Council. The vast majority of the hundreds of thousands who marched did so peacefully and lawfully. This week's anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong is a reminder of the importance of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the joint declaration, and it is vital that Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms set down in the Sino-British joint declaration are respected. I have raised my concerns directly with Chinese leaders, as have my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers, and we will continue to do so.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will want to express its condolences to the families of the rail workers who were hit and killed by a train this morning in Port Talbot. There will obviously have to be a full investigation into this, but our thoughts must be with the families and friends of those that were killed and injured.

I join the Prime Minister and others in congratulating Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin on becoming Bishop of Dover. She has been absolutely brilliant as Chaplain to the House, but she was also brilliant when she was a parish priest in Hackney. She shows such empathy for people, and we wish her well on her way. I am sure she will do really well.

I also congratulate the England women's football team on their successful journey as far as the semi-finals and wish the men's cricket team well in their current match against New Zealand, which I understand is 134-1 at the moment. Pride this weekend will be a source of great enjoyment. I think of all those who suffered in the past to try to defeat homophobia in our society and will be enjoying the joy of the streets of London this weekend.

The Chancellor says that a no-deal Brexit would cause a £90 billion hit to the public finances. The former Foreign Secretary says concerns about no deal are "confected hysteria". Who does the Prime Minister think is right?

The Prime Minister: First, I echo the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about the incident in Port Talbot. Secondly, the figure that was quoted was actually publicly available at the time. It appeared in the Government's economic analysis in relation to these matters. If he is worried about no deal, let me say this: I have done everything I can to ensure we leave the EU with a deal. I can look workers in the eye and tell them I voted to leave with a deal that protected jobs. He cannot do that because he voted three times for no deal.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister should be aware that her deal was rejected three times by the House, and when something has been rejected three times, one might think about an alternative method of doing things. A confidential Cabinet note apparently says that the Government are not properly prepared for no deal, and NHS trusts have warned that it will pose a major risk to NHS services. Furthermore, Make UK, which represents UK manufacturers, recently said:

“There is a direct link between politicians talking up the prospect of no-deal and British firms losing customers overseas and British people losing jobs.”

Is Make UK guilty of confected hysteria or is it speaking up for its members and its very legitimate concerns right across the manufacturing sector?

The Prime Minister: Business organisation after business organisation showed earlier this year that they wanted people in the House of Commons to vote for the deal so that we could leave with a deal.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister could not get her own party to support it. The Opposition parties did not support it either. As the danger of no deal looms ever larger, JLR, Ford, Nissan, Toyota and BMW have all said that no deal would threaten their continued presence in the UK. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has said:

“Leaving the EU without a deal would trigger the most seismic shift in trading conditions ever experienced”.

Furthermore, within the last week Vauxhall has said that its decision to produce the new Astra at Ellesmere Port will be conditional on the final terms of the UK's exit from the EU. What can the Prime Minister say to workers at Ellesmere Port and elsewhere—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will not be shouted down under any circumstances. If you are shouting, stop it. You can do better, and if you cannot, it is about time you did.

Jeremy Corbyn: Why does the Prime Minister not speak to both candidates to succeed her and remind them that as they trade insults over no deal, thousands of jobs are at risk the more they ratchet up their rhetoric?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asks what I would say to workers at Ellesmere Port. I would tell them that I and the vast majority of Conservative Members in this House voted to protect their jobs. The Labour party whipped three times against a deal. The Labour party whipped three times for no deal. The threat to those Ellesmere Port jobs is from the Labour party. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Ms Onn, you are very over-excitable. Calm yourself.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Labour party is about protecting jobs and living standards in this country, not crashing out without a deal. With tariffs up to 40% on some basic foodstuffs, will the Prime Minister set out exactly what impact no deal would have on food prices and on the farming industry in this country?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman claims that the Labour party stands up for protecting jobs and living standards. It has not only voted three times for no deal, thereby putting jobs under threat; it has also consistently, on a number of occasions, voted against the very tax cuts that help people to maintain their living standards. We will take no lectures from the Labour party on protecting people's jobs and living standards.

Jeremy Corbyn: As I recall, it was this party that put down a motion to take no deal off the table. The managing director of Birds Eye says that no deal would add 20% to the price of some foodstuffs “instantaneously”, and the National Farmers Union says that it would be very damaging to British farming. Both the candidates to succeed the Prime Minister have claimed that they will renegotiate the backstop. Can she confirm that section (12) of the European Council decision to extend article 50 ruled out reopening the withdrawal agreement, and therefore the backstop?

The Prime Minister: I do not think I need to tell the right hon. Gentleman what was in the Council conclusions. They are clear, and I have made them clear in the House. The right hon. Gentleman says that it was the Labour party that put down a motion to abandon no deal and take it off the table. The trouble is that when it came to the votes that mattered—when it came to the votes that would actually have an impact on stopping no deal—the Labour party whipped against them. That is absolutely typical of the right hon. Gentleman: all mouth and trousers.

Jeremy Corbyn: We made very clear what the danger of no deal is, and we will do everything to prevent a no-deal exit, because we know the damage it will do to jobs and living standards in this country.

This Government have comprehensively failed on Brexit. Jobs are at risk, inward investment has fallen off a cliff, and manufacturing is at a six-year low. No deal threatens to crash the economy. The Government themselves say that no deal would cut growth by 10%, yet we have two leadership candidates who are threatening no deal, and, indeed, are competing with each other on the rhetoric of no deal. This Government is now an irrelevance. The two candidates to succeed the Prime Minister have only fantasy plans. As she and her successors have no answers, does she not accept that the best thing to do would be to go back to the people and let them decide which way we go?

The Prime Minister: I have made the point in answer to five of the right hon. Gentleman's questions that if you want to ensure that this country leaves the European Union with a deal, you have to vote for a deal, which is what he and his colleagues have consistently refused to do. But there is another question for the Labour party. With all this talk about no deal, the question really is “Where does the Labour party stand on Brexit?” The shadow Brexit Secretary does not support Brexit. The shadow Foreign Secretary does not support Brexit. The shadow Chancellor does not support Brexit. The Labour deputy leader does not support Brexit. Labour wants to block Brexit, and that would be a betrayal of the many by the few.

Q11. [911719] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): The district, borough and county councils of Northamptonshire have been working hard in preparing for the creation of unitary authorities; but they and, most crucially, the people of the county need and deserve certainty that the appropriate unitary orders will be laid before Parliament. May I ask the Prime Minister to pledge that they will be brought forward imminently?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising what I know is an important issue that is of concern in his constituency and elsewhere in Northamptonshire. Subject to parliamentary approval, of course, the new authorities will be a significant step towards ensuring that residents and businesses can in future have the sustainable, high-quality local services they deserve. Officials are working hard with the eight Northamptonshire councils on the detail of the secondary legislation, because that will need to include detail. Our aim is to lay the statutory instrument as soon as practical for parliamentary debate and for approval.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I join the Prime Minister in welcoming the Pride event in London this week and of course right throughout the world, and acknowledge that it is the Scottish National party that has proportionately the largest LGBT group here in Parliament?

This Prime Minister's days are numbered. Her review of devolution is nothing more than an act of sheer desperation. This is a Prime Minister running scared of the people of Scotland. Does the Prime Minister think the future of Scotland should be decided by the people who live and work there or by her party?

The Prime Minister: The future of Scotland was decided by the people who live and work there: it was decided in 2014 and they wanted to stay as part of the United Kingdom.

Ian Blackford: If the Prime Minister looks at the opinion polls she will see there is a majority for independence.

Scotland's First Minister was explicitly clear when she said:

"It's for the Scottish people—not a Tory PM—to consider and decide what future we want for our Parliament and country."

Will the review of devolution include the views of her would-be successors that a Scot would never be Prime Minister and that Westminster should actively choke off Foreign Office support for a First Minister doing her job—doing her job, Prime Minister? This review is a farce. The real legacy of this Prime Minister is shutting down Scotland and ignoring the will of the Scottish Parliament. The Tories have never supported devolution, and it is clear that they never, never will.

The Prime Minister: There is no review of devolution. Only one party in this House wants to stop devolution in Scotland—the Scottish National party.

Q12. [911720] **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Iran continues to use all methods, including an increasingly sophisticated cyber-capability, to destabilise the middle east and pursue its ambition to become a regional superpower in the middle east. Does the Prime Minister agree that a cyber-armed Iran is as dangerous

as a nuclear-armed Iran and that we need to do all we can and that is necessary with our allies to combat the increasing threat from Iran in cyber-space?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise concerns about Iran's destabilising behaviour in the region. Our objective continues to be to work with our international partners to find diplomatic solutions and to de-escalate tensions.

My hon. Friend is also right to raise cyber-capability. We have a dedicated capability to act in cyber-space through our national offensive cyber programme, and last year we offered our offensive cyber-capabilities in support of NATO operations.

My hon. Friend talks about working with others: we were the first nation to do that, and we will continue to ensure that we have effective offensive cyber-capabilities that can be deployed at a time and place of our choosing across the full range of international threats.

Q3. [911711] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister hopes that net zero emissions by 2050 will be part of her legacy—although many of us would hope that we will achieve that objective sooner—but it needs policies to match that ambition. Developing onshore wind farms will help us to tackle the climate crisis, reduce prices for consumers and has overwhelming public support, so does she agree that now is the time to scrap the barriers that have seen new installations fall to the lowest level since 2011, restore subsidies for wind farms and allow them to compete in the contracts for difference auctions?

The Prime Minister: The Committee on Climate Change was clear that 2050 is the right target date for net zero emissions. There is no ban on onshore wind. In 2015, local communities were given more say on onshore wind applications in their areas. Onshore wind has successfully exceeded its expected contribution to our 2020 renewable energy target, but at the same time we are backing offshore wind through a new sector deal, maintaining the UK as the largest market in Europe over the next decade.

Q13. [911721] **Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister has shown a strong commitment over many years to tackling domestic violence and abuse. Her measures introduced in 2012, 2014 and 2015, and the groundbreaking strategy of 2016 on ending violence against women and girls, have all worked to reduce violence towards women. Will she tell us a little more about her hopes for the forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill, and about how she feels it will continue to help victims of this crime?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the work he has done on this important issue. He, like me—and I am sure everyone across the House—is absolutely clear that domestic abuse has no place in our country. That is why I have set out plans to end the postcode lottery of support for survivors of domestic abuse.

My right hon. and learned Friend refers to our draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which will introduce the first-ever statutory Government definition of domestic abuse, but this is not just about legislation. If we are going to

transform our response, we need other action, so the draft Bill will be accompanied by a package of non-legislative action to tackle domestic abuse, and in November last year we awarded a further £22 million for various domestic abuse projects across the country. Wherever you are, wherever you live and whatever the abuse you face, everyone must have access to the services they need to be safe.

Q4. [911712] **Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): Eve Leadbeater, a constituent of mine, and Lord Dubs arrived on the Kindertransport 80 years ago this week. Is it not important that we learn from history? Three years after Lord Dubs's amendment to the Immigration Act 2016 gave 480 places to child refugees, only 220 of the places have been filled. Is it not important for the thousands upon thousands of child refugees in camps across Europe and the middle east that we honour that pledge and allow 1,000 child refugees to come into our country each year for the next 10 years, so that we can turn the rhetoric, the crying, the care and the compassion for those child refugees into a public policy that actually meets their needs and does something about their suffering?

The Prime Minister: I do not know about the hon. Gentleman's constituent, but I know that Lord Dubs came here on the Kindertransport organised by my late constituent, Sir Nicholas Winton. We as a country can be proud of everything we have done to help refugees and other vulnerable children who are affected by conflict, violence and instability. Since the start of 2010, we have provided asylum or an alternative form of protection to more than 34,600 children, and we have granted family reunion visas to an additional 26,000.

We are determined to continue these efforts. We have introduced a new form of leave exclusively for children brought to the UK from the Calais camps, so that they can continue to rebuild their lives with families in the UK. That Calais leave will grant those who qualify the right to study, to work, to access public funds and healthcare and to apply for settlement after 10 years. We have a proud record of helping refugees, and we will continue with that proud record.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity, as Leader of the House of Commons, to chair an inter-ministerial group looking at giving every baby the best start in life? Some excellent work was done by my ministerial colleagues, and a number of recommendations were made, including that the Government should establish a first 1,001 days vision for what best practice should look like. What progress has been made on addressing those recommendations?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for the work that she did as Leader of the House and for her work on the inter-ministerial group looking at that issue. Beyond that, the issue of early years is a cause she has championed for some considerable time, both before and since she came into this House. I am proud that more than 850,000 disadvantaged two-year-olds have benefited from the free early education places that we introduced in 2013. Our social mobility action plan sets out a clear and ambitious plan for the early years, closing the word gap at age five, and we want to ensure that where a child gets to in life depends on their

individual talents and not on their background. We will continue to work with my right hon. Friend and others who rightly put a high value on the importance of the early days in a child's life.

Q5. [911713] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My 18-year-old constituent Sian and several of her fellow students have just completed their German A-level. Sadly, due to cuts to the school's teaching staff, they had to teach themselves for the last two terms. By contrast, the local private schools still have German teachers in place. At a time when some would turn their backs on Europe, does this not also suggest that the injustices that exist in this country are burning brighter than ever in our education system?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have been putting more funding into our schools and ensuring that the distribution of that funding is fairer—fairer—across the country. As I just said in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), I want to ensure that every young person can get as far in life as their talents and hard work will take them.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): As long ago as 1875, this country became the first in the world to require animals to be stunned prior to slaughter, yet the latest evidence from the Food Standards Agency is that 25% of all sheep slaughtered last year were unstunned following the use of a religious derogation. Religious slaughter is a contentious issue and a matter of personal conscience and religious conviction for many. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there should be a free vote on the Floor of the House on the issue?

The Prime Minister: I understand that my hon. Friend had a Westminster Hall debate yesterday on this issue, which raises a number of emotions and concerns across the House. We have upheld the right of religious slaughter, but this Government, as my hon. Friend will know full well, are taking steps to ensure that we monitor what happens in abattoirs through the introduction of CCTV.

Q6. [911714] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I am guessing that the Prime Minister always wears factor 30 or factor 50 sunscreen when she goes on her walking holidays—including in Wales—because she knows full well that 90% of skin cancers are caused by harmful exposure to the sun. We quite rightly give free sunscreen to our armed forces, so is it not time to give it to our police officers when they are on duty, especially those standing outside the Palace in the blazing sun for many hours? Does she agree with her Health and Social Care Secretary, who says that it is time to remove the VAT on high-factor sunscreen, so that we can save lives?

The Prime Minister: VAT rules allow drugs and medications dispensed by registered pharmacists against a prescription issued by a qualified health professional to be zero rated for VAT. High-factor sunscreen can be on the NHS prescription list for certain conditions and is provided VAT-free in those circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, but we should ensure that people do not just think that skin safety is about sun protection products, because leading cancer charities are clear that people should be taking

several steps for protection, including avoiding long periods of sun exposure. I take his point that some jobs involve people being outside for periods of time, but we should all be taking all precautions.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Under the Prime Minister's leadership, we have a new funding formula for our schools. I warmly welcome it as a first step, but more still needs to be done. To make it fairer still, does the Prime Minister agree that areas that have been historically underfunded, such as Dorset and Poole, need to be protected, while also protecting all schools?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern around this issue. Our fair funding formula will ensure a much fairer distribution of school funding over a number of years. I recognise that some authorities have been at the lower end of funding in the past. Indeed, several schools in my own constituency come under Wokingham Borough Council, which is one of those very authorities. That is why we are taking steps to ensure that the impact is fair as we introduce this fair funding formula for schools across the country.

Q7. [911715] **Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): Each week, 12 young people in the UK die from sudden cardiac death. That means 12 devastated families and 12 young people who never live to fulfil their potential. All the evidence suggests that the screening of young people could prevent those deaths, so will the Prime Minister ensure that the National Screening Committee looks at the evidence from Cardiac Risk in the Young and other charities?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue, and I am sure the whole House will want to extend our sympathies to the families and friends of young people who suffer sudden cardiac death. He and the all-party parliamentary group on cardiac risk in the young have done very important work on this issue. I am assured by the Department of Health and Social Care that the independent UK National Screening Committee will carefully consider all the relevant evidence, and I know DHSC will study the committee's findings when they are published in due course—it will look at the findings very carefully. This is an important issue, and we want to make sure we get it right.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): My 27-year-old constituent Kirsty Garrity tragically took her own life in September last year. After her death, her father found among her possessions a book called "The Peaceful Pill Handbook," which she had bought from Amazon. In a letter to me, Amazon said:

"We believe that legislators, rather than retailers, are best placed to make decisions on what should and should not be legally available for public purchase."

Does that not sound rather like Facebook, which recently said that it needs to be regulated because it cannot decide for itself what to put, and what not to put, on its platforms? Does the Prime Minister agree that businesses have a duty to think very hard about what they offer for sale and what they put on their platforms, and that they have a duty to behave with a moral imperative?

The Prime Minister: I am sure we all want to send our deepest sympathies to Kirsty's family and friends. We are determined to make sure that the UK is the safest place to be online, which involves tackling content that encourages suicide and self-harm. Working with the tech companies to get them to accept greater responsibility for the sort of material that is put out across their platforms has been a long-standing issue.

We have seen some tech companies take action to tackle the issue, and we want to ensure a more consistent response from companies to protect the safety and wellbeing of their users, especially those who are vulnerable. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who has responsibility for suicide prevention, is aware of this aspect of online content. She is deeply concerned, and she will be writing to Amazon about it.

Q8. [911716] **Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): A promise was made to pensioners at the last general election that the Conservative party would protect free TV licences until the end of this Parliament. That promise has now been broken, and pensioners like my dad will pay the price. My dad will turn 90 in a few weeks' time, and the TV is his main source of company. Like many other pensioners up and down the country, the TV is his companion.

Prime Minister, in your last act before you stand down, will you return the free licence to the pensioners of this country?

The Prime Minister: First, may I send my very best wishes to the hon. Gentleman's father for a happy birthday in a few weeks' time?

The BBC received a good funding deal from the Government, and many people would ask why the BBC can raise the salary bill for its top performers and personalities while taking the action it has taken on TV licences. The BBC needs to think again.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The Government have ambitious targets for a low-carbon economy and country, and achieving that will undoubtedly require nuclear energy. Will the Prime Minister encourage the next Prime Minister properly to support and invest in the nuclear industry?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, as a Government, we believe that nuclear should play a role in our energy mix, and I would wish to see that continue. That is why I am pleased we were able to take the decision we took on Hinkley Point C. I recognise that other nuclear projects have not been able to progress in the way hon. Members had hoped, but I want to see the Government continue to work with the nuclear industry to find a way to ensure that nuclear can, indeed, play a role in our future energy mix.

Q9. [911717] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent William Cree has epilepsy, and he suffers fits, struggles to eat and sometimes cannot walk or get out of bed, and he has memory issues, yet he was allocated personal independence payment only on appeal. He is now at the appeal stage for the limited capability for work and work-related activity element of universal credit, but the Department for Work and Pensions has not submitted the papers to court in time.

Will the Prime Minister look into Mr Cree's case, apologise for this additional stress and delay, and advise on what she will do to stop this unacceptable practice of the DWP not meeting court deadlines?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman has raised the particular case of William Cree, his constituent. I will ensure that the DWP looks properly into that case, and I will ask why the papers were not available in time for the court.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As I am sure my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister knows, Stoke-on-Trent is a unique city, being made up of six towns, and it is essential that all those towns prosper. Does she agree that we need to see investment in our towns, particularly through our future high streets fund bid for Longton?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to see the renaissance in Stoke-on-Trent, particularly in its ceramics industry. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of high streets, and that is why we have put money into the high streets fund. Bids for that money are currently being considered.

Q10. [911718] **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): As the Prime Minister enters the endgame of her premiership, will she join me in congratulating the Royal Portrush golf club on celebrating the return, after almost 70 years, of the Open golf championship, where some of the greatest golfers in the world will be coming—and there will even be some golfers from outside Northern Ireland! May I ask whether she and her two potential successors would like to join me in two weeks' time at Royal Portrush?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate Royal Portrush golf club on hosting the Open and to welcome the fact that the Open has returned to Northern Ireland. We look forward to seeing golfers, particularly from across the United Kingdom, performing well in that particular Open golf. As for being able to join the hon. Gentleman in two weeks' time, I suspect that I, and the two contenders for the Conservative party leadership, may be rather busy in two weeks' time, but I will certainly be watching what is happening in the Open with great interest.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the news of the fire and tragic loss of life aboard the Russian nuclear submarine Losharik while it was working on the sea bed in the high north should encourage her Government to accept that, to maintain operational military advantage and defend the west and critical subsea cable infrastructure from interference, we must, in this the 50th year of our extraordinary continuous at-sea deterrent—Operation Relentless—invest properly in our Royal Navy and her submarine capabilities?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the whole House will want to extend condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their lives. This was aboard a Russian nuclear submersible, but losing one's life under the sea is something I am sure we can all express our condolences for.

This is an important point about our submarine capability and the Royal Navy. I would like to pay tribute to all our submariners, who work so hard to keep us safe. We are committed to our submarine build programmes. The Ministry of Defence has been given access to the £10 billion Dreadnought programme contingency, so that our submarines will continue to silently patrol the seas, giving us a nuclear deterrent every minute of every hour, as they have done for 50 years, and we thank them for it.

Q14. [911722] **Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Prime Minister, Britain needs better buses. In Greater Manchester, our Mayor, Andy Burnham, has begun the process of re-regulating the bus network, so that we can have a transport system similar to London's. But a bus journey in London is capped at £1.50, yet in my constituency a journey of just a few miles costs more than double that. Prime Minister, should not everyone, in all parts of the country, get the same subsidy, so that they can have a bus service and pay a fair price, one as good as London has?

The Prime Minister: We are spending £250 million every year to keep fares down and maintain an extensive network, which benefits people up and down the country. I am pleased to say that since I became PM the overall number of bus routes is up by more than 2,000. Of course the hon. Gentleman asks me about subsidies for buses, but he might very well ask the Mayor about his responsibility in relation to this matter.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Many colleagues will visit the lobbying event on trophy hunting today, and this is in the same week as Japan has resumed commercial whaling. What more can we do to send the strongest message that this abhorrent practice should be stopped immediately?

The Prime Minister: First, we are very disappointed with Japan's decision to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission and restart commercial whaling. I have raised my concerns personally with Prime Minister Abe—I did that earlier this year. My right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary has written to his Japanese counterpart on this matter. We will continue to work with the Japanese Government to engage with them and raise our concerns at every level, and we urge them to rethink their decision.

Q15. [911723] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware that the Treasury has taken £4.4 billion from the mineworkers' pension funds, and she may also be aware of the debate in the House in which support was expressed for a review of the existing pension surplus sharing arrangements. Will she please commission a review of those arrangements? Let us have some justice for the retired miners and their widows.

The Prime Minister: Agreements have been reached on the sharing arrangements. Of course, we all have concerns about pensions and the continuing ability of pension funds to provide for pensioners, but one of the biggest challenges to pension funds—one of the biggest hits on pension funds—came when the previous Labour Government took £100 billion out of them.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): We can be proud of the Prime Minister's driving the global agenda on climate change, but what discussions has she had with her counterparts about how they can follow Britain's lead as the first major economy to commit to net zero carbon and help to reverse global warming?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I encouraged not only leaders around the European Council table but other leaders when I spoke at the G20 summit at the end of last week to follow the UK's lead. I am pleased to say that a number have already shown their willingness to do so. We will continue with the message that we can play our part, but it will be truly effective only if everybody around the world recognises the need to take action.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Reference has already been made to the Prime Minister's moving speech on burning injustices in education. On a day when her former school, Wheatley Park School, near Oxford, is planning to move to part-time education because of what the headteacher calls "enormous" financial pressures, does she agree that before she leaves office she must secure additional funding outside the spending review?

The Prime Minister: We have already put extra money into schools. We recognise the pressures there have been on schools and are ensuring that they are funded. I read in the *Maidenhead Advertiser* that the right hon. Gentleman thinks I am about to step down from Parliament. I am not. He said that the Liberal Democrat party was looking forward to a by-election in the "Windsor and Maidenhead" constituency; that is not my seat. I believe he claimed that the Liberal Democrats were looking forward to taking the seat, but they could not even win it when they put 1,000 people on the streets of Maidenhead when it was a decapitation target. Wrong on prediction, wrong on facts—typical Liberal Democrats: wrong on everything.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Two of my constituents are relatives of Kirsty Boden, one of the victims of the London Bridge terrorist atrocity. Despite the fact that at least one of the terrorists' families received legal aid for representation at the inquest, none of the victims' families did. Does my right hon. Friend think that we need to look again at the entitlement to legal aid for inquests, so that those people who wish to ask questions about what happened to their loved ones are not left to fend for themselves?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue, and he will have seen from the reaction across the House the concern that people have about it. As I have said previously, we send our deepest sympathies to the families of the victims. I can see why my hon. Friend has raised this as a matter of concern. I understand that the Ministry of Justice is making a number of changes to ensure that there is more support for bereaved families, and we are committed to simplifying the process for applying for exceptional case funding, but I will make sure that the Ministry of Justice meets my hon. Friend to discuss the issue further.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The whole country has been shocked by the brutal murder of the pregnant mum Kelly Mary Fauvrelle in my constituency at the weekend and the subsequent death

of her baby Riley, which was announced this morning. The police now believe that it may have been a random attack by someone unknown to the family. If the Government have been acting on knife crime, it is not working, so what further action will the Prime Minister now take to stop the terrifying increase in the use of knives on our streets?

The Prime Minister: We were all shocked when we saw the terrible act that, sadly, led to the death of Kelly Mary Fauvrelle. Of course, as the hon. Gentleman said, the baby inside her sadly died this morning. The question of knife crime is one I did refer to earlier. We are taking action in a number of ways. We will continue to work, and work with the Mayor of London, on the action that can be taken across London on this issue, but this is something that requires a multifaceted approach; it is about the whole of society. Yes, we look at giving police the right powers—we have done that—but we also need to look at how we can ensure that young people particularly do not feel the need to carry knives and that we deal with the criminal gangs and the drugs that are often behind these terrible acts of violence that take place.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Yet again this year, we can expect to welcome between 35 million and 40 million overseas visitors to our shores. Overall, tourism employs about 3 million people in the UK, including thousands in my constituency. Does that not underline the importance of a tourism sector deal?

The Prime Minister: We have, of course, been working with the tourism sector to look at what support can be given and how we can work with it to enhance not just the offer that it is able to make but the way in which it is able to ensure that people can come here and enjoy the benefits of not just my hon. Friend's constituency but all our constituencies across the country. Tourism is an important sector for us, and we will continue to work with the tourism industry to ensure that we can enhance that sector, and enhance the benefits to this country and our economy of that sector, but also enhance the benefits to the many tourists who come here and see what a wonderful place the United Kingdom is.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Following the Windrush scandal, in which black British citizens were deported, detained and stripped of their rights to access public services, the Prime Minister rightly announced an independent review led by Wendy Williams. She said that review would be published on 31 March 2019. It is now 3 July. Can the Prime Minister confirm that Wendy Williams will publish her review before she leaves office?

The Prime Minister: It was absolutely right that the Home Secretary commissioned that review from Wendy Williams. She will be putting that report together. I believe that the report has not yet been received by the Home Office, but, obviously, we will ensure that, when that report is received, that report is published.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming last week's announcement from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy of this Government's investment of £4.8 million in the Acorn carbon capture and storage project at the St Fergus gas plant in my constituency?

Does she agree that, along with the development of renewable sources of energy, natural gas will remain an important transition fuel on the way towards a net zero emissions target?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to welcome the investment that my hon. Friend has referred to. It is important, as we look to that net zero target, that we look across the board at the various ways in which we can ensure that we are providing for that net zero target. As he has said, the importance of natural gas within that energy mix in the future will remain. We also look at ensuring that we are providing support for technologies such as carbon capture, because that will play an important part in the future, too.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Prime Minister, a constituent of mine—a single mum who has worked for the Department for Work and Pensions full time over 30 years—has been forced to take part-time work to support her child, a severe sufferer of Down's syndrome, from childhood to adulthood. Because of the confusing rules in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs on working tax credits for such workers, she has been forced to extend her mortgage and go part time. Will the Prime Minister please help to resolve this issue? My constituent will not be the only person in the country in that situation.

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has heard the particular case that the hon. Lady has raised in this House. We do want to ensure—we are working, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is working, on ensuring this—that women are able to take their place in the workforce. We do see women in the workforce at record levels. We want to ensure, and we are working on providing, greater economic empowerment for women so that they can take their place. I am sure that the Secretary of State or the relevant Minister will respond on the specific case.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: No, no. It is becoming quite commonplace for there to be a flurry of attempted points of order immediately after Prime Minister's questions. Colleagues will have to be patient. I will exercise discretion and allow one point of order from the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who I believe wishes to raise a matter with which the Prime Minister is well familiar, so this might be a convenient moment. Thereafter, we should proceed with the Prime Minister's statement. Colleagues can of course raise points of order, more suitably and appositely, after statements.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If you will indulge me, may I please take a brief moment to thank everyone involved with the introduction of the children's funeral fund?

Since 2016, I have been asking the Government to introduce a fund to assist bereaved parents during their darkest hour and financially support them in funding a funeral. I have at times been impatient. I have at times been frustrated. But I have always known it was the right thing to do. The Prime Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and civil servants have delivered on my request, and I understand that the children's funeral fund will be operational from 23 July.

I thank everyone involved in making this happen: the organisations that have supported me; colleagues who have encouraged me; my family who, like me, have had to revisit our loss; my team, who have held my hand; and you, Mr Speaker, for your understanding. Martin's fund is a legacy for my son and will be a comfort to every parent who will need to use it in the future; so, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: I think it only right that if the Prime Minister wants to respond in a moment, she must certainly should do so. Let me just say to the hon. Member for Swansea East that the sheer passion, sincerity and integrity with which she has spoken and conducted herself are an example to us all, and that the determination that she has shown is an enormous credit to her. Her constituency, her party, the House, and people across politics and beyond are inspired by the way in which she has behaved, and we are unstinting in our admiration for her. Before the statement, let us hear from the Prime Minister on this subject because she has brought matters to fruition.

The Prime Minister: May I also commend the hon. Lady for the work that she has done? This was born out of personal sadness, but many families will benefit from the passion, commitment and determination that she has shown in championing this issue. She said that she has sometimes been impatient. Sometimes you have to be impatient, because it is that impatience that spurs others on. I am pleased that we have been able to introduce the fund, and I echo Mr Speaker's comments in commending the hon. Lady for the way in which he has championed this cause. As I say, we share and are concerned about the personal sadness that she went through, but she has taken that and put it to good use for the benefit of families up and down the country.

G20 and Leadership of EU Institutions

12.52 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on my final G20 and final European Council as Prime Minister.

At this G20 summit in Japan we discussed some of the biggest global challenges facing our nations, including climate change, terrorist propaganda online, risks to the global economy and rising tensions in the Gulf. These discussions were at times difficult, but in the end productive. I profoundly believe that we are stronger when we work together. With threats to global stability and trade, that principle is now more important than ever, and throughout this summit my message was on the overriding need for international co-operation and compromise. Alongside discussions with international partners on economic and security matters, I made it clear that Britain would always stand by the global rules as the best means of securing peace and prosperity for all of us. I will take the main issues in turn.

On no other issue is the need for international collaboration greater than in the threat to our countries and our people from climate change. As I arrived in Osaka last week, I was immensely proud that Britain had become the world's first major economy to commit in law to ending our contribution to global warming by 2050. I urged other G20 countries to follow Britain's lead and set similarly ambitious net zero targets for their own countries. Those gathered at this year's summit are the last generation of leaders with the power to limit global warming, and I believe we have a duty to heed the call from those asking us to act now for the sake of future generations.

Taken together, the G20 countries account for 80% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Discussions were not always easy, but 19 of the G20 members agreed to the irreversibility of the Paris climate change agreement and the importance of implementing our commitments in full. It remains a disappointment that the United States continues to opt out on such a critical global issue.

I outlined Britain's continued determination to lead the way on climate change through our bid to host, along with Italy, COP 26 next year. And, recognising that more needs to be done to support developing countries in managing the impacts of climate change, I announced that the UK's aid budget will be aligned with our climate change goals and used to support the transition to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Both as Prime Minister and previously as Home Secretary, I have repeatedly called for greater action to protect people from online harms and remove terrorist propaganda from the internet. In 2017, the attacks in Manchester and London showed how technology could be exploited by terrorists. Following those events, the UK took the lead and put this issue squarely on the global agenda. Through our efforts, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism was established—a body that has leveraged technology to automate the removal of propaganda online. But the horrendous attack in Christchurch reminded us that we must maintain momentum, and ensure a better co-ordinated and swifter response to make sure that terrorists are never able to broadcast their atrocities in real time. I therefore welcome the pledge by G20 leaders at this year's summit to do

more to build on existing efforts and stop terrorists exploiting the internet. The UK will continue to lead the way in this, including through our support of the major technology companies in developing a new crisis response mechanism.

At this summit, discussions on the global economy were held against the backdrop of current trade tensions between the United States and China. In this context, I reaffirmed Britain's commitment to free and fair trade, open markets and the rules-based trading system as the best means to bolster prosperity and build economies that work for everyone. The UK has long argued that the rules governing global trade need urgent reform and updating to reflect the changing nature of that trade. We continue to press for action to build upon the agreement reached at last year's summit for World Trade Organisation reform, and I believe the best way to resolve disputes is through a reformed and strengthened WTO, rather than by increasing tariffs.

This G20 was also an opportunity to discuss wider global issues with others, including Prime Minister Abe, President Erdoğan, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and United Nations Secretary-General Guterres. In my conversation with Prime Minister Abe, I paid tribute to him for hosting this G20 and thanked him for his role in strengthening the relationship between the UK and Japan—a relationship that I have every confidence will continue to grow over the coming years.

In a number of my meetings, I discussed Iran and rising tensions in the Gulf. Escalation is in no-one's interest, and engagement is needed on all sides to find a diplomatic solution to the current situation and to counter Iran's destabilising activity. At the same time, I was clear that the UK will continue to work intensively with our Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action partners to keep the Iran nuclear deal in place. The breach of that deal by Iran is extremely concerning, and together with France, Germany and the other signatories to the deal, we are urging Iran not to take further steps away from the agreement, and to return to compliance. The deal makes the world safer and I want to see Iran uphold its obligations.

I believe wholeheartedly in never shying away from difficult conversations when it is right to hold them. In my meeting with President Putin, I told him that there can be no normalisation of our bilateral relationship until Russia stops the irresponsible activity that threatens the UK and its allies. The use of a deadly nerve agent on the streets of our country was a despicable act, which led to the death of Dawn Sturgess. I was clear that the UK has irrefutable evidence that Russia was behind the attack, and that we want to see the two individuals responsible brought to justice. While the UK remains open to a different relationship, for that to happen the Russian Government must choose a different path.

In my discussion with UN Secretary-General Guterres, we spoke about the importance of the multilateral system and the UK's strong support for it. I also raised concerns about the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the need to ensure a comprehensive response, as well as emphasising the critical nature of continued humanitarian assistance in Yemen.

I am proud that the UK continues to play its part in trying to provide relief in countries such as Yemen, and that we remain committed to spending 0.7% of our

gross national income on development assistance. That commitment puts us at the forefront of addressing global challenges, so I am pleased that at this summit we announced our pledge of £1.4 billion for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, to help save lives.

Turning to the European Council, the focus of these discussions was on what are known as the EU's top jobs—the appointments at the head of the EU's institutions and the EU's High Representative. As I have said before, this is primarily a matter for the remaining 27 EU member states, but while we remain a member of the EU, I also said that we would engage constructively, which we did throughout. After long and difficult discussions over the last few days, the Council voted for a package of candidates with an important balance of gender, reflecting the diversity of the European Union. The Council formally elected Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel as President of the European Council. The Council also nominated German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen as candidate for President of the European Commission; Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell Fontelles as candidate for High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy; and the French managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, as candidate for president of the European Central Bank.

The Commission President will now be voted on by the European Parliament in the coming weeks. After being approved by the Commission President, the High Representative will then be voted on as part of the College of Commissioners by the European Parliament before the college is appointed by the European Council. After consultations with the European Parliament and the ECB governing council, the European Council will appoint the president of the ECB. The European Parliament will also vote on its President today. Subject to the approval of the European Parliament, this will be the first time that a woman will be made President of the European Commission, and I would like to congratulate Ursula von der Leyen on her nomination.

This was a package supported by the UK, and it is in our national interest to have constructive relationships with those who are appointed. Once we leave the European Union, we will need to agree the details of our future relationship. We will continue to share many of the same challenges as our closest neighbours, and we will need to work with them on a variety of issues that are in our joint interests. But that will now be a matter for my successor to take forward. I commend this statement to the House.

1.1 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I want to say thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for the fantastic campaign she has mounted and the comfort that she has brought to those who have been through the unimaginable strain of losing a child. Those who, sadly, will lose a child in future will at least know that, because of her work, one part of the commemoration of that child's life will be made a little bit easier. On behalf of so many families, may we just say thank you very much for everything you have done?

I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement. While this year marks the 20th anniversary of the G20, there is little progress to commemorate in tackling the urgent challenges that we face. Where the

leaders of the world's most powerful countries fail, we look instead to civil society, trade unions and community groups, and to an inspirational generation of young people, for the transformative change that is required.

This summit's communiqué did not make the necessary commitments on climate change. Does the Prime Minister agree that President Trump's failure to accept the reality of man-made climate change, his refusal to back the Paris accords and his attempts to water down the communiqué's commitments are a threat to the security of us all, all over this planet? Is the Prime Minister concerned that he could soon be joined by one of her possible successors, who has described global warming as a "primitive fear ... without foundation"? It is the responsibility of the G20 to lead efforts to combat climate change, as the Prime Minister herself acknowledged. These nations account for four fifths of global greenhouse gas emissions. As I confirmed last week, we back the UK's bid to host COP 26 next year. In 2017, the Government agreed to:

"Making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions"

in developing countries. So can the Prime Minister explain why 97% of the UK's export finance support for energy in developing countries goes to fossil fuels, and less than 1% is for renewable energy? The Government's pledge to cut carbon emissions by 2050 is an empty one. They have no serious plan to invest and continue to dismantle our renewable energy sector while supporting fracking.

The Prime Minister says that the international community must stand against Iran's destabilising activity in the region. The Iran nuclear deal agreement was a multilateral agreement signed up to by President Obama, and a number of other Governments, but reneged on by President Obama's successor. Beyond just saying that we need to protect the deal, what action has the Prime Minister taken to ensure this? What conversation did she have with President Trump on this issue?

Is it not about time that the Prime Minister's Government stood up to our supposed ally, Saudi Arabia? She says that she met Crown Prince bin Salman but gives no details. So can I ask her: did she raise the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, did she raise the killing of thousands of Yemenis, and did she pledge to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia? Did she raise with him the Saudis' financing and arming of Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, who is fighting the UN-recognised Government of Libya, and who, only last night, has been held responsible for an airstrike on a migrant centre in Tripoli that killed 40 people and injured dozens more? The Prime Minister rightly points to the need to protect people from terrorist propaganda, so before she leaves office, will she finally release, in full, the report she suppressed on the Saudi Government's funding of extremist groups?

The Prime Minister talks of confronting countries that interfere in the democracy of other nations, including Russia. I remind her that it was Labour that delivered amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, which introduced the Magnitsky powers. The truth is that the Conservatives have questions to answer about the almost £1 million-worth of donations from wealthy Russians to their party under her watch. If we stand up to corruption and condemn human rights-abusing regimes, then politicians should not be trading cash for access.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

The Prime Minister mentioned the worrying outbreak of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Could she outline what assistance the Department for International Development is providing in that terrible situation? I welcome the Government's £1.4 billion for the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria. However, the main conclusion from the G20 is that the world deserves better leadership for the urgent challenges facing humanity.

Moving on to the EU summit in Brussels, it has taken leaders three days to come up with a decision on who should take the EU's top jobs. But a three-day summit pales into insignificance next to the three years of failure that this Government have inflicted on us all over Brexit. I would like to congratulate those who have been appointed or nominated to new roles within the EU, especially Josep Borrell as High Representative for foreign affairs and security. For as long as we remain in the EU, we should seek reform. That includes increasing our efforts to tackle tax evasion and avoidance; stepping up our co-operation over the climate emergency that faces us all, all over this continent and this planet; and challenging migration policies that have left thousands to drown in the Mediterranean while sometimes subcontracting migration policies to Libyan militias.

Can the Prime Minister explain her decision for the Conservative party to join a political group that includes far-right, Islamophobic parties such as Vox of Spain? It claims that Muslims will impose Sharia law on Spain, turn cathedrals into mosques, and force all women to cover up. It is a party that campaigned to repeal gender violence laws and threatened to shut down feminist organisations. Does the Prime Minister understand the worry that this will cause many people in this country who will rightly be asking why her party has aligned itself with this far-right organisation whose policies are built on division, discrimination and hate?

Finally, does the Prime Minister agree that whoever succeeds her should have the courage to go back to the people with their preferred Brexit option to end the uncertainty and get Brexit resolved?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues, moving between them with sometimes no apparent link, but I will try to address them. On climate change, I have already expressed my disappointment that the United States has pulled out of the Paris agreement. I repeated to President Trump at the G20 my hope that the United States will come back into the Paris agreement in due course. I am pleased that the other members of the G20 held fast to the irreversibility of the Paris agreement and the commitments we had previously made. As I said in answer to Prime Minister's questions, we are showing the lead on this. I am encouraging others to follow, and they are showing their willingness to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about international development money in relation to climate change. I am pleased to say that we have committed to provide at least £5.8 billion of international climate finance between 2016 and 2020. This is not only a question of energy mix. It is also about climate resilience, and we are leading on that for the UN climate action summit in September this year. We have already helped 47 million

people to cope with the effects of climate change, supported 17 million people to access clean energy and reduced or avoided 10.4 million tonnes of CO₂, so we are putting our words into action.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about my meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. I did indeed raise the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. I was very clear that we expect a transparent and open judicial process and for those who are responsible to be brought to account. I also raised the importance of a political solution in Yemen and the fact that we are supporting the work of UN special envoy Martin Griffiths and want to ensure that all parties are committed to coming around the table and finding a political solution in Yemen.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I had a meeting with the director general of the World Health Organisation at the G20 summit, during which we discussed that. I also discussed it with the Secretary-General of the United Nations. This is a serious humanitarian challenge. The security situation in eastern DRC makes dealing with this outbreak more difficult in terms of operating through Government and other organisations. The United Nations and the WHO are committed to working through community groups on the ground. He asked about our response. We are the second largest bilateral donor to the response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the largest to preparedness efforts in neighbouring countries. We have been working not only where there has been an outbreak in the DRC but to ensure that neighbouring countries can respond effectively. I am pleased to say that, when there was a small number of cases in Uganda, Uganda responded extremely well and very professionally, and we have not seen further cases there.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Russia. I thought his comments were a bit rich—who was it, after the nerve agent attack on our streets in Salisbury, who believed the Russian Government rather than our own intelligence agencies? It was the right hon. Gentleman, so I will take no lessons from him on our relationship with Russia.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the European Council. I do not think I heard him welcome the gender balance in the appointment of the top jobs. It is important that we see the first woman nominated to be President of the European Commission and a woman nominated for the role at the European Central Bank.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about Brexit. It was always going to take two years to negotiate; that is the time set out in the treaty under the article 50 process. We brought the proposals to the House. He rejected those proposals. He has not brought forward proposals that command a majority—[*Interruption.*] I think the Shadow Foreign Secretary said that he has.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): No, I said that the House rejected it.

The Prime Minister: I had noticed that the House had not supported the plans that I brought forward but, once again, it is a bit of a nerve for a party that consistently says it wants to leave with a deal to consistently vote against leaving with a deal.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about going back to the people on Brexit. He talked about the delay and uncertainty. We have been waiting for weeks for the Labour party's policy on Brexit. We keep being told that the shadow Cabinet is taking a decision on a second referendum and, week after week, we still wait to hear it. It is little wonder that the shadow Home Secretary says she is beginning to worry about Labour's Brexit policy.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, since the 1980s I have consistently raised the question of Germany's increasing dominance in the European Union and the European Commission. In his recent book "Berlin Rules", our former ambassador to Germany states that the EU is and will remain "a German Europe". Nine of the 28 European Commissioners have German leaders of their cabinets. There are six German directors general. He says that:

"it is Germany's view which is sought by the Commission before it acts, and by other governments before they decide",

in the Council of Ministers by majority vote behind closed doors. Is that not a grave concern and a reason why we should leave the European Union by 31 October?

The Prime Minister: I am a little disappointed. Germany has not had presidency of the European Commission since something like the 1960s, so it is a bit churlish of my hon. Friend to suggest that we should not have voted for a German President. May I also point out that Ursula von der Leyen was born in Brussels? That might make it worse for my hon. Friend than the fact that she is from Germany. It is important that we see not only a gender balance but a geographical spread across the Commission in the appointments. He talks about us leaving the European Union. I want us to leave the European Union. I voted three times for us to leave the European Union. Had he voted with me, we would already be outside the European Union.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and advance sight of it. On a point of clarification, the Prime Minister suggested in Prime Minister's questions that there was no review of devolution. That is of some surprise to those of us who were listening to Radio Scotland this morning and heard Lord Duncan talk about exactly that; indeed, he said that Lord Dunlop has been appointed to that role. Many Scottish journalists have tweeted that they have had briefings from No. 10, so perhaps the Prime Minister will take this opportunity to clarify whether she is going to Scotland tomorrow or whether she does not know what her diary involves.

I endorse the Prime Minister's robust response to Russia, which must end its destabilising activity. Those responsible for the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal should be brought to justice, and the Russian state must take responsibility and allow justice to prevail. I also thank the Prime Minister for confirmation of the nominees for the Commission. We, of course, welcome the attempt to achieve a gender balance. It is important that the European Parliament is now able to take a role in this process.

The SNP welcomes that many of the world leaders reaffirmed their support for the full implementation of the Paris agreement but condemns President Trump's ducking of the issue. The fact that President Trump refuses to wake up to the reality is irresponsible

and delusional. This ticking time bomb needs a rapid and robust response. While the UK Government's commitment is to reach targets by 2050, in Scotland we are trying to achieve net zero faster, by recently committing to a target of net zero emissions by 2045. Scotland has already reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 47% since 1990. But we all need to go further and faster. We have an obligation to the planet and to future generations to recognise that this is a climate emergency.

I welcome the fact that world leaders affirmed their commitment to the implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable growth and that the summit agreed to work towards a free, fair, stable and open-market environment in trade and investment. However, the Osaka declaration following the G20 summit says that there is still concern about the state of the global economy, noting

"growth remains low and risks remain tilted to the downside."

The Prime Minister must take responsibility for the Government's failure to grow the UK economy and fight inequality. Without an appropriate economic response from the UK Government, inequality is set to get worse rather than better. The Institute for Fiscal Studies agreed when it stated:

"If the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecasts are correct, inequality is likely to increase in the next few years."

Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur, found that one fifth of the UK population—14 million people—live in poverty and that, by 2021, 40% of children will be living below the poverty line. Those are staggering figures. No Prime Minister can be proud of leaving this as her legacy.

There was a glaring omission in the Prime Minister's statement. The Japanese Foreign Minister warned against a no-deal Brexit, and said that it could risk Japanese auto manufacturers going through customs and that operations may not be able to continue. Therefore, I want to ask the Prime Minister: does she agree with the Japanese Foreign Minister?

Will the Prime Minister vote against a no-deal Brexit and against anyone intent on delivering a no-deal Brexit as being her successor? Furthermore, will she now act to undo the punitive austerity measures put in place by her Government to unlock economic growth and to begin to turn the tide on income inequality across the United Kingdom? Will she admit that she has made a multitude of mistakes, and failed to use power to help the powerless and rebalance our economy in a way that lifts the poor out of poverty and the disadvantaged into advantage? Prime Minister, this is your legacy of failure. It is your choice in your final days to do the right thing.

The Prime Minister: First, I will be going to Scotland tomorrow and I will be making a speech about the benefits of the Union of the United Kingdom. May I suggest that, rather than, as SNP Members always do, jumping on the bandwagon of something they read in the newspapers, they should actually wait to hear what I have to say in my speech tomorrow before they opine upon it?

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments about Russia and the importance of our working to reduce and stop Russia's destabilising activity, which takes many forms. We have seen it, most particularly, in the use of that chemical weapon on our streets, but of course we see it in cyber-attacks, in disinformation and

[The Prime Minister]

in attempts to interfere in what is happening in other countries—often in democratic processes—and we will continue to work with others to bring about the aim that we all want.

The right hon. Gentleman references again the issue about no deal and a deal. I am afraid that the answer to his points has not changed. It has not changed from Prime Minister's questions a little earlier this afternoon. I have consistently said that I think it is in the best interests of the UK to leave with a good deal. I believe we negotiated a good deal. Parliament was not willing to support that good deal, but I voted three times to ensure that we left the European Union with a deal. He chose to vote three times to leave with no deal, so I am not taking any lessons from him on that particular issue.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about failure to use powers. Actually, the best example of a failure to use the powers they have is the SNP Government in Scotland, who have been given extra powers, yet have consistently failed to use them. Whenever they are given extra powers, they do not use them. All they do is come back and say, "Please, sir, can we have some more?" Start doing the day job and stop focusing only on independence—that is what the SNP needs to do.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about economic growth. I am pleased to say that this country, under Conservative Governments, has seen I think 27 quarters of economic growth. That is the longest period of consistent growth of any of the G7 countries and that is a record the Conservatives are proud of.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I share the Prime Minister's enthusiasm for the appointment of so many women to the top jobs in Europe's institutions, and I thank her for the role she played in that. I really commend her for the good will and determination she has brought consistently to the table at both the G20 and the EU summit. Does she agree that if, when we leave the European Union, we are going to continue to enjoy a constructive relationship with our neighbours, it is very important that we leave in an orderly fashion, with an agreement?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her kind words. I agree that it is important that, once we have left the European Union, we continue to have a strong and deep partnership and relationship with the European Union and obviously with the individual member states within the European Union. I believe the best way of achieving that is to leave with a good deal and I am only sorry that Parliament was not able to find a majority for that good deal. It is obviously up to my successor to find a majority in Parliament that can enable us to leave in a way that is in this country's national interest.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister's statement says that

"the best way to resolve trade disputes is through a reformed and strengthened WTO".

Is it not the case that the dispute settlement mechanism no longer works because the United States does not recognise it and there are insufficient judges, and that

those who would have Britain dependent on so-called WTO rules are making Britain dependent on a very weak and damaged organisation?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to focus attention on the important dispute resolution mechanism at the WTO. That plays an important part in enforcing the rules the WTO has. Obviously, if appellate body member appointments continue to be blocked, that risks the effective operation of the dispute settlement system. That would not be in our interests and it would not be in the interests of any of the members of the WTO, so we are strongly supporting an informal process that has been launched by the general council at the WTO to seek a resolution to this issue of the appellate body. Proposals put forward so far by WTO members bring the right ingredients to many of the concerns raised and we are urging all members to engage constructively in those ongoing discussions.

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

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, a Lincolnshire knight in a cheerful suit—Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh: It sets off your black gown, Mr Speaker.

After having to negotiate with these people for so many dreary months, the Prime Minister must be mightily relieved that she will no longer have to go to Brussels, but what advice would she give her successor about dealing with these people? Would she recommend, for instance, the injunction that no deal is better than a bad deal?

The Prime Minister: I have always believed that no deal was better than a bad deal, but I believe we negotiated a good deal. The advice I would give my successor is to act at all times in the best interests of this country. I believe it is in our best interests to be able to leave the European Union with a good deal, but it is up to my successor to find a majority in this House to enable us to leave the European Union.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is reported this morning that Canada is apparently unwilling to roll over the provisions of the CETA deal—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—for the United Kingdom in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Could the Prime Minister tell the House whether she discussed this matter at the G20 summit? May I take this opportunity to congratulate the Chancellor, sitting next to her, on the clear statements he has been making in recent days about the obvious danger to our economy from a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: First, we will continue to work with the Canadians on the roll-over of the Canadian trade deal. I am pleased to say that the Department for International Trade has been able to see agreements on the roll-over of a number of trade deals, including significant deals such as the one with South Korea. But we will continue to work with the Canadians on this issue and it is right that we do that in detail to make sure that what comes out as a result of those roll-overs are arrangements that are in the interests of this country. I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman has tempted me to say this: he has consistently stood up and argued for the

case of not leaving the European Union without a deal, yet he has also consistently voted to leave the European Union without a deal.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I understand that, far from remaining silent at the EU summit, our Prime Minister made recommendations for not just one but for all four of the top jobs, and every single name she nominated or suggested was a highly qualified, highly competent woman. Can I thank the Prime Minister, as this might be her last statement as Prime Minister, for all she has done to champion women in politics in this country and across the world? Can we also send a message back to No. 10 to thank her husband for the highly dignified way in which he represented our country in the partners photo at the G20?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am not sure if it is the rickshaw photograph of my husband that my hon. Friend is referring to, but I will happily take those compliments back to him.

I was happy to put forward the names of a number of women and to champion the need for gender balance in the appointments to the EU's so-called top jobs. I believe it is important that we see that gender balance. I am pleased to have continued to be able to champion women, and I will continue to do that when I move to the Back Benches. May I also say to my hon. Friend that, apart from the appointments that have already been announced, it is expected that other women will take up senior posts within the Commission? Those are of course matters for the incoming President of the Commission, but I would expect to see more women taking senior roles in those roles in future.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): In the role that the Prime Minister played in the appointments to the EU's top jobs, what were the top three things that she supported in the policy programme of the Commission's new President?

The Prime Minister: Those people, including the President of the Commission, will not take up their positions until 1 November. It is, of course, possible that we will have left the European Union at that point, but I want to see a President of the European Commission—as I said to members of the European Council—who wants to continue working to find an arrangement for the relationship between the UK and the European Union in the future that is a positive and constructive one and that enables us to live with our near neighbours in a way that is to the advantage and benefit of both the United Kingdom and the European Union.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): As the Prime Minister knows, the UK decided not to give notice to quit the European economic area, as required under article 127. Although I absolutely understand that she would not want to bind the hands of her successor, will she instruct officials to consider rejoining the European Free Trade Association pillar of the EEA agreement, since—as she will understand—the EU is under an international obligation to make existing treaties operable?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that my hon. Friend has championed that aspect of our future relationship. I think that the future relationship that we had negotiated with the European Union was actually better than the

proposals that he has put forward, because it gave us greater independence while maintaining economic advantages in our trade relationship with the European Union. That, of course, has been rejected by the House, and it will be up to my successor to find the right way through.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Did the Prime Minister see the embarrassing sight yesterday of the Brexit party MEPs turning their backs on the European Parliament? Does she agree that such acts are born of the absurd notion, which has done so much damage to the country, that we are some kind of subjugated colony of the EU, rather than the full, equal and highly successful member that we have been? Will she join me in rejecting this notion of Britain as a colony, lest it lead to more humiliating spectacles such as we saw yesterday?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom has played a full role as a member of the European Union. We have been highly regarded around that EU table, and I want us to continue to be able to have a relationship with the EU in the future that will see us not only having greater independence outside the European Union, but able to contribute and work with our partners in the European Union on the challenges that we all face. Issues such as climate change are not restricted to one country or to one grouping of countries; these are issues for us all. We want to continue to work constructively and to maintain that high regard in which the UK has always been held.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend get the opportunity to thank our colleagues in the European Union for their immense contribution, together with us, towards the collective peace and security of Europe over all the years of our membership—not least the free peoples of eastern Europe and those in the Balkans who, at times of conflict, look towards the EU as a beacon of peace and democracy? Did she reassure them that with our membership of the Security Council and NATO we will continue to find ways to collaborate successfully on that continuing peace and security, and that they should ignore the sometimes childish and unfortunate anti-German rhetoric that occasionally comes from our Benches?

The Prime Minister: I have repeatedly given our commitment to maintaining the security of Europe. We do that, of course, through NATO, as the second-biggest contributor and biggest European contributor to it, and we will continue to do so. I was able to thank members around the European Union Council for the co-operation that we have seen between the United Kingdom and member states of the European Union, and to express my desire that that co-operation and working together will continue in the future for our mutual benefit.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): I do not know whether it is because of the prospect of the new European institution heads, but the Prime Minister will know that the former Foreign Secretary and the current Foreign Secretary are absolutely adamant that during August and September they will be able to negotiate a superior withdrawal agreement—perhaps with extra “positive energy”, as the former Foreign Secretary says. Does the Prime Minister think that it will be that simple?

The Prime Minister: Obviously it is up to whoever succeeds me to take forward negotiations and look at the relationship for withdrawing from the European Union and our future relationship with the European Union in the way that they think fit. The EU Council has made statements about the negotiations so far and about its position on those negotiations, but obviously it will be up to my successor to take those forward.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend have the opportunity to discuss with Secretary-General Guterres or other G20 leaders the troubling reports surrounding the alleged torture and death of the navy captain Rafael Acosta Arévalo in Venezuela? If there is evidence of torture and human rights abuses by Maduro and his henchmen, will she press for them to be held to account by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights or, if appropriate, referred to the International Criminal Court in The Hague?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that my right hon. Friend has expressed in relation to this case. I was able on a number of occasions to raise the overall issue of Venezuela; I was recently also able to discuss it with the President of Colombia when he visited the United Kingdom. We are all concerned about the state that we see in Venezuela, about actions that have been taken in that country, and about the appalling circumstances and conditions in which so many Venezuelans find themselves living, which is why so many Venezuelans have been fleeing their country to neighbouring countries, putting a significant burden on those neighbouring countries.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is good to hear the Prime Minister making it clear that there is no question of normalising relations with Russia while it remains in flagrant violation of the international norms that, as a permanent member of the Security Council, it is supposed to be at the forefront of upholding. Does it not gall her to see the man who is supposed to be the leader of the free world—the President of the United States—laughing and joking with this rogue President, Putin? Should not the UK be leading the charge to increase the pressure on Russia, potentially even through expelling its ambassador, while it enables atrocity after atrocity in Syria, gravely damaging the multilateral rule of law and order that is vital to ongoing peace and security in the world?

The Prime Minister: I think what is important for the United Kingdom is that we continue to take this strong position in relation to the activities of Russia. I have referenced a number of those already; I have not yet referenced in response to questions the actions that Russia took in Ukraine, which are matters that I also raised with President Putin.

It is important to look at the actions that the United States has taken. After the attack that took place in Salisbury, it expelled about 60 Russian officials. We saw a significant and unprecedented international response, but in fact the largest number of expulsions took place from the United States. Its actions, I think, have been important in this.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Prime Minister said that international development expenditure would be aligned with emissions reduction,

but last week the Secretary of State told us in terms that his main effort was resilience, not emissions reduction. The Prime Minister's priority is the right one, but does the Secretary of State know?

The Prime Minister: I assure my right hon. Friend that we are working on all these issues. As I indicated in response to an earlier question—I think it was in response to comments that the Leader of the Opposition made—it is important not only that we work on reduction, but that we ensure that while that reduction is taking place, we help those countries that need to build their resilience and their ability to deal with the climate change that we are already seeing. They are not mutually exclusive; I think we should be doing both.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Democracy, freedom and human rights, and the upholding of those principles through international law, must surely be the cornerstone of British foreign policy. Given that this year we have seen the largest number of mass executions on a single day in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, given the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi by that regime, and given its abominable and inexcusable actions in Yemen, does the Prime Minister really believe that it is appropriate to allow the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Salman to host the G20?

The Prime Minister: I think what is important about the G20 is that what it enables us to do is actually sit down, have those conversations and make those points directly. I was able to make a number of points, as I indicated earlier, about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and about what is happening in Yemen direct to the Crown Prince in the bilateral that I held with him, and it is possible for those points to be made around the G20 table. It is about engagement; if we do not engage, it is much harder to ensure that we are making those points and seeing those points being responded to. We do take action, we consistently raise the issue of human rights in Saudi Arabia, and we will continue to do so.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement. Many across the country recognise the outstanding professionalism, integrity and respect with which she has always represented the United Kingdom on the international stage. When does she think a decision and announcement will be made about our Anglo-Italian proposal to host next year's climate change conference here?

The Prime Minister: We had hoped that an announcement would be made towards the end of June; unfortunately, that was not possible. There is still a European bid from Turkey. I raised this with President Erdoğan when I met him. It may be some weeks before a final decision is taken, but we continue to make the necessary preparations for what I hope will be a successful bid.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she is immensely proud that Britain became the world's first major economy to commit in law to ending our contribution to global warming by 2050, and so am I. I am proud to have been part of that Parliament, and I am proud that my party supported that measure last week, in both the Commons and the Lords. Would the Prime Minister care to correct the record,

and to confirm that she understands that contrary to the impression she gave last week—accidentally, I am sure—Labour peers did not attempt to block the measure? In fact, they intended to strengthen it through an amendment to make it clearer.

The Prime Minister: Labour peers tabled a regret motion against the Government's proposal for a target of net zero emissions by 2050. I am pleased that, in the event, we were able to put that into law—that is important—and I had hoped that Labour peers would wholeheartedly embrace the measure, rather than tabling a regret motion.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As chair of the all-party group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, I thank the Prime Minister for the announcement on the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; I also thank her on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who chair the other groups involved. Was there discussion of the real problem of the lack of jobs across the world—not just in the European Union but in its near neighbourhood, in Africa? That is so important. So much time was spent discussing the top jobs; we need to spend an awful lot more time discussing jobs for the hundreds of millions of people who need them.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that ensuring that there are jobs available for people in Africa is a crucial challenge that we all face—one on which, again, the United Kingdom has taken a leading role. On my visit to Africa last year, I was able to talk about how we will use development aid, and other support that we can provide through such things as the great strength of the City of London, to ensure the investment that will lead to those jobs. I was impressed by the recognition of the issue among those I met, and by their enthusiasm to work with us to ensure that those jobs are available in future. I have discussed the subject with other EU leaders, and it is recognised around the G20 table.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): In the light of comments that the US ambassador to the UK made this morning about President Trump's desire for the NHS to be part of any post-Brexit trade deal, it appears that the special relationship is becoming more of a special interest for the President. What steps can the Prime Minister take in her final days in office, and what does she expect her successor to do, to resist those attempts to access our NHS as part of any future trade deal? What will she do, and what does she expect her successor to do, to ensure that the United States comes back to the table and is part of the Paris climate change agreement?

The Prime Minister: We continue to put pressure on the United States on the climate change agreement, and to raise with it the importance of the issue. As far as we are concerned, the NHS will never be privatised. We will continue to ensure that decisions about public services are taken by UK Governments, not by our trade partners, and future trade agreements will not alter that. Indeed, the President himself made it clear, following his visit to the United Kingdom, that the national health service was not part of that trade agreement.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her leadership on environmental matters and on tackling climate change. Yesterday, the all-party environment group heard from Lord Adair Turner that although Britain makes only 1.5% of global emissions, our influence abroad is massive, not just because we are a world leader in tackling climate change here, but because of the possibility of green tech jobs and investment in the United Kingdom economy. Does my right hon. Friend understand that that is a real legacy of hers? I hope that future Governments will commit further to this.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for that, and for the work he has done on environmental issues in his ministerial roles. He continues to champion these issues. I absolutely agree with him. There are those who say that we can either have economic growth or tackle climate change. That is a false dichotomy. Tackling climate change is about developing new types of job, new technology, and new areas of employment for our economy. Already, something like 400,000 people are employed in, effectively, the clean growth economy—in renewable energy and so forth—and we will see many more such jobs being created. The message that we need to take around the world is that this is about future economies, and future employment and jobs.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Did any of the countries represented at the G20 discuss with the Prime Minister the recent UN resolution regarding the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands? If she is seeking to leave a legacy, perhaps the best things she could do are respect the international rules-based order, respect the decision that sovereignty of the Chagos Islands should be returned to Mauritius, and restore the right to return to the Chagossian community, which would right a historical injustice.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Government's position on this. That position has not changed, and no such discussions took place.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The readmission last week of the Russians to the Council of Europe is being described by the Russians as international approval of the Russian invasion of Crimea. Did the Prime Minister have the chance to tell Putin that we totally reject that view?

The Prime Minister: I was able to make clear to President Putin the view that the United Kingdom takes: this was an illegal annexation of Crimea. I was also able to make it clear that we expect Russia to return the sailors and ships that were taken from the Kerch strait.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister spoke of engaging constructively with the European Union, which I welcome, but went on to praise a slate of top-job nominations agreed in backroom deals. Does she not think that the people of the European Union should have had the opportunity to vote for the Commission President in the European parliamentary elections, and that a British Prime Minister should champion democratic values in the European Union, in the G20, and in the United Kingdom, which means a vote on any deal?

The Prime Minister: That was a very clever way round to the hon. Lady's end point, which was that we should go back to the British people and ask them to think again. I do not think that we should; I think we should accept the decision that they took and deliver on it.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): At the top of her statement, the Prime Minister rightly spoke about climate change and its importance to her, which she is proving, and of the importance of the summit. There were numerous horrifying media reports this weekend that in Brazil, an area of Amazon rain forest the size of a football pitch is being cleared every minute. At the summit, was any mention made of this act of planetary self-harm, which seems to have resumed with menace since President Bolsonaro took power? If not, please could the UK Government make urgent inquiries to establish the position? What is happening is surely not in the interests of any of us, and certainly not in the interests of members of the G20.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the issue of climate change covered a broad range of topics, but I am certainly happy to take up my hon. Friend's request that we try to establish the exact situation in relation to these reports of deforestation. It is an issue that we should all be concerned about.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): I am very disappointed that the Prime Minister did not mention in her statement the 500,000 dead, the 11 million people displaced from their homes and the millions from Syria in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. In her discussions with President Erdoğan and Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and with the UN Secretary-General and with Putin, did she do anything to press on them the need for a political solution in Syria, an end to this conflict, and a stop to the Russian bombing of hospitals and the killings of civilians that are taking place at this very moment in Idlib and elsewhere?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I was able to raise with President Erdoğan and with President Putin my concerns about the need to come to a political settlement in Syria. I also raised very specific concerns about the situation in Idlib and the need to ensure that we de-escalate tensions in that area. So the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is, yes I did raise it in a number of the meetings that I held.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): With more EU citizens than ever now critical of the EU project, I wonder whether my right hon. Friend has considered how those hours of horse-trading look to those citizens. We have Ursula von der Leyen, the Commission President, who seems intent on creating a US-style new country and an EU army. We have Christine Lagarde for the European Central Bank; hers is perhaps the only name that we recognise, but we do so, I think, for all the wrong reasons. This new group of those in the top jobs seem to have federalism at the heart of their agenda, stripping more powers away from national Governments, and for any problem the answer is more Europe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that proves without any doubt that the Commission—and its institutions—has no regard or care whatever for the electorates it is there to serve?

The Prime Minister: The nature of the European Union for the future will be a matter for the 27 remaining member states, because of course we will be leaving the

European Union. I think it is right that those who have been appointed, or nominated, for those appointments are those who have shown their competence to undertake the roles in the future, but, as I say, how they shape that—how the future of the European Union is taken forward—will be a matter for the 27.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the wonderful face that she adopted when she was holding President Putin's hand. It had more ice in it than the polar ice cap, and it said it all. He, as she knows, gave an interview to the *Financial Times*, saying that western-style liberalism was "obsolete". I hope she was able to point out to him that, having the rule of law, with independent judges, free speech, freedom of assembly and free elections, is pretty good.

The Prime Minister: May I perhaps reassure the hon. Gentleman that, unlike a polar ice cap, on this issue I am not melting? [*Laughter.*] I did make the point to President Putin that liberal democracies have ensured greater prosperity and security for their people than any other system.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): We are used to statements from European institutions that their decisions are not reviewable, including the European Parliament insisting it would block any nominee for European President who was not one of the Spitzenkandidaten. Does the Prime Minister expect the European Parliament to veto the nominee—or might it just decide that compromise is possible where circumstances dictate?

The Prime Minister: I sincerely hope that, after considerable discussion and consultation with the European Parliament, the European Parliament will feel able to accept the package of nominees for top jobs. Of course, the Parliament will be voting on the President of the Parliament as well. But there was considerable discussion with the European Parliament as part of the process, so I hope that it would feel able to accept this set of nominees, notwithstanding, of course, that none of them was one of the Spitzenkandidaten who were put forward.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I commend the Prime Minister for her forthright stance with President Putin over the nerve gas that killed Dawn Sturgess in Salisbury. Will she confirm that she took an equally forthright stance with President Trump, whose views on the climate emergency will, if sustained, lead to the deaths of many millions of people around the world?

The Prime Minister: I have raised the United States's approach to climate change, and particularly to the Paris agreement, with President Trump on many occasions, and I continue to raise it with him.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My son Alexander is nine today, and in so many ways I think he is incredibly lucky to be growing up in Scotland.

Was there any discussion at the G20 of the appalling scandal emerging at the US border, where women and their children have been separated from each other, are being held in overcrowded and insanitary conditions that have been likened to concentration camps and, according to Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez,

who visited this week, being forced to drink from toilets and abused by US border guards? Has she raised that with President Trump, and if not, will she do so?

The Prime Minister: I wish the hon. Lady's son Alexander a very happy birthday today.

I am sure we are all concerned about the deeply shocking images that we have seen from the US-Mexico border. Obviously, countries are responsible for their own border policy, but we all, I think, have the responsibility of ensuring that we address migration issues humanely. Concerns about what has happened on that border will continue to be raised.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), the Prime Minister will be aware that during the G20 the Russian Federation returned to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. With respect, there are questions about the Government's approach to its return, but they are perhaps for another time. Given Crimea, given Georgia, given Moldova, given Chechnya, given MH17, given, of course, the nerve agent attack in Salisbury, and given the opportunity that the Prime Minister had to meet President Putin, how does she feel the future of our relationship with the Russian Federation will go now?

The Prime Minister: The point was made, which I reiterated in my statement, that I have been consistently clear: we have no argument with the Russian people. It is possible for us to have a different relationship with Russia, but for that to take place Russia has to change its behaviour and to follow a different path. We will not be able to normalise our relations until it does.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): While we may be concerned at the lack of complete openness and democracy in the appointment of top jobs in the European Union, we are about to get a Prime Minister foisted on us in an election in which 99.75% of the population have no say, so perhaps a wee bit of humility is called for.

When the Prime Minister met Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and asked for support in building a political solution to the crisis in Saudi and Yemen, did she remind him that the causes of that crisis are military; that one of the biggest players in that military crime is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; and that according to a Committee of this Parliament it is highly likely that British weapons are being used in the commission of those crimes in Yemen? So did she tell him that it is time for the illegal bombing of civilians in Yemen to stop? Did she tell him there will be no more British arms sales to Saudi Arabia until those crimes have stopped? If she did not tell him that, why not?

The Prime Minister: We continue to make the case in Yemen for ensuring that there is a political solution. That is the only way in which we shall see a stable, secure Yemen into the future. We have been playing a leading role in those diplomatic efforts. We are supporting the United Nations in bringing key Yemeni and international actors together to deliver a peaceful solution. We support the efforts of the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, and we continue to do so, particularly to secure the implementation of the Stockholm agreement.

On the first point that the hon. Gentleman raised, I am not sure that the SNP is the best party to raise the question of how leaders are appointed to the leadership of their parties.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Brendan O'Hara.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In terms of value, the United States is the world's largest export market for Scotch whisky, worth more than £1 billion last year. Yesterday, we heard that Scotch is on a list of products that could face large import tariffs into America, which would be deeply damaging, particularly for whisky-producing communities such as those in my Argyll and Bute constituency. What discussions did the Prime Minister have with President Trump over the damaging America First, isolationist trade agenda and the effect it will have on markets around the world? Does she agree that in terms of trade, as in so much else, he is not a trustworthy ally?

The Prime Minister: We have been consistently clear with the United States about our concerns regarding the approach it is taking in relation to trade. As I said earlier, we continue to support the concept of a rules-based international order, working through the WTO. As I said in my statement, we want to see reform of the WTO rather than people resorting to the introduction of tariffs. We consistently champion the Scotch whisky industry around the world. I am pleased to say that there have been successes, not least by one or two of our trade envoys, in working with the Scotch whisky industry to ensure that tariffs have been reduced in other parts of the world; I can think of at least one example. We continue to try to ensure that we are opening up markets for Scotch whisky, which is an extremely good product and which we want everybody around the world to be able to enjoy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Prime Minister for two solid, busy hours at the Dispatch Box.

Counter-Daesh Update

2 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on the campaign against Daesh, which recently controlled a third of Iraq and Syria—an area the size of the UK—but which has now lost its final piece of territory in Baghuz, Syria. Its sudden rise and fall—morally troubling, profoundly threatening and almost unprecedented—carries deep lessons and warnings for Britain and indeed the nations of the world.

As recently as 2003, the borders of Syria and Iraq were stable. Secular Arab nationalism appeared to have triumphed over the older forces of tribe and religion. Different religious communities—Yazidi, Shabak, Kakai, Christian, Shi'a and Sunni—continued to live alongside one another as they had for more than a millennium. Iraqis and Syrians had better incomes, education, health systems and infrastructure than most citizens of the developing world.

By 2014, all this had changed, partly because of the Iraq war, partly because of the Arab Spring in Syria, but in great part because of the astonishing rise of Daesh. Just three years after the withdrawal of the coalition in 2011, a movement initially founded by a tattooed, drug-taking video store assistant from Jordan had, following his death, captured Raqqa, Fallujah, Ramadi, Mosul and Palmyra, torn off a third of the territory of Syria and Iraq and created an independent Islamic state of 8 million people. It was a state with endemic poverty and struggling public services defined not just by suicide bombs but by a vicious campaign against religious minorities. Well-established borders between nations were obliterated. A few hundred men routed three divisions of the Iraqi army. Secular nationalism was swept aside by a bizarre religious ideology.

No one in 2005, and very few in 2010, would have predicted the success of that movement. There were, of course, many reasons to fear an insurgency in north-east Syria or Iraq. People felt little loyalty to the lamentable Governments in Damascus and Baghdad, with their anti-Sunni discrimination, corruption and poor provision of services, but there was initially very little reason to believe that people would support Daesh rather than other insurgency groups.

Indeed, Daesh's imposition of early medieval social codes and horrifying videos of slaughter of fellow Arabs seemed to most Iraqis and Syrians profoundly irrational, culturally inappropriate and deeply unappealing. Its military tactics seemed almost insane. It deliberately picked fights not only with the Syrian and Iraqi regimes, but with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, Shi'a communities as a whole, the Iranian Quds Force and the Kurds, who initially tried to stay out of the fight. It finished 2014 by mounting a suicidal attack on Kobane in Syria in the face of over 600 US airstrikes, losing many thousands of fighters and gaining almost no ground.

All of this, which should have been Daesh's undoing, seemed at times simply to encourage tens of thousands of foreign fighters to join it, and they came not only from very poor countries but from some of the wealthiest countries in the world—from the social democracies of Scandinavia as much as from monarchies, military states,

authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies. Part of its success was notoriously connected to social media. It was the first terrorist movement that really flourished on short, often home-made, video clips, on Twitter rants and on Facebook posts from the frontline. It grew far more quickly, and survived far longer, than any diplomat, politician or expert analyst predicted.

The options that seemed available to defeat this kind of movement in 2008 were no longer available in 2016. Eight years earlier—or, in our case, six years earlier—there had been a full-spectrum international counter-insurgency campaign that relied on overwhelming force, huge investments in economic development, 100,000 coalition troops, eight years of coalition training packages and almost \$100 billion a year of US expenditure. But that approach ultimately failed to create stability in Iraq and there was no appetite to repeat it in 2016. The US and its allies did not want to deploy troops on the ground in Syria and very few near the frontlines in Iraq, and no one was advocating nation building in the middle of another war.

Instead, the counter-attack on Daesh in Mosul was led by the Iraqi Government. Initially, this did not seem very promising. The Government appeared to lack the capacity and will to restore even the most basic services to communities in Fallujah or Ramadi. They were backed by unreliable Sunni tribal militias and by Iranian-supported Shi'a popular mobilisation forces, which alienated and terrified the local populations. Kurdish Iraqi forces also seemed unwilling to fight Daesh in Mosul. The coalition provided training to Iraqi forces but on a much smaller scale than during the surge. Daesh had laid mines throughout the urban areas and was fighting for every inch of ground.

It is remarkable, therefore, that Daesh was ultimately defeated. This was largely due, on the Syrian side of the border, to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and, on the Iraqi side, to the counter-terrorism force, which at times was enduring casualty rates of almost 40% of its combatants. Iraqi forces regrouped and retook Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul by early 2017, while the forces in Syria had retaken Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor by 2018.

Whereas during the surge the UK and its allies had been intimately involved in trying to reshape the Iraqi Government and security on the ground, our recent involvement has been less extensive. Rather than on nation building, since 2014 it has focused on £350 million of humanitarian aid in Iraq to provide healthcare, food and shelter. We have provided almost £1 billion to Syria over the last four years, including £40 million in aid to north-east Syria in 2018, which is going towards mine clearance, the immunisation of children, clean water, food and shelter.

This assistance continues. In Syria alone, there are 1.65 million people in need, while over half a million have been forced to flee their homes. Unexploded munitions and mines remain a major issue. In Iraq, 4 million people are returning home having been forced out. Nevertheless, this aid is on a much smaller scale than that which was provided by civilian officials from 2003 to 2011, our embassy and associated staff are much smaller, there are no longer coalition civilian outposts in every province, and the coalition and indeed the Iraqi

Government are a long way from being able to take on the task of reconstructing the shattered remains of Mosul.

What lessons can we draw? First, the hundreds of billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of troops committed by the coalition in Iraq from 2003, and more intensely from 2008, were not sufficient to create a stable civil service, a flourishing and sustainable economy, strong institutions, security, or any of the ingredients of a well-functioning state. This suggests that even the best-resourced foreign intervention may not be able to reconstruct a nation in the context of an insurgency. Secondly, local forces with a light foreign support may be able to achieve far more than people anticipate. Paradoxically, the Iraqi operations may have been effective not despite the lack of support from the west, but because of the lack of support. Operating with much less foreign assistance may have given the Iraqi and Syrian forces far more legitimacy, flexibility, control and sense of responsibility.

Thirdly, the sudden rise and sudden fall of Daesh illustrate the extreme fragility of many contemporary societies. The entire political-economic context was and remains so fluid and so open to exploitation, with so little deep institutional loyalty or resistance, that it was terrifyingly easy for an insurgency group to establish itself on both sides of the border. It may have lost its territory for now, but the underlying conditions remain and could allow insurgents to establish themselves again. Even without holding territory, Daesh remains a significant terrorist threat.

Finally, in a context so inherently unpredictable and unexpected, Britain and its allies need to stand in a state of grace, preparing for the unexpected. We need to keep a close eye on countries that may seem temporarily at peace, continue to invest in the development of countries that may seem no longer to need development and continue to deepen our knowledge of countries that may not seem to be a priority today, while retaining our linguistic expertise and, above all, nurturing our relationships with people in those countries and with potential coalition partners such as the US and France and, in a different context, Germany.

Whether in north-east Nigeria, in Somalia or Libya, in Afghanistan or Mali, the key to our response will never be the amount of money that we invest or the number of troops that we deploy. It will be the depth of our understanding and the care and subtlety with which we respond: our ability to deploy development, defence, intelligence and economic levers, diplomacy and a dozen other tools, rapidly and precisely, not overruling other Governments, but supporting them in the right way at the right time with prudence and economy.

That is why I must close this Daesh statement with deep respect for the courage of our military forces, the skill of our diplomats and the generosity of our development programmes, but above all with deep respect for the people of Syria and Iraq who were in the heart of this fight, who gave their lives, who led this response and who provide us with an example of how we can act as partners with energy, but above all with humility. I commend my statement to the House.

2.12 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. However, while the update is welcome, may I point out

that it is only the second statement to be made in the House in the 365 days since 4 July last year, although the Government promised quarterly reports to keep the House updated?

We welcome the destruction of Daesh's final enclaves in Syria. We know that Daesh is a threat to us all and that it must be defeated wherever it emerges. Just today, news reports have revealed the uncovering of another mass grave in Raqqa; 200 corpses have been found, and it is feared that more will follow. The dead, thought to be victims of Daesh, include bodies found in orange jumpsuits, the kind typically worn by their hostages.

Let me pay tribute to the UK forces who have put their lives on the line and show gratitude—as the Secretary of State did—to the Kurdish forces who have taken such huge risks in leading the fight against Daesh. Will the Secretary of State now reassure the House that the Kurdish community will not be abandoned or left vulnerable to attacks by Syria or Turkey? He mentions Yazidis, Christians, Shi'as and Sunnis in his statement, so will he tell us what he is doing to support the protection of all communities in the region?

There is also the question of the ongoing role of our forces. The 2015 motion that set down the terms for our engagement in Syria to eradicate Daesh's safe haven in Syria and Iraq was worded in such a way as to avoid an ongoing military conflict in the region. Will the Secretary of State now set out the purpose of our forces, given that their original purpose of defeating Daesh's safe haven has been achieved? Does he believe that the original mandate has now expired and that therefore a renewed mandate for military action—and clarity on the role of special forces—is required for continued UK engagement in the region?

Let me say a few words about the ongoing conflict in Syria. There remain serious concerns for civilians in Idlib. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that there are safe corridors for civilians to leave, given that the United Nations has warned that up to 700,000 people could flee Idlib as refugees? Given that dozens of health facilities have been damaged and destroyed in recent months and more than half a million civilians have been unable to access vital medical care, what steps are the Government taking to encourage parties to the conflict to adhere to international humanitarian law and protect civilians?

Last month, I was lucky enough to meet members of a delegation from the Syrian Women's Political Movement. They spoke about their experiences of being denied their rights to employment, education and medical care and facing sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation. They called for increased women's representation in peace negotiations and decision-making positions. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to respond to their calls?

As for Iraq, does the Secretary of State share the growing international concern about the arbitrary, draconian and legally unsound way in which the Iraqi authorities are conducting trials of alleged jihadist collaborators and the resentment caused among the Sunni community in the country?

What discussions are taking place about the huge number of detained suspected Daesh fighters? More than 55,000 suspected fighters and their families have been detained in Syria and Iraq. Most of them are citizens of those

[Dan Carden]

two countries, but overall they come from at least 50 countries. More than 11,000 relatives are being held at the al-Hol camp in north-eastern Syria. Michelle Bachelet, the UN human rights chief, has said that the relatives of suspected fighters should be taken back to their countries of origin. Does the Secretary of State agree with her call?

Let me finally raise the issue of Daesh's ongoing influence beyond the physical battlefield. The Secretary of State has spoken today about Daesh's physical territory, but its influence online is an ongoing threat and deeply worrying. What are the Government doing to work with our allies to ensure that action is taken by social media companies so that Daesh cannot find new safe havens online to spread its hatred?

Rory Stewart: The shadow Secretary of State has touched on a number of issues, stretching from the Kurdish community to Daesh online. I shall try to deal with them in turn.

What I think is at the heart of the answers to all these questions is that the only way in which we will be able to resolve the problems is through a proper political settlement. Many of the issues raised by the shadow Secretary of State—whether the issue is the minority rights of Yazidis and Christians, or the relationship between Kurds in Syria or Iraq and their national Governments—will have to be resolved in that way. It is very easy to stand at the Dispatch Box and try to talk about an inclusive political settlement, but that is unbelievably difficult to achieve, particularly after eight years of war, deep resentments and a massive militarisation of societies. We see the challenges all the way from Somalia to Yemen, and it will be just as difficult on the Syria-Iraq border, but ultimately that is the only way to resolve these issues, and the more support we can provide for mediators to try to come up with those political solutions, the better off we will all be.

The hon. Gentleman raised a technical and important question about the purpose of British forces. The reason for our forces on the ground was the Iraqi Government's request for self-defence against Daesh and Syria, and the justification for their continuing presence is to do with the continuing threat posed by Daesh as a terrorist organisation, but not as a territory-holding organisation. I can, however, reassure the House that the nature of our presence is relatively limited. We are talking about airstrikes many of which are not conducted, the planes not being based in the middle east itself, and we are talking about British troops who are predominantly involved in training operations such as counter-IED and first-aid training. Some are based in the Kurdish regions, others in Iraqi bases. We are talking about a few hundred people. This is not the type of operation that we were talking about in relation to Iraq or Afghanistan, and I therefore do not think that a whole new mandate is necessary.

I share the hon. Gentleman's frustration that a debate on an issue as important as this should be so poorly attended in the House of Commons. I hope that our sense of seriousness as a nation means that the next time such a statement is made, people will engage more in the debate.

Idlib is a source of huge concern. DFID has put £80 million into humanitarian support in Idlib, but it remains true that the populations in Idlib are under a ferocious and brutal attack from the Syrian Government. It remains very difficult to access people within Idlib, and we continue through every mechanism to call on both the Syrian Government and their supporters, including their supporters from Russia, to exercise restraint, but our options have been very limited and we need to do so in a way that does not repeat the mistakes made in the past of laying down red lines that we cannot maintain or raising the hopes of communities in ways that we cannot vindicate or justify.

This brings me to the question of resettlement in Iraq and the 55,000 suspected Daesh fighters and their families and social media. All that is leading up to a much bigger issue: there are clearly some legal issues raised, and there are consular and human rights issues raised, but at the heart of all this has to be the question of Daesh mark 2, or in other words, how we prevent all the same conditions—all the same resentments, all the same abuses, all the same lack of public services and all the same corruption—that led to the emergence of Daesh in its first form back in 2004-5 and its new form of 2011-12 from re-emerging again. We have to work with the Iraqi Government and with those areas of Syria controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces to ensure that people's rights are respected, that reconstruction money is going in and above all that Sunni Arabs feel they have a stake in a political settlement, whereas at the moment they often feel deeply excluded by the regimes, by the ethnicity of the regimes and by the sectarian allegiances of the regimes.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): On that last point, recognising the considerable caution my right hon. Friend has expressed about the future of Iraq, what more can be done to help promote political reconciliation in the provinces of Anbar and Nineveh and to encourage economic reforms that will enable all the provinces of Iraq to benefit from the stability that our forces have done so much to secure?

Rory Stewart: This is of course an issue that my right hon. Friend knows very well indeed. In essence, the only way that we can begin to bring some kind of life and some kind of hope back to areas such as Anbar and Nineveh is by making sure that we have the right combination of economic development, governance and security, which is a pompous way of saying we need to start fixing houses in Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul. That means clearing mines out of the way, and that means actually physically getting buildings up. This has to be led by the Iraqi Government. There is more we can do in terms of tax incentives, training, support and infrastructure, but that all points to the next consideration, which is of course security. They still remain dangerous areas; there is still a continuing rural insurgency. The way in which that security is addressed—the identity of the Iraqi forces we bring in and their sectarian allegiances—will be very important in regaining the trust of the population. Finally, we must have the right kind of devolution down to the local level so that people feel that the leadership in Mosul, Ramadi or Fallujah genuinely reflects them—reflects them democratically, reflects their identities, reflects their sense of hope—so that those three elements of security, governance and economic development can begin to produce a sense of hope.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): First, may I say as someone whose brother served in Iraq that I am conscious of the sacrifice made by members of the armed forces over the long period in which they have been there? I may not necessarily have agreed with the original direction of travel, but nevertheless the commitment of members of the armed forces is keenly felt by those of us who have family in the armed forces and by those of us on these Benches.

I do not disagree with much of what has been said by the Secretary of State and by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who spoke for the official Opposition, but I do wish to raise some issues that have not yet been spoken about. Before doing so, however, let me say that the onus is on us not only in these islands but across western Europe to consider our own history in terms of ethnic and religious tension before we ever believe that we could give some kind of panacea to the peoples of Iraq, and I will also say Kurdistan. I think we should first learn from our own history.

The Secretary of State raised some serious issues about opportunities for moving forward into reconciliation, and even the official Opposition mentioned some of the issues highlighted in some of the camps, and I wish to specifically highlight what was mentioned by Ben Taub in *The New Yorker* back in December last year:

“Shortly after ten o’clock, three judges in long black robes shuffled into Courtroom 2 and sat at the bench. Suhail Abdullah Sahar, a bald, middle-aged man with a thin, jowly face, sat in the center. There were twenty-one cases on his docket that day, sixteen related to terrorism. He quietly read out a name; a security officer shouted it down the hall to one of his colleagues, who shouted it to the guard, who shouted it into the cell. Out came a young man named Ahmed. A security officer led him to a wooden cage...

‘Sir, I swear, I have never been to Qayyarah,’ Ahmed said.

Sahar was skeptical. ‘I have a written confession here, with your thumbprint on it,’ he said.

‘Sir, I swear, I gave my thumbprint on a blank paper,’ Ahmed replied. ‘And I was tortured by the security services.’...

‘Enough evidence,’ the prosecutor said. ‘I ask for a guilty verdict.’...

Ahmed wept as he was led out of the room. His trial had lasted four and a half minutes.”

I am sure that the Secretary of State recognises that some of the issues in relation to reconciliation are compounded by corruption within the existing infrastructure of the Iraqi Government, notably corruption in Mosul through the limitation of the impact of international aid because of the mayor of Mosul. I was at a meeting yesterday with my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) on Scottish medical professionals trying to get into Mosul as well.

Does the Secretary of State recognise that there is the issue of women and children, specifically those women whose husbands divorce them by telephone and children where husbands abdicated responsibility for them after they joined Daesh? Their ex-wives and children are now being treated as not only second-class citizens but lower than cattle.

Finally, does the Secretary of State recognise the dire need for truth and reconciliation not only in Iraq, but to enable breathing space between the Government of

Iraq and the Government of Kurdistan specifically in relation to some of the border issues, which are allowing a possible Daesh resurgence?

Rory Stewart: That portrait of a courtroom is of course profoundly shocking, and the hon. Gentleman is right to say that if court proceedings are conducted in that way—in other words, if people feel that their constitutional rights are not being upheld and that their evidence is being extracted by torture to gain a prosecution—that simply provides a really strong reason for there to be more insurgency, as well as that being a flagrant abuse and a flagrantly unjust act. The challenge for us is to think what Britain and other countries can actually do about it. The reality is that we have tended to approach rule of law programmes through focusing on training, so traditionally a judge like that would have been put through a training course; they might even have been flown to the University of Kansas for a couple of weeks to go on a seminar and there would have been a lot of investment in legal books and court procedure. The problem however in that specific case is unlikely to have been simply to do with capacity building; it is much more likely to be about the political context. The key thing is to try to communicate to a sovereign Government in the most respectful way we can through the Ministry of Justice that in the end this kind of approach is, as indeed many Iraqis would acknowledge, self-defeating. Working out how we as Britain or France or Germany or the United States or anyone else can actually get involved right down to the level of that courtroom and a decision made by a judge on the bench remains very tough there, or indeed in 100 other countries in the world.

The question of divorce and the treatment of women is again a subset of a much bigger issue: the ways in which this type of injustice and abuse will continue to fuel resentment going forward into the future, and I look forward perhaps to sitting down with the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issues of the borders on another occasion.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is always a pleasure to hear my right hon. Friend talking about this subject; although it is a grim subject, the depth of his knowledge is always enlightening, and I would hope that at some stage we might have a debate rather than just an update statement so that we can engage with him more fully. May I therefore raise a couple of points?

First, does my right hon. Friend accept that ultimately the reason Daesh was defeated was that, by seizing and holding territory, it gave up the terrorists’ best weapon: the cloak of invisibility? Secondly, the only thing I found missing from his statement was any reference to that part of Syria that was not fought upon and occupied by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. Can he explain what percentage of the country is occupied by forces other than the Kurdish-led forces? Is not a large percentage of the country occupied by the forces of Assad? Does he now accept what the Government have denied all along: that if we wanted the insurgency in Syria to be defeated, the logical consequence—unacceptable though it seems—was going to be that Assad was at least in part going to win, given the support of his Russian backers?

Rory Stewart: These are two important challenges from the distinguished Chairman of the Defence Committee. I shall take the second one, then move on to

[Rory Stewart]

the first. It is of course true that the vast majority of Syria is now in the hands of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Looking back in time, we can see that the optimism of the United States and the United Kingdom that Bashar al-Assad would inevitably be defeated, and the red lines that were created by President Obama and others, have not been vindicated in any way at all. In fact, with Russian backing, the Syrian regime has not only retaken the land right the way up to the Euphrates—the edge of the area we are talking about with the SDF—but has pushed south to the Jordanian border and is now pushing up to Idlib, having taken Aleppo and the rural areas around Damascus. The Chairman of the Defence Committee is absolutely correct in his assessment of that. That does not answer the bigger question, which is what Governments such as those of the United Kingdom or the United States will choose to do with the Syrian regime in the future. This returns us to the kinds of challenges that we faced in dealing with, for example, the Shi'a community in southern Iraq under the brutality of Saddam Hussein. How on earth do we balance our humanitarian obligations towards people in horrifying conditions with our sense that we do not wish to operate in the territory of a man who, whatever the sequence of his military successes, remains an unbelievably brutal murderer who is clearly associated with the execution of unarmed prisoners and countless persons through the deployment of chemical weapons? That will remain the key issue for the House to consider over the next months and, indeed, years.

On the first issue, the Chairman of the Defence Committee is also absolutely right. One of the most bizarre, peculiar and ultimately self-defeating parts of Daesh's campaign was its decision to try to hold territory and, in particular, to try to take on conventional forces. The entire idea of an insurgency or a terrorist organisation is supposed to be that it should drift around like mist or, to take Chairman Mao's analogy, that it should work and feed off the consent of the local population. Daesh did neither of those things. It attempted to hold territory and, in Kobane, to take on 600 US airstrikes. It attempted to alienate the entire population that it was trying to depend on, through its brutal videos and its incredibly horrifying Islamic social codes. What is extraordinary is not that Daesh was ultimately defeated but that it remained so successful for so long and was able to hold this territory for such an extended period of time.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On Monday, I met the Iraqi ambassador, and it is clear that the Iraqi authorities are keen for the UK Government, EU countries, the US and Russia to take responsibility for Daesh fighters and their families who might—or might not—have been involved in terrorist activity. Will the UK Government take responsibility for those fighters?

Rory Stewart: The position of the UK Government remains that it is more appropriate to prosecute the vast majority of those people in the countries in which their crimes were committed. If those individuals were Daesh fighters, and if they were slaughtering Iraqi and Syrian civilians and committing crimes within that territory, it is perfectly acceptable for them to be prosecuted in that territory, just as it would be for a citizen of any country who committed a crime in somebody else's country.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his thoughtful responses, but I would like to pick up on two brief things. He mentions unexploded munitions and mines in Syria, and I wonder if he could expand on that and tell us how much of that country is still dangerous to live in for the many people who have been forced to flee their homes. Also, possibly a longer piece of work is about rebuilding the peace and about how this House and Governments relate to countries post conflict. What does he think the role of parliamentarians across this House—across both Houses, in fact—should be in supporting parliamentarians and potential parliamentarians in not-quite-yet democracies in the middle east? What role does he think there might be for us in that peace building?

Rory Stewart: First, the mines remain an unbelievably serious issue. They are ensuring that not just a lot of agricultural land but much of the urban centres of Fallujah, Ramadi, Mosul, Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa are almost uninhabitable. This is not just a question of the ordnance buried in those buildings. The old city of Mosul is so profoundly damaged that it is almost impossible to understand what we can do to rebuild these places without ceilings falling in on people's heads. We are talking about many billions of pounds-worth of damage. This brings us to the question of the role that parliamentarians can play, and actually there is one. There is a gloomy analysis of countries such as Iraq, which would have suggested 10 or 12 years ago that there was nothing much we could do, but it is striking that a new generation of leadership is now emerging. The recent visit of the President of Iraq, Barham Salih, shows the emergence of a new, more progressive type of politics in Iraq that wishes to engage with Members of Parliament. That does not mean that we in this House hold the panacea for what is happening in Iraq, in Myanmar or indeed anywhere else, but respectful relationships, partnerships, modelling ways of behaviour and exchanging thoughts with humility about the problems we have, even in this place, dealing with sectarian conflict in Britain or with some of the polarising and divisive effects of our recent referendum here may be useful in dealing with questions on the aftermath of the referendum in Kurdistan.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I do apologise for having overlooked the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood). The problem is that he is sitting in the blind spot, so when the Secretary of State is standing at the Dispatch Box I cannot see the hon. Gentleman or anyone who is sitting in that seat—[*Interruption.*] No, this is no criticism of the stature of the Secretary of State. Far from it. I happen to be of considerably diminutive stature, and I cannot see over him. The hon. Gentleman sits in what might appear to be a prominent position if I were sitting somewhere else, but not when I am sitting in the Chair.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I quite understand that it must be my svelte figure that hides me from view.

Following large territorial losses in 2017 and 2018, Daesh declared a global battle of attrition in May this year. What steps is the international coalition taking to ensure that foreign terrorist fighters do not simply move their fighting elsewhere, beyond Syria and Iraq?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend has put his finger on the problem. Isis affiliates are now emerging all the way from northern Nigeria to the Philippines, and they are feeding in every case on very similar problems: the lack of legitimacy of the local government; corruption; poor provision of public services; sectarian and tribal conflicts; economic problems, particularly unemployment among young men; fluid borders; and, in cases such as north-east Chad, even catastrophes of climate and the environment. Addressing the root causes that allow this type of insurgent group to flourish involves an enormous development effort, but we are currently about \$2.3 trillion a year short of being able to provide the sort of support that could transform the economies all the way from northern Nigeria to the Philippines. What we can do is try to balance our investment with that of other partners in a modest and targeted way. We are now looking much more closely at the work we can do with the French and the United States on the border between Nigeria, Chad, Mali and Niger, but we may have to accept that we cannot control all of the world all of the time, which is why I believe that nimbleness, deep country knowledge, enormous flexibility and enormous energy are going to be required to deal with this over the next 30 to 40 years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and thank him for his comprehensive update. The defeat of Daesh in Syria is good news, but there have been indications that Daesh is re-establishing in other countries, such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, Algeria and Libya. The recent story in the media about stolen US missiles being in the hands of terrorists in Libya is particularly worrying. As he rightly said, contact and co-operation with other countries is now necessary, but will that be done in Libya, where it is uncertain who is in charge; in northern Nigeria, where Daesh is free to roam; or in Afghanistan, where Daesh is attempting to connect in an area in which it once had influence? It is important to prevent Daesh mark 2 from being established elsewhere.

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman puts his finger on the problem, which is that coming up with a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy simultaneously in Libya, Afghanistan and Nigeria is beyond us. At the height of the counter-insurgency surge in Afghanistan, there were not only over 100,000 troops on the ground, but over 100,000 international civilians and £100 billion a year of expenditure, largely from the US. Those days have now passed, so we are having to respond to such conflicts with a much lighter footprint.

The reality is that the areas where Islamic State has established itself in those three countries are almost entirely outside Government control. They are areas that are inaccessible not only to us, but to soldiers or police from the central capitals. Security must come first, but that security needs to be based on some kind of trust in the regime in the centre. That will be the real problem going forward.

In some ways, ironically, it may turn out to be an exception that Daesh tried to hold territory in Syria and Iraq, because it made them an easier target. Ultimately, their flaw was the attempt to try to hold Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Mosul and, in the end, huge courage from Kurdish-led Syrian forces and from the Iraqi army allowed them to retake those areas. However, when Daesh

act as an insurgent guerrilla group in remote areas of Afghanistan, Nigeria or Libya, that poses huge demands on Governments that are not actually able to provide intelligence, governance or public services in those areas. A different strategy is necessary, because we are not going to be able to prevent such things from emerging, and we will have to respond quickly with partner Governments when they do.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my trips to north-eastern Syria on the behalf of the Kurdish authorities. I want to ask about the designation of north-eastern Syria and Rojava as a zone under the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019. I am informed that the Home Office wants to make it illegal for British citizens to enter the zone but, as someone who visited post-war Afghanistan, the Secretary of State will know the importance of allowing British people to visit such areas to help them rebuild. These people were our allies and helped us, as he described it, to defeat ISIS, and it would be totally self-defeating to make it illegal for British citizens to co-operate with them in the future. Will the Secretary of State hold urgent discussions with the Home Office to ensure that Rojava, north-eastern Syria or Kurdish-controlled Syria—whatever one wants to call it—is not in that designated list?

Rory Stewart: The reason why the Home Office has been considering introducing this legislation is that we are looking at ways to try to prevent people from going out to such areas for terrorist activities. It is not primarily intended to prevent humanitarian assistance from going out. One of the legal issues that the Home Office has faced is that, despite having clearly advised that British citizens should not be travelling to such areas in order to prevent them from joining Daesh, we did not have the legal framework in place to make that happen. The proposals that the Home Office has been considering have been designed to target foreign fighters and to exclude people who are going there for humanitarian reasons.

However, I have listened carefully to the concerns, which have also been expressed by a number of international aid agencies, NGOs and others, about the possibility that people going there for good reasons could be caught up with people going there for bad reasons. I am sure the Home Office will have heard the hon. Gentleman's representations. Indeed, we at DFID have raised similar concerns ourselves.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State's analysis of the situation was thorough and highlighted the fluid and unstable situation that continues to persist in the region. However, I cannot help but note the cognitive dissonance that seems to exist between his Department and the Home Office, particularly in relation to asylum applications. Some 250 of my constituents are liable to be evicted from their homes, many of whom are Syrians from the region. Will the Secretary of State undertake to write to his counterpart in the Home Office to emphasise the continuing and ongoing danger that the region presents and to stress that sufficient credence should be given to asylum applications, so that asylum seekers are not placed in situations where their lives are threatened?

Rory Stewart: The Home Office is trying to do a very difficult job, and it often does it very well. It is the responsibility of the Home Office to try to have a fair and transparent process for asylum seekers. When processing asylum seekers—even asylum seekers from difficult countries such as Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan—it is extremely important that we verify their stories and ensure that they have legitimate cause to seek asylum. I am sure that the Home Office has heard the hon. Gentleman's point carefully and will be looking carefully at such cases. However, in my experience, the Home Office takes enormous care and thought, by using people who have deep knowledge of those areas and people who speak the local languages, to ensure that the support that the British Government provide for asylum seekers is genuinely targeted towards the people in most need.

Points of Order

2.46 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During last week's Prime Minister's questions, in referencing the conflict in Yemen, the Leader of the Opposition stated:

"UK weapons have been used in indiscriminate attacks on civilians in which over 200,000 people have been killed".—[*Official Report*, 26 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 653.]

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Saudi coalition and the action that it has taken in Yemen, the latest UN figure for casualties killed by military action is in the order of 10,000. There is academic research saying that the figure may be five times as high as that, but that relates to the numbers killed in the whole conflict by both sides. To say that the United Kingdom has been involved in killing 200,000 people is an absolute and total inaccuracy and not a proper reflection of the complexity of the conflict.

The Leader of the Opposition's office has been approached by journalists about correcting the record, but they were told that he has no intention of doing so. They then came to me and asked me to try to raise the issue. I have notified the Leader of the Opposition's office and, by coincidence, the Leader of the Opposition himself in a meeting literally just before coming into the Chamber. Would you say, Madam Deputy Speaker, that an inaccuracy of that scale involving the United Kingdom was something that would merit correcting on the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his intention to raise this point of order and, in particular, for confirming that he has correctly, and in accordance with procedure, informed the Leader of the Opposition of his intention to raise this matter on the Floor of the House. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the accuracy or otherwise of words spoken at the Dispatch Box, and more generally in the Chamber, by any right hon. or hon. Member is not a matter for the Chair. However, it is of course a matter of concern for the whole House that anything said in this Chamber should be accurate. The hon. Gentleman has taken the opportunity to draw the attention of the entire House and, indeed, the Opposition Front Bench to the matter, and I am sure that his concerns will have been noted.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I suggest that Members read "Eats, Shoots & Leaves" about the importance of the comma? The problem with the spoken word is that the comma is not always reflected in the written word. I would suggest that, in this situation, the Leader of the Opposition was referring to the deaths in the overall conflict, which some academics have put at almost 200,000. We should understand that in the wider context of a war in which hundreds of thousands of people have either been killed or are starving.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his elucidation, and I do not make light of this very serious matter. We are talking about the loss of a great many lives, and I am sure it will be appreciated that this is an extremely serious matter that has now been fully aired on the Floor of the House.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his advice on that excellent book, “Eats, Shoots & Leaves.” I do not know how it will come out in *Hansard*, but there is a significant difference, as he says, between “eats shoots and leaves” and “eats, shoots and leaves.” He makes a very good point, which I am sure the whole House will take on board.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 10 May, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to raise my grave concerns about her Department’s investigation and recording of claimant deaths and how those deaths might be associated with the DWP.

I raised concerns that, under the Secretary of State’s predecessors, coroners’ letters and peer reviews were not sent to Dr Paul Litchfield, the independent expert who reviewed the work capability assessment in 2013. I also asked for information on deaths after claimants were found fit for work following a work capability assessment, and on deaths since 2015 after a personal independence payment award was reduced or refused.

I received a reply from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work today, nearly two months later. He said

“the Department does not hold any information”

on the 2010 to 2014 peer review due to

“the length of time since the reviews were carried out, factors such as document retention policies, organisational changes and staff turnover”.

We are talking about the circumstances of people’s deaths some five years ago. To tell me that these documents cannot be found smacks, at least, of incompetence and, at worst, of a cover-up.

I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how to ensure that the Government make sure that the Department for Work and Pensions, first, keeps proper records and reports back to the House on the outcome of an investigation into these missing documents and, secondly, heeds my call for an independent inquiry into all deaths linked to the Government’s social security reforms.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice that she intended to raise such an important point of order. [*Interruption.*] I hope I can have some silence from the Government side of the House. The hon. Lady raises an extremely important matter and, again, one literally of life and death.

The hon. Lady knows this is not a matter on which I can give advice or any ruling from the Chair, but she has used the vehicle of a point of order to make sure that the Treasury Bench is aware of the issue, which I am sure will be drawn to the attention of the appropriate Minister. I would hope that any Minister with responsibility for these matters will wish to take steps to ensure that what she has asked for is properly fulfilled. If that does not occur, the proper advice I can give her is that she should seek the advice of the Table Office as to other ways in which she can bring this matter once again to the Floor of the House.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My constituent Lizanne Zietsman is a wife, a businesswoman,

an employer and a valued and respected community member on the Isle of Arran. She has been ordered by the Home Office to leave the UK by 12 July. I have taken up this most urgent matter with the immigration service and the Minister for Immigration. To further highlight this case, I have tabled an early-day motion and will present a petition to Parliament to show the strength of feeling on the matter.

Given the urgency of this case, Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise on what other avenues are open to me to do all I can to have this appalling decision reversed and to prevent Lizanne from having to leave her husband, her business and her community in nine days’ time?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. Once again, she is well aware that I cannot give her an answer on the substantive point she raises, as it is not a matter of responsibility for the Chair, but it is the responsibility of the Chair to make sure that the Floor of the House is properly used to draw any such serious matter to the attention of the appropriate Minister.

I am sure the hon. Lady, having taken the opportunity to raise this matter on the Floor of the House—[*Interruption.*] Forgive me, but my voice is not working very well today, and I would be really grateful if the Government Whips would not speak in a loud voice while I am trying to address the House. I appreciate that it is very unusual for the occupant of the Chair not to be properly heard, but perhaps just a little bit of courtesy would be appropriate.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) raises a very important point, and I am sure it will be conveyed to the appropriate Minister, and that the Minister will take appropriate action.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Home Office decision makers use the country policy and information note “Nigeria: Trafficking of women” when handling particular types of sensitive protection and human rights claims. This policy is used to form a base of information on the UK’s analysis of Nigeria. However, under the heading “Assessment” on page 1, I was horrified to read what I can only call offensive, belligerent and totally disrespectful guidance:

“trafficked women who return from Europe, wealthy from prostitution, enjoy high social-economic status and in general are not subject to negative social attitudes on return. They are often held in high regard because they have improved income prospects.”

This guidance has caused offence and dismay.

Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise me first, on how the policy can be corrected; secondly, on how we can ensure Home Office decision makers use a more respectful policy in handling protection and human rights claims; and, finally, on how the House can receive an apology from the Home Secretary for overseeing a Department policy that has caused so much offence to those trafficked women?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady raises a matter that is, in the true sense of the word, shocking, if that is indeed the guidance, but it is not for the Chair to pronounce upon the veracity, or otherwise, of documents published by Government Departments.

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

As I said a few moments ago, it is the responsibility of the Chair to make sure that, when a Member wishes to draw a matter of such importance to the attention of a Minister, they should have the opportunity to do so. I hope the hon. Lady will benefit from having had the opportunity to raise her point of order this afternoon. I have every confidence that the appropriate Minister will pay attention to what she has said. Let us hope that steps will be taken to rectify the situation.

I apologise to the House for my inaudibility.

Plastic Pollution

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

2.58 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):
I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to set targets for the reduction of plastic pollution; to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy and annual reports on plastic pollution reduction; to establish an advisory committee on plastic pollution; and for connected purposes.

You have 10 minutes to rest your voice, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Plastic pollution has attracted massive amounts of attention and coverage in recent years. For those of us fortunate enough to live in coastal and island communities, it is far from a novel problem. Walk along any of the magnificent, if occasionally breezy, beaches of Orkney and Shetland, and the evidence is there for everyone to see for themselves: plastic washing up along our coastlines, despoiling some of the most spectacular, and the last genuinely wild, environments to be found anywhere in Europe. In the northern isles, every spring, we have an impressive and well-drilled series of litter-picking operations—the “Bag the bruck” campaign and Da Voar Redd Up—but as much as we can pick up off the beaches, we know that when the tide comes in again the pollution will start again. We can pick up only what we can see and what we can see is only the tip of the iceberg—there are bigger concerns about what we cannot see. Plastic breaks down to become microplastics, and once they are in the ocean they are next to impossible to remove.

Much of the credit for the rise in interest in this issue can be given to the excellent work of the BBC’s “The Blue Planet” series and Sir David Attenborough. They have raised awareness and forced us to confront the impact of our throw-away culture. In particular, they told us how these microplastics have an impact on our food chain and they have challenged us to do better at protecting our valued marine life. May I also pay tribute to Friends of the Earth and the Women’s Institute, which have been staunch in their continued support for this campaign and given me invaluable support in the drafting of this Bill? Other organisations I have been privileged to work with include Surfers Against Sewage and City to Sea, among many others. But this now goes beyond the campaign groups; in our coastal and island communities, the challenge of plastic pollution is being taken up in every walk of life. From microplastics infecting the food chain to marine life swallowing plastic bags, mistaking them for jellyfish, our throw-away culture has now become an existential threat to many of our indigenous industries, especially our fishing industry.

Therefore, it is perhaps no surprise that some of the leading voices calling for a reduction in plastic pollution in my constituency come from among the Shetland fishing industry. For years, these people have supported campaigns such as “Fishing for Litter”, and just this week the Shetland Fishermen’s Association has been highlighting the environmental damage caused by the practices of gillnetting and longlining. I would like to think that all right hon. and hon. Members are sufficiently acquainted with the different means of fishing that I

would not need to explain what gillnetting is, but 18 years in this House makes me suspect that that may not be the case. So if the House will indulge me, I will just give a little explanation of what I am speaking about.

Gillnetting is a type of fine mesh twine, which works by being placed in the water and left there for prolonged periods. The fish swim into the holes in the mesh, which then tighten around them, trapping them. Gillnetting is brutally effective, but it results in vast nets being placed in the water and left there for a long time. These nets are sometimes several miles long and will be laid end to end. The practice is predominantly to be found among Spanish-owned and licensed vessels fishing within our waters, and it is pushing out many of the local boats, excluding them sometimes from several hundred miles of our territorial waters and doing so in a way that is drawing increasing attention. The aggression that is shown towards local fisherman by the Spanish boats that lay these gillnets is increasingly a problem and it will require to be addressed. More often than not it is the local Shetland boats, which then trawl the waters, that pick up the gillnets and longlines left behind by the Spanish trawlers and that are left having to bring them into port for safe disposal.

We are all acquainted with the phenomenon of finding one Department acting in a way that is contrary to the actions of another, but I must point out that the Department responsible for the fight against plastic pollution is the same Department responsible for fisheries management. It is remarkable that this situation has been allowed to continue in the way that it has and to come to a head in the way it now threatens to do. I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), in her place this afternoon, but I hope she will take the message back to her Department that, from the point of view of sustainability as well as plastic pollution, this now requires urgent attention. We must have cross-Government, joined-up thinking to ensure that from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regulating fishing practices, through to the Department for Education procuring sanitary products for school, some of which, regrettably, involve single-use plastic, the Government are testing every proposal and policy to ensure that it is plastic pollution-proof. On cross-Government work, colleagues across the House will, no doubt, be aware that about 90% of the world's plastic pollution comes from 10 rivers in Africa and Asia. So while we in the UK must ensure that we do our fair share to end plastic pollution, the Department for International Development should be giving that leadership around the world, working with our partners and friends to cut plastic waste around the globe.

Before we can lead, however, we must get our own house in order. In the northern isles, as is often the case, we look to our nearest neighbours in Norway to see how that can be done. Norway has one of the best stories to tell on this. It was always fairly low in the amount of plastic waste it disposed of, but it has now reached a recycling rate on plastic bottles of about 97%, with 92% going on to be plastic bottles once more and 1% ending up as waste. Norway's example shows what we can achieve, and it sets an example to the rest of the world. We, too, must have the ambition to eliminate plastic waste for good, which is why this Bill and the campaigns that inform it are so important.

The Government have already outlined policies for reducing plastic pollution and I welcome the high-level consideration that there has been on this issue. We can disagree and debate whether those policies are enough. I have concerns that the Government are not doing enough and not doing it fast enough, but it is good that the debate is about how much we should do, rather than whether we should begin to do it. So I do give some credit to the Environment Secretary for his engagement and recognition of this as an issue.

Behaviour changes are going to be key in winning the war against plastic pollution. Interestingly, the Conservative leadership candidates are today debating the efficacy of "sin taxes", but this is an area where I hope the sin tax will not come under any challenge, because it is clear from what we have seen, for example, with the tax on plastic bags, that such a sin tax is effective and urgent, and we need to see more of this. Plastic is merely one part of our unhealthy approach to litter and waste, and we must build a more circular economy, where everything, or as close to everything as possible, is recycled or reused. This is a process and it is never going to be an event, and never has that been more clear than in this case.

I am realistic about the prospects of success for my Bill, which starts as a ten-minute rule motion today, but it deals with an issue that is not going to go away. That is why there is enthusiasm beyond the walls of this House today for meaningful change. The Government have to listen to people across the length and breadth of this country to deliver meaningful change in order to protect our natural environment for generations to come. This Bill would be a start to that process. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Alistair Carmichael, Tim Farron, Ben Lake, Scott Mann, Kerry McCarthy and Alex Sobel present the Bill.

Mr Alistair Carmichael accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 415).

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) (NO. 3) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the time it took the Financial Secretary to the Treasury to pour himself a glass of water, the House authorised the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 3) Bill, which, among other things, includes

"authorisation for the use of resources for the year ending with 31 March 2020"

[Patrick Grady]

to be

“increased by £348,553,768,000.”

It goes on to authorise all the rest of the expenditure of similarly great magnitudes that the Government expect to use over the next couple of years, without any possibility of debate or amendment, which is not what Members from the Scottish National party were led to believe when the English votes for English laws process was introduced. We were told then that the estimates process would be how we would scrutinise the Barnett consequential of estimates.

The Bill represents the supply element of the confidence and supply arrangement that one of the other parties in the House has with the Government—it is good to see that at least a couple of them are here, which is more than there were the last time the supply estimates went through the House. Will you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to whether any other mechanisms are available to groups of Members to secure £1.5 billion of funding for their constituencies without any of them really having to show up very often?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and understand the point that he has made. I will separate his party political points, which of course are not a matter for the Chair, from his procedural points, which are partially a matter for the Chair.

I advise the hon. Gentleman that although he and his colleagues might not have had the opportunity to examine every line of proposed expenditure, we had two days of debate—yesterday and the day before—on some aspects of the matters in the Bill that the House has just passed. The hon. Gentleman makes his point well, and I fully understand his criticism of the procedure. It is not for me to agree or disagree with him, but I am quite sure that the Procedure Committee and others will take seriously the points that he has made.

Income Tax

3.12 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I beg to move,

That the draft Capital Allowances (Structures and Buildings Allowances) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 June, be approved.

The instrument before the House gives effect to the amendments to several tax Acts, principal among them the Capital Allowances Act 2001. The Government are determined to ensure that the UK tax system supports business investment and jobs. At 19%, the UK has already reduced its corporation tax rate to the lowest in the G20, and it is scheduled to fall still further to 17% in 2020. The Government recognise the importance of providing tax reliefs for genuine business costs, which is why we are taking steps to increase the overall competitiveness of the capital allowances regime.

At the autumn Budget, we announced an increase in the annual investment allowance for plant and machinery to £1 million per annum for two years, meaning that businesses will be able to deduct five times more qualifying plant and machinery expenditure in the year in which they make the investment. However, the UK is currently the only G7 economy that offers no capital allowances on investments in structures and buildings. That means there are no allowances on critical investments in bridges, roads or tunnels. It also means no allowances on investments in shops, offices or factories.

In the 2018 Budget, the Government set out to rectify the gap in the capital allowances regime by providing relief to businesses on qualifying expenditure on new non-residential structures and buildings. The Finance Act 2019 gave power to that effect, and I am now pleased to introduce the draft statutory instrument necessary to enact the change. It was important to follow the legislative process to provide taxpayers with certainty that the allowance will come into force as soon as possible, to minimise the risk of deferred investment and to allow the Government to consult extensively on this important measure, as we have done.

At the Budget, the Government published a detailed technical note for consultation that outlined the key features of the new allowance. Businesses that invest in new builds or renovations on or after 29 October 2018 will be able to claim tax relief at 2% a year on eligible costs, over a 50-year period. Following the first round of consultation, officials met scores of different companies, representative bodies and individuals from throughout the country. At the spring statement 2019, the Government published detailed draft legislation and invited further comments from stakeholders.

I am pleased to report that the vast majority of stakeholders welcomed the structures and buildings allowance. I extend my thanks to the many individuals and organisations that participated in both rounds of consultation, either in person or through written representations. Stakeholder responses have been a considerable help in the shaping of the new allowance, leading to amendments, including those relating to short-term leaseholds, eligible pre-trading costs and periods of disuse.

As I have said, the structures and buildings allowance has been designed to enable businesses to claim tax relief on the costs of new non-residential structures and buildings.

This means that qualifying expenditure on new builds or renovations for which all the contracts for the physical construction works were entered into on or after 29 October 2018 will be eligible for relief. Relief will be available for any business that fulfils two conditions: first, that it owns a qualifying asset, either through direct building or by acquiring one from a developer; and secondly, that it uses the building for a qualifying activity for which the business is chargeable for UK tax.

Qualifying persons will be able to claim tax relief at 2% a year on eligible construction costs, including renovations. The allowance will apply across all sectors and sizes of UK trade, benefiting business owners, workers and the wider economy. The relief will be limited to the costs of the physical construction of the structure or building, and will not apply to the costs of acquiring the underlying land, rights over land, or planning permissions.

In summary, the regulations will enact important improvements to our capital allowances regime, in line with the power this House approved in the Finance Act 2019. Since 29 October 2018, business investments in new, and renovations of old, structures and buildings have been accompanied by an expectation of this allowance of 2% relief per annum against income or corporation tax bills. It is now important for the House to honour the commitment made in the Finance Act 2019 by enacting the regulations, thereby bringing them into force in line with their commencement provisions. I therefore commend the regulations to the House.

3.18 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The Minister said that he got support from businesses for tax relief. Well, that is not a surprise: when people are offered tax reliefs, they will accept them because it is cash in their pocket.

In a document published on 5 March last year, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that our current tax system

“does not consistently deduct the cost of investment meaning that some investments are discouraged, some are incentivised and some are unaffected by the tax system.”

It went on to say that there should be

“a clear policy justification”,

which should be focused, and that we should ensure

“that the benefits outweigh the costs.”

The document also said:

“Too many reliefs have weak or poorly articulated policy aims”,

and that

“digging into the details and evaluating how each relief stacks up against a clearly stated tax design”

is important. It continued:

“The bar for introducing any new relief should be high.”

On the very same night, the Chartered Institute of Taxation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies had a debate about business tax reliefs, which asked whether they were

“corporate welfare or essential elements of the tax system”.

The question is, do we think they are an essential element of the tax system? In the debate on the Finance Bill, we raised these matters, but we were not able in any way to amend the law, which is regrettable. However, we did raise, in a sense, the whole question of tax reliefs, and it is a desperate shame to find ourselves here again debating the introduction of what amounts to another

corporate tax relief, when so little has been done to sort out the scope of the scores of tax reliefs already in operation.

At the last count, the Government were responsible for managing 115 principal tax reliefs totalling £430 billion, as well as 80 minor tax reliefs totalling an estimated £690 million. However, alongside those, there are up to 235 reliefs in operation for which we have no cost data at all. I repeat: we are forgoing revenue on 235 tax reliefs, but Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs does not count the cost. I find that quite remarkable. I cannot think of a single other policy area where the Treasury would be uninterested in Government expenditure.

Ministers tell us that the cost of these reliefs is negligible so there is no point making efforts to manage them more effectively. I do not believe that that holds water, especially when we consider that the Government regularly deprive citizens of small but essential sums of social security for the crime of being perhaps five minutes late to the jobcentre. Perhaps the Minister can explain why the Government can give away millions to large companies without counting the cost, while stripping the poorest in our society of the pounds and pence they need to survive. I ask that especially in the light of an interesting article by the Minister in *The Sunday Times* some weeks ago about our being one nation. It would be interesting to hear him comment on that. I agree with him that we have to bring the nation back together again, and that is an important part of this issue. I would also like to know what efforts the Government have made to improve the management of tax reliefs at HMRC. Will the Minister now commit to a moratorium on introducing further tax reliefs, unless the annual cost data on them can be collected and published by HMRC?

Turning to the measure before the House, it will not surprise anyone here that the pile of opaque and unaccountable tax reliefs is being added to, with yet another tax relief for businesses that does not necessarily fit the robust criteria set by the Institute for Fiscal Studies—criteria that this House should set in relation to the introduction of tax reliefs.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman was talking about the cost of tax reliefs. Has he worked out the cost to UK business and investment of imposing a policy that would requisition 10% of businesses that have more than 250 employees? I understand that that is Labour party policy.

Peter Dowd: I do not think it is a question of requisitioning; it is about a different approach and taking a different look at engaging workers in our economy. That is it—it is as simple as that. I appreciate and completely accept that the hon. Gentleman does not accept the concept, but that does not mean that the concept is wrong.

The Government boast about their corporation tax giveaways, but it is clear that even those billions, stripped from our public services, are not enough to satisfy their intentions in relation to corporate welfare. Furthermore, it seems that, in their rush to hand out giveaways, they have given no consideration to how this measure will fit into the already complex and convoluted system of capital allowances. It is not necessarily a question of saying whether I agree or disagree with these things; it is a question of saying we have a convoluted system—and it is incredibly complex. We do not have any review

[Peter Dowd]

mechanisms of these reliefs, and we do not have any sunset clauses on them—in fact, we have debated that in Committee in the past, but the Government seem to have no response.

This new measure on structures and buildings allowances will, as the Minister said, provide relief for qualifying expenditure on new non-residential structures and buildings incurred on or after 29 October 2018 on a 2% per annum, straight-line basis. At the Finance Bill earlier this year, the Government blocked our attempts to require Ministers to publish details of the likely take-up of this new allowance across different-sized businesses.

Despite those concerns, the secondary legislation before us remains vague, with important definitions that would assist in addressing areas of ambiguity delayed and deferred to guidance. We have had lots of this deferral to guidance, secondary legislation and other things—potentially even tertiary legislation in due course. It really is not good enough. We need transparency and openness; we do not need to be told, “This is going to happen, but the detail may come a little later on.” Similarly, the decision by Ministers to delay finalising the details of this new allowance until June, when the final stages of the Finance Bill took place in January, is yet further evidence of the continued environment of uncertainty that business is forced to operate in under this Government.

The Chartered Institute of Taxation rightly criticised the Government over these new regulations, stating at the time of the 2018 Budget that

“it is neither sensible nor responsible for the government to introduce reliefs into the tax system at a time before they have consulted upon the scope and application of the relief or fully considered, and are therefore able to legislate for, the details of the relief.”

It concluded that these regulations will only complicate matters, particularly given that plant and machinery are excluded. That means that taxpayers are still required to identify the plant and machinery in buildings, with the same grey area that currently exists between buildings, fixtures, plant and machinery. The administration of this new allowance will be substantial and burdensome for businesses, flying in the face of the Government's initial promise to simplify the tax system.

The demotion of much of the detail of this allowance to secondary legislation remains of great concern to the Opposition, particularly given that capital allowances are yet another means of extending tax breaks to large businesses, many of which do not necessarily need the relief. The reality is that many small and medium-sized businesses that desperately need support from the Government will struggle to access this relief without incurring substantial costs as a result of hiring tax experts to guide them through its complexities.

Rather than continuing this piecemeal approach, which seems only to confuse and deter businesses in need, Labour remains committed to carrying out a review of tax reliefs once in government to evaluate individual reliefs against their effectiveness and value for money. It seems that, again, this opaque Government will not commit either to a proper review of the measure before us or to a wider review of the full plethora of their corporate relief giveaways.

This is no way to run the country. Once again, the devil will be in the detail of the guidance that HMRC publishes, particularly when it comes to what constitutes qualifying expenditure, the definitions of terms such as “dwelling-house” and “mixed-use building”, and clarification of the treatment of successive leases and the new flexible rules in instances where expenditure is incurred after a building comes into use.

Although the Opposition remain sceptical about the introduction of yet another poorly-considered allowance on top of the 1,200 allowances that already exist—many of which have existed for decades without review—we will not be voting against the secondary legislation today. Instead, we will wait to scrutinise the guidance when HMRC publishes it later this year. [Interruption.] I can hear Ministers sniggering. A responsible Opposition will vote against something when they disagree with it and will support something when they agree with it. When we want to consider the detail, implications and other information that comes from the Government, we will hold back. That is what a responsible Opposition should do—not automatically vote against or support things willy-nilly—and that is what we are trying to do, because we are being responsible. Ministers can snigger at that responsible approach if they want to, but we will continue to be responsible, and we will continue to oppose this Government as and when we feel it is necessary to do so.

3.29 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Let me begin by thanking the Association of Taxation Technicians and the Chartered Institute of Taxation, which have provided me with some information so that I can help to scrutinise this incredibly technical piece of legislation.

I would first like to raise a couple of issues. The tax information and impact note on these regulations explicitly says that there is

“no impact on civil society”.

This is directly contradicted in the explanatory memorandum, paragraph 12.1 of which says that charitable organisations will be required to keep more documentation and to gather together that documentation, which they currently do not have to do. I would suggest that there is a direct impact on civil society, so the tax impact and information note should be updated to reflect that.

I have the same concerns as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), on the decision to implement the relief in this way. In June 2018, the Office of Tax Simplification published a report called, “Accounting depreciation or capital allowances? Simplifying tax relief for tangible fixed assets”. It is hugely riveting, I promise. The report said that the tax system should look to reduce, or at least not increase, the different types of expenditure in classes of assets that have to be identified solely for tax purposes. Unfortunately, the way in which the Government have chosen to do this increases the number of classes of assets that have to be identified purely for tax purposes. As this directly contradicts an OTS recommendation, it would be useful if the Minister explained why the Government have chosen to do it this way, and not to change the current system of capital allowances to include this measure, perhaps along with plant and machinery, as this is already a very difficult distinction for people to make. With the lack of

published guidance, I fear that the distinction between plant and machinery, and fixed assets, meaning the building itself, will remain difficult to assess. I have concerns about that.

The other issue is about the timing of this legislation. It was announced as something that would happen immediately as part of the Budget on 29 October 2018. However, we are now considering these regulations in July, without the publication of the guidance. We do not have the guidance to be able to work out whether the way in which the measures are being implemented makes sense. And this is not just about parliamentarians' scrutiny. Businesses and organisations that have operated under this new system since 29 October have had to keep all the relevant documentation since then without knowing what the relevant documentation is and without knowing the exact classes of assets they can claim against under this tax relief.

Given the huge amount of uncertainty businesses are already experiencing because of Brexit, it is incredibly concerning that they must deal with this additional uncertainty. I get what the Government are trying to do; they are trying to make it a more attractive proposition to create and renovate properties. I understand that logic, but they have actually implemented this measure in a cack-handed way that has increased uncertainty this year, and certainly until we get the guidance and see how things are beginning to work.

Concerns have been raised with me about the fact that the Government have chosen not to include prisons and student housing, for example, in this legislation because they fall under a residential remit, rather than under the remit of a commercial property. I understand why they have chosen to do this, but it seems to be a missed opportunity. We cannot class prisons and student accommodation in the same kind of residential category as we would class a dwelling-house, and there may have been an opportunity—particularly given the pressing need for changes in the prison system—to include some flexibility. I am not saying that this is what the Government definitely should have done, but I do not think they considered it enough; nor did they put forward an argument why they did not do it in the documentation that they have published.

The Treasury has said that this will cost £585 million in 2023-24—that that will be the Exchequer impact. Neither the tax information and impact notes, nor any of the other documentation that I can find—perhaps it was more explicitly mentioned in the Budget and I did not catch it—says what is the expected economic impact in terms of an increase in GDP as a result of these changes, which would presumably result in a commensurate increase in the tax that the Exchequer receives. It would be useful to know whether the Government think that this tax relief is value for money and whether it will generate more tax revenue for the economy than it will cost.

The Government have told us that it will cost £17.7 million for new HMRC systems to be put in to administer this tax, but they have not been clear about the economic benefit that they see coming out of it. That is partly, I think, because of what HMRC said in the tax information document:

“Since Budget 2018, HMRC has attempted to gather further information on the number of those”

businesses

“likely to claim the SBA.”

However, it has not been able to do so. I do not understand how the Government can tell us that this tax relief will have a positive economic benefit if they cannot even tell us which types and numbers of businesses are likely to claim it. It would be useful to know whether the Government have any firmer details on that since the note was published and any information on whether they think that there will be an economic benefit.

My next point, which I am sure the Minister will get very used to me raising during our future deliberations on SIs and in finance debates, is on when the Government intend to review this tax relief. This is a massive tax relief in terms of the fiscal impact that it will have. The Government are saying, I assume, that it will have a positive benefit in terms of its economic impact. I would like to know when they will review it to see whether it is working as intended, because there is no point in having something that will not work as intended. I am sure the Minister will say that there will be a review in three to five years' time that will be sent to the Treasury Committee and that I just have to look at the Government's website at some unspecified point during that period. However, can he provide a bit more detail on the exact timescales for a review of this tax relief, given that it is so significant in nature, so that we parliamentarians can scrutinise whether the Government have actually achieved what they set out to do?

My last point is about the guidance, which I have already mentioned. When the guidance is published, will the Minister be sure to ask somebody in his team to ensure that Labour Front Benchers and I have access to it and are made aware of where it is, because it may be published in some place on the HMRC website that we, as people who do not run businesses that claim capital allowances, will not regularly check? It would be incredibly useful if he committed to fulfilling that small ask as well as answering many of my questions.

3.58 pm

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to both Opposition Front Benchers for their comments, which were quite wide-ranging. I will try, if I may, to keep my responses reasonably short.

The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) began with a very wide-ranging critique of reliefs as such. He then cited the Institute for Fiscal Studies on the reliefs in general that have built up in the tax system over the past several decades. However, in trying to criticise the Government on the grounds that the system is not consistently applied across different reliefs, he does not reflect on the fact that this measure is designed to correct an anomaly. We have an anomaly in our system in that we do not offer reliefs on structures and buildings. We are therefore removing a disincentive to investment and levelling the playing field in a way that has a clear policy justification.

The hon. Gentleman said that there is an absence of transparency, but there were 18 weeks of consultation in two phases on both the principle and detail, so it is hardly clear that that is true. He also implied that a Labour Government would remove tax reliefs. If that is true, I would welcome him indicating to the House which reliefs a Labour Government would propose to remove or abolish.

Peter Dowd: The Minister ought not to put words in my mouth. I exhort him to read what I said. Unlike the leadership candidates, who are spending money left, right and centre, the Opposition are responsible. The point I was trying to make is that it is important to review reliefs. There are 1,200 of them. Many other countries review reliefs—there is nothing particularly radical about that, and I exhort the Government to do so.

Jesse Norman: It is hard to make swingeing criticism of the idea of reliefs and then not indicate any that a Labour Government would propose to abolish. It raises the question whether the Labour party is serious about this. The hon. Gentleman described these reliefs as “corporate welfare” and giving away millions of pounds to large companies. All companies benefit that have qualifying investments and are subject to UK taxation in the way indicated; it is not just larger companies. Many of the reliefs he describes are negligible and therefore should not necessarily be the target of extensive review. He talks about the reduction in corporation tax as though it is a bad idea but neglects the fact that significantly more corporation tax has been raised following these reductions.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for being willing to give way. I am sure he is aware of the evidence repeated over and over again by the bodies that have looked into this that the reason for increased corporation tax take was not the reduced rate of corporation tax—rather, it related to the return to profitability of banks and so forth. It was not related to the reduction in rate, and just about every authoritative study that has looked at this has suggested that.

Jesse Norman: Those companies’ return to profitability was the result of proper, prudent financial management. I remind the hon. Lady that in the specific case of the financial sector, the bank levy has taken billions of pounds a year more from the banks than the Labour tax that it replaced. I do not think her view has credibility.

The hon. Member for Bootle criticised the timetable, but it is designed specifically to keep uncertainty to a minimum. Far from the suggestion that it would create more uncertainty, the point of my saying that qualifying expenditure on new builds or renovations for which all contracts for the physical construction works were entered into on or before 29 October 2019 will be eligible for relief is precisely to give very clear direction to future investment. I do not agree with many of the points that he made.

Kevin Hollinrake: Does the Minister think that the hon. Member for Bootle understands how reliefs work? He said that it was about giving away millions of pounds to corporations. Actually, if a corporation invests on the back of a relief, it still costs that corporation money; it just makes the investment slightly more attractive.

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is right. The point of the relief we are giving through the structures and buildings allowance is precisely to level the playing field and to enable and encourage more business investment.

The hon. Members for Bootle and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) asked about reviewing or monitoring. As they will be aware, the Treasury and HMRC

continuously monitor tax reliefs according to the level of risk they pose, and they publish annual statistics on tax reliefs, including cost estimates where they are available.

I will now turn to the other points made by the hon. Lady. She says charitable organisations will be heavily affected. The statement that the acquirers of structures or buildings are asked to fill out consists of four factual pieces of information: first, what is the asset; secondly, when was it built; thirdly, when did it come into use; and, lastly, how much did it originally cost? That is not a heavy burden on any institution.

Kirsty Blackman: To be fair, I did not say it was a “heavy” burden. The tax information and impact note says that there will be

“no impact on civil society”.

That is not true because there will be an effect on civil society. It may be a minor effect, but there will be one, and I was just asking for the tax information and impact note to be updated to reflect that.

Jesse Norman: I perfectly understand, and it is a verbal point. This is subject to a de minimis factor: any Government action will have some minuscule effect on many people, but that does not mean that it is significant enough to register.

The hon. Lady raised a question about process, which I have already addressed. She raised a point about the Office of Tax Simplification. The difficulty with the suggestion it has made is that, if the boundary were removed between buildings that get relief at 2% and plant, fixtures and so on that get relief at 6%, the result would have to be a combined rate of relief somewhere in-between. The effect for many businesses with long-term investments in plant would be that they lost out through reduced relief or delayed relief if the rate went down. There would be a significant number of losers and a negative impact on business investment, when we are trying to have the exact opposite effect.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of student housing. This measure is of course specifically aimed away from residential property and other buildings that function as dwellings and towards commercial properties. For that reason, student housing is not included, but hotels and care homes will qualify because the underlying businesses are service providers whose premises are being used in a trade.

Kirsty Blackman: Much of the student housing in my constituency works almost as serviced apartments. They are apartments with one shared kitchen and a number of flats, and they are much more like a hotel or care home in that they are run as businesses and students are there only for a short period. Are those kinds of serviced dwellings for students included or are they not included?

Jesse Norman: The answer is that they are not. The hon. Lady is welcome to write to me with specific details of the student housing in her constituency. Of course, many students live in housing that universities would regard as equivalent to hotel accommodation of years ago. However, the general rule is that it is not included, but that hotels and care homes—where there is such trade, as I have described—are included. I think that is a tolerably clear line.

The final point the hon. Lady raised was about the impact on GDP. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that the capital allowances package announced at the Budget would increase business investment by 0.4%, so that number has been calculated and put into the public domain.

Peter Dowd: The Minister is talking about numbers and putting the record straight. He referred earlier to the bank levy and bank surcharging. In 2017-18, they raised £2.6 billion and £1.9 billion, totalling £4.5 billion, and in 2023-24, they will raise £1.1 billion and £2.1 billion, totalling £3.2 billion, so they will raise considerably less than they raise now, not the billions more that the Minister suggests they will raise.

Jesse Norman: If I may, I will just correct the record. I said that they have raised billions more—and they have raised billions more—than the pre-existing Labour tax. That is a fact of the financial environment that surrounds banks, just as this is a new fact for the financial environment that surrounds corporations more generally. And on that point, I will sit down.

Question put and agreed to.

Dangerous Drugs

3.49 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I beg to move,

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 4 June, be approved.

I am sure that Members of the House will have noticed that the amendment made by the draft order is based on scientific and technical detail and is therefore distinct from other amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 that have recently been brought forward for debate. In that context, I place on record my thanks to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs for its expert advice on the matter and for its continued work, which has informed the draft order.

The purpose of the draft order is to amend schedule 2 to the Misuse of Drugs Act by reducing the scope of the generic definition of the compounds referred to as the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids. Given the concerns that have been expressed in other debates on the subject, I should clarify that it will not repeal the generic definition of the compounds commonly known as Spice and Mamba, which will remain subject to control. This measure follows the advisory council's recommendation, which was published on 22 December 2017. I hope that it will be helpful to hon. Members if I explain the background to the recent control on these drugs and why the Government are making this amendment.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I am relieved that the Minister specifically mentions Spice; having worked for a short time in the Ministry of Justice, I have seen exactly the damage that comes from that drug. Will he confirm that this statutory instrument is in effect simply a tidying-up exercise—a technical change—and will not in any way mean a looser regime of drug licence management?

Mr Hurd: Like my hon. Friend, I have seen the results of Spice and Mamba directly while out on patrol on the streets of Newcastle. We have had passionate debates in this place about those drugs—particularly with my hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who are passionate about their impact on town centres. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) and other colleagues that the draft order is not in any way a relaxation of controls; it is simply a response to representations made by the scientific community about the need to revisit our regulations because of some consequences that were not intended when they were originally drafted.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is really good to hear the Government accepting solid evidence when it comes to drugs issues, because they do not have a very good record in that respect. In Scotland, we have had 1,000 drug deaths in the past year. The Select Committee on Scottish Affairs is doing an inquiry into the reasons behind that, and one thing that we have found is that the Misuse of Drugs Act gets in the way of treatment and recovery and is an impediment to dealing with the problem, yet the Home Office will not send a Minister to our inquiry. Will the Minister confirm—today,

[Pete Wishart]

now—that a Home Office Minister will turn up, give evidence and defend the Government's approach to drug use?

Mr Hurd: I am more than happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman offline about this. I am not aware of the underlying issue, but I certainly agree with him about the absolute need to proceed in this complex and extremely sensitive area on the basis of evidence. I am more than happy to have a conversation with him outside the Chamber about the Scottish question and situation, because I am not aware of that problem.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I gave some background to the recent control of these drugs and why the Government are making this amendment. We rely on independent experts, the ACMD, which first published advice in 2014 on the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids—a group of compounds, commonly referred to as Spice and Mamba, that mimic the effects of cannabis. The advice recommended that these compounds be captured by way of a generic definition as class B drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act because of their harms and widespread availability. This followed the control of the first generation of synthetic cannabinoids in 2009 and of the second generation in 2013.

The ACMD also recommended that the compounds be placed in schedule 1 to the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, because it could not confirm any known medicinal uses at the time. Placing these compounds in schedule 1 reflects the fact that they have little or no known medicinal or therapeutic benefits in the UK, and will mean that they can be legally accessed only with a Home Office licence, which is generally issued for research or industrial purposes.

Following the ACMD's recommendations, the changes came into effect on 14 December 2016, but shortly after their implementation, the ACMD and the Home Office were informed by representatives of the research community that the breadth of the definition meant that it captured a large number of research compounds, many of which were reported not to be synthetic cannabinoids. As a result of the broad, generic definition, research institutions needed to obtain schedule 1 licences when they may not otherwise have needed them.

The licensing process is in place to ensure a minimised risk of misuse and diversion of, and harm from, controlled drugs. However, as I am sure the House will agree, we would not wish to place substances under control and make them subject to the licensing requirements where there is no need to do so. It is therefore important that we amend the definition, which has created an additional formal regulatory burden for the research industry relating to compounds that were never intended to be controlled. To remedy this, the ACMD made a further recommendation in December 2017 that the scope of the generic definition be reduced.

The order amends the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 to reduce the scope of the generic definition of the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids, so that while those compounds that have been found to cause harm are captured by it, fewer compounds are unintentionally captured. Owing to the continued harms posed by the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids, the order does not repeal the generic definition. I repeat for

clarity that such compounds as those that go by the street name of Spice and Mamba will continue to be caught by the generic definition.

The order, if accepted and made, will come into force on 15 November. A further statutory instrument will be introduced via the negative procedure to make the necessary parallel amendments to the generic definition under schedule 1 of the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 and in the Misuse of Drugs (Designation) (England, Wales and Scotland) Order 2015, so that those compounds unintentionally captured will no longer require a Home Office licence for the conduct of research, as they will no longer be controlled.

I hope that I have made the case to the House for amending the generic definition of the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids so that it no longer covers a number of compounds that were unintentionally controlled. I commend the order to the Committee.

3.57 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): We will not oppose this statutory instrument. In fact, we welcome the proposed amendment to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Revising the generic definition of synthetic cannabinoids will mean that compounds never intended to be controlled will no longer be controlled, while those most likely to be misused and cause harm will be. That said, we must ensure that neither this change to drug policy nor any other adds to the problems that we already face in controlling the use of drugs.

The Government's approach to drugs since they took office in 2010 has been ideological and plagued by irresponsible cuts. The UK now has the highest recorded level of mortality from drugs misuse since records began. Under this Government, the UK has become the drug overdose capital of Europe.

There is nothing more important than preserving the life of our citizens, but the current woeful approach to drugs fails to do that, so it must be time to consider different approaches, based on what would most effectively reduce harm, such as overdose prevention units, commonly known as drug consumption rooms—places that take people off the streets, and provide them with a safe environment, clean needles and somewhere that they can engage with treatment to combat their addiction. Labour supports piloting such schemes.

There is also the use of cannabis oil for medical purposes. Last October, there appeared to be a breakthrough on this, when the Home Office brought in new legislation to allow expert doctors to issue prescriptions for cannabis-based medicines, if they believe that such treatment could benefit their patient. However, as we have learned from recent high-profile cases, there appears to be some confusion around the Home Office guidelines when it comes to bringing the substance into the UK. We need assurances from the Government that any changes they are making to drugs policy will be fully implemented, clear in how they will be delivered and effective immediately.

Opposition Members recognise that there needs to be a complete shift of emphasis, understanding and effectiveness in the UK drugs policy and we would be looking to establish a suitable forum, such as a royal or a parliamentary commission, to identify what works and what we need to do to make our drugs policy efficient. So, although we support the order and welcome

the changes as positive advances in drugs policy, there is still a long way to go in the bigger picture of drug control and legislation.

3.59 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The SNP also supports the order before us for many reasons, many of which are contained in the fantastic report from the Health and Social Care Committee, “Drugs policy: medicinal cannabis”, published this morning. We support it not least because we believe that, under the current regime, the potential exists for research and investigation into medicinal cannabinoids to be hindered, and in some cases blocked completely.

All hon. Members will have had constituents contact them about medicinal cannabis and the potential positive impact they feel it would have on them or their families in the face of sometimes horrendous medical conditions. I know that there are no simple answers to many of the questions facing the authorities and the Government, and that opinions in this place and throughout society are varied and sometimes conflicting. However, surely it is a primary duty of Government and the state to ensure the best possible health and welfare of its citizens, and I hope that we can all agree that those with chronic health conditions, sometimes causing unimaginable pain and suffering, should not be denied the potential fruits of research into cannabinoids simply because the legislation has not kept pace with scientific progress. As the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs made clear in its initial letter to the Minister at the end of 2017, when referring to the current statutory position:

“There are potential delays to clinical research as compounds within the scope of the MDR which move into trials in humans need to obtain appropriate licences and put practical arrangements in place for clinical trial sites”.

It is also important to note that the council’s recommendations, which have led to the order we are discussing today, were based on wide consultation with those directly involved in and managing clinical research, including the British Pharmacological Society, the Medical Research Council and the Royal Society of Chemistry. So we welcome the prospect of such trials and research becoming easier and more simplified. It is only through the scientific method of hypothesis, testing and analysis that our pharmacologists—that is easy for me to say, Mr Deputy Speaker—and clinicians can make the discoveries necessary to develop and improve on the treatment and medication available to those in desperate need. That is the story of all modern medicine in recent history, and I am glad that the order will give the scientific community some of the tools and legal protections needed in that regard.

We now know of some of the problems encountered by those attempting to access medicinal cannabis since the relaxation of legislation last year, and hope that those who have been stymied in their attempts to secure medication and treatments for their loved ones will see the changes in policy that we are making today as progress that they themselves have driven. It is disappointing, however, that the Minister, in his reply to the ACMD earlier this year, did not take the opportunity to take on board some of the council’s other recommendations that it feels would help scientific research and, in the long run, potentially help more people in need of improved and transformative medication. I understand the reasons

that the Minister gave in his letter, but I would ask that he give the council’s recommendations further consideration, coming as they are from a body not known for proposing such changes in law lightly.

I would be failing if I were not to draw comparisons between the broadly sensible, pragmatic approach taken by the UK Government in this instance, albeit slow, and their head-in-the-sand attitude to the cross-party consensus—which we have just heard from the Labour Front Bench—in Glasgow for progress on drug treatment facilities in that city. As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) highlighted, the west of Scotland has an appalling level of illegal drug abuse and addiction and a high number of deaths, and the Home Office’s refusal to allow the health authorities and third sector organisations in Glasgow to try to alleviate some of that suffering is in marked contrast to the spirit in which we are discussing the order before us.

Not so long ago, this Government had set their face against even entertaining the idea of medicinal cannabis, yet here we are today. In that spirit, I implore the Minister and his Government to think again on safe drug consumption rooms. We should be in the business of saving lives, which is exactly what that approach could do. We must give our pharmacologists and scientists every advantage as they seek to discover new treatments and medications, but, more importantly, we must alleviate the suffering of those, such as Alfie Dingley and Billy Caldwell, who have waited too long. We must all get our collective finger out in this place and improve the legislation.

We also owe it to the families, many of whom feel forced to smuggle in this life-changing treatment for their children. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who is not in her place, who recently travelled over to the Netherlands with Emma Appleby to secure the medicine required for her epileptic daughter, Teagan. The issues they faced, with Border Force initially confiscating the medicine amid much confusion, highlighted not only the inconsistency in the law, but that the law is not fit for purpose. The families are also forced to spend a lot of money, and often to fundraise, to travel overseas and secure medicine for their children. This is not right. We welcome the SI as a step in the right direction, therefore, but in doing so we urge the Government to do all they can to ensure that this process is robust but as quick as possible.

4.5 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I join others in welcoming this statutory instrument, but I ask the Minister why it has taken so long. The recommendation from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs was made in December 2017. Why has it taken more than 18 months to get to this point? Given the changes being made to facilitate research, for goodness’ sake, would it not have made sense to act immediately on its advice, rather than delaying for so long?

I urge the Government, despite their inclination, to go further and embark on a process that focuses on evidence, including the evidence of harm. Does the Minister think that drugs policy should be based strictly on evidence of how we best reduce harm? If he accepts that premise, he will accept the need for significant further reform.

[Norman Lamb]

Picking up on the point made by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), I urge the Minister to appear before the Scottish Affairs Committee. There is a danger that if Ministers refuse to attend Select Committees it will send out the most appalling signal to anyone else tempted not to respond to a Select Committee request to give evidence. This is such an important matter. The Scottish Government, to give them credit, want to trial new methods. Consumption rooms make enormous sense. There is evidence that we could significantly reduce the number of deaths from dangerous drug use through that sort of approach. It is scandalous that the Government are standing in the way of the trial in Glasgow of that much safer approach—standing in the way of good evidence-based policy making.

If the Minister accepts that we should be guided by the evidence of what works best to reduce harm, he would inevitably explore what they have done in Canada by ending the ludicrous prohibition on cannabis, which has brought about the most appalling side effects. So many young people are being driven into crime, too often ending up with criminal records, and being confronted by violence in the poorest communities in our country. The extent to which young teenagers from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are used by criminal networks to sell these drugs and are putting themselves at risk of extreme violence is shocking.

If the Government are interested in protecting young people from harm—both the violence that is an inevitable consequence of the illegal market and the risks of buying on the illegal market, where the only strains available now in places such as London are the most potent strains of cannabis that pose the biggest risk to a young person's mental health—the Government will see the sense of regulating the market and taking the market away from criminal networks. We hand billions of pounds a year on a plate to organised crime in the most ludicrous way. We put young people at risk of extreme violence. We put young people's health at risk. Instead, we could be raising tax revenues to educate people about the dangers of drugs—both currently illegal and legal drugs.

Let us remember that the most dangerous drug of all, in terms of harm to self and others, is alcohol—alcohol which is consumed in vast quantities in this very House of Parliament, for goodness' sake. The hypocrisy in this debate is breathtaking. Aspirants to become our Prime Minister—members of the Conservative Cabinet—make embarrassing admissions about misdemeanours from their past, while others have been convicted of doing the same thing and have had their careers blighted.

Let us end this hypocrisy. Let us follow the evidence. Let us regulate the market, take the criminals out of the market and protect our young people more effectively.

4.10 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who is a fellow Select Committee Chair: he chairs the Science and Technology Committee and certainly knows a thing or two about good evidence.

It is actually quite encouraging and unusual, in the case of an issue involving drugs, to see the Government accepting evidence and doing the right thing. This statutory instrument is a really good reform of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Of course synthetic cannabinoids, which could be used in research to try to develop treatments which we know could help countless people in our constituencies, should be taken out of schedule 2.

As I have said, it is unusual to see the Government accepting good evidence. They normally approach drugs issues uninformed by evidence, and are singularly unresponsive to developments and debates relating to such issues and to the environment that is an emerging feature of all our constituencies and communities. They turn their face against the international innovations that are springing up not only in Canada, but in Portugal, Germany and other countries that take a very different approach to dealing with the contagion of drugs-related problems in the community. This Government are immune to the mayhem that their general policy on drugs is currently generating.

The 1971 Act is not just in need of minor tinkering. It is in need of widespread reform, review and updating. We in the Scottish Affairs Committee are conducting an inquiry into problem drug use in Scotland, because in two weeks' time we expect to find that more than 1,000 people have died as a result of drug use. That means that 1,000 families will have been impacted by deaths that need not have happened. There are things that we could do to try to address and resolve this problem.

Our Committee had a fascinating session yesterday and I want to share it with the Minister. We do not know whether he will come to the Committee, but he will have to answer these questions; the Home Office will have to address the way in which it is currently handling drug issues and policies. I ask him to come to the Committee and tell us what he is going to do, because in one way or another we will get the answers from the Home Office.

As I have said, yesterday's session was absolutely fascinating. It was attended by senior police officers from across the United Kingdom, and even by a representative of the Government's own Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. There is overwhelming consensus and agreement that the criminal justice approach to drugs issues is failing. It is failing our communities, it is failing our constituencies, and, in particular, it has ultimately failed the bereaved.

We heard not just about this useful statutory instrument, in which a reclassification is liberalising policy, but about the constant ratcheting up—as a senior chief police officer put it—of drugs classification. Let us take the example of cannabis. Cannabis was classified as a B drug. The classification went down to C and then back up to B. We are hearing that there is overwhelming consensus that something different is required: we must start treating drugs as a health issue and not a criminal justice issue. I know that my colleagues in the Health and Social Care Committee are also looking into whether the general policy and its consequences could be changed and I am grateful to them for that.

Norman Lamb: I meant to mention the following case when I spoke earlier: a family in Norwich have just had to spend well over £1,000 on a private prescription for

their young son who has epilepsy. They will not as a family be able to afford more than a few weeks'-worth of paying for this privately. It is ludicrous that that family, desperately in need of help for their young boy, cannot get it through the NHS; I think there have been only three prescriptions so far under the NHS.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have allowed the debate to drift a little away from the scope of the debate, but I do not want it to drift too far. I ask Members to bear that in mind.

Pete Wishart: That is the point. It is all about this statutory instrument because it will help people like the family the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. It will supply the evidence and research so that that could happen. It is unacceptable that people, because they do not have this in place, are having to go abroad and are still being arrested when they come back to the United Kingdom. That was mentioned in the report from the Health and Social Care Committee today, so progress has been made, but we are looking forward to looking at the whole issue of cannabis when we go Portugal to see how decriminalisation has worked there. Portugal had drug deaths on a par with what Scotland is currently experiencing, but the number has been cut to a manageable level because of its approach to cannabis and decriminalisation.

As I say, yesterday's session of the Scottish Affairs Committee was fascinating. Let me tell the Minister something that the assistant chief constable of Scotland said because it is important for this particular measure. He said:

"There are 61,500 problematic users in Scotland just now. It is growing in number. For the vast majority, the end for them is death. And the criminal justice process is actually pushing people into a place where there is more harm."

That is from an assistant chief constable responsible for keeping people safe.

Someone on the Minister's own advisory council said:

"We are seeing police creating ways to reduce the harm done by the Misuse of Drugs Act. If we fully implemented the law of possession, we would be creating harm."

That is what we are hearing from everybody, but we are hearing nothing from the Government because they will not come to our Committee to tell us what they actually feel about this; they are not prepared to come to defend this, which is totally unacceptable. We now need to hear that they are prepared to come in front of us.

When the Government do talk about drugs issues, the policy is, "We don't want to send the wrong signal." A fat lot of good that does to people six feet under the ground as a result of failed drug policies, part of the ever-increasing drug deaths.

The Home Secretary is happy to dispense with all the compelling evidence—everything he hears, all the international examples about drug consumption rooms—because, as he said, of his own childhood experience in his own personal neighbourhood. The Government know the evidence about drug consumption rooms. The Government have even accepted the evidence about drug consumption rooms. The only thing the Government have not done is do anything about it. People are dying. Do something about it. This works: all international evidence shows that drug consumption rooms make

a difference. They stop people dying and allow them to get the treatment and recovery services that they should be entitled to.

It is appalling that the Government have one message on this: the belief that a drugs war can be prosecuted and won. All we need is the kids from "Grange Hill" and Nancy Reagan singing "Just say no." It is time that this Government grew up and accepted the real range of issues on this matter.

We know that a health approach to drugs issues is required. We know that problematic drug use is a result of a complex cocktail of deprivation, poor mental health, trauma, stigma and addiction disorders, but the Government's policy does nothing about this.

We want the Government to attend our Committee to defend their current drugs policy. I say to the Minister again: for his summing up, he can get his notes from his civil servants and get them to say that somebody will be coming to our Committee who will give us evidence and is prepared to defend the Government's policy, because right now this is unacceptable.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I thank the hon. Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) for their constructive approach to this narrow statutory instrument, which is essentially a tidying-up exercise to comply with requests from our research community. I am glad that that has been understood and welcomed. Mr Deputy Speaker, many speakers have taken advantage of your traditional generosity in straying over the boundaries of this SI into a broader conversation around drugs policy, and I acknowledge that passions on this run high. The demand for a review of policy will not go away, but I believe that this needs to be led by the evidence. Speakers today have presented one side of the debate, but those on the other side believe with equal passion that the evidence tells a different story. However, I do not think that this is the day to have a debate on drugs policy.

There is a lot of passion about attendance at the Scottish Affairs Committee, and if I was unclear in my response on that, it is because I am not technically the Minister for drugs. That invitation has gone to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), the Minister with responsibility for crime and safeguarding, and I am assured that she will respond in due course. She has not declined to attend, as has been suggested—[*Interruption.*] Well, I am assured to the contrary. Anyway, I am sure that she and her officials will have heard the passion behind this request and will respond in due course.

The fact of the matter is that today, the Government's policy on legalising cannabis and drug consumption rooms is set. Hon. Members will also be aware that a new Prime Minister will mean a new Administration, a new Government and an opportunity to reopen these debates where necessary. I am sure that many Members on both sides of the debate will be encouraging that to happen. I should say to the Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), for whom I have great respect, that I strongly believe that policy in all areas should be driven by evidence. That is why I welcome the

[Mr Nick Hurd]

fact that the Home Secretary has asked Dame Carol Black to lead one of the largest reviews of drug demand and supply for many years.

Norman Lamb: I welcome the appointment of Dame Carol Black to do this work. Will she be able to look at the experience from Canada, so that we can look at all the options in making our decisions about the right way forward?

Mr Hurd: We are determined to look at all aspects of drug demand and supply, and the terms of reference of the review are public. I want to add, because this is relevant to the context of the narrow debate that I thought we were going to have, that in the interests of updating evidence—this relates particularly to the right hon. Gentleman's point on updating evidence on harm—I have asked the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to review the current classification of synthetic cannabinoids in this context. That review is due to report by the summer of 2020, and I hope that he will welcome that.

I want to talk briefly about the issue of medicinal cannabis, which a number of Members took advantage of your generosity to address, Mr Deputy Speaker. As the Minister who led the work, under the direction of the Home Secretary, to change the law, I am pleased that we took that step at the pace that we did. It was clear to me that it was absolutely necessary, when we were confronted by the evidence from families who were suffering what I believed to be unnecessary hardship and pain as a result of regulation and law. As has been pointed out, the law liberalised the situation but effectively required prescriptions to be issued by specialist clinicians. As was disclosed in evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee, which reported today, there is clearly an issue around the levels of clinical confidence at the moment, and my colleagues in the Department of Health

and Social Care are absolutely determined to work closely with partners to try to build that clinical confidence, which is clearly a priority, so that more families do not have to suffer the pain and frustration that are clearly out there.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the Minister for his tolerance. What advice do we give to the family from Norwich whom I mentioned who are spending well over £1,000 on just three weeks' supply of cannabis oil for their son with epilepsy through a private prescription? They simply will not be able to afford to carry on, so what should they do?

Mr Hurd: The legal route that we have opened up is that if the situation complies with the various conditions in the framework set by the regulations, a prescription for such drugs is allowed, as long as that is what is recommended and approved by the specialist clinician looking at the case. Given where we are with the evidence base, and although our decisions were informed by expert advice, the right hon. Gentleman will understand that we had to put strict conditions in place in relation to the change being clinically led. This is not about decisions by politicians and not necessarily about decisions by GPs; it is about decisions by specialists in the area. I am sure that he will understand the reasons for our caution in that respect. As I said, the issue is now about how to build the research and evidence base to increase clinical confidence inside the NHS. That must be the priority at this time.

I have enjoyed this debate, which has ranged further than I expected, and I welcome the support for this SI and the proposed changes following recommendations from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 4 June, be approved.

Backbench Business

Whistleblowing

4.26 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House calls for a fundamental review of whistleblowing regulation to provide proper protection for a broader range of people.

I thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for his support in making the application to the Backbench Business Committee and all the other MPs who supported the application. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee, the Chair of which is sitting in front of me, for enabling this incredibly important debate to take place. I want to start by telling four brief stories to illustrate why facilitating whistleblowing is so important.

I was the Minister in the then Department of Health who initiated the review led by James Jones, the former Bishop of Liverpool, of the horror of what happened at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. In his report from June last year, the very first chapter deals with the nurses who tried to speak up in 1991 about what was happening in that hospital. However, the report refers to the silencing of those nurses' concerns and to a patronising attitude towards them, although they were trying to do the right thing. The consequence of not listening to those nurses is the extraordinary and horrifying conclusion of the report, which is that over 450 older people died following the inappropriate prescribing of opioids. These old people had gone in for rehabilitation but came out dead.

In this context, we can often be talking about life and death situations, so enabling and empowering people to speak up can literally save lives. That, at its most clear and stark, is why this matter is so important. The horrific scandal at Gosport hospital could have been stopped if those nurses have been listened to, but they were not, and that is an outrage in itself.

Scrolling forward to 2013, Dr Chris Day, a brave junior doctor working in a south London hospital, raised safety concerns about night staffing levels in an intensive care unit. It is in all our interests that brave people should speak out about safety concerns in any part of our health service, but perhaps particularly in intensive care units.

What happened to Dr Day, because he spoke out, is wholly unacceptable. He suffered a significant detriment. His whole career has been pushed off track, and his young family have been massively affected. Junior doctors in that unit were put in the invidious position of being responsible for far too many people compared with national standards, so he pursued a claim against both the trust and Health Education England. The NHS spent £700,000 of public money on defending the claim and, in large part, on attempting to deny protection to junior doctors who blow the whistle against Health Education England. Lawyers, disgustingly, were enriched.

Late last year, the tribunal that eventually heard Dr Day's case ended early after he was threatened with a claim for substantial costs. He and his wife could not face the prospect of losing their young family's home, so he caved in. That is surely scandalous treatment of a junior doctor. He was defeated by superior firepower.

We have the grotesque spectacle of the NHS, of all organisations, deploying expensive QCs to defeat a junior doctor who raised serious and legitimate patient safety issues.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's work on Dr Chris Day's case to get the answers we deserve on how he has been treated. Many whistleblowers face an inequality of arms at tribunals. They have often lost their job by that point, and they face a very difficult situation, with highly paid QCs running rings around them, which is often the result of employers trying to find loopholes in the law to avoid liability.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support in pursuing the Dr Day case, and I completely agree with the points he makes.

Sir Robert Francis, in his 2015 "Freedom to Speak Up" report, spoke about how NHS whistleblowers who had given evidence to him overwhelmingly experienced negative outcomes, and he talked of a hostile culture of fear, blame, isolation, reprisals and victimisation—in our NHS, for goodness' sake.

Those stories continue. The impact on individuals can be devastating and profound. They can be ostracised, abused and disadvantaged in their career, with dire consequences for their mental health. One nurse who tried to expose wrongdoing said, "I would never put myself in that position again. I would rather leave." What a damning indictment of how we treat people in our treasured and cherished public service.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman and I have both worked on the general issue of whistleblowing. I pay tribute to his leadership on the matter, along with that of my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who I hope will catch your eye later, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The right hon. Gentleman is making some very good points, and we know two things. First, we know there is strong concern across the country about how whistleblowers are being treated. We see it in the west midlands, and he is articulating the point. Secondly, we know whistleblowers help to ensure proper accountability and transparency. In my view, the work that he and others are doing on whistleblowing has not received anything like the amplification it requires.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with the points the right hon. Gentleman makes, and he makes them well. I will come on to discuss them in a moment.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) *rose*—

Norman Lamb: I will give way briefly, but I am nervous about the Deputy Speaker and overstaying my welcome.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Let me just reassure you on that. I hope I do not make anybody nervous.

Dr Johnson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, as he is being most generous with his time. He said that the doctor was feeling under pressure from the overwhelming firepower and the potential to incur

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

the NHS's substantial costs. What support did his union, perhaps the British Medical Association or defence unions such as the Medical Defence Union or Medical Protection Society, offer him on legal costs?

Norman Lamb: Shockingly, the BMA abandoned him, and that is a story in itself, which needs exploring further. Not just in the NHS but across the economy, people are often literally on their own, faced by expensive lawyers. I speak as a former employment lawyer and I know what happens in employment tribunals. They were intended as a layman's court, but they are anything but that these days.

The third story I want to mention is that of my constituent Mark Wright, a successful financial planner at RBS. Things started to go wrong after he raised concerns about unacceptable practices in the bank—this was before the crash. On 17 September 2008, immediately after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, an intranet statement was put up in RBS saying that the group was “well capitalised”. That was clearly an attempt to reassure staff, including staff shareholders, customers and investors that the bank was secure. Of course when the bank crashed, those staff shareholders lost a fortune, and many, including my constituent, believe that they were badly misled by that intranet statement.

Mr Wright's mental health was destroyed as a result of trying to challenge the bank, as was his career. He made a complaint to the Financial Conduct Authority, which reported his name back to the bank, for goodness' sake. The FCA was later criticised by the Complaints Commissioner. I pursued his complaint with the FCA and it denied knowledge of the intranet statement repeatedly to me, yet an internal FCA email has emerged, after a subject access request to the Complaints Commissioner. It was dated 14 March 2014 and it said

“the intranet notice that Mr Wright refers to was online between 17 September 2008 and January 2009... as staff used it to take reassurance that all was well which would tend to support Mr Wright's allegations”.

That was an email within the FCA, yet we were never informed of that email or of that finding in that explosive document.

Clearly, the FCA has a copy of that intranet statement, yet it will not or cannot disclose it to us. The FCA says that the law does not allow it to do so. RBS, which is part state-owned, will not disclose it, yet clearly it is in the public interest that it should be disclosed. I believe I was misled by Andrew Bailey, the chief executive of the FCA, who told me, in effect, that Mark Wright's allegations offered nothing that was not already in the public domain and he referred to an intranet statement by Fred Goodwin, which he said had been

“in the public domain for nearly 10 years”.

Yet the intranet statement has not ever been in the public domain. The Treasury Committee, which had looked into this, had never received a copy of it. So I was misled, and we have a regulator that is too close to the banks; that failed to protect Mr Wright's disclosure or his identity; that, crucially appeared to fail to take the allegations about the misconduct of that bank seriously; and that cannot or will not put a crucial statement into the public domain. Let us just think about the damage caused by bankers in the run-up to

the crash. Had we empowered people like Mark Wright to do the right thing, rather than destroyed them and ignored them, we might just have prevented the disgusting behaviour and greed of bankers, and we might now have seen some of those responsible for destroying our economy behind bars. As it happens, they have got away with it.

The fourth and final story is of foster carers throughout the country who are frightened to raise concerns about any behaviour from the council that they deal with. Of course, the council refers children into their care, so if a foster carer is concerned about the behaviour of a social worker and expresses concerns, that council can just stop the flow of children to them, and so their income stream—their ability to earn a living—disappears. This has a chilling effect on the willingness of any foster carer to speak out about child protection concerns, because they fear losing their livelihood.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does that not highlight how, whether in finance, the NHS or anywhere else, this happens in situations with a power differential and a hierarchy? Someone has power over someone else and can make them lose their job or lose what they love doing, so there is a constant threat.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We need effective legislation to redress that imbalance of power.

All the cases I have outlined highlight the value and importance of enabling people to expose wrongdoing. Effective protection for brave people who decide to speak out is first of all vital for that individual—they should be celebrated, not denigrated—but it also benefits us all if we give them protection. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said earlier, this is actually an issue of good governance. It is about keeping organisations honest; protecting businesses from fraud, crime and other wrongdoing; and maintaining the highest possible standards. Good protection for those who speak out acts as a deterrent against bad behaviour; closed, secret cultures, which cover up wrongdoing and destroy those who try to speak up, deliver poor public services or cheat customers in the private sector, particularly in financial services, or lead to the toleration of bullying, sexual harassment and so on. So often, non-disclosure agreements are the final step that keeps the wrongdoing secret, slamming shut the door on proper scrutiny. Things need to change.

The question is: does the current law work? Palpably, from the examples I have given, it is clear that it does not. First, it leaves out key groups—not only foster carers—that simply are not covered by the legislation. It leaves out job applicants, volunteers and priests. Just think about the abuse of children by so many priests over the past few decades. Had priests been given the protection to speak out, perhaps we would have prevented some of that dreadful abuse. The legislation leaves out non-executive directors and trustees. It leaves out relatives and friends of the whistleblower when they are victimised because of what the whistleblower has done. It leaves out someone who is victimised by being presumed to be a whistleblower—if a company thinks that someone has spoken out, even if they have not, and does something like dismissing them, that person has no rights under the legislation because they are not actually the whistleblower. That is a ludicrous situation.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and am sorry that I was not here at the start of the debate. Some time ago—I think when the right hon. Gentleman was at the Department of Health—I was the co-author of a review of the NHS hospitals complaints system. One reason why we were not more forceful on the point he is making was that we thought legislation was in the pipeline, or that there was an attempt to put things right for potential whistleblowers.

I am still concerned. In my own local authority area, Rhondda Cynon Taf, the Cwm Taf health authority has just been heavily criticised for maternity deaths. One of the people involved got in touch with me anonymously. I did not know what to do with the letter—I did not want to pass it to the authorities—so I passed it to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which was at that time completing a report on the Cwm Taf health authority. It is still a major problem and people are afraid. Even when they think there is greater understanding and leeway, people are afraid. We have to put that right.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with the right hon. Lady. Sir Robert Francis, who did the report in 2015, recommended the introduction of “freedom to speak up champions” in the NHS, and that has happened. However, this is an administrative process within trusts that, I am afraid, simply has not worked—that is the brutal lesson that we have to learn.

For those who are covered by the legislation, the law does nothing to enable a concerned person to speak up in the first place. For example, the law is silent on standards expected from employers, and it offers only inadequate protection after the event—after the person has been destroyed by a cruel organisation. The individual who then tries to pursue their rights under the legislation is too often faced by highly paid lawyers and is pressured into non-disclosure agreements, which, as I indicated, can result in wrongdoing never being exposed. Indeed, we know that the terms of some non-disclosure agreements are unlawful because they seek to shut up the individual and to stop them speaking out, even when a crime is involved.

Only a tiny percentage of cases that are pursued to the tribunal actually end up with a decision of the tribunal. To succeed, someone must show that the reason—or, if there is more than one reason, that the principal reason—for a dismissal is that the employee made a protected disclosure. They therefore open themselves up to false claims that other reasons existed. If the tribunal decides that there were other reasons, either the person's claim is dismissed or their compensation is reduced.

There is no full definition of the range of disclosures that are covered by the legislation, so the protection is completely uncertain. Disclosure has to be to a prescribed person, but what happens if someone does not know who to report their concerns to? They could easily find themselves entirely unprotected—for trying to do the right thing.

Mr Mitchell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Lamb: I am conscious that I am trying the patience of the Deputy Speaker, and I need to get to the conclusion of my remarks.

The brilliant organisation Protect highlights the fact that a number of laws, such as in the utility sector, make it an offence to disclose certain information and include no public interest defence exceptions for whistleblowing. Even if there is awful wrongdoing, the person is prevented from speaking out, because they would commit a criminal offence. That surely has to change.

The brutal truth is that brave people who do society a service by exposing wrongdoing are not adequately protected, and many have no protection at all. After Gosport, I met the Prime Minister and made the case for reform. I explained to her that these are life or death situations in many cases. I have heard nothing from the Prime Minister at all since then, and that was last summer. It is time for a fundamental review by the Government and for new legislation. Such a review needs to listen to all the interested parties—to the all-party group on whistleblowing, to Protect and to Compassion in Care, which has set out proposals as part of what it calls Edna's law. All must be involved, and we must look at international best practice.

The all-party group has a report due out soon. It follows a comprehensive survey, which included getting the views of very many people who have tried to whistleblow, and it will offer vital evidence to the Government. It will propose an office for the whistleblower, which could be of extremely powerful value in supporting people and would be a centre of excellence, providing guidelines to employers, monitoring activities and providing support, advice and training to members of the public, public institutions, private sector bodies and so on. It is a very important proposal.

I want a commitment from the Minister to undertake a thorough review, because it is long overdue. I also want a commitment to ensure that if the UK leaves the EU, it will at least meet the standards of the proposed new EU directive and preferably go much further. The UK was a pioneer, but the legislation is flawed and inadequate. New legislation to deliver high standards of governance in the public and private sectors is long overdue. We need safe space for brave people to do the right thing; effective mechanisms to hold people to account for wrongdoing that is uncovered, including potential criminal sanctions; and effective compensation and support for those who suffer as a result of speaking out.

4.50 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who has done such incredible work in this area and on the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking, on which most of my remarks will focus. Many points in his speech resonated with me, particularly when he mentioned a whistleblower who said, “If I knew then what I know now, I never would have spoken out.” Every single whistleblower I have been in contact with has said exactly that. If that is the case, we have got this drastically wrong.

There is so much good work going on. The all-party group is doing tremendous work, and many of those people are in the Public Gallery today. Whistleblowers are so valuable to us in so many ways, as the right hon. Gentleman described. The principle underpinning the work that is happening is that they should be encouraged,

[Kevin Hollinrake]

their contribution should be valued and, of course—more than anything—they should be protected. From my experience within the financial services sector, that is the opposite of what happens; I will allude to a number of cases during my speech.

Mr Mitchell: May I take my hon. Friend back to the last comment made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)? He talked about the importance of an office for the whistleblower and addressed the critical problem of the lack of effective high-level co-ordinating leadership, and in my view a national office for the whistleblower would be the answer. Does my hon. Friend agree that the creation of a national office for the whistleblower—to protect, advise and support whistleblowers by overseeing, co-ordinating, setting standards and holding to account the regulators and employers—is the right way to proceed? The vital point is that it would not investigate cases of whistleblowing; it would ensure that cases are properly investigated by existing bodies, identify failings and successes, and propose systemic improvements that would help to get us out of this very difficult situation.

Kevin Hollinrake: I support that principle and many other recommendations mentioned by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. I will be interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing, when he speaks about his group's recommendations.

I just know that this is something that we have got to get right that we have got wrong at the moment, because the people who step forward to take these risks can lose everything—their careers, their jobs and their livelihoods. It is devastating when they tell their loved ones that this is what they are doing. In addition, their colleagues, friends at work and self-esteem are put at risk. From the cases I deal with, it seems that that is all put at risk for no benefit, as people do not even achieve what they set out to by highlighting the issue, and they suffer devastating consequences as a result.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have not put in to speak because the issue that concerns me is still pending, but does my hon. Friend accept that even being a senior consultant is no protection against what can happen to someone who blows the whistle? I have a case of a senior consultant in an eye unit who became concerned about financial irregularity and, even worse, substandard treatment that was causing eyesight to be lost. The effect of his complaining was that he was the one who was suspended and who faced a General Medical Council examination. The Royal College of Ophthalmologists was simply shown the results of an internal inquiry, not the source material. The Care Quality Commission did nothing, and the GMC is only now beginning to look into his claims—now that it has dismissed the false allegations that were made against him. Is that not a disgrace?

Kevin Hollinrake: I could not agree more. My right hon. Friend highlights the importance of some of these cases. We have to ask why an organisation would not want to know about this. My role before coming to this place four years ago was as managing director of my

own business. We were quite a large business at that point. I dealt with all the complaints in the organisation because I wanted to know what was going on there, and that is the best way to find out. These people are our eyes and ears. We were an ethical business and we ran it well, but if anything was going off track, we would want to know about it. However, it seems that when these people step forward, the people around them—their superiors, I guess—too often feel that the situation is too risky and look to close down the complaints.

From the fair business banking perspective, we know that one third of all serious economic crimes are brought to light because of the actions of whistleblowers. It is very rarely the regulator that is going in there and identifying the problem and then dealing with it—in fact, quite the opposite. It is therefore absolutely fundamental that these people will step forward. All the whistleblowers we deal with say, “I would never do that again.” Other people in the sector hear about that and are then deterred from stepping forward. That is an absolutely intolerable situation. What these people do should be welcomed.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk talked about the case of Mark Wright. In my experience, this not just about the organisations themselves but also about the regulator. The regulator could take a much firmer stance. Whistleblowing is part of its processes. It has responsibilities under protected disclosure to deal with whistleblowers, but that is not what happens. It pays lip service to the issue of whistleblowing. It says, “Yes, okay, we’re dealing with that,” but the cases that I will highlight illustrate that that is not what has happened. The FCA has got a terrible reputation in this area.

Norman Lamb: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the sense one gets from the FCA is that it regards these people as irritants—troublemakers? The people who investigate the allegations of whistleblowers are often people who have been through the revolving door, in and out of banks and the regulator, and so are too close to the people they are supposed to be regulating.

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes. I ask myself all the time, “Why is it like this?” and that is one of the reasons—the revolving door. Those people are part of a wider group or club—the old boys’ tie kind of stuff. This cannot be allowed to be the case.

As I said, the right hon. Gentleman highlighted a case that was heavily reported where the FCA told RBS who the whistleblower was. That seems absolutely unthinkable, and it was criticised by the Complaints Commissioner. When the FCA dealt with the case of the chief exec of Barclays, Jes Staley, who had tried to find out the identity of a whistleblower, which is totally against protocol, he was fined a modest sum that was probably a few weeks’ wages for him. Where is the deterrent there for not treating whistleblowers in the wrong way?

In my own experience, Joanne Rossouw contacted me about fraud at Barclays relating to payment protection insurance claims under the Consumer Credit Act 1974. She felt that there was a total lack of protection and support from the FCA and that its communications were simply unacceptable. The case of Paul Carlier was heavily reported. He whistleblowed on foreign exchange dealers at Lloyds and was then unfairly dismissed. The FCA had promised to support his case and to provide

an opinion to the tribunal he went to when he was unfairly dismissed, but did not do so, despite Andrew Brodie at the FCA calling the Lloyds process for the treatment of whistleblowers a whitewash and a joke. That was not the only case—there were others that he dealt with. Yet these people are not sanctioned. Why is that?

Paul Moore, my constituent, was the first person to raise the issues at HBOS. In 2004, he described a toxic culture at HBOS, with pressured sales targets and people taking unacceptable risks in lending money. Of course, HBOS collapsed in 2008. He was unfairly dismissed. He was treated disgracefully by the Financial Services Authority, as it was then. As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk said, if we had taken a robust approach when whistleblowers came forward, it may have stopped the financial crash happening in the first place, which cost our taxpayers £1.8 trillion.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend is underlining the point that the regulators are stricken with lethargy when it comes to responding to whistleblowers. Does he agree that whistleblowers need the protection of an independent office to advocate for them with these bodies, which are sometimes very forbidding in the way they respond to the approach of whistleblowers?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to improve how we deal with whistleblowers and the legislation around them. We must also insist that regulators, which already have access to sanctions, deal with these issues robustly. There is a cultural problem in the FCA in dealing with this. That must be addressed, and it can only be dealt with by the leadership of the FCA.

The most egregious case I have dealt with over two years as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking is that of Sally Masterton. She was a senior risk manager at Lloyds. In 2013 she wrote a report called “Project Lord Turnbull”, which highlighted the fraud that was concealed at HBOS before the takeover by Lloyds. She identified a billion-pound fraud—these are not small numbers or small issues, which is perhaps why they are swept under the carpet. She was asked to set out her findings. She produced the report and gave it to her superiors. This was happening at the same time as a police inquiry into the low-level fraud that was happening at HBOS. She was then suspended and prevented from working with the police, despite the fact that the police had said in an email that she was vital to the investigation. She was later constructively dismissed.

She was then discredited. Lloyds wrote to the FCA to discredit her, effectively saying, “This person is a rogue employee. They are not a cogent witness.” The FCA accepted that without any investigation. That was in 2013. Five years later, Lloyds apologised to Sally Masterton, saying that she had been disgracefully treated for five years and admitting that it had tried to discredit her all the way through that process—imagine what those five years of her life were like. The FCA told Lloyds to intervene because she felt she had been terribly mistreated. Andrew Bailey himself had met Sally Masterton and determined that she had been disgracefully mistreated. Lloyds apologised to her and came to a financial settlement with her, but the FCA did not sanction anybody in Lloyds for that mistreatment. That is incredible.

All the FCA keeps telling me is that there is another investigation going on—Linda Dobbs’s investigation of Lloyds’s reporting of information before and after the HBOS takeover—but that is unacceptable. The FCA has already established the mistreatment, yet it will not move forward to sanction the people responsible. Under the senior managers regime, these people, including the chief exec, could be sanctioned, fined or banned. That is exactly what should happen.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very relevant point, and it applies to my constituent who suffered reputational damage following his whistleblowing about the High Speed 2 project. I am sure my hon. Friend will come on to talk about what either the FCA or another body can do to provide protection for whistleblowers and restore their reputation.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is right. The FCA has a huge opportunity. It should regulate without fear or favour, but that is not where we are. It constantly looks over its shoulder at the banks and seeks to defend their reputation by concealing the truth, rather than robustly investigating these issues.

I asked Andrew Bailey four times a simple question in connection with this issue: did he follow the processes set out on the FCA website for how it deals with whistleblowers? Sally Masterton’s case was supposed to be referred to his team within five days and then go through the proper process. Did he do that? He has not responded to that question four times. It is totally unacceptable.

Sally Masterton says in her protected disclosure to Andrew Bailey:

“This is the tenth time that whistleblowing issues have been raised with you and ignored”,

over a period of five years. That is despite the fact that the FCA itself, in communication within the FCA, has admitted her report was well drafted and presented, and one FCA person said to another:

“I see a couple of potential risks... We may get challenged as to what we”—

the FCA—

“did about this report when received or LBG’s treatment of Mrs Masterton”.

Stephen Kerr: We should also mention the fact that there was whistleblowing to the Financial Reporting Council on the audits done at HBOS about the amounts of money set aside against expected liabilities. The head of the FRC, Stephen Hadrill, appeared before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, of which I am a member, and said some really interesting things about ongoing inquiries with other regulators in relation to whistleblowing, but nothing further has been said.

Kevin Hollinrake: I think this is about KPMG’s audit of HBOS in 2008, which was signed off a few months before HBOS went bust, despite the fact that the risks to that business were clear. The FRC then gave KPMG a clean bill of health. There was the revolving door between the FRC and the auditors as well. It is a very big concern, which I know my hon. Friend has raised in his Select Committee work.

Ann Clwyd: I am sure everybody would like to join me in paying tribute to Julie Bailey, who was one of the best whistleblowers in the NHS. She triggered the Mid Staffs inquiry and the Francis report, as well as raising many other issues. She is now living in Wales. The way that Julie Bailey was treated after she became a very well-known whistleblower is an absolute disgrace. It is an example of what happens to whistleblowers, and it does not matter how well known they are.

Kevin Hollinrake: The right hon. Lady pays a very important tribute and makes a very important point about how we can persuade more people to come forward. It has to be about how they are protected and looked after. Looking at other regimes internationally and how they deal with this will be an important first step in reforming our whistleblowing procedures.

The big thing I would say about all the issues I deal with is that they go right to the top of these organisations. These are not at low level, they go right to the top. They must be dealt with—yes, by whistleblower reform, and, yes, by a regulator that is far more robust and regulates without fear or favour. I believe we need other measures, including a public inquiry into some of these situations and into the circumstances of the disgraceful treatment of many businesses, particularly by Lloyds and Royal Bank of Scotland.

I endorse many of the recommendations made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. I think we need a much more robust Financial Conduct Authority regulator. Culturally, the biggest issues in the regulator need fixing. We should look at whether we should provide financial incentives for whistleblowers of the right nature. We do need to make sure that our regulator goes in robustly when we see these mistreatments or improper practices, together with our law enforcement agencies. That is what happens in the States in these situations. It is a case of saying, “Either you deal with us and you deal with these issues, or we really will take further steps, including potential criminal sanctions.”

The situation is not where we want it to be, but I conclude by thanking the whistleblowers who do come forward. They are so important, and we would not be where we are today in understanding what has happened in the banking sector without the incredible contribution of many of the whistleblowers I deal with.

5.9 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in this debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on helping to secure it in time generously allocated by the Backbench Business Committee. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who—along with so many other colleagues present—has worked so hard to ensure that the issue gets the attention that it deserves.

I have spoken in this House before about my constituent, Ms Julia Davey, who ran two successful businesses, Angelic Interiors Ltd and Angel Group Ltd. Despite fixed assets and shareholder funds worth multi-millions across the two businesses, they both ended up being placed into administration, which has lost Ms Davey more than £6 million. She followed advice from Lloyds bank during her time running the two businesses, and she believes that responsibility for the liquidation of her assets lies with it.

In 2009, unbeknown to Ms Davey, her account was transferred by Lloyds to its business support unit. Two years later, she was told that she had to pay for the services of a so-called turnaround company, Baronsmead Consultancy, which went on to charge her extortionately for its work. In good faith, she paid it more than £6 million in costs and fees, only to discover from a well-placed whistleblower inside Baronsmead that, far from working in her interests, it was taking her money while colluding with Lloyds to put her out of business and into administration.

Sadly, in the 18 months in which I have been trying to help Ms Davey since our last debate on the topic, nothing has progressed. Ms Davey is still being pushed through bankruptcy processes that she should not have to face. Like the constituents of other hon. Members, and like others who have been mentioned in this debate, she has found her life left in ruins. Her mental and physical health have both been hit, and she tells me that her wellbeing has been further disregarded by Deloitte, which took her to court at a time when it knew that she was the sole carer for her mother, who was dying from cancer. Just a few weeks ago, Ms Davey's office was broken into; two laptops were stolen and the server was tampered with. The campaign against her has been relentless, but there has been no such rigour from the Financial Conduct Authority or the police to bring to justice those whom she believes to be the real perpetrators.

Ms Davey might not have known the true course of events that led to the demise of her businesses if it had not been for a whistleblower who alerted her in 2013 to what was being done to her companies. Clearly, whistleblowers are invaluable in calling out immoral and frankly criminal acts such as those that have been detailed in our debate. As other colleagues have outlined, we urgently need legislation to protect whistleblowers and the public by deterring and preventing these situations. The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 has failed to protect whistleblowers or address the concerns that they raise. It is high time that an independent structure was put in place to vigorously regulate the banking industry and protect whistleblowers, to prevent further cases like Julia's.

It is greatly worrying that banks and their advisers can operate so unethically, employing turnaround companies to act on their wishes to liquidate a company while posing as a supportive business and facing no accountability whatsoever. In my constituent's case, the turnaround company, Baronsmead, is not covered by regulation because it does not fall within the remit of the FCA. Similarly, not all the activities of Lloyds Banking Group come under the FCA's watch.

I would be grateful if the Minister commented on how and when new regulations might be introduced to provide oversight of all the operations of banking groups and the companies that they employ. I would also like to know why the FCA is not investigating the case as a genuine whistleblower complaint, eight months after receiving the information. The whistleblower has provided extensive evidence of the wrongdoing involved, but my constituent feels that the FCA has blocked her questions about an investigation and allowed the bank's cover-up to continue.

As I mentioned, the whistleblower first came forward in 2013 to raise concerns about the manipulation of Ms Davey's companies by Lloyds Bank and its agents,

but those concerns were not acted on. It was only after WhistleblowersUK entered the picture in November 2018 that a meeting was arranged between the FCA and the whistleblower. Ms Davey's case was then referred from the FCA to the National Crime Agency, but since then the FCA has not answered questions about what investigations might be going on with the NCA, using the Federal Information Security Management Act as a shield.

I ask the Minister why no information is being provided to my constituent, her advocates or the whistleblower. Furthermore, what can be done to ensure that the FCA acts on this serious matter? I understand from WhistleblowersUK and its chief executive, Georgina Halford-Hall, that there is concern that when the FCA gets involved in such cases, it is seen to be an ally of the financial services, rather than an independent regulator, and that the complaints processes are designed to stifle information that could lead to prosecution.

Staff at the FCA have told WhistleblowersUK that the FCA has a responsibility to ensure that there is not a run on a bank that might impact the UK economy. That would not be a problem if whistleblower intelligence were acted on. This is a public interest issue of extreme importance; members of the public, especially owners of small and medium-sized enterprises, must be aware of the malpractice that can happen in the banking industry and, most importantly, be protected from it. I look forward to the report that WhistleblowersUK is due to release later this month, which I am sure will be very helpful.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present Ms Davey's case to the Chamber, but I am disappointed that I have had to do so. This case has dragged on for years, and in that time, Ms Davey has endured repeated attempts to smother her case, as well as attacks on her health, her private information and her personal property. She has gone from being a successful small business owner, who trusted her bank to uphold its professional and moral obligations, to being forced through bankruptcy procedures, and desperately fighting court case after court case. The serious injustice of having lost millions must be addressed, and stringent regulation should be brought in, so that no more hard-working business owners fall victim to this, as she has done. I look forward to the responses of the Minister and the shadow Minister.

5.16 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing. I was very impressed by the speech of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). It was a compelling and comprehensive argument for the law to be reviewed. It is vital that we keep whistleblowing laws and protections, and public interest disclosure laws, up to date and relevant in an ever-changing, fast-moving landscape. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully to the arguments presented—the motion gives a strong case to be answered—and give a considered response. I know well that she is extremely conscientious in performing her duties as a Minister of the Crown.

I was hugely impressed, as ever, with the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). Since becoming a Member of Parliament, I have had to look more closely at the performance of regulators, and what surprises me is how thoroughly inadequate most regulators in this country

are at regulating what they are supposed to regulate. It is all too clear that there is, at times, an unholy relationship between the people who staff the regulator and the industry that they are supposed to regulate, and that stifles the tension that there has to be between a regulator and the sector or industry being regulated.

The APPG plans to publish a report shortly identifying how the law fails to protect whistleblowers of any type—I stress “of any type”. The APPG has consulted a whole range of groups, and has positive, effective and practical proposals for change. We hope to learn from other countries as we aim for a “best in class” legal framework. I believe this is one of the aspects of competitive advantage that we should be claiming for the United Kingdom, in terms of our economy and how we treat those who, in most cases, feel driven by conscience to speak up, to raise concerns and to do the right thing for the right reasons.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman and the APPG for the excellent work they do in this field. Prior to this debate, the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association wrote to me. Referring to a recent staff survey in the NHS, it said that only 28% of respondents felt safe to raise their concerns as whistleblowers. So I agree wholeheartedly with the powerful contribution that he is making.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention because it underlines the fact—and it is a central purpose of the APPG—that we need to improve the overall perception of whistleblowers, and the attitude to them.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I apologise for being a bit late for the start of the hon. Gentleman's speech. Members who have been in this place for a long time will remember the case that I had of a consultant called Mattu. He was a whistleblower and he was suspended. He was never really employed again by the NHS and the case cost—you could take a guess at the figure—something like £3 million. It ended up in the courts, where they tried to use my letter against that individual. So on the one hand we encourage whistleblowers, but we do nothing to protect them and sometimes we try to destroy their reputation.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for that intervention. I think I remember taking part in a Westminster Hall debate in which that case was highlighted.

We are going to publish our first report of a series. We have created an ambitious work schedule for our all-party group, but our primary report, based on the first-hand testimony of whistleblowers, should be published soon. I see so many people in the Chamber who have been of so much support to the group's work, and who have served on the panels that we have put together to receive evidence and witness testimony, so I take the opportunity to thank publicly the Members who have been willing to do that.

We have also worked alongside WhistleblowersUK, which specialises in supporting whistleblowers. I pay tribute to its work and that of other such organisations. Most importantly, I would like to thank the whistleblowers themselves. The whistleblowers who have come before us to give testimony have proven to be caring, principled

[Stephen Kerr]

members of society who have put themselves at considerable risk to call out malpractice and misdemeanour. Some of those people are not covered by the current whistleblowers' protections and law; many work, but some were not working.

In less than 12 months, we have heard and collected over 400 pieces of individual evidence to contribute to the series of reports that we intend to publish. Many of the testimonies were very difficult to hear and I will tell hon. Members why. These are people who put everything on the line. As colleagues said earlier, when those whistleblowers first spoke up, they did not realise what it would involve. However, having started out on that course, they stuck with it. I have nothing but total admiration and respect for these people. They have suffered mental trauma, loss of their career, loss of their businesses, persecution of their families, stringent gagging orders—all in the name of blowing a whistle on crime, corruption, negligence, wastefulness and cover-ups.

Many of these people are not employees; they are service users, bystanders, parents at school, patients at hospitals, suppliers, customers and taxpayers. Whoever they are, we should be grateful for whistleblowers. They saw themselves as doing their job, doing their duty, doing what was right. They did the right thing to uphold what they thought was the right standard—the professional standard. They thought they would probably be praised and recognised for speaking up, doing the right thing, protecting people, protecting reputations—organisational reputations, individual reputations—and standing up for the public good and public confidence, particularly in our public services.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the public sector is sometimes the worst offender? I was contacted by a firefighter who had reported his hierarchy—I will not go into it because it is subject to legal action. He sent the report to the police and they then sent it back to the fire service he was reporting. That is the public sector. Unbelievable!

Stephen Kerr: As we have discovered, this is a common characteristic of how whistleblowers and the issues they raise are treated. Issues they raise in anonymity and confidence are then disclosed to the very body they are raising concerns about and because of that they are easily identified. What follows is deeply unpleasant—to hear about it is deeply unpleasant; to experience it must be something else. So I do agree.

Whistleblowing in a work environment in the public sector should not be difficult, but it is, and it is up to this Parliament to change that. Without whistleblowers, we would not know about Gosport War Memorial Hospital, Cambridge Analytica, Lux Leaks, the behaviour of Jess Staley, the CEO of Barclays, Mid Staff NHS Trust or Rotherham's grooming gangs. These are issues that make headlines, but there are many more cases that Members probably know of in their constituencies, from all over the country and across all kinds of sectors and activities, public and private. Bringing these issues to light, while difficult, undoubtedly identifies better ways for companies to work, for services to be delivered and for justice to be served.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. It was good to work with him in applying for this debate. We have heard about cases in the public sector, such as the one the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) mentioned, and about others in financial services, such as those the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned. It is worth comparing the outcome for those brave people, whose lives, as he says, are destroyed, with the outcome for those guilty of wrongdoing in the banks, for example, who continue to earn a fortune and who no one has touched for their wrongdoing, despite the devastating impact they had on our economy.

Stephen Kerr: Whistleblowers are heroes, not villains—although sometimes there are villains in their stories—and they should be treated with respect and listened to. Sometimes they are looking for no more than validation of what they have brought to the attention of the authorities. Whether they should have a financial award, or whatever, is a side issue; the real issue is how they are perceived and responded to.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman raises financial rewards. Does he think they might make the personal situation for a whistleblower within a workplace worse, because it would be easy to ascribe their actions to their seeking a financial benefit as opposed to genuine altruism?

Stephen Kerr: I completely understand, and am sympathetic to, that point. We need to work together to establish this independent office of the whistleblower. Sometimes whistleblowers pay such a heavy price in terms of the financial consequences that flow from their actions that perhaps there is a case for compensation, but I have not made up my mind. We have to hear more evidence and have a wider discussion in Parliament about these issues. It is absolutely clear, however, that whistleblowers need somewhere safe to go, and to be supported and have their cases properly advocated in the face of power, authority and bureaucracy.

I mentioned the problem of blacklisting. One person told us how he had been blacklisted for speaking up. He had reported criminal activity to the employer. Instead of dealing with the issue, the employer dealt with the person who had spoken up in the first place and coerced them to stay silent. It is bad enough to have something criminal going on within one's business, but then to cover it up, and contrive to force those who are willing to speak up for the reputation of the organisation or business to leave, is clearly unacceptable, and then to seek to blacklist them so that they cannot work in a profession in which they have trained and acquired qualifications is truly shameful.

The complex legal framework surrounding whistleblowing covers too few people. It is complex and legalistic. Many of the whistleblowers whom we met were not recognised as whistleblowers by the law. The tests that are necessary to stop people abusing whistleblowing are too stringent and do not recognise complexity. One employee brought up issues of racism at work and the flouting of HR rules. The employer, instead of recognising the whistleblowing, tried to diagnose a mental health issue, sending the employee on medical leave. The company-appointed psychologist then broke confidentiality to speak to the managers of the business. Although regulators confirmed that the employee had a point, they were dismissed and have received no justice.

Whistleblowers can be dragged through the courts, with mounting costs and unending hassles. For many, their cases have consumed their lives. It may be thought that the best advice such a person could be given would be “Move on and forget it”, but that is not justice; it is unjust. While it might be said to have been good and well-intentioned advice, is that really the way in which we in this place want the affairs of our country—economic, and relating to public service—to be dealt with? I really do not think so.

However, it is equally important not to limit the definition of whistleblowers to employees. As I said earlier, and as was mentioned by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, many categories of people should have the protection to which whistleblowers are legally entitled. We must ensure that, when they blow the whistle, they are given proper protection under the law—and the law is too vague in this regard.

When an individual faces the full force of a corporate or public sector legal department, it is a complete mismatch. Public corporations should be mandated to disclose legal costs to shareholders in such cases, and the same should be true of public authorities. They should have to make clear and transparent the costs of fighting whistleblowers that will be borne by the taxpayer. Some of the estimates of the costs that have been incurred by public services are absolutely mind-blowing and wholly disproportionate.

One brave whistleblower in Scotland had evidence of HR malpractice. It should have been a simple grievance dealt by the organisation, which should have been pleased to receive the feedback from that person. Instead, the person and their family, who also worked there, were victimised. They cannot afford legal representation, and will have to argue their own case at a tribunal against a public sector legal department with an expansive budget.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my very good friend for allowing me to intervene. It seems to me that the very best companies, corporations and organisations should include in their codes of ethics or conduct a requirement for employees, or people for whom they have responsibility, to report things that are wrong. In the first instance, that should happen within the organisation, but if people still feel that they have not obtained satisfaction, there should be a device within the organisation enabling them to report things, and they should not be victimised for that. They should be applauded, because if they do that, the company will get better.

Stephen Kerr: I completely agree with my hon. and gallant Friend. I cannot understand why any organisation would not embrace the feedback someone brings them when it has to do with the types of things whistleblowers raise: why on earth would any business or public sector organisation not want to know when things are not being done right—what is right in terms of the law, what is morally right, and what is right in terms of the values of the organisation? And there absolutely should be a no recriminations policy in any organisation worth its salt. I also absolutely believe that there needs to be a place where whistleblowers can go, a safe harbour where their case will be properly treated and respected and where they will get the necessary level of support, whatever that support might be, so their case can be properly heard.

I think I have made it clear that I strongly believe that no organisation of any repute should be operating in the ways we have heard discussed in this debate by various colleagues. Governments and companies should be confident enough to know when they are wrong, and they should be honest and brave enough to address that. The reaction to whistleblowing should be to say, “Thank you; thank you for speaking up”, and then when the whistleblower’s words and evidence are evaluated organisations should be more than happy; in fact, they should be recognising and themselves rewarding whistleblowers who speak up so that the changes that flow from that will mean they as businesses or public service organisations can become more efficient, effective and ethical in the way they operate.

The APPG will soon publish its findings and recommendations, and we will further consider and promote the case for an independent office for the whistleblower, giving protection to and advocating in the interests of whistleblowers. We shall also be asking for an end to the use of non-disclosure agreements to cover up wrongdoing, criminality and other morally dubious behaviour. That idea must be fully debated and explored, because there are currently far too many abuses of NDAs.

Parliament and Government have a responsibility to set the conditions and the standards; we have to create the culture in our country where people feel confident that they can and should speak up in the public interest. We want whistleblowing recognised as a positive and public-spirited thing to do, and I look forward to the Minister’s reply today, but this is the start of the debate on this issue, not an end, and we must recognise the courage and integrity of people who do the right things for the right reasons, because they are guided in what they are doing by conscience and the public interest.

5.37 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has made a good and wide-ranging speech, and he is right that this is the start of the process, not the end of it: there is clearly a need for significant legislative reform. I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for getting this debate under way and for the consistency he has shown over a number of years in supporting those who blow the whistle, and indeed for how he set out today why there is a need for a fundamental review of the regulations. It has been clear for some time that we are simply not protecting people in the way I think we would all like to see.

We have had piecemeal reforms, often as a result of case law, which have given some notable advances in protection, but that has also left gaps and loopholes, and it still remains the case, as we have heard on a number of occasions today, that the best-run organisations with the most comprehensive policies in place can be very daunting places for someone to blow the whistle in, and it does not come without consequences.

I know from my own experience as an employment lawyer before I was elected to this place about the issues employees face across a range of sectors when they are brave enough to speak up. We must not underestimate how difficult that is and how brave people are when they decide to blow the whistle, because there are many

[Justin Madders]

examples of how people have suffered, with careers destroyed, and worse, as a result of sticking their head above the parapet. This can involve anything from being shunned by colleagues to being dismissed on spurious charges. There are a number of unfortunate consequences that can arise from blowing the whistle, so we really should support those who have the courage to do it. Sadly, the treatment that some people receive can continue even after they have left their employment. This is far from being the benign environment that we would like to see. We are having new laws in Ireland and Australia, and a new EU whistleblowing directive is coming in in 2021, so if we are to ensure that our workers' rights at least keep pace with those in the EU, which is what the Government have committed to, we must begin to think about how we can strengthen workplace protections for whistleblowers.

I have spoken before about whistleblowing in the NHS and the importance of providing a workplace environment where NHS staff are able to raise concerns about things they are worried about. It should be an environment where there is no fear of repercussions or unfavourable treatment and where staff feel confident that action will be taken to resolve their concerns.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend knows, the Department of Health is based in Leeds, and one of my constituents whistleblow about the DH2020 process in her role as a trade union representative. She was not supported, and she was hounded out of the job she loved, incorrectly. She won her case at an employment tribunal, but that was no compensation to her because she is no longer in that job and has had her career ruined by whistleblowing on behalf of all the employees in the Department of Health who have been affected by DH2020.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and that is something I will come on to later. The current legislation is retrospective. It is righting wrongs after they have occurred but, as we have heard, it is too late to put a career back in place after the event.

In the NHS, it is particularly important that people feel able to blow the whistle safely, not only because they have general obligations as an employee, but because many staff have a professional duty to raise concerns where they see them and could actually be in trouble with their own regulators if they do not do so. NHS England and NHS Improvement policies are very clear on this. They say:

"If in doubt, please raise it. Don't wait for proof. It doesn't matter if you turn out to be mistaken as long as you are genuinely troubled."

The NHS constitution pledges that NHS employers will support all staff in raising their concerns. As we have heard on a number of occasions, however, that clearly has not happened. Fine words are not enough. Sadly, staff do not have the confidence to raise concerns without fear of repercussions.

The most recent NHS staff survey, in which staff were asked whether they would feel safe raising concerns about unsafe clinical practices, found that only a fifth said that they strongly agreed that that was the case, and three in 10 said that they did not feel safe raising such concerns. When asked whether they were confident that

their organisation would address their concerns, just 14.8% of staff strongly agreed with that statement. Given that 17.8% of staff said that they had seen errors, near misses or incidents that could have hurt patients in the last 12 months, it should be deeply concerning to all of us that staff in the NHS do not feel that their concerns are being acted on.

As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk mentioned, junior doctor Chris Day was a prominent example of someone who blew the whistle and was treated appallingly. He raised legitimate concerns about staff ratios, then lost his job. The tribunal action that followed resulted in a lengthy and, in my view, wholly unnecessary legal battle in which Health Education England effectively sought to remove around 54,000 doctors from whistleblowing protection by claiming that it was not their employer. Four years and hundreds of thousands of pounds later, it eventually backed down and accepted that it should be considered an employer after all.

Norman Lamb: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the contract between Health Education England and the trusts, which demonstrates the degree of control that Health Education England has over the employment of junior doctors, was not disclosed for some three years in that litigation? It was drafted by the very law firm that was making loads of money out of defending the case against Chris Day. I have raised this with Health Education England, but it will not give me a proper response because it says that the case is at an end. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is totally unacceptable and that it smacks of unethical behaviour for that law firm to make money out of not disclosing a contract that it itself drafted?

Justin Madders: The right hon. Gentleman highlights an important point, and in response I will quote something that Sir Robert Francis said:

"When asked for advice by NHS organisations about issues around public interest disclosure, legal advisors have tended to be influenced by an adversarial litigation—and therefore defensive—culture."

That notion is clearly present in this particular case. At the end of the litigation, Health Education England said:

"Having never wished to do anything other than facilitate whistleblowing for doctors in training, HEE is happy to be considered as a second employer for these purposes if it removes a potential barrier for junior doctors raising concerns."

However, as we have heard, that did not manifest itself during the four years of the litigation. Why did it take so long for HEE to accept that it should be considered an employer? What message does that send to NHS staff about the corporate attitude to whistleblowers? It is hardly encouraging.

Whistleblowers are a vital safeguard when all other systems have failed. As the right hon. Gentleman said earlier, there is a whole list of cases in which if the whistleblowers had been listened to earlier, lives could have been saved—Gosport, Morecambe Bay, Mid Staffordshire and Bristol Royal Infirmary. The Francis report shone a light on some of the completely unacceptable treatment that NHS staff have experienced. One individual told the inquiry that

"finding employment is proving very difficult and I question whether any of it was worth it".

Another said:

"I have often been so depressed by this experience that I have often considered suicide."

Damning words. It shames us all that some people feel that way for having done what we all think is right.

I acknowledge that some progress has been made on the protections afforded to NHS employees in recent years, particularly as a result of the "Freedom to Speak Up" report and the regulations brought forward by the Government to protect whistleblowers' future employment prospects. I remain worried about other issues, however, such as protections for other workers who support whistleblowers. Where a team of medical professionals are working on the same thing, it is easy to envisage circumstances in which two or more employees notice an issue of concern together, but only one of them actually makes the disclosure. I raised that matter with the Minister, and it was made clear at the time that the only remedy available to the second person or other associated parties would be to register a grievance under their employer's grievance policy. That protection is not strong enough, so we need to recognise that people work in teams. Unity is strength, and collective arguments are always better, so we need to strengthen the protections in such situations.

Another issue is that it is only once someone has lost their job that they can take their previous employer to an employment tribunal and seek redress, but the onus is on the whistleblower to prove that it was their disclosure that led to them losing their job. The Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association has come across many cases of employees facing action after speaking out based upon circumstances different from their whistleblowing case, but which appear to be clearly linked. Such action can be subtle, such as bullying, harassment, undermining, being overlooked for opportunities for promotion, or a general feeling that the employer may be looking for a reason to act against them. Of course, such instances are virtually impossible to prove, but they contribute to the climate of fear for whistleblowers, who may worry that they are only ever as good as their next mistake. We cannot continue to allow promising careers to be left in tatters as a result of ineffective whistleblowing protections. We must send a strong message to employers that, as the legislation intended, those making disclosures should be protected, not attacked.

By its very nature, the legislation only gives a person protection after a detriment has been suffered, when it is often too late. No tribunal can fully mend a destroyed career after a dismissal. It is disturbing that the success rate of whistleblowing claims that reach tribunal is only 3%, which shows how easy it is for employers to use parts of the legislation to avoid their responsibilities. I do not know of any other tribunal jurisdiction that has such a low success rate. If I was still practising and my success rate was 3%, I would not be in a job for long, but that percentage shows why we need to understand how the legislation is not working as well as it could be.

Of course, as we have already discussed, most employers are in a much better position. They are able to rely on expert legal advice, they can put forward alternative allegations and reasons for treatment, and they can allege misconduct or redundancy. There are too many hoops to jump through and too many opportunities for

employers to argue that disclosure does not count under the legislation, which of course removes the employee's protection altogether. That is wrong.

It is not enough for an employee to rely on their own assertion of subjective belief that the information tends to show a breach of regulations. That leaves them at the mercy of the roulette wheel of justice, and potentially having to wait many months before they can know for sure whether their disclosure will have full protection under the law.

In considering how the law operates, we need to examine whether protected conversations, which were introduced under the coalition Government, are working as intended. Of course, a person can have a protected conversation with someone without mentioning whistleblowing at all, but a potential disclosure might have been raised earlier. Employees in that situation who have been told that there is a payment for leaving their employment are in a vulnerable situation, and they will not know for sure whether their disclosure would count. We need to see whether there is any correlation between protected conversations and disclosures made under the whistleblowing Act.

Whistleblowers should not only be protected but venerated for their role in defending the safety of others. Nobody who makes a disclosure, wherever they work, should do so in fear or at the risk of having their livelihood taken away. The whole culture of workplace protection in this country is one of extreme disposability, be it temporary and agency work, zero-hours contracts or just the ease with which people can be dismissed. This does not lend itself to a healthy environment in which people feel confident and secure in speaking out without fear of reprisal.

The truth is that we have allowed a situation to develop in this country where job insecurity is considered to be just part of the landscape. That has to change. We owe it to people to ensure that protections are as effective as possible, which is one of my tests for a decent and civilised society. At the moment, it is a test we are comprehensively failing.

5.52 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). I am impressed by his hard work in matching the sad reality of NHS practice with its policy on paper and in thinking through the implications for patient care.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for helping to secure this important debate and to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for his hard work as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing, on which I also serve. As he did, I thank all those whistleblowers who have been willing to come before our group to discuss this issue.

I also thank my constituents. Even though I am a new Member of Parliament, a number of my constituents have tried to blow the whistle and, in almost every single case, their experience has accorded with what has been described today—an initial unwillingness to address the issues and problems raised, followed by, in many cases, retaliation. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston described the variety of ways in which that retaliation occurs, which are difficult to write down and take action against.

[Anneliese Dodds]

The retaliation has been quite extreme in some cases. One constituent had a vexatious legal case taken against them. They were cleared, as they should have been, because they had done absolutely nothing wrong. Of course their name is still on the legal record, even though they were cleared, and they believe that is having an impact on their employment.

The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) described the pattern at Lloyds bank, which is a common one. His account accords with the account of the Thames Valley police and crime commissioner, with whom I have discussed this case a number of times. He is rightly exercised about it, because it indicates many people's continuing unwillingness to deal with these issues properly.

I do not want to speak for long, but I want to address the need to reform PIDA and the non-disclosure agreement regime. That must come after a thorough review of all the arrangements for whistleblowing, as urged by the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing.

As a number of speakers have said, it is unclear to many whistleblowers who is a prescribed person under PIDA and the Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) Order 2014. I find in my constituency casework that even within the category of "prescribed persons" it is often very unclear whether the scope of interest of that prescribed person covers their case. For example, in the field of education, the chief inspector is able to deal with issues relating to the welfare of children living in school-provided accommodation but cannot deal with unethical educational practice within those schools. It appears that the only body that could be appealed to in that case is the Secretary of State for Education, but there does not seem to be a clear procedure in that Department to deal with whistleblowing concerns. I recognise that this is not the same Department as today's Minister's, but the Government overall need to make sure that proper procedures are in place. After all, our constituents are informed on the website that lists those prescribed persons that if they cannot find someone to report to and they do not want to report to their employer, they should take their case to their Member of Parliament. If we do not know exactly who then to take the case up with to try to get some resolution, that puts us and our constituents in a difficult position.

We need to have a proper investigation of whether the existing list of prescribed persons is appropriate and whether those bodies are adequately prepared. In addition, because of the lack of preparation in many cases, we find that regulators and other bodies are ill-equipped to separate out vexatious complaints and genuine whistleblowers—there is a huge inefficiency in the system there. We also find that regulators who are not on the list of prescribed people often are not aware of, and do not understand, how to advise whistleblowers about who they should approach. I have had a number of cases where whistleblowers have tried to ask the relevant regulator, who is not a prescribed person, what they should do and they have then been signposted to the wrong people and given duff advice. That should not be happening, and the Government need to grasp the nettle and provide coherent guidance.

I very much agree with the right hon. Member for North Norfolk about many of the gaps, but we also need to deal with the issue raised rightly by my hon.

Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) about the fact that those bodies, including those that have a duty under this regime, often talk to each other in a way that completely contradicts the principles of the legislation. They are sharing information inappropriately, even though it is already covered by that PIDA regime. One case of that has been mentioned, but I have dealt with one case where someone's case was casually discussed at a semi-social networking occasion by a public employee and the whistleblower's employer. What makes it even worse is that the case was related to child protection. We cannot have this situation where almost chummy relationships lead to that valuable information being inappropriately shared.

I want to comment on the use of non-disclosure agreements and bring this discussion into line with that on their use in sexual harassment cases. The Women and Equalities Committee has criticised their use in relation to sexual harassment, and we should be questioning whether they are ever appropriate in relation to whistleblowing cases. The UK legal system is strong on libel compared with that of other countries. Those of us concerned about investigative journalism might argue that it is too strong, but it is very strong in international terms. If untrue statements are made by those who have been whistleblowers, that can be pursued in court by their previous employer or by the body about which the whistleblowing complaint was made. If we are really to learn from the testimony of whistleblowers, it should not be possible to silence them with NDAs.

As everyone else has done, I wish to end my speech by thanking the whistleblowers in my constituency. There are a number of them I cannot name because of the procedures I have just talked about and because they are concerned about the impact on their professional reputation if their name becomes known as that of a so-called troublemaker. That is an enormous problem because, as Members have mentioned time and again, whistleblowers provide a corrective to malfeasance and illegal activity, and their testimony is incredibly important.

When I talk about whistleblowers' evidence, I always think about the phrase "It can lead to positive change". I learned that phrase from the Oxfam whistleblower Helen Evans, who was one of my constituents. The whole process of what happened to her is instructive. Sadly, some people tried to weaponise the evidence that she brought to the table and use it against international aid, but she has consistently and rightly argued that what she and others uncovered indicated not only that those vulnerable young women and girls in Haiti had been appallingly treated, but that they really needed economic empowerment. She was never arguing against international aid; in fact, quite the opposite: she was arguing for it. She has been determined to argue that what she did must lead to positive change, and indeed her example, and that of others, is leading to positive change in the international aid sector. Those who initially did not listen to her now say that they are grateful for her testimony. That is often the case with whistleblowers, but they should not have to go through that fight to get to that understanding.

We need positive change in our public services and in the private sector, wherever unethical or illegal behaviour goes unchallenged. We should recognise and praise those whistleblowers who help us to get that positive change.

6.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who set the scene, and I thank the hon. Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for making such valuable contributions, as others have previously and will afterwards. The members of the all-party group have been engaging on this subject and are to be congratulated on sustaining their interest and on their efforts today.

Like the hon. Member for Oxford East, I would not be happy to make known all the cases I have been involved in over the years, because of the individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland that were involved. I know of cases involving the health service, the council, sometimes the police and sometimes other organisations, but I shall not go into any of the details, because that would inhibit the people who came to me. I am always clear about the confidentiality of those conversations.

I wish to dwell on one case, because it has dragged on for so long. When I describe the case, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton will know it and the person involved, because he is indirectly involved in the case or has knowledge of the person. First, though, let me say that a review of the 20-year-old PIDA is welcome and necessary to ensure that the UK remains the best place in the world to do business. Piecemeal reforms, often as a result of individuals bringing claims, have extended the scope of who is protected, but unfortunately there remain gaps and inconsistencies. The Government recently committed to ensure that workers' rights keep pace with those in the EU, whatever the Brexit outcome. This is an opportunity to reiterate the commitment to ensure that worker protection does not fall behind in the coming years.

I feel that I can say all that for a few reasons. In my constituency, I had a constituent who was engaged in what was at the time the longest-running employment tribunal case. It ran from 2007 to 2012 and involved 50-plus tribunal days. It was an absolute endurance test for my constituent and led to his substantive mental health problems and a complete physical and emotional breakdown. My parliamentary aide and I supported the employment tribunal process for some 18 months while he recovered. We helped that gentleman and his family. Sometimes, we need to be aware not only of the impact on the individual who does the whistleblowing, but the financial, emotional and mental impact on the family, too. It is clear that what that gentleman went through was horrendous.

In the end, the employment tribunal found that my constituent had made 12 protected disclosures involving going concern matters for the UK company and intangible asset valuations that could not be justified. Does that sound familiar? We had Carillion and BHS in 2018 and 2019. If people learned their lesson, wouldn't that be great? But people do not learn their lesson, because these things seem to happen over and over again, as has been explained here today.

I make that point because, during those 18 months, my constituent and I engaged in occasion with the FRC on an investigation into his disclosures. The investigations by the FRC and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales were lamentable. In fact, in

response to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee audit inquiry, the FRC's chief executive officer recently refused to disclose what whistleblowing investigations had been undertaken in the last 10 years.

In 2011 and 2012, the predecessor of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had a consultation on the Sharman inquiry on going concern, which started in late 2011, to which I made an extensive contribution.

The 30-plus responses have all been removed from the FRC website. Eight years on, we have another BEIS/FRC consultation on going concern. Will this accounting profession ever get things right? Concurrently, in November 2011, the then Department issued a consultation on the reform of the FRC.

In December 2010, the FSA and PwC conducted an independent inquiry into the Royal Bank of Scotland. Their press release stated:

"The issues we investigated do not warrant us taking any enforcement action, either against the firm or against individuals."

How disappointing. It continued:

"The FSA cannot publish the content of the RBS review as information gathered from the bank during the course of the review remains confidential under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000."

Last month, eight years later, we had a further report from the FSA's successor, the Financial Conduct Authority. Disappointingly, it essentially concluded the same.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the FCA and the FRC. With the change that is now coming to the FRC, we have an opportunity to break away from the pattern of performance in the past. We have an opportunity to disconnect from that past. Does he agree that it is vital that, whatever replaces the FRC, it is not continuity FRC?

Jim Shannon: Yes, I absolutely agree. I do not think that anybody in the House today, or probably outside it, disagrees with what he has said. Continuity would not be what we want; it is change that we want, and the quicker, the better.

Concurrently, the HBOS whistleblower, my constituent Paul Moore—I have his authority to mention his name—met the then Treasury Committee Chairman, Andrew Tyrie MP, now Lord Tyrie, in February 2011. We were delighted to learn, as was subsequently published, that the Committee would look to engage independent assessors, who would report to it for some of its future investigations. That was announced and reported on the front page of the business section of *The Daily Telegraph* on 5 May 2011, and it was followed up in subsequent inquiries.

However, only days ago, commenting on the Government response to its excellent report on the future of audit, the Chair of the BEIS Committee, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), stated:

"The collapse of Carillion and accounting scandals at Tesco, BT and Patisserie Valerie and others have provided a painful lesson that audit isn't working. Businesses, investors, pension-holders and the public deserve better. Urgent audit reform is needed, not yet further consultation."

That is exactly what the hon. Member for Stirling referred to. She continued:

"The CMA and BEIS Committee's extensive inquiries on audit proposed a range of practical recommendations to improve competition, tackle conflicts of interest and improve the culture

[*Jim Shannon*]

of challenge in audit firms. Their response to our report suggests the Government is in danger of kicking vital audit reforms into the long grass.”

Then they will get lost, and we will forget about them. That should not happen. She added:

“We should not wait for the next corporate collapse. The Government needs to ignore the lobbying of vested interests in audit and set out a clear timescale for delivering on the substance of the CMA and BEIS Committee’s recommendations”.

We should listen to what the Chair of that Committee says.

Are things different in 2019 for audit and whistleblowing, compared with my experience in 2011 and 2012, when I first came into the House? No, nothing has substantially changed yet. Yet, whistleblowers regularly provide an early warning sign when things are going wrong. Often dubbed the canaries in the coalmine, they can help to avert a future scandal. They can save organisations money. One in every three serious economic crimes was highlighted by a whistleblower, according to a recent survey. That makes whistleblowing more effective than all the usual watchdogs—corporate security, internal audits and law enforcement—combined.

In addition, we need a regulator who is willing and able to listen to whistleblowers who come forward, and to protect them from retaliation. Research by Professor Kate Kenny from Queens University in Belfast shows that the cost of whistleblowing can still be very high, financially and personally—both physically and mentally. I witnessed that up close with my constituent and his family.

For a healthy economy and a reputable financial sector, we need to start supporting whistleblowers. Finance has never been more difficult to regulate because it incentivises people to chase excess profits, even at the expense of ethics and the long-term survival of an organisation. It remains acceptable—in many cases, profitable—to remain silent about wrongdoing. We need to encourage whistleblowers. What this all means is that a significant shift is needed, starting with helping employees to speak up, otherwise the financial sector and the remainder of the economy remain at risk of another crisis. In fact, we may be asked to foot the bill, just as we did with the trillion-odd pounds last time.

The Democratic Unionist party has been very active in supporting the APPG on fair business banking and victim support groups such as the SME Alliance and the CYBG Remediation Support Group in pressing Her Majesty’s Government and the banks to put in place a voluntary redress scheme for SMEs that is truly independent. Wow! Wouldn’t that be great? Such a scheme should also address the unintended consequences of light-touch regulation enabled through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and the abuse of SMEs. As a banking redress process is finally beginning to take shape, will the Minister make a similar commitment to address much more effectively the “Future of Audit” report and the renewed vigour for updating our whistleblowing legislation? Like the banking redress for SMEs, these are important matters for our economy post Brexit. The original PIDA whistleblowing legislation has its genesis some 20 years ago. I will therefore appropriately finish by restating my opening comments.

A review of the 20-year-old PIDA is necessary to ensure that the UK remains the best place in the world to do business. Piecemeal reforms, often as a result of individuals bringing claims, have extended the scope of who is now protected, but there remain gaps and inconsistencies. The Government recently committed to ensuring that workers’ rights keep pace with those in the EU. This is an opportunity for the Minister to reiterate the commitment to ensure that protection of workers does not fall behind in the coming years. The Democratic Unionist party—part of the partnership with the Conservative party in government—supports that commitment with regard to updating our whistleblowing legislation in a post-Brexit Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

6.11 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing and opening this debate, and to the other members of the APPG for their work on this topic.

Bristol Royal, Mid Staffordshire, Morecambe Bay, Liverpool, Gosport, Whorlton Hall—all shocking scandals of health and social care. In every one of those scandals, there was a whistleblower years before it came out who tried to raise concerns and protect people. They were ignored, and that is often the least that happens, as they are often undermined, victimised or dismissed.

Bob Stewart: I suspect that the hon. Lady might be going on to say that those people were then blacklisted; they could not get another job in the health service afterwards, for some reason that they could never actually ascertain.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his intervention. As a medic myself, it is clear that we are advised by the General Medical Council, the Royal College of Nursing and various official bodies that we must speak up—that we have a duty to speak up. However, the landscape we look at is littered with broken careers and often broken people.

The problem is that whistleblowers think they are protected because they have heard about whistleblower protection, but it simply does not exist. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk talked about “brave people” speaking up. People should not have to be brave to raise concerns. If all people see is others ahead of them who have been driven and hounded out of their career, and who have maybe ended up with mental health issues or worse, then that is a big, black, threatening cloud—keep your mouth shut, keep your nose clean, walk by on the other side. The problem is that that results in more suffering and more death.

There are two aspects to this issue: business and industry, which is represented most commonly by the finance sector; and public services, which are most commonly represented by the NHS. Those two sectors—finance and the NHS—probably generate the biggest number of scandals and whistleblowing cases, and therefore specific treatment is required in those industries to invite whistleblowers to come forward and protect them.

While there is UK-wide regulation of finance, health services are devolved. The four health services are struggling with this and working to improve whistleblowing. After the Mid Staffs scandal, Sir Robert Francis highlighted

that in Mid Staffs—indeed, this was an issue in some of the later scandals—there was an obsession with becoming a foundation trust. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and others have talked about why people cover things up. Whether it is a high-profile business or a public service that has been corporatised, there is a drive to remain shiny and perfect on the outside, instead of admitting a problem and trying to fix it.

Having produced his report, Sir Robert Francis set up the “freedom to speak up” guardians in hospitals and the national guardian. In Scotland, the local person in health boards—we do not have trusts—is a specific non-executive director who is a whistleblowing champion. The advantages of a non-executive director is that they are on the board, with a clear and loud voice, and they are not an employee, but they are part of the system. The “freedom to speak up” guardians are employed by the trust, so they are operational—they are a person to go to—but they are also an employee. There are issues at the trust and health board level with how the guardians or champions themselves are protected. Perhaps we need not only an independent national office but an independent system. In the NHS, that might be people who are taking responsibility for safety or healthcare services information. Unfortunately the legislation on that is in the Brexit long grass, but I hope it will eventually come forward.

There is a national guardian in England, but it does not have statutory powers. Scotland has set up an Independent National Whistleblowing Officer, who is basically the public services ombudsman. They are completely separate—they are outside the system—and they have statutory powers, which is important. A reporting and advice line was set up back in 2013, so that if people were afraid to report locally or were not getting anywhere, they could report to that phonenumber.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Lady makes a good point about what is happening in Scotland now, but it is worth mentioning the evidence that my APPG received from Police Scotland and NHS Scotland. For example, the lessons that NHS Scotland has learned in Inverness are being taken on board by public authorities in Scotland. The size of our country allows us to do things a bit more quickly and deftly, but undoubtedly the lessons of the past are being learned and implemented, and I applaud NHS Scotland and Police Scotland for that.

Dr Whitford: So small is beautiful after all—that is excellent. The evidence is there; it has been there for years. The problem is that action has not been taken.

The Independent National Whistleblowing Officer has already developed, published and is consulting on standards. The standards will look at bullying and harassment—an issue that has come out in NHS Highland—and patient safety issues, and they can empower reporting and review. They include primary care and social care. They include not only trainees like Dr Chris Day, who was appallingly treated, but students and volunteers. No one should be limiting and excluding the person who saw bad and dangerous behaviour from coming forward and doing something about it.

Every health board will have to report on the actions they have taken to remedy the findings of an investigation. Health boards must investigate and record how they

investigated. They must record the action they took, and they must show any improvements that they developed from that investigation. Statistical analysis will be part of an annual report by the board every year, which will look for themes, trends and patterns. This is—and I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman recognises it—an attempt to make this work by having an independent office.

The results of a survey of health and social care staff in Scotland—and they are health and social care staff now—showed that two thirds felt they would have the confidence to speak up and raise a concern. That is contrary to the fact, as Members have said, that approximately a quarter of staff in England would have the confidence to speak up. As a doctor, I would like to see the figure an awful lot closer to 100%.

The Independent National Whistleblowing Officer will have among their statutory powers the ability to take disciplinary procedures against anyone who victimises a whistleblower. That is also critical because, at the moment, as we have heard, the whistleblower suffers, and the person who caused the suffering does not.

Regardless of how the different nations of the UK are trying to tackle whistleblowing issues within their own public services, particularly their NHS, we need to deal here with the financial and other UK regulation systems. In particular, the Public Interest Disclosure Act is the overarching legislation for whistleblowing, covering all sectors. It was actually 21 years old yesterday. It was a private Member's Bill, so perhaps it did not really have the scrutiny it should have had. It was groundbreaking at the time, but the UK is now well behind the pack, including countries such as Ireland, and, frankly, it needs to catch up. As has been highlighted by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), it does not protect the whistleblower; it only allows them to go to an employment tribunal after they have suffered huge detriment, with only a 3% success rate, and the tribunal is often used to create more damage and victimisation.

The whistleblowers I have been working with have asked for an independent, free-standing public interest protection Act—not part of employment law, but free-standing—that should do a few things. It must ensure investigation of the concern, because the concern often disappears in all the fighting. The whistleblower should be protected from the point at which they raise their concern. It should cover all those who would be in a situation to report, including trainees or non-workers. It should prohibit detriment, and there should be the ability for civil wrong or criminal offence actions to be taken.

This requires an independent agency or body, and it should also cover regulators. This is not just about the FCA or the FRC, because the Care Quality Commission is in the frame for Whorlton Hall, in that it did a report that described it as not having a problem when people had actually raised issues. If we take the heat out of whistleblowing and make reporting normal, as we have done with Datix systems in the NHS—making this not whistleblowing, but just part of normal duties—then we can change this. Whistleblowers must be valued. In the NHS, it is a matter of patient safety, and that is critical.

[Dr Whitford]

6.23 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): What an interesting debate this has been. I, too, would like to congratulate all those brave people who have come forward as whistleblowers. There has been so much agreement in this Chamber and that is not just because there are so few of us here; it is because this is a serious issue that we all have a willingness to try to redress.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on applying for and being successful in securing this debate. His speech went to the very heart of the question: where people have done a very brave thing in reporting abuse, they are then subject to serious detriment. This is what I have been amazed by in this debate: rather than us concentrating all our energies and efforts on how the process can work best and how swift investigation can take place, they have been spent thinking about whistleblowers using their energies to fight to save their job, their relationships, home and mental health. The important point is the corrosive, knock-on effect on how everybody else feels about the system and their willingness to come forward and blow the whistle.

The case of Dr Day and the numerous other whistleblowing cases are illuminating. Nearly 10 years into austerity, the huge cuts in the public sector and the long-term societal shift towards privatisation lead to a couple of conclusions. First, the cuts need to stop—as a Labour Member, I would say that—because they often create dangerous working conditions, with staffing and skills shortages, and the privatisation of care is inappropriate. Secondly, we need much more robust legislation in the face of these conditions. A crucial theme that has been repeated throughout many hon. Members' speeches is the unequal distribution of power in the workplace; as with so many workplace issues, legislation must redress that inequality.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned the need for non-regression clauses in respect of EU directives that pertain to workers' rights after our withdrawal from the European Union. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) highlighted an important trend that seems to occur when people whistleblow: rather than a thorough investigation being made of their claims, disciplinary procedures are used as a silencing mechanism. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) paid tribute to the whistleblowers and stressed their selflessness. I think that there is probably a burden that those people wish to relieve selfishly, seeing that harm, but he is absolutely right that they are doing it to put an end to the harm or misconduct that they see.

There have been so many important speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) spoke about the complex picture for constituents trying to understand who the prescribed person is. If as Members of Parliament we find it confusing, imagine what it is like for people with very busy lives who are not navigating these systems all the time—it shows that there is a failure in the system.

For many years, whistleblowers were not given the protection that they need and deserve, and were left

at the mercy of unscrupulous employers and state organisations. There are many victims of that negligence, so it is right that the balance started to shift from 1996 onwards, first with the Employment Rights Act 1996 and then with the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and its revisions between 2013 and 2015. However, in this place, we must continuously ask whether our protections and support for whistleblowers are inadequate in an ever-changing work and political environment. I therefore welcome this debate and will shortly outline some of the principles behind my party's approach.

There are currently three key protections for those who have made a protected disclosure: first, the right not to be subject to detriment as a result of whistleblowing; secondly, the fact that where the principal reason for dismissal is the fact that a worker has made a disclosure, that dismissal is automatically unfair; and, thirdly, the fact that where a provision in any other agreement seeks to prevent whistleblowing, that provision is void. However, while those protections are important, they do not address the current failures in the law—the gaps that allow many workers to fall outside the legislation's scope. Nor do they address an issue that has been raised in all hon. Members' contributions: the failure to encourage the cultural changes that will promote a culture of honesty and transparency in our workplaces, businesses and organisations—a culture where whistleblowers are celebrated as a public good that forces organisational change.

The failure to cover all workers, because of the definition of “worker” that is used, is a major flaw in the current legislation; it means that many self-employed workers are not covered, for instance. As we know, self-employment is a much abused and contested category. It cannot be right that, just because someone is employed on a contract that tries in the first place to absolve their real employer of responsibility for them, they are also denied protections with regard to whistleblowing. Also excluded are most job applicants, which means that whistleblowers can routinely suffer detriment through the recruitment process, without any redress, because they are known to be whistleblowers. Surely that is an anomaly, given that job applicants have the right to protection under the Equality Act 2010 from discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

The Government's approach to whistleblowing makes little attempt to encourage a proactive culture that not only supports whistleblowers, but creates conditions in which the issues that they disclose are taken seriously in a timely manner and remedies are sought. Where is the requirement to investigate, and where are the mandatory and, importantly, enforceable methods of supporting good practice and cultural change? UK law needs to be much more proactive, and early intervention should be prioritised to protect both the whistleblower and the public.

It is clear that, in recent years, we have fallen well behind other countries on this issue, which is hardly surprising, given the Government's anti-worker stance on most issues. That was thrown into sharp relief by a recent EU directive that provides protection for the self-employed, and requires organisations with over 50 employees to establish reporting channels.

I would like to say a few words on the principles that will guide a future Labour Government, which hopefully is not too far off, when it comes to whistleblowing.

Our key objectives in government will be to encourage people to raise concerns about wrongdoing; to ensure that concerns are investigated in a timely fashion and appropriately; to ensure that wrongdoing is rectified; to protect whistleblowers and others affected by whistleblowing; and, importantly, to require employers to maintain procedures that facilitate whistleblowing.

A Labour Government would like it to be the legal duty of employers to protect whistleblowers, and would like that to be enforced. That would apply to all workers, irrespective of the nature of their position and whether they are paid; for example, it would include interns and volunteers. Protections would apply to those making the disclosure, whether they were a worker, a former worker, or were seeking work or undergoing training. I think I am right in saying that there is quite a consensus on that.

I want to talk about the patterns. As shadow Minister, I have been thinking about the themes in the experience of the whistleblower. The feedback is that the typical journey of a whistleblower looks like this: if the worker is inexperienced at whistleblowing, there is uncertainty about what to do and who to tell, as has been said. They often go to their immediate manager. The system response may be poor, and include ignoring or minimising the issues, deliberate delays, hostility and intimidation. It may include reluctant, ineffective or biased, tokenistic investigations, and deliberate attempts to exhaust and discourage the whistleblower through excessively lengthy and complex processes.

Intimidation may increase in severity; there may be counter-allegations, formal disciplinary proceedings against the whistleblower, suspension and dismissal. This is not even the full journey; we have to remind ourselves that all the whistleblower has done so far is report wrongdoing, misconduct or harm, yet their employment prospects are in serious danger by this point.

The whistleblower then escalates concerns externally to regulators. The system response is likely to be a full attack by this stage. If the whistleblower has not yet been dismissed, dismissal is almost certain, perhaps on trumped-up grounds, but probably on the lawful grounds of breakdown of employment relationship under the “some other substantial reason” route. At this point, the whistleblower’s employment prospects are likely to be damaged beyond repair. They are unlikely to obtain equivalent employment in the same field again. Regulators, oversight bodies and Government Departments are often part of the problem, and may turn a blind eye to the whistleblower’s disclosure and the fact that they have been suppressed and victimised. Sometimes they will even, outrageously, orchestrate the harm and suppression.

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 kicks in only after the whistleblower has been harmed and, as has been mentioned, it allows the whistleblower to sue only for limited compensation, long after the event, and long after the public interest matters have been buried.

The Government continue to say that a review of whistleblowing legislation would be premature. Quite the opposite—it is well overdue. That is what those who have been affected by the failures of the legislation tell us, and it surprises me that some Members, on the Opposition and Government Benches, think that we know better than them. Whistleblowing legislation is about preventing disaster—preventing death or wrongdoing—so the legislation should be equally serious, and should

provide appropriate pre-detriment protections for those who blow the whistle, and appropriate sanctions for those who are determined to punish and discount the voice of the whistleblower.

I end with a question. The motion refers to “protection for a broader range of people”, and widening the scope of the legislation. Job applicants, volunteers, interns, non-executive directors, public appointees, priests and ministers of religion, foster carers and members of the armed forces are not afforded protections for whistleblowing under the current regime. Have the Government any plans to extend the definition of “worker” to include people in those categories?

6.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for securing today’s important debate. I should also like to congratulate the right hon. Sir Norman Lamb on his knighthood, in recognition of his commitment to public service. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today, and for the passion that they have expressed in voicing the concerns and putting their arguments on UK whistleblowing policy.

The Government recognise how valuable it is that whistleblowers are prepared to shine a light on wrongdoing. That is important at an organisational level but also, more broadly, for society, so that issues such as abuse of power are brought to light. This afternoon, stories have been shared in the House of people who, having acted as whistleblowers, have been disadvantaged and experienced severe detriment.

Effective whistleblowing policies enable workers to speak up, to prevent wrongdoing and fraud. That helps to protect employers from financial loss and reputational damage, and builds their trust with customers. Those who blow the whistle should be able to do so without fear of recriminations. Employment protection enables workers who have blown the whistle to seek redress if they are dismissed or suffer detriment at the hands of the employer because they have made what is called a “protected disclosure” about wrongdoing that they have witnessed at work.

I can assure hon. Members that over recent years the Government have taken steps to support a cultural change in relation to whistleblowing in all sectors. A number of statutory and non-statutory improvements have been made. Those include the publication of guidance for whistleblowers on what they need to do to make disclosures while preserving their employment protections; and guidance for employers, including a non-statutory code of practice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) mentioned guidance. The hon. Lady spoke about the extent to which MPs have clarity in dealing with people who come to them for advice. I would like to go away and see whether there is any kind of guidance that we might publish, particularly for MPs, to improve our ability to help our constituents.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister heard some of my comments about the Financial Conduct Authority and

[Kevin Hollinrake]

its, at best, quite tepid approach to whistleblowers. What are we to do when, effectively, an agency that is commissioned by the Government does not follow through on its whistleblower obligations?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend. I was preparing to come on to that, but he is absolutely right—the FCA falls under the control of Her Majesty’s Treasury. I shall go into greater detail later, but I want to meet HMT to raise with it some of the concerns that have been voiced today in the House about the FCA and whistleblowing policy.

Norman Lamb: I thank the Minister for her very kind comments. I am sure she will come to this, but would she agree to meet us to discuss the case for a review, because I think a review of the legislation—not just guidance—is absolutely necessary? It was a Conservative who introduced the private Member’s Bill, and it could be a Conservative Government who modernise it and ensure full protection for all whistleblowers.

Kelly Tolhurst: I am happy to meet colleagues to talk about things they would like done in this area, and I note that the right hon. Gentleman distinguished between guidance and a review, which I will come to.

I want to outline what the Government have done and what steps are being taken, though I understand that for some colleagues these have not gone far enough. We have increased the scope of the protections in whistleblowing legislation by extending them to NHS students, nurses, midwives and job applicants in the health sector. We have also fulfilled the commitment to keep the prescribed persons list up to date. In response to the recommendations from the Women and Equalities Committee, we have committed to adding the Equality and Human Rights Commission to the list of prescribed persons at our next annual update. It will be subject to parliamentary time, but we aim to present that to the House before the end of the year. As I outlined earlier, I will consider whether there are things we can do within that to make it clearer.

We have also introduced guidance for prescribed persons and employers to help them to support whistleblowers. The most recent reform was a new legislative requirement for most prescribed persons to produce an annual report on whistleblowing disclosures made to them by workers.

Justin Madders: I appreciate all the work that has been done, but, as I said earlier, does the 3% success rate at tribunals not tell the Government that the legislation is not working?

Kelly Tolhurst: The whistleblowing legislation at the moment is regarded as proportionate, but as new evidence comes to light and as things change, it is right that we keep these policies under review, and it is right that we have these debates in the House of Commons so that the Government can be challenged over what is happening now and how we can improve.

Dr Whitford: It has come out clearly from this debate that PIDA only allows 3% of people to get some redress—it is only some redress—so surely we require legislation

that protects the whistleblower right at the start of the process, rather than trying to mop up afterwards.

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand the passion and concerns, and the statistics, but we need to implement a framework that works across all sectors, and actually in particular sectors some of the challenges are not easy. It is absolutely right that we do what we can at pace but that we also review and look at what happens in the future. That said, I take the hon. Lady’s point.

The relevant prescribed persons were required to publish the first of their reports by the end of September 2018, and those were placed in the parliamentary Libraries. The second annual reports will be due by the end of this September and will also be available in the House Libraries. The reporting duty increases confidence in the actions taken by the prescribed persons, because it enables greater transparency about how the disclosures are handled. With these improvements, we believe that the whistleblowing framework is proportionate, though I accept that as new evidence and practices come to light we will need to keep the legislation under review.

Hon. Members will be aware that the EU has developed a whistleblowing directive that we expect to be approved this summer. It is very wide-ranging and comprehensive, and we will have to consider how we take it into UK law. It could fall within the implementation period agreed under the terms of the withdrawal agreement, but, as we know, there are questions marks over that. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned workers’ rights. As colleagues knows, the Government were clear throughout the EU negotiations that we would not reduce workers’ rights when we left the EU. Whistleblowing and how we proceed in that regard is covered by the overall provision for the protection of workers in employment. I hope that Members will take that as some kind of commitment from me, at least. As for more formal reviews, it is right and proper for us to review the Government’s whistleblowing framework. It would be premature to do so now, but that does not mean that it will not happen.

I welcome the ongoing work of the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and vice-chaired by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. Officials are hoping to meet members of the APPG soon to discuss, in particular, the legislative framework and protections for workers, and to feed the results of those discussions into their internal work. I hope that my hon. Friend and the right hon. Gentleman have been able to speed up that process.

Many issues have been raised today, and I want to deal with as many of them as possible. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk talked about foster carers, and that is an issue about which I am particularly passionate. I understand the challenges faced by foster carers, and the importance of protecting people who are doing a fabulous job in looking after young people who desperately need help. Fostering services are required to have a complaints procedure and a whistleblowing policy. In addition, foster parents whose approval is terminated, or whose terms of approval are amended, have a right to challenge the decision, and the right to a review by means of the independent review mechanism. I understand that the right hon. Gentleman is to meet a representative of the Department for Education to discuss

some of those challenges in more detail, and I shall be interested to hear about the outcome.

As the House will know, the Government embarked on a consultation earlier in the year. That has now closed, and we are ourselves consulting on the various elements. I know that there are certain opinions in the House. We will issue our response to the consultation very soon, but, as I have said before at the Dispatch Box, the use of NDAs in an attempt to cover up wrongdoing is unacceptable. We have made it clear that no NDA will prevent the protection of whistleblowers.

Many Members, including the right hon. Member for North Norfolk and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), have expressed concern about whistleblowing in the health sector. In 2016, the National Guardian's Office was created, and there is now a network of "freedom to speak up" in every NHS trust so that staff can speak up and be given advice on raising concerns with their local guardian. There is also a national helpline. Following the independent inquiry into Gosport War Memorial Hospital, the Government responded by announcing they would legislate, subject to parliamentary time, for NHS trusts in England to report annually on the number of staff who speak up, thus increasing transparency. The Department of Health and Social Care is still considering further ways of strengthening protections for NHS workers.

I am very conscious of the time, Mr Speaker, but let me touch briefly on financial regulation. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned the work that he does in his role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance. I have had many conversations with my hon. Friend about a number of issues. I understand that the Financial Conduct Authority is currently conducting two investigations of the activities of HBOS, including its communications with regulators, following issues relating to misconduct. I look forward to seeing the reports. As I have always said at the Dispatch Box, I am prepared to meet Treasury Ministers to take the matter further. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned his constituent Ms Davey. I shall be happy to meet Treasury Ministers to discuss that as well. I understand that it is a live case, and I shall be more than happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman after the debate. I understand all the concerns about the FCA that have been raised by Members on both sides of the House, and I hope they accept my assurances that I will take them forward.

On blacklisting, the Information Commissioner is opening a call for evidence on the implications of modern employment practice and recruitment and selection, and hopefully that will shed further light on what can be done. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) knows, we are undertaking reform of the FRC after the independent review by Sir John Kingman.

I hope I have given some reassurance to the House in the time I have had that I am taking this issue seriously. I cannot stand here and promise Members exactly what they want, but I am prepared to promise that while I am in this post I will do what I can to work with them and address as many of their concerns as possible.

Once again I thank all those whistleblowers, some of whom might be watching our debate, who feel that they have suffered detriment for what they have done, and I

also thank those Members who have made sure their voices are heard in this Chamber.

6.50 pm

Norman Lamb: This has been a remarkably well informed debate, and it is striking that a complete unanimity of view has been presented to the Minister that the law at the moment is not adequate; it is not, in her words, "proportionate", I am afraid. We hope very much that we will convince her; I am pleased that she has agreed to meet us, but we need modern legislation that adequately protects people who do the right thing, because we all rely on them to ensure that we have the best business practices in this country and the best and safest public services. We only get those standards if people speak out, and at the moment we do not give those who do the necessary protection in order to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls for a fundamental review of whistleblowing regulation to provide proper protection for a broader range of people.

PETITIONS

Dundarave Football Pitch

6.51 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): There is a need for a major tourist arrival hub in Bushmills, and an identified need for 200 additional car parking spaces. Potentially this encroaches on the local community's football and recreation facilities, risks public safety and potentially increases village congestion. Any threat to this local facility is objected to by 1,320 petitioners who "request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call for the retention of the football pitch at its current location; further that moving the football pitch would represent an unacceptable waste of public money given the funds which have been spent on bringing the current site up to standard."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of Residents of Bushmills,

Declares that Dundarave football pitch is a valuable asset to the local community which has recently been improved with the erecting of fencing and the addition of changing rooms; further that petitioners are alarmed by suggestions that the pitch may be turned into a park and ride facility for the National Trust; and further that The Trust should understand the importance of outdoor life, including sports.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call for the retention of the football pitch at its current location; further that moving the football pitch would represent an unacceptable waste of public money given the funds which have been spent on bringing the current site up to standard.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002484]

Lloyds Bank, Yateley branch

6.52 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I rise to present a petition regarding the proposed closure of the Lloyds Bank branch in Yateley on 29 August, which is particularly highly valued by residents, especially

[Mr Ranil Jayawardena]

older residents, people with disabilities and small business owners. The petition has been signed by nearly 1,000 people

already, with many signatures still coming in. I thank all those who signed, shared and promoted the petition, and this shows the strength of feeling in the community.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,
Sheweth,

That Lloyds Bank have proposals to close their Yateley branch on 29 August 2019; further that this high street branch is particularly highly valued, especially by older residents and small business owners who often pop in to manage their finances; further that there has been an increase of branch usage in the last year by businesses, proving the demand for a high street branch; and further that if accounts are moved to Camberley or Fleet, this becomes between a one- and two-hour journey by public transport, which is clearly not in the best interests of our community.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to take all possible steps to urge Lloyds Bank to reconsider this decision and to make sure that the banking industry considers the social implications of their actions.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P002485]

Schools in Winchester

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

6.54 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The title of this Adjournment debate is “Schools in Winchester”; it has therefore been drawn fairly wide, and deliberately so. Supporting schools in my constituency, which for the record is Winchester and Chandler’s Ford during this debate, is a key focus for me. Winchester is my home; it is the place where my wife and I choose to live and bring up our children, Emily and William. They both attend local state schools, in primary right now, with my daughter about to make the transition to “big school”, as it is called, in September.

Like every MP, I get into my schools regularly—I was in one just on Friday—and this means that I see the system as a parent and as a local representative. Here is what people say where I come from:

“The schools in Winchester are excellent.”

“House prices are driven up by the quality of the schools here.”

“You can’t go wrong whichever school you go to.”

There is a lot of truth in each of those statements.

Across Hampshire for year R admissions, 92% of parents are offered their top choice of school. In the county, 91% of children attend schools that are rated good or outstanding—that was 69% when the Government came to office in 2010—and 68% of pupils in the county reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2, compared with 65% across the country as a whole. In my Winchester constituency, we are ahead of the national average in the year 1 phonics check, in outcomes in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary and in the key progress 8 calculation, which takes primary school outcomes and measures them against a child’s GCSE outcomes five years later.

In my constituency, every school bar one is Ofsted rated good or outstanding, and that applied to every school until quite recently. Yes, there is a plan to turn around Stanmore Primary School, which requires improvement right now, but it is a lovely school with a huge amount going for it, and I hope it knows that we in Winchester are right behind it and supporting it under the new leadership to come. As well as some 30 primary or junior schools in the constituency, we have three secondary schools in the city: Westgate and Henry Beaufort, which are ranked good, and Kings’, which is excellent. We have two secondaries down in Chandler’s Ford: Toynbee, which is good and very much the rising star, and the excellent-ranked Thornden Academy, which is one of the top-ranked schools in the whole country. Finally, we have the Perins Academy over in Alresford. Perins is worthy of further mention because it heads up the Perins multi-academy trust, or MAT, which I know the Minister will be pleased to hear, primarily created to bring under its wing the previously failing Sun Hill Junior School in the town.

We also have some strong leaders in Winchester’s schools. They are committed individuals who are always professional and who always engage sensibly and helpfully with me, for which I am grateful. On leadership, I just want to pause and pay special tribute to a lady called Fey Wood from Oliver’s Battery Primary School in Winchester.

She retires later this month after a long career in teaching and a recent cancer battle, which she has come through with her trademark toughness and a lot of love from the city. When she came to the school in 2015, just 12 pupils applied to join the reception year. This year, there will be 34 who want to go to the school. I wish Fey a very happy and healthy retirement and thank her for everything she has done for the children and parents of Oliver’s Battery during her five years with us.

So we have got it all going on, as they say, and I cannot claim, as a constituency MP, that my mailbag is consistently full of complaints from parents about the quality of the education their children are receiving or from teachers about the policies of Her Majesty’s Government. The Minister will be pleased to hear that. I first became the MP for Winchester nine years ago, and in the early years of the 2010 Parliament we had major capacity problems, especially in the city of Winchester. The baby boom that strangely coincided with the financial crash of 2008 had rather predictably by 2012 led to demand outstripping supply for us. If I am honest, Hampshire was very slow to plan for this, but in the face of a pretty concerted campaign by me and local parents, its response was first class.

One of my proudest achievements so far as Winchester’s MP was to deliver a £10 million investment plan that brought 420 new primary places across the city online for September 2014 and included expansions at Saint Peter’s—the Catholic school in Winchester—All Saints, St Bede and Weeke, plus the creation of Hampshire’s first all-through school at the Westgate, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) visited when she was Secretary of State.

So when it comes to schools in Winchester, capacity is in a good place now. Like many areas, we have major housing development taking place, including the new Kings Barton community, which will host the new Barton Farm Academy, sponsored by the excellent University of Winchester. I am thrilled to be a trustee of that school-to-be. We were on site last month for the ground-breaking ceremony for what will be a 420-place academy when full. Pupils will benefit from the university’s value-driven ethos, evidence-based learning and teaching and a passionate commitment to social justice. It is also an eco-school, and we are already incredibly proud of it.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

Steve Brine: Ahead of this debate, I asked constituency heads for their thoughts on their school’s current funding position and whether they had had to make any reductions in teaching or other staff for the current 2019-20 financial year. I wanted to get a view on the teachers’ pension scheme, which the Minister will know is the source of much concern in the profession. I wanted to get from the heads themselves the current view, and it is fair to say I certainly got that.

There is an understanding across the board among schools in my Winchester constituency that per-pupil funding has risen, but there is also frustration at the reduction in the lump sum in Hampshire to bring it in line with the national funding formula, which was a decision taken by the schools forum a few years back.

[*Steve Brine*]

The truth is that has created winners and losers, depending on the size of the school, a point to which I will return. Concern is unanimous within the schools about the rising cost base, including the unpopular apprenticeship levy. I would therefore welcome comments from the Minister on what procurement help the Department can offer to help schools meet the challenge of rising costs.

Three of my secondary schools have told me that they have regrettably made staffing reductions in the past two years. Several told me about support workers, librarians and business managers not being replaced and about increasing science and maths class sizes. Kings' School, which is ranked excellent, increased its intake by 24 pupils this year without increasing the number of classes, so tutor groups now have 30 pupils instead of 28. That increase in numbers has understandably undermined trust between the Winchester schools, putting something that we have called the Winchester schools teaching alliance in a fragile position and leading one secondary school to pull out of it altogether.

Several heads made the point that they have had no choice but to cut back on continuing professional development in recent years, which is inevitably going to hit staff recruitment and retention—if it is not hitting it already—in Winchester and central Hampshire, which is already an expensive part of the world to live in.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I sought the hon. Gentleman's permission to intervene and talked to him about the matter that he is bringing to the House. Does he agree that the Government need to refocus on the point of the schooling system, which is to educate children, prepare them to reach their potential and help them to find a job that makes the most of what they have? Instead, there is a fixation on micro-management, which ignores our duty to ensure that schools are funded correctly and given enough to operate to an acceptable standard.

Steve Brine: The hon. Gentleman and I have danced in this Chamber many times during Adjournment debates—usually with me at the Dispatch Box—so it is good to see him in his place. I agree with some of what he says, but I do not think that schools are micro-managed by this Government. The Government have a focus on rigour for some of the key outcomes, and the Schools Minister has been absolutely laser-focused on that, as he should be. A good school looks at the whole person, and my schools in Winchester do that, but they are finding that a challenge right now, and I will come on to the reasons why.

Finally on funding, I have my fair share of small rural primaries in Winchester, and the fair funding formula has not been good news for them all. For obvious reasons, the schools forum decision that I mentioned earlier has not created winners out of schools with a small role. Compton All Saints' Church of England Primary School tells me that the new formula has left it operating with about £20,000 less than in previous years. That, as the Minister will appreciate, makes a massive difference in a school with only four classes.

As the Minister will know, the Government have now published their response to the recent consultation on funding the changes to the teachers' pension scheme

employer contribution rate. This welcome announcement confirms that the Government will fund all state-funded schools, further education and sixth-form colleges and adult community learning providers to cover their increased costs from September 2019, when the rate for employer contributions is due to increase to 23.6%.

The letter to me from the Secretary of State for Education, dated April 2019, said the grant will be accompanied by a "supplementary fund" to which schools facing unusually high pension costs—typically, I suppose, where a school faces a shortfall between its grant allocation and its actual increase in pension costs—will be able to apply for additional support. Ministers said they planned to announce details of how schools can apply to the supplementary fund in the autumn of this year, so will the Minister please update us on progress?

More generally, the message I got is obviously one of relief that the TPS employer contribution has been fully funded for 2019, but schools need a lot more certainty—I am sure the Minister hears this a lot on his travels, and I know that he travels a lot—if they are to plan properly. Rolling one-year settlements are just not good enough.

One of my schools tells me that it is part way through a four-year deficit recovery plan and that it aims to balance in 2020-21, but the great known unknown in its projections is staff costs. Governing bodies urgently need to take a long view of financial planning, and I urge the Minister in that respect.

Other themes running through the responses centre on help for children with additional needs and for parent teacher associations, and I am sure we have all engaged with PTAs in our constituencies. I hear that PTAs in my patch—I know that other people hear this, too—are increasingly being asked to step up for major capital projects in the absence of any chance that schools in my constituency will be eligible for external funds.

Will the Minister touch on what resource schools in places like Winchester can tap into when they need to make capital improvements to their site? I understand there is a capital maintenance grant, but Hampshire County Council tells me that its calculated liabilities—in other words, what needs doing—are currently around £370 million, whereas the grant received this year is around £18 million, which is obviously a big gap.

I am very concerned by what I am hearing about children with special educational needs or additional needs, a subject about which you and I care passionately, Mr Speaker. If I am honest, this is the issue that brings together all the pressures, funding and otherwise, being communicated to me by headteachers in my constituency and by the local education authority.

I am getting a consistent message from heads that they are seeing a marked increase in the needs of children, especially with regard to social, emotional and mental health. As one head put it to me:

"Schools seem to be having to cope with increased levels of violent behaviour—not because the children are naughty but because we are unable to provide for their needs. Special school places are at a premium and children who need this specialist and therapeutic provision are having to be 'held' in mainstream school. This not only means their own needs are not being met—but also disrupts the learning of others. Teachers find working in this environment stressful and I have experienced good staff leaving because of it."

This familiar view has been expressed to me by several of my headteachers.

Funding pressures at local authority level, for which I appreciate the Minister and the Department for Education are not responsible, have left social care and children's services under pressure, and schools are increasingly finding themselves plugging the gap. Teachers are becoming involved as lead professionals in supporting families and home life.

Teachers have always done much more than teaching, of course, but right now it feels like they are expected to be housing officers, mental health professionals and even nutritionists to boot. I have spoken warmly of the teachers at my schools, and they are resourceful people, but that is pushing it. As one headteacher in Winchester put it to me recently, a small group of pupils are taking a very large slice of support and time, which obviously is then having an impact on the other children, but it is also having an impact on the children with less complex education, health and care plans, who then miss out as a result.

I thought that IDACI—the income deprivation affecting children index—on the proportion of people under the age of 16 who live in low-income households could be a place to turn, but sadly it is not, because my constituency will always fall short of that measure, even though there are pockets of deprivation in Winchester; these are nothing special just because they have a fantastic view of the south downs or the city of Winchester from the playground. If we add in how stretched child and adolescent mental health services are and how stretched the supporting families programme is in my area, we have a perfect storm, which says clearly that we need so much more support in our schools, to stand with these often highly vulnerable children and their families.

Clearly, we as a country are at a crossroads in our political life at this time. As we pause for breath before the new Prime Minister takes office later this month, I make this plea to my right hon. Friends the Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), as well as to the outgoing occupant of No. 10, who I know will hear these words acutely. When I was a Minister at the Department of Health and Social Care, as I was until recently, I was fortunate to work alongside two Secretaries of State as we landed a very healthy long-term financial settlement for the NHS and subsequently a long-term plan for how it would deliver the improved outcomes we wanted to see across the acute sector, public health and all the things I am passionate about. We clearly need a long-term plan for schools, backed by significant new investment—the first bit may be easier than the second—just as we did for the NHS.

As the Minister knows, I have long been a member and supporter of the f40 campaign group and we have had some success. I pay tribute to the Minister because I know that he has personally done a huge amount with f40 and to push the fairer funding agenda within government, during a time of difficult financial constraint. It is a fact that over the two years 2018-19 and 2019-20, per-pupil funding in Hampshire is going up by £167, which represents 4% compared with the national average of 3.2%, and when changes in pupil numbers are taken into account, total funding rises in my county by £42.5 million. But when the dedicated schools grant for 2019-20 is divided by the number of students in Hampshire, each pupil is worth £5,523, which is the fourth lowest figure in England.

Although we have received an additional £6 million over two years in high needs block funding, we clearly cannot keep up with demand. Let me give an example. In 2014, there were 5,500 pupils with a statement across Hampshire, but in 2019 there are 8,300 pupils with EHCPs. It does not take a genius to work out that this has led to a big deficit—a £10 million in-year deficit at the LEA. I know from independent studies that the UK is a high spender on state primary and secondary education by international standards, and real spending per pupil is half as much again higher than it was in 2000, during the so-called Blair years of plenty, but we still have all that I have set out in this debate and schools facing very real financial constraints, which I know, from his letter in April, that the Secretary of State and the Minister do not duck.

The long-term plan for schools must be part of a properly funded settlement that recognises the reductions in lump sum that have done so much to aid the current situation, enters into a new long-term deal with the profession on pay and pensions and, like the NHS long-term plan, takes seriously the wider services in society, such as CAMHS and social services, because when they fall down they significantly affect our schools.

I would say, with the benefit of my experience in the Department of Health and Social Care, that we did bring in a long-term settlement for the NHS and we did bring forward a long-term plan for the NHS, but we did not, at the same time, bring forward the people plan of the workforce or a funded public health settlement. That weakened the NHS long-term plan, and those two elements are now playing catch-up. We must not make that mistake again with a new long-term plan for schools.

We have much to celebrate in my constituency. I have given many figures in support of that and tried to be balanced in the way I have presented the schools in Winchester. We have strong leadership at the LEA, and I have given some stats relating to that, and very strong leadership in the schools themselves. Generally, we have a well-engaged parent body. However, there are signs for me, as a constituency MP for nearly a decade, that suggest we need change. I have set out some of that this evening, particularly in respect of the acute challenge that we face on high needs.

Above all, we need that long-term plan. We need a long-term financial settlement for schools in Winchester and throughout the country. I would be grateful if the excellent Minister and the rest of his team at the Department left a note to that effect when, or if—although I hope not—they leave office in a few weeks' time.

7.15 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on securing this debate and on his excellent and well-informed speech. He is particularly passionate about supporting schools in his constituency. We have many conversations around the building—in the Library and elsewhere—about his support for his local schools and his concerns about particular schools, and I do enjoy those conversations.

My hon. Friend shares the Government's ambition that every state school should be a good school that teaches a rigorous and balanced curriculum and offers pupils world-class qualifications. Since 2010, the Government have focused on driving up academic

[Nick Gibb]

standards, and I note that all but one of the state schools in the Winchester constituency are graded good or outstanding. I wish Fey Wood, the headteacher of Oliver's Battery Primary School, a happy retirement after a long and successful career in teaching.

It is only by continuing to have the highest standards across the board that we can ensure that every school ensures that all children and young people are able to fulfil their potential. High standards, which are exemplified by many Winchester schools, have been a key focus of our radical reforms since 2010, but we recognise that there is still work to be done and remain committed to ensuring a sustained improvement in standards.

As part of our aspiration that all children should experience a world-class education, we reformed the national curriculum, restoring knowledge to its heart and raising expectations of what children should be taught. This is being delivered by all maintained schools and sets an ambitious benchmark for academies that we expect them at least to match. Too many pupils, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, were being entered into low-quality qualifications, so we also reformed GCSEs to put them on a par with qualifications in the best-performing jurisdictions in the world. The result is a suite of new GCSEs that rigorously assess the knowledge and skills acquired by pupils during key stage 4, and are in line with the expected standards in countries with high-performing education systems.

I note that for Winchester the average attainment 8 measure, which shows the average score of a pupil's eight best GCSE grades, is well above the national average. Clearly, secondary schools in my hon. Friend's constituency have adapted well to the new, more demanding GCSEs.

The Government also introduced the English baccalaureate school performance measure, which consists of English, maths, at least two sciences, history or geography, and a language. Those subjects form part of the compulsory curriculum in many of the highest-performing countries internationally, at least up to age 15 or 16. The percentage of pupils in state-funded schools who take the EBacc rose from 22% in 2010 to 38% in 2018, but we want that to rise to 75% by 2022 and to 90% by 2025. I recognise the challenge that presents, but it is right that we should aim to provide the best possible education and therefore more opportunity for young people.

Again, Winchester has risen to the challenge: in 2018, some 55.3% of pupils in the constituency's state secondary schools entered the EBacc. My hon. Friend will be pleased that Winchester is leading the way.

The Westgate School in Winchester is doing particularly well, with 66% of pupils entering EBacc—well above national and local authority averages. Having young people learning languages is vital if Britain is to be an outward-looking global nation, so it is excellent that 74% of Westgate's year 11 pupils studied a language GCSE in 2018.

Literacy is hugely important, Mr Deputy Speaker—sorry, Mr Speaker. You have been there long enough; I should know by now that you are not a Deputy Speaker. Children who are reading well by age five are six times more likely than their peers to be on track by age 11 in

reading, and 11 times more likely to be on track in mathematics. Ensuring that all pupils in England's schools are taught to read effectively has been central to our reforms, and we are now seeing the fruits of that work. By the end of year 1, most children should be able to decode simple words using phonics, and once they can do this, they can focus on their wider reading skills and develop a love of reading.

In England, phonics performance has improved significantly since we introduced the phonics screening check in 2012. At that time, just 58% of 6-year-olds correctly read at least 32 out of the 40 words in the check. In 2018, that figure was 82%. In the district of Winchester, 84% of pupils—I think my hon. Friend mentioned that figure—passed the year 1 check. While that is just above the average, I am keen that we are ambitious and that the percentage of pupils meeting this standard continues to rise.

We can see that this focus on phonics is having an impact. In 2016, England achieved its highest ever score in the reading ability of nine and 10-year-olds, moving from joint 10th to joint eighth in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study—PIRLS—ranking. That follows our greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum, and the particular focus on phonics. At key stage 2, Winchester again does well, with 74% of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in 2018, compared with 64% nationally and 68% in Hampshire—a figure that my hon. Friend also cited.

Thornden School is a highly successful academy in my hon. Friend's constituency—an example of the freedom we have given frontline professionals through the academies and free schools programme. Since 2010, the number of academies has grown from 200 to over 8,500, including free schools. Four out of ten state-funded primary and secondary schools are now part of an academy trust. Converting to being an academy is a positive choice made by hundreds of schools every year to give great teachers and heads the freedom to focus on what is best for pupils. It allows high-performing schools to consolidate success and spread that excellence to other schools. The figures speak for themselves: around one in 10 sponsored academy predecessor schools were good or outstanding before they converted, compared with almost seven in 10 after they became an academy, where an inspection has taken place.

I note that my hon. Friend is a trustee of the University of Winchester Academy Trust—an innovative partnership supported by the university that has been successful in two free school bids. He will know at first hand the vital role that governors, trustees and clerks play in supporting our education system, and especially the additional reach and capacity that a multi-academy trust can bring to improving the education of even more children.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of school funding. Core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion in this financial year. This year, all schools are attracting an increase of at least 1% per pupil, compared with their 2017-18 baselines. Those schools that have been historically underfunded will attract up to 6% more per pupil, compared with 2017-18—a further 3% per pupil on top of the 3% they gained last year—as we continue to address historic injustices. In Winchester, the per pupil percentage increase in this financial year is 6.5%, compared with 2017-18.

We are well aware, of course, that local authorities and schools are facing challenges in managing their budgets in the context of increasing costs and rising levels of demand. We will be making the strongest possible case for education at the spending review and pushing for maximum levels of visibility for the education sector. I hope my hon. Friend will be reassured by that. The Secretary of State has made it clear that, as we approach the spending review, he will back headteachers to have the resources they need to deliver a world-class education.

My hon. Friend asks how we are helping schools to meet cost pressures. We have announced a strategy to help schools reduce their costs and make the most from every pound. This strategy includes recommended deals covering energy, water, IT and photocopying. Our Teaching Vacancies site, which is now available across the country, is a free job listing website that will drive down schools' recruitment costs. We have also launched a new price comparison site called School Switch to help schools lower their energy price by comparing tariffs.

My hon. Friend raised the important issue of high needs funding. We recognise that local authorities, including Hampshire, are facing high-needs cost pressures. That is why we allocated an additional £250 million of funding towards high needs over this year and next year, on top of the increases we had already promised. Hampshire will receive £6 million of this additional funding.

Our response to these pressures cannot simply be additional funding. That is why in December the Secretary of State wrote to local authority chief executives and directors of children's services to set out our plans. Those plans include reviewing current special educational needs content in initial teacher training provision, and ensuring a sufficient supply of educational psychologists, trained and working in the system. We will continue to engage with Hampshire County Council and other local authorities, along with schools, colleges, parents and health professionals, to ensure that children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities get the support they need and deserve.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of capital funding. Regrading capital funding for improvements, for financial year 2019-20 we have allocated £22.7 million to maintained and voluntary-aided schools under Hampshire County Council. This includes a school condition allocation of £18.98 million for Hampshire to invest in maintaining and improving its schools, as well as a total of £3.7 million in devolved formula capital for individual schools to spend on their own priorities. In 2018-19, maintained and voluntary-aided schools in Hampshire also benefited from an extra allocation of £6.5 million from the additional £400 million announced at last year's Budget.

Six schools in Hampshire are included in the priority school building programme, which is rebuilding or refurbishing buildings in the worst condition at over 500 schools. Hampshire has been allocated £231.2 million to provide new school places between 2011 and 2021, which they can invest in places at any type of school, including academies. The latest available data shows that there are 10,700 more school places in Hampshire today than in 2010.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of teachers' pensions. The teachers' pensions scheme is an important one for this country. It is one of only eight that are guaranteed by the Government, because we believe that

it is important that we continue to offer excellent benefits in order to attract and retain talented teachers. The employers' contribution rate to the teachers' pension scheme will increase from 16.4% to 23.6% in September 2019, as my hon. Friend pointed out. As confirmed in April, we will be providing funding for this increase in 2019-20 for all state-funded schools, further education and sixth-form colleges, and adult community learning providers. This includes local authority centrally-employed teachers, teachers at music education hubs and funding to local authorities for pupils with EHCPs who are educated in independent settings.

My hon. Friend mentioned the supplementary fund. We have published how we are distributing the pensions funding to schools, but in order to match the funding as closely as we can to the actual cost that individual schools will face, we are allocating the funding using a per-pupil formula. That means we need a supplementary fund, to ensure that no school is placed in financial difficulty by the pension changes. It will mean that no school faces a shortfall of more than 0.05% of their

[Nick Gibb]

overall budget. We are currently working with stakeholders on the specifics of the fund, with a focus on ensuring that the processes involved are as efficient and streamlined as possible for schools. We will announce details of the supplementary fund in October, including how schools can apply, alongside publishing school-level grant allocations.

I want to congratulate my hon. Friend on the success of many schools in his constituency at improving and maintaining the high standards that our children deserve.

I have set out the range of reforms that the Government have introduced since 2010 with the sole focus of raising standards. I thank him for raising his concerns about funding, and I hope I have reassured him that we will be making the strongest possible case at the spending review and pushing for maximum levels of visibility for the education sector.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 3 July 2019

[SIR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

Red Squirrels: Potential Extinction

9.30 am

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered potential red squirrel extinction.

“This is a tale about a tail—a tail that belonged to a little red squirrel, and his name was Nutkin. He had a brother called Twinkleberry, and a great many cousins: they lived in a wood at the edge of a lake.”

That is from “The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin” by Beatrix Potter, written in 1903. The lake and the island that Beatrix Potter described are of course St Herbert’s Island on Derwentwater in my Copeland constituency. Sadly, the abundance of red squirrels that Beatrix Potter described—or *sciurus vulgaris*, to give our only native tree squirrel its Latin name—could never be enjoyed today. I believe that the decline of the red squirrel is a national tragedy. Its numbers across the UK have declined from an estimated 2.5 million, as recorded over 100 years ago, to the latest count of just 140,000, with only 15,000 left in England. It is a harrowing tale of human intervention, bounties, woodland destruction, predation and disease, but there is hope.

In Cumbria, we are just about retaining our red squirrel stronghold, thanks to the dedication of volunteer conservation groups such as the West Lakes Squirrel Initiative, which I have been proud to support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward this matter, which I spoke to her about last night. I am very pleased that in my constituency of Strangford—particularly in Mount Stewart, which is run by the National Trust—there is a red squirrel conservation project, which is ably supported and very successful. Alongside that, there are the red squirrel projects at Rosemount in Grey Abbey and on the Ballywalter estate, which are two shooting estates. Does she agree that when it comes to preserving the red squirrel, the eradication or removal of the grey squirrel is important, because of the pox that it carries, and that to do that we need the co-operation of landowners, shooting organisations and rural pursuit organisations? If so, does she feel that perhaps the Government should encourage those groups to be involved in efforts to save the red squirrel?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent intervention and pre-empted much of what I want to say today. I share his sentiment entirely. The threats from squirrel pox and deforestation in the form of clear felling, and the difficulty in accessing land to control grey squirrels, mean that the task of red squirrel conservation is far from easy.

“The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin” was written in 1903 by a wonderful author and illustrator who obviously adored red squirrels. However, in that same year, and for decades afterwards, a bounty on red squirrels would lead to more than 100,000 being killed in the Scottish highlands

alone. Rewards were paid for their bushy tails for over 43 years. If only those gamekeepers, foresters and country folk could have had a crystal ball. Man has a lot to answer for.

In 1876 some bright spark thought that it would be a good idea to introduce the larger and more prolifically breeding grey squirrel from North America to Cheshire. The grey squirrel out-competes our native reds for habitat, food and reproduction, and grey squirrels carry, but are not affected by, the fatal virus of squirrel pox. It is estimated that there are now 3.5 million grey squirrels living in the UK, compared with just 140,000 red squirrels, and it is widely agreed by scientists, Government Departments, wildlife trusts and conservationists that grey squirrels and red squirrels cannot cohabit. Without exception, where there are live greys, there will be dead reds.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am sorry that I am unable to stay and listen to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), as I have red squirrels in my garden on the Island. Does my hon. Friend agree that the real point is that besides having more trees and the right trees—I speak as a life member of the Woodland Trust—we need to move the boundaries, so that red squirrels get more land area and grey squirrels get squeezed out? It is not a question of eliminating grey squirrels from the whole country; it is a question of expanding the area where red squirrels can thrive and prosper.

Trudy Harrison: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Creating such a ring of steel around the red squirrel strongholds is absolutely imperative. This debate is not about a national effort to control greys and secure the reds; we have to concentrate on stronghold areas if we are to win the battle.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. We in Barrow and Furness are with her in wishing to preserve the red squirrel. However, what does she say to those detractors who would say that in fact she is nothing more than a squirrel racist? 1870—the time when grey squirrels were released into Britain—was also when Barrow shipyard was built and most Barrovians arrived in the area. I do not imagine that she would suggest herding up Barrovians and removing them from their native Cumbria. Can she say more about how grey squirrels will be protected alongside what is rightly a drive to preserve the red squirrel?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that I of course would not want to see Barrovians rounded up and banished from Barrow. The point is that the native red squirrel and the North American grey squirrel cannot cohabit, and that is because grey squirrels carry the squirrel pox virus but have themselves developed immunity to it.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She will be aware of the pioneering work on the Isle of Anglesey by the well-known Red Squirrels Trust and by Dr Craig Shuttleworth. Being an island, we have natural boundaries and we have preserved them. However, an important point was made about woodland. We need the correct

[*Albert Owen*]

woodland, and in the forests of Newborough and Pentraeth the number of breeding pairs of squirrels has gone up from none to more than 350. That is a success story, where we have natural boundaries as well as the proper woodland and habitat. With the onset of the debate on climate change, surely now is the time to plant the right trees in the right places to help the environment and squirrels' habitats?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. This is a really worthwhile debate and I think that, perhaps with the exception of the comment from the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), we are aligned on what must be done.

John Woodcock: It was a probing amendment.

Trudy Harrison: Planting the right kind of trees is absolutely imperative, but we must also be careful of unintended consequences, because allowing trees to be planted that can create a wildlife corridor for grey squirrels to infiltrate red squirrel strongholds would be disastrous. It takes just one grey squirrel to infiltrate a red squirrel community, and then the squirrel pox virus will tear through the entire population, with devastating consequences.

"Belinda: The Forest How Red Squirrel" is another book that I find utterly enchanting. Red squirrels from the Forest How guest house in Eskdale are brought to life by Peter Trimming, who I am pleased to say is in the Public Gallery today. The bushy-tailed, tufted-eared, bright-eyed visitors to the garden feed tables are portrayed as tame creatures, with brilliant and detailed photography. However, the book goes on to tell the story of red squirrel suffering, as one by one there are fatalities until the last red squirrel, affectionately known as Belinda, sadly dies.

The first signs of squirrel pox are that the squirrel is lethargic and lacking in co-ordination, and the sick squirrels will develop open lesions on their eyes, mouth, ears and paws. The little tufty ears wither, leaving the blind and helpless animal to die a painful, slow death of hypothermia, starvation and, inevitably, predation. Squirrel pox does not discriminate between an old red or a lactating mother, and an infected female with young in the drey would probably leave her kittens to perish, too, through hypothermia, starvation or predation. It is highly unlikely that a red squirrel will recover from squirrel pox—in over 90% of cases they die. Some say that only 5% survive. Indeed, some say that it is unheard of for a red squirrel ever to recover from squirrel pox.

Given the current rate of decline, if we are agreed that our children and grandchildren should, like us, be inspired by Beatrix Potter's books and see for themselves our most iconic native British wildlife in the wild, we must act quickly. It has been said that the fight for red squirrel survival will be futile, but thankfully in life, although there are those who say things cannot be done, there are also people who refuse to accept defeat. There are people who give up hours, days, weeks and years of their own time and spend their own money because they are determined to be part of this greatest revival—people such as Peter Armstrong and Steve Tyson, who work throughout the year in my Copeland constituency in

the name of red squirrel conservation with a committed team of supporters. I commend their efforts, and those of all volunteers who go out in all weathers, across rough terrain, in wind and rain against the odds to save the reds.

Red squirrel conservation requires many factors, including the permission of landowners, the skills of a marksman or markswoman, and the bulk purchase of nuts and corn, feeders, trail cameras and traps. It is a costly hobby; it requires risk assessment, quality control, promotion and fundraising, bid-writing, account-keeping, and driving for miles and miles. It requires monitoring and collaboration, dealing with countless setbacks, and relentless commitment. The revival of the reds is possible—perhaps not right across this great nation, but in areas of the north of England, Devon, Anglesey, Scotland, and in the glens of Northern Ireland and on the Isle of Wight, we can effectively keep areas of our countryside free from grey squirrels and therefore avoid unhelpful competition for habitat and food and the awful, painful, deadly squirrel pox virus.

I ask the Minister to consider the asks of those volunteers and conservation groups ahead of the development of a strategy for red squirrels in England. During my research for this debate, what really struck me was the extent of consensus and collaboration. Nobody—no organisation or wildlife trust that I have spoken with—disagrees that where there are live grey squirrels, there will be dead red squirrels. The North American grey squirrels will always outcompete our native reds, and there is currently no vaccination or cure for the deadly virus that will be spread throughout a red squirrel community.

There are some solutions in the pipeline, from the release of predatory pine martens to infertility potions being administered to grey squirrels in Nutella chocolate and hazelnut spread. In the name of red squirrel conservation, a pile of research is being invested in, but those solutions will all take time to develop and may not be deemed viable in all areas. It is extra tricky in the few areas of the UK that currently enjoy a red squirrel population. Although the pine marten release project may work well in areas void of red squirrels, and it may be that the pine marten would struggle to capture the lighter, more nimble red squirrel, the same could not be said for a drey of young red kittens, which would surely make a tasty, easy meal for such a voracious carnivore.

Pine martens may have their place in the great grey challenge, but introducing a predator when a population is already on the edge of survival does not seem like the best idea. There have been reported sightings of pine martens carrying dead red squirrels, which confirm my concern. It is also important to note that the red squirrel is one of many mammals and birds that are threatened in our countryside. The pine marten, a member of the weasel family, became extinct in England over 150 years ago because we humans decided that it was eating too many birds' eggs and small mammals. However, it is thriving in North America, where its main source of food is the grey squirrel.

The concept of a contraception or infertility potion is being developed by the Animal and Plant Health Agency. It requires a method of administration that is targeted only at grey squirrels, because the compound is not specific to squirrels and would, if ingested, cause other mammals to become infertile. Research on a contraceptive

compound is currently in the second year of its five-year project, and hopes are high that in future it will provide another tool for the humane management of grey squirrels and perhaps other mammals. However, until then, the compound is not being used; the last thing we would want is for a red squirrel, or indeed any other wildlife, to become infertile because it happened upon a tasty dollop of chocolate and hazelnut spread. Much research into a squirrel pox vaccine is under way by the Wildlife Ark Trust; that vaccine is being heralded as a possible saviour of the red squirrel, but that is also some way from being the finished article.

From what I have seen in our Cumbrian countryside, the simple, clean shot cull is by far the most effective and humane method of grey squirrel control, and therefore of red squirrel conservation. However, one landowning organisation requires some further encouragement to embrace those commendable volunteer actions, and I call upon the Minister to gently urge some progress in that regard. The Forestry Commission does not allow volunteer groups to shoot grey squirrels on its land, even though those groups are trained and fully insured. In contrast, deer control is undertaken in those same publicly owned forests, using high-powered rifles. Where red squirrels are present, trapping clearly carries the risk of the unintentional entrapment of a lactating mother, and the subsequent death of her kittens, which, even if left alone for only a short period of time, would starve, become hypothermic or succumb to a predator.

Grey squirrel re-invasion is a major threat, even to successful eradication projects such as those in Anglesey and west Cumbria. Ongoing grey squirrel control is necessary in all mainland areas where red squirrels are present, to prevent grey squirrels making re-incursions. That requires continuous effort, and there is a need constantly to find resources. Landowners may obtain grants to control grey squirrels, which are paid providing there is some evidence of effort. That is not necessarily the most efficient use of resources.

The Forestry Act 1967 does not allow authorities in England and Wales to refuse tree-felling licences in order to conserve or enhance flora or fauna. Although red squirrels are protected from deliberate injury or killing, and their nests or dreys are also protected, the habitat they need is not. Clear felling of habitat happens even in the breeding season. I understand from many conservation groups that responded to my call for evidence that timber harvesting companies can use that legal loophole—the incidental result of an otherwise lawful act. I ask the Minister to consider making tree-felling licence authorities able to refuse licences or issue enforceable wildlife conditions. The Forest Stewardship Council's stamp of approval must require the protection of red squirrel habitat if it is to be worth anything meaningful.

This year, as part of the Government's commitment to delivering the 25-year environment plan, the Red Squirrels United project—funded by the EU LIFE programme and the National Lottery Heritage Fund—is developing a strategy for red squirrels in England, in collaboration with the UK Squirrel Accord and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. It is my request that this strategy and action plan reflects today's debate, and considers what more could be done by a Department that has achieved so much in the name of environmental protection.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady not only on securing the debate, but on her enduring interest in the matter, which I and many others share. Does she agree that we need to hear from the Minister, and from the various other Ministers across the United Kingdom, about a project or plan for the next 15 or 20 years? A written answer that I got from the Minister indicates that in England alone there are 150 greys for every single red, so there needs to be a 15 to 20-year project that would ensure not just the survival but the flourishing of the reds.

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely correct; the issue requires a long-term strategy of collaboration that is appropriately resourced. That is the only way we will ensure that our children and grandchildren will enjoy the benefits, as we have, of our native British wildlife.

Albert Owen: The hon. Lady is talking about funding, which is important. One important source for conservation in the UK has been European structural funds, particularly in relation to public land owners and the community working together to preserve and increase the number of red squirrels. Will she join me in pressing the Minister to use the shared prosperity fund post Brexit in the same positive way when it comes to wildlife and the preservation of species such as the red squirrel?

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I join him in making that point to the Minister. As we lose some funding, we must ensure that alternative funding pots become available for this worthwhile and urgent project.

I thank the many individuals and organisations who have contributed very helpful and detailed briefings, including Dr Craig Shuttleworth, Jackie Foott, the National Trust, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Red Squirrels United and the UK Squirrel Accord, which is a UK-wide partnership of 37 leading conservation and woodland organisations, Government agencies and companies, founded by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

The key asks from all those organisations focus on: ensuring long-term, sustainable funding; amending the Forestry Act 1967 to ensure that key vulnerable flora and fauna are protected in the licensing process; ensuring that the 1967 Act contains a requirement to consider the landscape level of impacts of continuous tree felling licences; and, most importantly, effectively enforcing the Invasive Non-native Species (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. I also thank the Wildlife Trust, which shared a photograph of a litter of four red squirrels orphaned after a tree hosting their drey was felled, and the Woodland Trust, which rightly points out that grey squirrel control is not at all effective unless control is undertaken by the majority of neighbouring landowners, whose combined efforts improve viability and effectiveness.

I commend, celebrate and thank the thousands of people who work all year round to protect our wildlife in the fight against decline. I hope that the Minister and colleagues across the House will join me in appreciating the selfless effort required.

9.52 am

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this debate. Formby in my constituency is regarded as the mainland's southernmost stronghold for red squirrels. We have red squirrels on the Isle of Wight, Brownsea Island and Anglesey, but Formby is the furthest south on the mainland. Reds are found elsewhere in the Liverpool city region too. My wife and I enjoy walking our dog in the pine woods by Formby beach, where we find red squirrels. The National Trust has done superb work over many years to ensure that the woods, the dunes and the habitat there are maintained and that the red squirrel population is looked after. That red squirrel wood at Formby is a real treat for anyone visiting the area and is a place to find red squirrels in good numbers.

Conservation is going on in a strong way in Formby. It follows the foresight of the Weld-Blundell family in planting pine woods on the dunes at Formby in the late 1800s, which created the ideal habitat for red squirrels and many other species. The trees provide a valuable windbreak for the asparagus fields and the neighbouring residential area. The next-door dunes are also home to the natterjack toad, the sand lizard, the northern dune tiger beetle and birds including skylarks and willow warblers. It is a fine place of nature conservation.

In Formby, other neighbouring villages and some of the smaller towns, the red squirrels have a place of affection among the public. People are fully aware of the precarious position that the red squirrel is in and how endangered the species really is. People are extremely fond of them and are encouraged by the National Trust and other conservation organisations to look out for grey squirrels and to alert the authorities when they come across them. They are also encouraged to look for signs, particularly in late summer and the autumn, of potential squirrel pox. As the hon. Lady said, it is almost certainly fatal to all reds, whereas greys have acquired immunity to it.

The reds are extremely tame. They are happy to approach humans and are generally not put off by humans being nearby, although I think my dog is probably a bit too much for them on the occasions when we walk him near the squirrels. He is always on a lead, I hasten to add, in case anyone has concerns, although I am not sure what he would do if the opportunity arose. I think he would be more curious than a threat to them. The squirrels can be found in gardens, although when I told some of my constituents that this debate was taking place, one of them pointed out that when she was encouraged as a child to feed red squirrels, she was bitten. We had one discordant voice, but that was the only such piece of feedback that I received. They are genuinely very popular, and with good reason, too. I filmed a red squirrel that decided to dart between my legs in the course of what he was doing. He was quite happy to be close to me. That was actually in Cumbria. Cumbrian red squirrels are very friendly, but they are very friendly in Formby and across the Liverpool city region too.

The hon. Lady spoke about the impact of greys. They impact not only on red squirrels, but on trees, which are the habitat for the reds. The damage that greys cause is widespread. I am tempted to wander into a debate on climate change at this point, because when trees are

damaged, it reduces their effectiveness at removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Greys certainly cause damage that undermines the habitat for red squirrels and the other species I have mentioned. It is extremely important that we protect native species, and this debate contrasts the importance of native species against those that have come from overseas.

I am grateful to the National Trust in Formby and the national organisation for their briefings about the good work done at Formby. I am also grateful to the Woodland Trust. All the briefings stressed the importance of controlling the numbers of greys. The National Trust also stressed to me the importance of the funding it receives and of having greater funding to maintain and enhance the landscape—the habitat and the trees. There have been concerns about the thinning out of trees at Formby, for example. Important work has been carried out by the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, including on the Merseyside red squirrel project. It is also part of the national Red Squirrels United project, which is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Those projects are extremely important. The hon. Lady mentioned the importance of supporting the existing strongholds, and she is right about that as a strategy, but we can never take it for granted. We have to be extremely alert and work extremely hard to maintain that work. Funding is extremely important. I hope the Minister can confirm that the Government intend to maintain and potentially enhance funding in this area.

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the strongholds of Formby, the Isle of Wight, Cumbria and my constituency of Anglesey. The money to conserve this important species and habitat also creates an economic benefit from tourism coming to the area. He knows that the Anglesey beaches, with the woodlands in close proximity, are a great example of that, so does he agree that this is about giving money not only to conservation groups, but to the local economy and community to invest for the future?

Bill Esterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was heartened to hear from his previous interventions and in my research for this debate about the work in Anglesey and the impressive way in which the red squirrel population has been defended and the greys pushed back. Certainly in Formby, the investment promotes tourism and we get many visitors, but that also brings challenges, as he will know. Sometimes too many visitors try to get into a small area with limited roads and parking, but that is for another debate.

The Woodland Trust briefing made the point that the introduction of pine martens as a natural predator against the greys has seen early signs of success. I understand that that is also the case around the country. Because the greys are slower, the pine martens are more likely to attack and catch them. As the reds are faster, nimbler and smaller, they are more likely to escape, so natural predation is effectively being used to control the greys and protect the reds. I am interested in the Minister's analysis of the evidence on that point, which the hon. Member for Copeland mentioned. We could do with some clarification, so let us look at the evidence and at what works.

Control of greys is a real problem. In Formby in 2007-08, squirrel pox led to the deaths of 85% of red squirrels in the area. Thanks to the brilliant work of the

National Trust and the many local volunteers, there has been a good recovery, but I am sad to report what has been described as an “intense burst” of red squirrel deaths in Formby recently. The Wildlife Trust is currently testing to see whether squirrel pox is the cause.

Finally, I want to turn to the environment Bill. Protections of habitat are crucial, as we have discussed. The proposed office for environmental protection will have responsibility for monitoring, and it is vital that the regulatory framework is fit for purpose once we leave the EU. Currently, the European Commission exercises influence and power in an effective way. The current proposals suggest that the office for environmental protection will sit with the Government and will not have the independence that the European regulatory arrangements give. Concerns have been raised about that level of independence and whether the regime will be sufficiently robust to maintain the necessary oversight. We need a little more detail from the Minister and the Secretary of State in the part of the Bill that is yet to be published, with tangible and clear targets for restoring the natural environment to support red squirrels and other species.

I have two asks in this debate. The first is for funding for control and protection work, including spreading the word about red squirrels. They do not often bite. They are a fabulous part of our natural world in the UK. We need to raise awareness and provide support to prevent the spread of grey squirrels and disease. Secondly, we need a robust framework in the environment Bill. There are 17 strongholds for this iconic British animal. The red squirrel deserves our full support, but it needs action, not words.

10.5 am

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this important debate. I declare an interest: my family own and manage woodland in Northumberland and we are passionate red squirrel protectors, so I am proud to come with a natural bias. The reason why the native British squirrel, which happens to have red fur, is under threat of extinction, is because men of wealth—I have yet to find any evidence of female culpability—with an interest in zoological matters in the late Victorian era, when travel and discovery of previously unknown wildlife became fashionable, decided that bringing grey non-native squirrels from the United States would improve their standing, feed their curiosity and perhaps even help to advance scientific understanding.

Every mother dreads that moment over tea when her child declares that they need to bring into school some strange object or picture that clearly requires parental assistance and time, just as they are trying to put their kids to bed. And so it was that when I was told by my then six-year-old that a project on the red squirrel was the following day's activity and we needed to take in project information and pictures, my heart sank. I wondered how on earth I could assist that very enthusiastic young boy by providing something that had not simply come off the internet. We were in the stage of development when the internet was not the solution to all questions and we could still use books to elucidate new material.

We disappeared into an old musty corner of the house where my father-in-law's grandfather's books were kept—they had never been opened in my time in the

house—and discovered a series on interesting zoological subjects. I pulled one off the shelf and flicked through, looking for “red squirrel”, but could not find it, which was very confusing. I looked through again and saw “squirrel”, only to realise that in 1923, when the book was published, the conversation was still about the squirrel. The red squirrel was a given; that was the colour of our squirrel. We flicked through and saw a wonderful line about a gentleman who had brought some grey squirrels to London and placed them at the Zoological Society—London Zoo—and everyone was fascinated to see the big grey squirrel, which was described as a curiosity. Also, they had bred so successfully that they had let them out into Regent's Park. It was fascinating to watch a six-year-old go, “How did that happen? Weren't they a scientific curiosity?” Perhaps no child understands this, but the point is that something entirely exciting and positive can have incredibly long-term repercussions.

My son took in the musty old book, which did not match the internet submissions that other parents had dug out late at night to support the project of the day, but it led to a school trip to Wallington Hall, a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful place with 13,000 acres of farm and woodland that now has a vibrant community of red squirrels, thanks to the conservation efforts after near extinction in 2011. When the schoolchildren went to visit in 2008, the red squirrel population had almost disappeared. They went with their exciting project in mind and were told by those working at Wallington that there was a real problem. It was fascinating to watch that next generation become aware of the need for conservation. Wallington is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of the Northumberland tourism industry and provides an opportunity to bring people out from Newcastle to enjoy a beautiful rural existence.

The National Trust has led in investing in finding ways to preserve and restore the red squirrel population. At Wallington, we have our very own red squirrel ranger, Glen Graham, a wonderful man, who has led the way in supporting and protecting our native squirrel population, and working out the best ways to do that in what is, helpfully, a relatively contained woodland environment. He provides food, because the greys eat more than the reds, and he keeps predators away with a lot of humane trapping. He also tries to keep the humans away.

We have wonderful traffic signs on the roads that say, “Squirrels crossing here—please slow down”. Realising how much we all need to do has been a really interesting part of the community's involvement in the red squirrel project. Every time people drive into town they drive past those signs and slow down, sometimes so that they can peer over the hedge to see the red squirrel who might just be crossing. The National Trust has been profoundly involved, and was a founder member of the UK Squirrel Accord. Across Northumberland and the rest of the UK, landowners and farmers are committing time and resource to trapping grey squirrels. The only way is to rebalance the numbers. The greys will just take over the woodland space if they can.

There are three real threats, one of which is clearly disease. We have discussed the squirrel pox, for which the grey is a carrier and by which the red is almost always fatally affected. That is a technical problem,

[*Anne-Marie Trevelyan*]

which we need to continue to work on. We must find a vaccine against it so that the red has a chance to compete, at least on that level, in a fair and balanced way. Competition for food is also clearly a huge challenge, simply because the grey eats more in a day and has more of an impact on trees. The reds just cannot keep up.

A fundamental part of that is the question of the amount of woodland habitat that we need. The grey poses a greater threat to our woodlands, as they strip bark from the broadleaf trees for food and for building dreys. That can leave a tree vulnerable to disease, creating weaker, disfigured trees, and that can reduce seed production through crown loss and then depressed timber values. There is an all-round negative impact on the woodland, which requires long-term investment.

We need to plant more broadleaf woodland to create more areas of potential home for our native red squirrel. I raise again with the Minister the logistical challenges put before any landowner wanting to plant new woodland. Our manifesto commitment to 11 million new trees through this Parliament is proving far from likely to be achieved. The Forestry Commission and Natural England seem intent on thwarting progress, with endless internal battles that leave the private investor at a loss regarding how to make any progress.

The Minister will recall the interventions, for which we are still grateful, that she had to make to help the Doddington forest project to get under way. She will be pleased to know that it is now planted, despite years of effort to slow its progress. Local children helped to plant it. The Northumbrian red squirrel population is now waiting for those trees to grow into a new home for them and their families in the decades ahead. In the meantime, because trees grow very slowly, I call on the Government to increase their support for and investment in grey squirrel reduction projects, in order to leave space for our Squirrel Nutkins.

10.13 am

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this important debate. It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and thank you for interpreting the rules generously enough to allow me to speak. I will be very brief, but I think the debate would benefit from having an opinion from the Isle of Wight, where we have a sizeable red squirrel population.

As we have heard, red squirrels are the only squirrel native to the British Isles. They are disappearing from the mainland at an alarming rate, having been replaced by the American grey squirrel. Looking at a map of England, what is truly upsetting for people who love the reds, as I do, is that there are only two red squirrel hot spots south of the Mersey: one is in Anglesey, of which the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) just spoke; the other is on the Isle of Wight.

Out of a red squirrel population of 140,000 in the United Kingdom, between 3,000 and 3,500 at its height are on the Isle of Wight. We know that thanks to excellent work done by the Wight Squirrel Project and the Isle of Wight Red Squirrel Trust. We also produce some fantastic T-shirts and hoodies with red squirrels

holding up a 30 mph speed limit sign, like those my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) mentioned. I have, on a couple of occasions in the last few years, seen the bodies of red squirrels on the road. It always angers me when they wind up dead on the road, because we do not have enough of them.

The Isle of Wight is a stronghold for red squirrels because we are an island. The Solent is thankfully a barrier to grey squirrels. I was told recently—I am not sure whether it is an urban myth—that we once turned back a ferry, not because it had mainlanders on it, who are very welcome to visit, but because there was a grey squirrel on it. The ferry was held up, we found the grey squirrel, and it got off—it probably did not have a ticket anyway. We do not want greys on the Isle of Wight. As we know, it takes only one grey to spread disease among the population of reds. It is illegal to bring a grey squirrel into red squirrel territory and the penalty is two years' imprisonment or a £5,000 fine.

Red squirrels are truly beautiful animals. About five years ago, I was living in an even more remote place than I am now. It was a mile and a half down a single-track lane, and as I drove back in the evening buzzards would fly overhead, and badgers and the occasional red squirrel would run across the road. I drove very slowly. A red squirrel came and sat on my porch once and ate some nuts. It was no further away from me than my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed is now. It was the most beautiful and special animal, and we need to ensure that we protect their habitats.

The Island is about 10% woodland, and that is increasing slowly. What we have not done, and what we probably need to do nationally, is ensure that where possible we link woodland environments together to enable the reds to have greater space in which to flourish and reproduce, because reds have a lower living density than grey squirrels. They need more woodland and undergrowth to support the same population, because they are slightly more solitary animals than grey squirrels.

We do not have many deer on the Isle of Wight, so I think an environmental expert would say that our understory trees and our young shoots are in better condition than those in parts of Britain with a deer population that tends to eat shoots and harm the growth of understory trees. However, I would be delighted to hear from the Minister what more the Government can do to support projects to reforest parts of the United Kingdom with broadleaf trees—not conifers, which acidify the soil and do not do enough to support insect life, bird life, and red squirrel and other mammal life.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I have been listening to the points made by my hon. Friend and others about the connection between red squirrels and greys, red squirrels and predators, and red squirrels and trees. There is a connection between all those different elements of wildlife management. We have some red squirrels on the island of Caldey, in my patch. In order to get them there, we had to eradicate rats, which led to a revival in ground-nesting birds. Is not the point that the Government should take a holistic approach—not picking on one species and one method of enhancing or controlling it, but looking at wildlife, and the way in which we manage it, in the round to make it a success?

Mr Seely: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly valuable point: what is good for red squirrels is generally good for most native species. As we know, three varieties of tree—oak, hawthorn and English willows—support hundreds more insect varieties, which in turn support more bird life and wildlife of all sorts than conifers especially.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister about all the good work that the Government are doing to support red squirrel populations and other wildlife populations in Britain.

10.18 am

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I had not intended to speak but, there being a little time available, I will do so briefly, largely because I serve on the Environmental Audit Committee, which is currently carrying out an investigation into invasive species. Of course, the grey squirrel is a classic example of what can happen when an invasive species arrives on these islands.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this extremely important debate, and I listened very carefully to the contributions of other Members. We are unanimous in thinking that the red squirrel is a wonderful native creature, which we must do what we can to preserve. There is no question about that at all. I do not think that a single person would disagree, although I must admit that I rather agree with the flattering remarks made about the greys all through the debate—that we are stronger, more aggressive and bigger—but that is on a personal level, rather than on a squirrel level. I mention in passing an interesting point that so far no one has mentioned this morning. The House will be interested to know that Germans cannot pronounce the word squirrel; it is the only word in the English language that no German can pronounce. Rather curiously, we cannot pronounce the German word for squirrel either. That is a curious little fact that the House ought to know!

The Environmental Audit Committee is studying invasive species at the moment, including such exotic things as the floating pennywort, the American crayfish and all sorts of Asian wasps, as well as the grey squirrel. They all have one thing in common: once they are here, it is almost impossible to get rid of them. In the Environmental Audit Committee, we are looking at the degree to which we can control such species—for example, keeping them in one area—or whether extermination is better.

I had a very interesting time last year when I visited the island of South Georgia in Antarctica, where there has been an immensely successful operation to remove rats. Rats and mice were brought there by whalers over the centuries. Over the last couple of years, the South Georgia Heritage Trust has invested in the order of £10 million in using aerial dispersal of rat poison to eradicate the rat population entirely. As a result, we have seen a significant improvement in the pipit and other native species on the island of South Georgia. They also eradicated 10,000 reindeer, which were devastating the habitat that the native South Georgian population needed.

It has been interesting to hear the description of the Isle of Wight this morning; I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). We also heard of an island I did not know about in Wales

from my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart), and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) spoke of Anglesey. These are islands. Although this is not exactly easy, as these things have to be carried out very carefully—biosecurity is enormously important, and the biosecurity going on to South Georgia was simply extraordinary, as we had to inspect every aspect of our luggage and clothes and so on to make sure that there was not a single possibility of any kind of invasive species getting on to the island—none the less, islands can be protected. It is reasonably straightforward and simple to make sure that we do.

The mainland of the United Kingdom is, of course, more difficult. A glance at the maps of the red squirrel population over the centuries and that of the grey squirrel over the last 150 years demonstrates how they move inexorably forward. I very strongly congratulate some of the initiatives that we have heard about this morning. There has been wonderful work done in Northumberland and elsewhere, where individual organisations have fought manfully—personally—to make sure that they keep the grey squirrel at bay. They do wonderful work, and, in one or two places, they have forced the grey squirrel back, but it is pretty much an ad hoc operation. If they take their eye off the ball for one second, the grey squirrel will be right back to where it was before, and pushing further northwards, until such time as—as the motion for the debate says—we risk the extinction of the red squirrel. Unless we do something about it, that is what is going to happen, and we should be aware of that in this place. We have lost so many species over the centuries and within the next century or so there is a very real risk, if not a probability, of the total and utter eradication—extermination—of the entire red squirrel population in the United Kingdom, perhaps leaving aside pockets here and there.

We have not yet discussed the solutions, and perhaps the Minister will come on to that in a moment. There are the ad hoc solutions we have discussed and there are things we can do with regard to forestry and in individual areas to make sure that we preserve the pockets of red squirrels, but is that going to win in the long term? Are we going to preserve red squirrels? Are we certain that 500 years from now there will be a red squirrel population in the United Kingdom? I doubt very much that a single person in this Chamber or elsewhere this morning would swear on their lives that that would be the case, and I think it is extremely unlikely to be the case.

I hope that when the Minister addresses the matter she will consider the holistic solution described by my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire, which will not just preserve what we have but allow the progressive extermination of the invasive species that is the grey squirrel. It seems to me that unless we can find a way down the road—we are talking about many decades from now—of sending the grey squirrel back to where it came from, that is, the United States, and unless we exterminate it from the United Kingdom, it is extremely unlikely that we will keep the little blighters under control. All we have to do is to glance at South Georgia, where the rats and mice arrived with the whalers, absolutely ran over the entire island and destroyed the biodiversity of the island. Only by their eradication can we now preserve the very delicate balance of biodiversity in that island.

[James Gray]

Precisely the same applies here. The interesting and worthy projects that we have heard about are great, but we cannot be certain that they will work. There is only one way to be certain that we are going to keep the red squirrel for generations to come, and that is through finding means for the final eradication of the grey squirrel from these islands.

10.24 am

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing the debate, and on her opening remarks, the originality of which was commendable. Her knowledge of squirrels and the management of their habitat was very impressive and certainly superior to mine. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his short intervention, and other Members for their points and concerns. Apart from one, most points have been very well made. Like the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), I sit on the Environmental Audit Committee and agree that invasive species are a problem for this country and its biosecurity. A recent visit to Cambridge University revealed challenges we all face that are way beyond our ken, as far as I could see. I hope that we will learn more about how to deal with those challenges over the next few weeks.

Scotland is home to 75% of the UK's 140,000 red squirrels. Although they are one of the most popular mammal species in the country, they are facing a number of ecological challenges, which have reduced the population. Scottish Forestry, the Scottish Government's responsible body for forestry policy and regulation, is working with a number of partners, including Scottish Natural Heritage, to save the red squirrel for future generations.

The red squirrel is a priority species under the species action framework, which sets out a five-year plan for managing species in Scotland so that effort and resources are targeted to offer the greatest benefit. The Scottish squirrel group was established in 1996 to oversee conservation efforts and, in 2006, published the Scottish red squirrel action plan for 2006 to 2011. The plan integrates grey squirrel control, survey and monitoring with measures to combat the threat of squirrel pox, and the Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels project has been putting the strategy into action since 2007. Its present priorities include defending red-only areas in the northern Highlands by the targeted control of grey squirrel populations, controlling grey squirrels in north-east Scotland to reduce their distribution and abundance, defending the areas where the food sources and the environment favour red squirrels from grey squirrel incursion, and controlling grey squirrels in priority areas within the grey squirrel range in certain areas of southern Scotland, as well as the island woodland habitat of Arran.

Thanks to those conservation initiatives, and unlike in England, where there is a possibility that the red squirrel could become extinct within the next 10 years—we need to face up to that possibility—red squirrel numbers stabilised in Scotland in 2017 and grey squirrel numbers have declined. In fact, there has been a significant boost in red squirrel numbers in Aberdeenshire and they are holding their ground in the central lowlands, recolonising

areas they previously abandoned. Unfortunately, however, red squirrel numbers are still falling in parts of the Scottish borders, especially where squirrel pox is present.

Since 2018, efforts to stop grey squirrels moving north of the highland line appear to be succeeding and we are all delighted. Red squirrels are now thriving in areas where they have been reintroduced into the northern highlands. There have even been suggestions of an expansion of the range of red squirrels into my own area of Falkirk and Stirlingshire. I hope those sightings are well founded.

There are many groups helping with red squirrel conservation. Men's Shed members in Gala, Dalbeattie and Hawick made feeder boxes for this year's Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels annual survey. The boxes have a small piece of sticky plastic—I do not know if we should be using plastic; I hope it is recyclable—that traps hair from visiting animals, which enables the presence of different species to be recorded. That is a good example of red squirrels bringing communities together, as was mentioned earlier.

The Forestry Commission of Scotland has five principles for managing a red squirrel stronghold. I will not go into the detail, but I will lay them out. The first is to manage the forest to maintain a dependable food supply. The second is to resolve conflicts with other management objectives without compromising the success of red squirrel strongholds. The third is to have a plan for red squirrels at the landscape scale. The fourth is to plan forest operations to reduce short-term impacts on populations and sustain long-term resilience. The fifth is to establish a monitoring system, which is extremely important, and a review process. That is sound advice, and we in Scotland hope this good practice will continue to show positive results for all our communities, to endure for all future generations.

10.30 am

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), my constituency neighbour, on securing the debate. I am grateful for the excellent contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), and from the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and for North Wiltshire (James Gray). I thank the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) for giving us the Scottish perspective.

I am not only Labour's shadow Environment Secretary; I am also hugely privileged to have red squirrels in my garden. When we have visitors from outside the area, I notice that their seeing a red squirrel is an extraordinary experience. My father-in-law had wanted to see a red squirrel all his life, and it was not until he came to stay with us that he managed to do so. There is huge affection, and it demonstrates how rare they are across Britain.

My comments apply mainly to the situation in Cumbria, because I have first-hand experience of it. As we heard, everybody knows just how serious the plight of Britain's red squirrels is. They are afforded the highest protection possible but are still hugely threatened. Sadly, they have suffered serious population decline despite our best efforts. According to the Cumbria Wildlife Trust, however,

evidence is starting to suggest that the red population is being maintained in the north of England through the commitment and dedication of conservation groups. The trust estimates that we have a population of around 15,000 reds in the region.

In Cumbria, we have 14 red squirrel volunteer groups dedicated to preserving our red squirrel population. Without their important work, the long-term survival of the species would not be possible. We have five designated red squirrel reserves across the county. Although the presence of non-native grey squirrels has been the primary cause of the decline in the red population, that is not the end of the story. We heard from hon. Members about the loss of habitat, insensitive forestry operations—for example, the hon. Member for Copeland mentioned the felling and disturbing of dreys, where young squirrel kittens are present during the breeding season—and woodland fragmentation, all of which are factors that add to the pressure.

We heard a lot from hon. Members about the squirrel pox virus, which is carried by grey squirrels, and about how it has the biggest, and potentially catastrophic, impact on red squirrel populations. My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central gave a good example of how that can happen. The fact that the pox has nearly a 100% mortality rate in reds shows how devastating it can be. We also know that there are problems with competition with greys for food, and their direct aggression contributes to the decline in red populations.

Volunteers do an excellent job of monitoring the grey squirrel population, and members of the public also help by reporting sightings. As in many villages in Cumbria, our village noticeboard has a sign with the details and telephone number of the local red squirrel warden, whom we call when we see greys—I have done so on a number of occasions. The warden then comes out and traps the greys, in order to protect the red squirrel population in the area.

In Cumbria, the National Trust supplements reds' diets by putting a small quantity of nuts and seeds into special squirrel feeders every morning. In fact, my husband does that in our garden and is very keen on watching and feeding reds. It helps not only monitor the population, but look out for any sick or injured red squirrels, which we can report to the volunteers and squirrel monitors.

The UK Squirrel Accord consists of 32 leading woodland, timber and conservation organisations. As we heard, it was created at the invitation of Prince Charles, with the aim of bringing a concerted and co-ordinated approach to securing the future of red squirrels and woodlands. Habitat loss is a major threat to red populations, so it is essential that protections for the areas that support them are maintained and properly enacted. That would fall under the proposed Office for Environmental Protection post Brexit, so it is absolutely vital that the proposed body and the regulations underpinning it are fit for purpose. A number of stakeholders, and the Opposition, have set out our significant concerns about its lack of independence and the lack of powers to force the Government into action if necessary. As things stand, the OEP would be weaker than our existing arrangements under EU law. Can the Minister tell us when the rest of the environment Bill will be published, and whether it will have rigorous targets for the restoration of Britain's natural environment?

People rightly think of Cumbria as a very green county, but only 10% of it is covered by woodland. That is 3% lower than the UK average, and well below the EU average of 38%. Protection and enhancement of our woodland is absolutely paramount. The Government have talked a lot about tree planting—we heard from the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed that it is becoming very challenging for a number of reasons. Can the Minister tell us what assessment has been made of targeted tree planting in areas where it would benefit our red squirrel populations?

In May the House declared a state of environmental emergency. Many of our animal species are facing extinction, and the UK is set to miss our 2020 biodiversity targets. Tackling climate change and restoring our precious natural habitats go hand in hand. Restoring ecosystems not only makes significant contributions to carbon sequestration, but can safeguard populations of iconic British wildlife species such as the red squirrel.

The hon. Member for Copeland mentioned the Forestry Act 1967, and I support her request to the Minister to ensure that red squirrels are protected as part of the tree felling licensing process. Can the Minister tell us whether the Act could contain a requirement to consider the landscape-level impacts of continuous tree felling licences? Does she agree that a red squirrel conservation strategy is required to help co-ordinate and prioritise their protection and recovery across England? If we want future generations in Britain to be able to enjoy species such as the red squirrel, we need the Government to take serious action to protect and enhance the populations and their precious habitats.

10.38 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing the debate.

I am concerned that the squirrel is at risk of dying out. Several of the hon. Members who contributed today have left the debate. We need to be warriors if we want to protect red squirrels, and that includes staying to listen to all of the debate, which has been excellent and shows people's passion for protecting this iconic native species. As my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland mentioned, Squirrel Nutkin has gone down in history, and I am just about old enough to remember Tufty from the road safety films that were shown in the '70s. I believe Tufty has already reached the age of 65, so popular was he at pushing forward road safety—at some point he was replaced by the Green Cross Code Man.

The red squirrel is certainly a very special species. The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) is unfortunately no longer in his place, but he knows the importance of the species. I grew up in Formby and, to be candid, I did not realise that grey squirrels existed until I came to London as a student—I could not see a single red squirrel anywhere, and there were grey squirrels all over the place. That is when I learned of the terrible impact that grey squirrels have had on our native species.

As has been pointed out, the red squirrel is protected by domestic legislation and is currently found in a number of strongholds across England, including the

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

north of England and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). The red squirrel is also present in larger numbers in Scotland, and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) quite rightly set out the great success of protection north of the border. There is also a limited population on Anglesey in Wales, and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who is no longer in his place, highlighted the projects undertaken there to increase the number of red squirrels. That is a devolved matter, but I am sure that hon. Members will recognise the contributions that we can make, which is why, as the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) pointed out, it was important that all four nations came together for the UK Squirrel Accord and to work with many non-governmental organisations, landowners and so on.

The red squirrel is under attack; not from humans, but from the grey squirrel. The grey squirrel is an invasive species from North America that has a significant impact on our native trees—broadleaves in particular—by stripping bark and eating bulbs, and on our protected species, including the red squirrel. The Government are committed to protecting and expanding red squirrel populations, and to tackling the threat that grey squirrels pose to them, particularly the tendency to spread squirrel pox, to which red squirrels are far more susceptible. Preserving biosecurity, including the elimination of non-native species, especially those that jeopardise our native species, is very important to us. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) rightly mentioned the Environmental Audit Committee's inquiry, and I assure him that this Government are absolutely committed to doing what we can to eradicate such species.

I fear that that point was missed by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who tried to accuse us of being racist about squirrels. I have never heard such nonsense. I really think that he needs to go on an education tour in Cumbria to understand the importance of red squirrels and why they are so special to our nature.

James Gray: The Minister may move on to this so I might be picking up unreasonably on a slip of the tongue, but she talked about the “eradication” of invasive species, no doubt in the context of our current inquiry on the Environmental Audit Committee. Will she suggest that we might find ways not just of controlling but of eradicating the grey squirrel?

Dr Coffey: I think that I used the word “elimination,” which is the same. I agree that has to be our target, rather than just control.

We have made sure that strict protections are in place for those species. Regulations are in place and we need to ensure that they are effectively enforced in England and Wales, as well as at the UK border and in the offshore marine area. Similar legislation is being prepared by the Scottish and Northern Ireland Governments.

The Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order 2019 requires us to put in place management measures for widely spread invasive species, including the grey squirrel, that have been risk-assessed and found to be highly damaging. Management measures must be

aimed at the eradication, population control or containment of the species concerned. Under the order, releasing listed invasive species back into the environment will be prohibited unless it is part of further control efforts authorised by a licence, although that is effectively already domestic law.

Grey squirrels have attracted much attention. As I said in response to a recent petition, rescue centres may continue to rescue and treat grey squirrels; they are not obliged to kill grey squirrels, but they cannot release them into the wild without a licence. When the order comes into force in the coming months, it will bring England's approach to controlling the release of grey squirrels into line with that of the devolved Administrations, who also acknowledge the impact of the species.

The population decline of red squirrels, a species that was once common in England, is of significant concern to the Government and we want to continue to find ways to address it. The Forestry Commission undertakes a number of actions to protect red squirrels from the impact of grey squirrels, as outlined in the grey squirrel action plan for England. DEFRA, in partnership with the UK Squirrel Accord, has provided funding for work by the Animal and Plant Health Agency to develop a fertility control method for grey squirrels. Although I am assured by officials that the research continues to show promise as a potentially effective and humane method of controlling grey squirrel numbers in the long term, I am conscious that it has been worked on for several years, and I do not want us to keep relying on it as the only way to tackle grey squirrel numbers.

On bolstering the populations of pine martens, I am conscious of what my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland said about the impact on red kittens. The pine marten is a natural predator of grey squirrels, and its reintroduction in places such as the Forest of Dean and Northumberland is expected to have an impact on grey squirrel populations in those areas, reducing their threat. Red squirrels co-evolved with pine martens, which they evade by scurrying to the tips of branches, where the larger pine martens cannot reach them. The greys do not know this trick and as a result are predated upon in higher numbers by pine martens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland also referred to felling licences. They simply authorise the felling of growing trees and do not absolve landowners of compliance with the legislation in place to protect wildlife, including red squirrels, as set out in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The Forestry Commission considers whether to grant felling licences against the UK forestry standard, which covers the impact on biodiversity, including the habitat of red squirrels. The Forestry Commission checks all applications against a large number of records, including red squirrel reserves. That allows the Commission to highlight any potential issues and advise the applicant on how to avoid the disturbance or damage of protected species.

I am pleased to say that later this year there will be a consultation on an English tree strategy, which will provide the opportunity to consider the need for further strengthening of wildlife protections during forestry operations. In the preparation of the environment Bill, we are considering extra powers for the Forestry Commission in some regards, and there may still be an opportunity to consider clauses to strengthen those powers.

The environment improvement and recovery networks will be a key part of fulfilling the 25-year environment plan. One does not always need specific legislation targeting one species; as my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) pointed out, it is important to have a holistic approach. Although we need to focus on our iconic native species and the elimination of invasive non-native species, it is absolutely right to take that wider approach. With the development of local nature improvement plans, more focus can be given to those iconic species in areas where they are particularly important, rather than having a one-size-fits-all plan.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): One of the best places in Scotland to spot red squirrels is Montreathmont forest, just outside Forfar in my constituency. A number of years ago, an application for a wind farm in the forest received widespread opposition from locals and organisations because the forest was registered as such a significant habitat for wildlife, including red squirrels. Will the Minister join me in celebrating those local people who invested a huge amount of their time to ensure that wildlife sightings continued to be registered? We must ensure that planning applications are in the right spaces so that we do not destroy those habitats.

Dr Coffey: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend on that important point, and I recognise the importance of what is now called “citizen science” in ensuring that data is available to local authorities and Governments, to inform policy and decision making so that policies are properly implemented.

There has been a lot of discussion about trees. In the wider discussion about biodiversity, it is important to remember that habitat degradation is one of the major reasons for the global biodiversity challenge. On the kinds of trees that we have, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight spoke specifically about the need to plant more broadleaves, but we actually need a balanced biodiversity and a balanced tree strategy to take that forward. Both conifers and broadleaves will work for red squirrel habitats but, as has been pointed out, they thrive mostly in areas where there are conifers. Largely, greys do less well there, because there are not the same kinds of nutrients as in broadleaf woodland, so there is less competition for the reds.

It is important to recognise the multi-purpose of trees. As we have discussed many times in this Chamber, the right tree in the right place offers multiple benefits, for flood situations, for habitats, for protection from heat in urban areas and for all sorts of other things, as well as being a general force for good. The hon. Member for Workington mentioned the 10% woodland coverage in Cumbria, and I agree that Cumbria is absolutely under-forested. A year last December, I too planted a tree up in Cumbria—I cannot recall the constituency, but it was on the Lowther estate—in what is one of the largest such developments, alongside Doddington moor on the other side of the country. I encourage my hon. Friends from Cumbria to speak to the national park authority about what it will do to encourage the planting of more woodlands and forests, because that can make a difference.

Countryside stewardship schemes will support landowners who want to develop habitats specifically for species such as the red squirrel. As we develop the

design of the environmental land management scheme for when we leave the European Union, it will in effect turn the existing common agricultural policy on its head so that we pay for public benefits. Those schemes will attract more and more attention from landowners, rather than them just considering commercial forestry.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: In Cumbria, the first forestry investment zone, or FIZ, is a small test of that, but what else are the Government doing to encourage such activity? As I said, the challenge for landowners is the active support of the Forestry Commission to make something happen.

Dr Coffey: The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), is now responsible for domestic forestry and the Forestry Commission, so I no longer have day-to-day contact in that regard. I hope that the tree strategy will be a way to make progress.

I suggest that some of the biggest forest and woodland planning applications had particular issues. We have to balance compliance with the habitats directive and the different assessments that have to be made, and I know how expensive those can be. Applications for financial support from the Government need to ensure that they are not only absolutely compliant with UK forestry standards, but taking wider environmental regulations into account. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), however, that lessons could have been learned from some of those major applications, and I hope that they will be for future developments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland asked why the Forestry Commission does not allow more shooting. Shooting, or culling, of grey squirrels is an important driver in their elimination. The Forestry Commission has asked me to point out that it has responsibility for public access and public safety on its estate. However—I will be open about this—I do not think that the commission does a very good job of tackling non-native invasive species. We have the wild boar problem down in the Forest of Dean, and other such problems across the country. I would like to see a more proactive approach, such as the deer initiative, in which people who are not Forestry Commission employees work in partnership to tackle the deer problem. I would like to see more of that happen with some other non-native species.

In speaking about other elements of the issue, many hon. Members paid tribute to the important role played by volunteers in the protection of our domestic red squirrel populations. As they said, a variety of charities up in Cumbria raise public awareness of the threats to red squirrels, engage directly with local landowners, and created a citizen science system in which members of the public record red and grey squirrel sightings. Pockets of improvement could happen elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight talked about the nature networks and the woodland and habitat links in his constituency. I see that as something we could take forward in the environmental improvement plans that we expect across the country.

As for grey squirrels being a carrier of pox, I have already tried to address some things, such as dealing with grey squirrel procreation success—I think that is

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

the best way of putting it. We also have to be open about this: for red squirrels to survive for the next 500 years—although none of us will be alive then to keep that guarantee to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire—we must significantly or entirely reduce the threat from the grey squirrel and its diseases. We must also ensure that any future introductions of species align with international guidelines. Such threats have to be tackled head on.

I have already referred to the fact that landowners, if they wish to do more and possibly designate reserves, may apply for countryside stewardship scheme funding. That is open to them. Many different challenges will of course continue but, in response to other questions about funding, it is available. Natural England still funds a variety of activities such as species recovery programmes, which are very much alive. There is also what we will do with the shared prosperity fund. The choices about future funding in Wales are a decision for the Welsh Government, but certainly the environmental land management scheme will be a real opportunity for farmers and landowners to consider carefully where, in the right place, we can continue to invest significantly in a species.

In conclusion, the passion to protect our red squirrels touches many right hon. and hon. Members. It is important to keep our focus on ensuring that iconic native species, whether fauna or flora, remain important in the future. That is a key part of our 25-year environment plan. I am confident that some of the measures in the forthcoming environment Bill will help, but equally important is direct action through the nature improvement and recovery networks that we will establish.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): For the record, I point out that Members who have made a speech ought to listen to the following two speeches and to be present to hear the wind-ups. That does not apply to those Members who have only intervened.

10.56 am

Trudy Harrison: Thank you, Sir David. It has been a pleasure to serve under you today. I thank the Minister for her robust response. I am pleased that she agrees that the Forestry Commission could do more. In answer to the point about public safety, of course that is a paramount consideration, but when the shooting of

wood pigeon, pheasant and deer already happens, I fail to see the argument against considering similar controls, under licence, of the grey squirrel.

I thank the many Members who have made speeches and interventions. We have a real consensus. The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) referenced the importance of tourism. The Lake District national park, where my constituency is, has 18 million visitors, and so many of them come to see and appreciate our wildlife, which is perilously in danger of extinction. I think of the hedgehogs—Mrs Tiggy-Winkle—or the Kewick hatchery project that I am involved with to ensure that we still have salmon and sea trout in the rivers of Cumbria. We learned the awful fact that the Formby stronghold has lost 85% of its red squirrels. I am pleased that they are making some recovery, although there has been the recent outbreak of squirrel pox.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) had told me her enchanting story in the Tea Room, but just think that some time ago books about red squirrels referred to them simply as “squirrels” because that is all we had in the British Isles. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) for looking after and promoting his stronghold. It was the best tourism advert—I am really looking forward to a trip to the Isle of Wight.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) and from the hon. Members for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) and for Workington (Sue Hayman)—how lucky is the hon. Member for Workington to have red squirrels adorning feed tables in her own garden. I commend her husband for looking after our wonderful native reds. My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) referred to the importance of a holistic ecosystem approach. I talked about the salmon and sea trout, but we also worry about the pearl mussel in our area, which needs to lay its eggs in the gills of a salmonoid—so without the salmon and the sea trout, the pearl mussel would also suffer.

I am pleased to hear from the Minister that the consultation on further strengthening forestry protection will indeed happen, and I encourage all Members across the House to urge their conservation groups to get involved. Thank you, Sir David, for paying attention to us speaking about such an urgent issue, and for allowing me to speak in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered potential red squirrel extinction.

NHS Dentists: Cumbria

11 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of NHS dentists in Cumbria.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue of enormous importance to my constituents and many others around Cumbria.

NHS dentistry in Cumbria has reached breaking point. More than half of all adults in our county have not had access to an NHS dentist in the last two years, while one in three of our children does not even have a place with an NHS dentist. In rural areas such as ours, lack of access to an NHS dentist results in families having to make ludicrously long journeys to reach the nearest surgery with an available NHS place. Often, people are not able to make, and simply cannot afford, those journeys for a simple check-up.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman refers to his constituency, but the problems occur across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Does he agree that the lack of dentists in rural areas is incredibly disconcerting? Perhaps we need to look at bigger incentives for those willing to open a rural practice, and incentivise those training in dental surgery, since one in five has to wait three months to have dental surgery. In other words, a rural strategy is needed.

Tim Farron: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point; in a moment I will come to some answers to those problems. The challenge is especially acute in rural communities when it comes to attracting and retaining dentists to work in NHS practices in places that are relatively close to people's homes.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on all our behalves. The problem affects not just rural areas but more remote urban areas such as Barrow. Does he share my huge concern that people in Barrow face a 90-mile trip to Whitehaven if they want access to a new NHS dentist? That is the longest trip in England, for a town where more a third of young people suffer tooth decay, compared with 5% in more affluent areas.

Tim Farron: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, which I will come to. He is absolutely right that the distance from the nearest available treatment affects urban as well as rural areas. It is a problem across the country that relates specifically to the NHS dental contract, which I will come to in a moment.

According to the most recent data available, taking a child living in Windermere to their nearest NHS dentist will involve a 60-mile round trip to Morecambe in Lancashire. That will mean a three to four-hour journey by public transport, with multiple changes. However, poor signposting by the NHS—it was not easy to decipher—means that that place is not obviously available. The nearest place advertising for new child NHS patients is in Appleby, which is an 87-mile round trip—two

hours in the car or a five to six-hour round trip by public transport. It was only with the help of the British Dental Association that we managed to identify availability at the far-distant yet ever so slightly closer practice in Morecambe.

I am sure hon. Members will agree that this is beyond ridiculous. NHS dentistry is a public service. It should not take scouring the internet forensically with a fine-toothed comb and with the expert help of a national professional body to find a space for a child with an NHS dentist. That space has already been paid for through our taxes. Let us imagine for a moment the outrage if it were similarly impossible for people to get access to a GP.

For adults, the situation in Cumbria is even worse. I was appalled to discover that the nearest practice with available NHS provision for a new adult patient in Windermere involves a 98-mile round trip by car to Wigton—a six-hour round trip by public transport, involving three different trains and bus rides. The nearest practice that is advertising is even further away and involves a 104-mile trip, there and back, to Alston, taking over six hours by public transport. After that, the next option listed involved going 123 miles there and back to Blackpool.

Despite those obstacles, families in our communities are still trying to secure places at dental practices but are refused. In Sedburgh, Windermere, Grange, Ambleside and Kendal, dentists are working to their full capacity and even beyond, and are doing a brilliant job, but they simply do not have the numbers or the funding to meet demand. The Government have, cleverly or accidentally, dodged confronting the extent of the problem by doing away with official waiting lists. For the last six years, the NHS has held no waiting lists locally or nationally, and patients cannot depend on their clinical commissioning group or NHS England to support them in their quest to find a dentist who will treat them or their children. Will the Minister rectify that and ensure that reliable and up-to-date waiting lists are kept from now on?

We took the matter into our own hands locally. The *Westmorland Gazette* and I rang round our local dental surgeries to see whether there was availability, and found that in Kendal, not one of the 10 dental practices in our biggest town had a single space available for an NHS patient. Some 33% of new patients tried and failed to get a dentist appointment in the wider Morecambe bay CCG area last year. That is the equivalent of nearly 16,000 people. When we include those already on the books with a dentist, that figure rises to 18,000 people, and they are just the ones who have tried. That is a disgrace, and the situation is only getting worse.

The consequences should not be underestimated. Children across Cumbria have some of the worst dental health in England, with one in three suffering tooth decay by the age of five. In some areas, almost 20% of children under three have tooth decay, and a fifth have tooth decay when they are still toddlers. Often, that does long-term damage to their oral health before they even have the opportunity to make decisions for themselves. If children cannot see a dentist in a regular and timely way, preventable conditions become emergency conditions and the pressure is piled on NHS services, along with all their other responsibilities.

Nationally, tooth decay is the leading reason for hospital admissions among young children, despite being almost entirely preventable. In 2017-18, over 45,000 children

[Tim Farron]

were admitted to hospital to have multiple teeth extracted under general anaesthetic because of tooth decay. Children face completely unnecessary pain and distress, and the NHS faces a £36 million annual spend for that dental work. Dentistry in Cumbria is understaffed, underfunded and overstretched. Although this a local problem, it is a symptom of a systematic one, the effects of which are felt right across the country.

The primary cause of the increasing problems with dental access in Cumbria and across England is the way that this Government choose to commission dentistry. The NHS dental contract is completely perverse. Based on units of dental activity, it sets quotas on the number of patients an NHS dentist can see and the number of dental procedures they can perform in any given year. If a dentist delivers more than they have been commissioned to do, not only are they not remunerated for the extra work, but they have to bear the cost of any materials used, any necessary laboratory work or other overheads from their own pockets.

That is not the only issue. Last November, I managed to secure the agreement of health bosses to increase the contracts of local NHS dentists in Kendal, so that they could see and treat more patients. It was great news—I thought. However, when NHS England contacted our local dentists, it found that not one of them was able to take up its offer because, as it told me,

“the practices are already working to capacity within the staffing resources they have available, reporting they are having difficulties recruiting additional staff.”

Additional resources were made available, but there were not the dentists to provide the service for local people.

The problem is at least in part the result of the contract, which pays a set amount for particular types of treatment, in some cases regardless of the number of teeth the dentist is treating. In practice, that means that a dentist gets paid an average of £75 for an entire course of treatment, including six fillings, three extractions and a root canal, but that is not enough to cover their overheads. They get paid exactly the same amount of money for a single filling. That acts as a serious disincentive for dentistry, full stop, but especially in more deprived areas, where evidence shows that more significant treatment is often required.

Perhaps the most significant issue with the current dental contract is that it totally fails to provide any serious recognition or budget for preventive work. The work of educating adults, parents and children to maintain good dental health receives no funding, despite the fact that that would significantly ease the burden on dentists and the NHS as a whole further down the line. Indeed, check-ups are the smallest and least-remunerated part of the unit of dental activity worksheet. As a consequence, there is no massive incentive to up the number that a dentist does.

None of that is helped by the Government's decision to cut £500,000 in the last few months from Cumbria's public health budget this year, undermining vital preventive work, especially in our schools. Nor does it help that we are currently in limbo when it comes to the future of emergency dental services under the soon to be defunct

Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. Will the Minister tell me which trust will be responsible for emergency dentistry in south Cumbria after October?

Morale among dentists practising in the NHS is at an all-time low. The latest British Dental Association membership survey shows that nearly three in five dental practitioners in England are planning to scale down or leave NHS work entirely in the next five years. Those with the highest NHS commitments are the most likely to want to leave. In recent months, I have received countless letters at an increasing rate from residents, many of them very elderly, asking where they can go for dental treatment, as their current dentist has gone private and they have effectively been kicked off the list. A lot of parents have contacted me saying that they have been asked to pay now that they have been kicked off their local dentist's NHS list. If they pay, the dentist might provide NHS provision for their children. It strikes me that that is a form of bribery. Many parents cannot afford to pay for themselves just so their children can get free care. That is not right.

The current system also fails to use the skills of all dental staff to their full potential. The NHS dentist contract restricts the initiation of a course of treatment to dentists alone. I met the British Association of Dental Therapists, which explained that dentists often refer the patient to a therapist to carry out the treatment if it is within the remit of their qualification. The fact that that can be begun only by a dentist creates a bottleneck that prevents patients from receiving the treatment that they need when they need it. The dental therapists made the case to me—and, I believe, to the Government—for reforming the system to allow them to initiate a course of treatment, ease some of the burden on dentists, and enable patients to be seen more quickly. I ask the Minister to action that request, or at least to look into it as a matter of urgency.

I welcome the Government's steps to reform the system by beginning to carry out a few pilots and trials in different forms of commissioning, but the pilots have not gone far enough, there are not many of them, and the proposed systems do not provide a complete break from the old “unit of dental activity” system. Rather, they blend it with new systems. In the face of the crisis that we have on our hands, I am afraid that a piecemeal change is simply not enough for the people of Cumbria. We need total system reform. The Government need to sit up, take notice and change the contract so that people get the dental treatment they need. The current system is unjust, not fair to dentists and patients, and not fit for purpose. It is not good enough for Cumbria.

Urgent action is needed to roll out a system that fairly rewards dentists for the work they do, includes incentives for preventive work and allows all dental practitioners to use their skills to their full capacity. If we want our NHS dentists to feel that their vital work is valued and not to feel encouraged to move into working privately or give up the profession altogether, we need to take swift, far-reaching action. We need a funding system that does not feel like a treadmill, that rewards preventive care and that is not riddled with unfairness, idiosyncrasies and perverse incentives.

Those of us living in Cumbria are seeing the colossal impact of the current system on the health of children and adults alike, and we are further affected by the huge distances that we have to travel to get care, if we are

lucky enough to stumble across an NHS dentists with available space. My question to the Minister is this: what action will she take to provide my constituents with the NHS dental healthcare that they desperately need and that their taxes have already paid for?

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this debate. He raised some important issues about dentistry, some of which are national problems that I have been looking at since I came into this role about three months ago, and some of which are pertinent to both the urban and rural areas of Cumbria—I know that there are problems in the constituency of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) relating to geography and economics. I will talk a bit about what we are doing nationally, but of course there are some distinct issues to do with the geography in Cumbria.

Cumbria has struggled to attract dentists. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale has raised that issue, which I take very seriously, on many occasions. National access to NHS dentistry is high, but I know from my conversations with colleagues from across the House that there are notspots, and that in isolated areas it is very difficult to get to a dentist. We are taking steps to address that issue to ensure that everyone has access to an NHS dentist. It is NHS England's responsibility to commission dentist services to meet the needs of local people, and it has been actively looking into dental access issues in Cumbria. Its regional team covers my constituency, so it is looking at Lancashire and south Cumbria together. It has urgent work in hand to explore and implement schemes to improve local access.

In south Cumbria, NHSE will be working to help practices that are under-delivering on their contracted levels of dental services. If despite that support a practice remains unable to deliver its full contracted level of dental activity, the unused funds will be diverted into other local practices. NHS England believes that that could support care for about 3,000 patients. Alongside that, work is being taken forward across Lancashire and south Cumbria to integrate dental services within primary care networks. It is important that dentists are part of the integrated primary care network team, enabling oral health advice and prevention work to be offered across the primary care network. Oral health needs, including gaps in services and access difficulties, must be part of the wider health picture. The hon. Gentleman touched on that when he talked about access to GPs.

That is the local action. I want to touch on what we are doing nationally.

Tim Farron: The Minister made a very interesting point about people who under-deliver on their contract. It is important that we do not misunderstand what that means. A dental surgery can be working flat out, but if it is, for example, spending more of its time doing preventive work or reacting to people who want consultations and so on, it gets only one unit of dental activity for that. It could be absolutely full to the brim but be doing the lower-tier work just because that is how it is, reactively. That dental surgery is not failing or

not working hard enough. It is doing the preventive stuff that we want it to do more of, but the UDA system, with its perverse incentives, does not reward that.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman anticipates my speech: I will talk about contract reform later. He knows much better than me that the problem with the previous contract was that it was introduced with perhaps a bit too much haste, and we are now living with the consequences. We are mindful that we need a contract that works well and is sustainable for the future.

Nationally, we are introducing so-called flexible commissioning, which allows local NHS commissioners to commission a wider range of services from dental practices. That is expected to make NHS dentistry more attractive to new performers. Another key recruitment and retention challenge—of course, this is not confined to dentists; it applies to a whole range of healthcare and other professionals—is the growing demand among younger dentists for more varied portfolio careers. NHSE is working closely with Health Education England and a wide range of stakeholders to make portfolio careers a reality for dental professionals, allowing dentists to move between specialities such as prevention, restorative work, oral health and special care dentistry.

We want UK-trained dentists in the NHS, and we want them to stay in those careers, but dentists from overseas also play an important part in delivering NHS care. I am pleased that the NHS and the Government have taken steps through the launch of the EU settlement scheme to maintain that essential supply of dedicated and skilled workers, including European economic area-trained dentists, when we leave the EU. Last summer, doctors and nurses were removed from the tier 2 cap, leaving more places for other highly skilled professionals, including dentists.

The interim NHS people plan, which was published early last month, commits to creating a capable and motivated multidisciplinary dental workforce of a sufficient size to meet population health needs. The full people plan will be published later this year.

We are working closely with NHSE to reform the current dental contract. Feedback from dentists who are testing the prototype contract suggests it is a more satisfying way of delivering care. It supports a better skills mix, allowing dental care to be supported by a wider range of staff, such as therapists and hygienists. At a meeting a couple of weeks ago with a wide range of dental stakeholders, I announced that a further 28 dental practices had joined the programme, bringing to 102 the number of practices that are testing the new prevention-focused way of delivering care. NHSE is considering carefully when that approach can be rolled out more widely across the NHS. It is important that we get the new contract right, but I am hopeful that the roll-out will happen as soon as possible.

I want to touch briefly on three questions hon. Members asked. The first and most important was about children's oral health. I heartily agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale about the importance of children's oral health and all the preventive measures the Department can take to protect children's teeth. He rightly pointed out something that not all hon. Members are aware of: the biggest cause of emergency admission for children is poor oral health. Of course, that is

[Seema Kennedy]

entirely preventable. The Government are committed to that, particularly among deprived children. We have made the Starting Well approach available to other NHS England commissioners, and that is promoting increased access and early preventive care for very young children.

John Woodcock: That more than a third of children under five in Barrow have tooth decay is truly appalling. The Government need to make faster progress. I assume the Minister would vigorously oppose any attempt to weaken the sugar tax, which is designed to move people away from that harmful substance towards a healthier lifestyle.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman makes a very timely intervention. We can see how successful the soft drinks industry levy has been in how it has helped to reformulate sugary drinks, the amount of money it has raised that has been recycled into school sports, and the fact that it is changing people's tastes and behaviour. The prevention Green Paper is in train; let us hope that he is pleased with what is announced in it.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale mentioned emergency dentistry and I will have to write to him with specifics about the commissioning of services.

On the public health budget, I know from conversations with Members across the House that there are pressures on local government budgets. The ring-fenced public health budget will be a matter for the forthcoming spending review, when it will be assessed using all available evidence. The hon. Gentleman can be assured that I will take away all the evidence I gather from meetings with Members across the House and in my ministerial position to feed into the spending review process.

Tim Farron: Just so the Minister is fully aware of the facts—I know this predates her time in this role—the NHS talked in its long-term plan about its vision for early identification of conditions of all sorts, and about preventive care, and then literally a fortnight later, just before Christmas, the settlement for public health spending for Cumbria was reduced by £500,000. I would be grateful if the Minister intervened to ensure that that does not happen again, because it has a huge impact on our ability to keep children in good practice in their early years so they have good dental health.

Seema Kennedy: Of course, part of prevention comes from the public health budget. That now sits back with local authorities, which is where it was historically, and of course—the hon. Gentleman knows my constituency well, having grown up there—there are different needs in different areas. What the NHS does through the immunisation and screening programmes is also part of that aspect of preventive health, but I take on board his comments about the specific public health situation in south Cumbria.

I hope the hon. Gentleman is reassured that significant action is being taken locally in Cumbria and nationally, both now and for the future, to improve access to NHS dental services. The new prevention-focused dental contract in particular, which is a key part of our reforms, should attract people to and keep people in the dental profession, and make dentistry a more varied and rewarding career. It will ensure better access to dentistry in places such as Cumbria and across the country for all our constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

English for Speakers of Other Languages

[MS NADINE DORRIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for the provision of English for speakers of other languages.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate, which is about a subject that is close to my heart and to my community: the urgent need to invest in English as a second language, particularly for refugees.

I am fortunate to represent a place that is diverse, inclusive and welcoming. I am proud to be from a city of sanctuary, because almost 500 people living in Birmingham have arrived since the beginning of the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement scheme. Last summer, I was fortunate to meet 12 people from Syria who have started new lives in Birmingham, supported by Refugee Action. They shared with me their experiences of life in the UK, and spoke about how respectful and kind those around them have been, how comfortably their children have settled into local schools and what a great place Birmingham has been to live in. The biggest problem that almost everyone wanted to raise with me was the lack of sufficient access to English language learning.

People had different reasons for wanting to improve their English. For one family, it was to ensure they could communicate properly with healthcare professionals to support their daughter with her complex health needs. For another, it was so that they could speak English well enough to pass their UK driving test. For another man, it was so that he could take up the profession he held back home in Syria as a football coach.

Earlier today I met Nour, a Syrian refugee living in Birmingham—he is in the Gallery listening to the debate. Nour is a passionate champion of the importance of learning English, and I want to share with Members his powerful words:

“When you start to speak English fluently, it means you can get a good job and make your dreams come true. I am working hard. I want to create a company like Microsoft. You will see—I will achieve my dreams and goals.”

The experiences of this group of refugees is mirrored by many people of different backgrounds, who have different motivations but the same ambition to be able to communicate better with the community around them. We should support that ambition and be a country that is open and welcoming, but that requires providing people with support after they arrive here. Language classes are fundamental in building cohesive communities, yet many barriers exist for people to access classes and they struggle to find the opportunity to learn to speak English.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. It is clear that there is support from both the refugee community and the British public for having these classes. Does she agree that there are particular concerns that women with children are prevented from accessing these classes, because there is no provision for children?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and I will touch on that later in my speech.

Government cuts to English for speakers of other languages over the past decade have been ruthless; let us not pretend otherwise. Refugee Action's report, “Turning Words into Action”, shows that Government funding for ESOL in England fell from £212.3 million in 2008 to £105 million in 2018. That is a shocking real-terms cut of almost 60% in a decade. Unsurprisingly, this decline in funding has been accompanied by a decline in adult participation in ESOL classes by nearly 40% over the same period.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate, which is about a subject many of us have been raising over the last nine years as we have seen the erosion of courses. Does she recognise that there is a new threat to funding for ESOL courses, because the European social fund has been a significant supporter of those courses? Does she hope that the Minister will today give a commitment to match, pound for pound, funding from the European social fund for ESOL courses in future?

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention, and he is right. So many Members across the House have been campaigning for this over the past decade. I hope that the Minister will respond to his request.

Last month a report by the Government's social research team, using methodology agreed with the Department for Education, found that the demand for English language teaching was high, with almost three quarters of survey respondents reporting a “significant demand” for English language learning provision in the communities they serve. However, providers are struggling to meet that demand. Over half the respondents found it “fairly difficult” to meet demand, and one in eight found it “very difficult”. The overstretching of these providers hits learners hard, particularly the most vulnerable. New research carried out by Refugee Action found that 59% of refugees did not think they had received enough ESOL teaching hours and only 34% of respondents felt that their current level of English was enough to make them ready to work in the UK.

Third sector organisations are unable to fill these gaps because limited funding means they have little or no access to hardware and technology to support their teaching.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. She makes the point about third sector provision. In my constituency, First Step and the Angelou Centre provide ESOL classes, as well as Newcastle City Council and Newcastle College, but because of the devastating cuts they are in no way able to meet demand. My constituents and refugees in Newcastle often speak to me about the need to increase ESOL provision so that it is not just a lucky few who are able to receive the gift of the English language.

Preet Kaur Gill: It is important that we hear first-hand experiences from Members representing their communities about how difficult it has been and the impact of cuts.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

It is disingenuous for the Education Secretary to praise ESOL as a way towards social mobility and inclusion without providing much needed resources. Women are disproportionately impacted by barriers to ESOL and they miss out on the benefits that those who are able to learn English gain. More than three quarters of parents said that a lack of childcare had been a barrier to their ability to attend English lessons. For those on a low income, practical and logistical barriers exist. A quarter of refugee respondents, for example, had not been able to access any financial assistance to pay for travel to classes. That can mean people are forced to miss classes because they are unable to travel to them.

Some groups are excluded altogether from accessing English, such as asylum seekers, who in England become eligible for funding only if they have been waiting for a decision on their claim for six months or longer. That includes a broader issue with the current resettlement process that researchers from the University of Sussex found is leading

“to a tragic waste of refugees’ unfulfilled potential”.

The Government frequently talk about the importance of ESOL provision for refugees. Back in 2016, after many years of ESOL cuts, pressure from the Opposition Benches, from charities and from civil society organisations forced the Government to give additional funding for people arriving under the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement scheme. Although welcome, this fairly modest pot of money supported only one group of people to learn English, and therefore cannot be seen as a solution to the wider problems of access to ESOL.

The Government’s 2018 integrated communities Green Paper acknowledged the vital importance of English for integration but gave no new money specifically for ESOL. In their 2018 immigration White Paper, the Government committed to

“an ambitious and well-funded English language strategy to ensure that everyone in this country, especially those with newly recognised refugee status, are supported to speak the same language”.

Once again, however, there was no new funding. The Government’s failure to act flies in the face of public opinion, which is strongly in favour of supporting people to learn English. For example, recent independent polling by YouGov shows that 91% of the British public believe it is important that refugees who come to the UK learn to speak English. If the Government are serious about allowing everyone the possibility to learn English, investment must be made, not empty promises.

Informal ESOL learning groups run by volunteers and community organisations across the country are a vital part of learning, and we know that they are often fantastic community assets. There is good work ongoing to help reach learners in segmented communities, and we should continue to work to ensure that such groups are joined up and co-ordinated.

There are other innovative forms of ESOL that should also be encouraged. In September, the adult education budget will be devolved to six combined authorities and the Greater London Authority, allowing for creative regional ways of delivering ESOL teaching. For example, the West Midlands Combined Authority is currently exploring ways of delivering more ESOL in workplaces,

specific to certain sectors, to firm up the link between learning English and employment. Those new powers and responsibilities need to be matched with appropriate resources, so will the Minister tell us what they will be?

Thus far the Government have ignored the moral case, but perhaps they will listen to the economic one. Much of people’s passion to learn English comes from their desire to find work. Although it is certainly only part of the integration picture, for many it is the main motivation to learn. If people had access to eight hours of ESOL classes a week, the taxpayer would be fully reimbursed for two years of those classes after an individual’s first eight months of employment at the national average wage. In the case of supporting refugees to access ESOL, the cost of providing that volume of learning would be just £42 million a year.

Moreover, leaving people to flounder without the ability to speak the language can have a detrimental effect on their mental health and wellbeing, and lead to isolation and loneliness, all of which are extremely costly to the state and society. Investing in people who want to learn English is a smart thing to do.

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Will she join me in suggesting that the Minister might do well to look at the German example? All refugees in Germany have access to a 600-hour language course, which enables them to learn to speak German. Clearly the German Government and the German economy see an economic return on that investment, as well as a social return in terms of mental wellbeing.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention. I was not aware of the German example, and I think that the Minister will be keen to look at it after this debate.

All political parties talk of the importance of helping people to become productive, equal partners in their communities, and supporting people such as Nour to achieve their goals. However, too often the cuts to ESOL that we have seen under the coalition and Conservative Governments have prevented that from happening.

Today I want to ask the Minister four questions. First, will she act now to ensure that everyone can learn English? Secondly, will she commit to producing a formal ESOL strategy for England? Thirdly, what steps is she taking to ensure that people who face particular barriers to learning, such as those with caring responsibilities or difficult travel arrangements, are given the resources they need to overcome them, and to ensure that ESOL provision is always accessible? Finally, in order to have an inclusive, welcoming country, additional investment is necessary to ensure that everyone who needs it is given the opportunity to access high-quality, sufficient English language teaching, so will she support my call and take these demands to the Treasury in advance of the forthcoming spending review?

2.42 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I will start with a reference to the all-party parliamentary group on social integration, which correctly provided a statement that, to be successful at getting ESOL taught, we had to

recognise that we were up against cultural norms among the groups to whom we were trying to provide the language training. I remember 11 or 12 years ago, when I was a councillor in Oxford, seeing groups of women in particular who had been coming to English classes for five or six years, but whose English was no better than on the day they first went. It was an opportunity for them to get out of the house and have social interaction with other people on the course.

ESOL teaching can be useful for that purpose of providing social interaction, but that does take away from the purpose of providing the language tuition that we all think is important. Fortunately, most refugees do not fall into that category; they passionately want to learn English. There are many reasons for doing that: for talking to neighbours, for having that normal family social interaction, for studying and, most importantly, for work-related activities.

Much of the thinking about teaching English stresses the need for a community-based strategy. I am not sure that I understand what a community-based strategy is in this case, particularly given that so much of the English-language training is provided by large local government organisations that can hardly be described as community-based in the way they operate. At some point we will have to bottom that out when we talk about how these services should be delivered in the best possible way.

I have mentioned that it is essential to run language training courses for large refugee communities; it is essential to run them for all refugees, but particularly so where there are large refugee communities. My own constituency does not have any, so I can speak on this with a touch of objectivity, and look at that training to see how it proceeds. I have also already mentioned the importance of English language training for people getting a job, but that also leads to another question: what role should employers have in providing English language training for people to whom they offer jobs? That is much more than simply the social mixing that I talked about at the beginning.

The ability to teach the English language affects so many other areas. One area that it affects particularly is that of loneliness; if a refugee is lonely and does not have the right language skills, they will be even lonelier. It is essential to be able to address that. I remember reading the story of a refugee lawyer who spoke very little English, but who wanted to be able to continue to practise law when she came to the UK with her family. To be able to practise UK law in the UK, she had to take a conversion course. The stories that were told of the difficulties she faced in finding that sort of language training, just to be able to keep her family alive in the way to which they were normally accustomed, made for a sorrowful tale, and it is one I would recommend to all hon. Members.

Finally, I will mention, as I frequently do in this Chamber, the work of the Council of Europe. The UK is a member of the Council of Europe and it is rare that we take what it does into account. It has a programme called “Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants”, which is there specifically to ensure that member Governments of the Council provide the linguistic training that is essential for migrants to be able to improve themselves by learning the language so that they can do all the things that we take for granted.

2.48 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms Dorries. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) not only for securing this debate, but for her incredibly insightful opening speech, in which she very articulately made the case for ESOL funding.

Only a week ago, I had the pleasure of showing a group of ESOL learners from Halifax around Westminster, as part of a trip organised by Halifax Opportunities Trust to complement their studies. They were a wonderful group of people, each with a different story to tell, but all of them enthusiastic about the opportunity to gain a better understanding of their adopted Parliament, how it works and its relationship to their lives. While they are still studying English, it was their ability to ask questions and understand the answers that empowered them to truly experience Parliament as participants, rather than simply as observers along for the ride.

However, although almost everyone understands the value of being able to speak English, ESOL provision is harder to access than ever before. As we have heard, Government funding for ESOL in England fell from £212.3 million in 2008 to £105 million in 2018—a real-terms cut of almost 60%. Unsurprisingly, Calderdale College in my constituency has had to reduce its ESOL provision by 50%, despite an increase in the number of learners seeking it. We expect the publication of the national ESOL strategy in the autumn. With YouGov polling suggesting that 91% of the British public believe it important that refugees and others who come to the UK should learn to speak English, we know that there is overwhelming support for investment in ESOL as a means for that to happen.

Here in Westminster, I vice-chair the all-party parliamentary group on social integration, which the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned. In 2017, we published our “Integration not Demonisation” report, which argued that the ability to speak English is one of the key principles underpinning healthy and successful integration within communities. As part of the call for evidence for that report, it was a pleasure to welcome the all-party parliamentary group to Halifax, where the chair and I met with those involved in integration work.

Office for National Statistics research published in the report suggests that approximately 800,000 people living in the UK at the time of the 2011 census could not speak English—2% of the population. In some areas with large numbers of immigrants, including Newham, Brent, Tower Hamlets and Leicester, that can be as high as 9% of the population. Further to this, 22% of Muslim women in the UK self-report that they are unable to speak English well.

To address that, the report recommended that the Government should introduce a national strategy for the promotion of English language learning, which would unleash the economic potential of immigrants, enabling newcomers to participate fully in British life and ensuring that everyone in our society can benefit from meeting and mixing with others from different cultures. We went so far as to say that enrolment in English language classes should be compulsory, acknowledging the Casey review findings that, in some

[Holly Lynch]

communities, regressive cultural and family norms and practices can prevent the most vulnerable from learning English.

We also asserted that the ability to learn English should be a right extended to everyone. We argued that, while the Department for Education should lead that work, it should be delivered with input from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and other relevant Departments to ensure that it was as effective as possible.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and a lot of good points. The Government found £10 million in 2016 for Syrian refugees to undertake ESOL classes. If there is money for Syrian refugees, surely there is money for all the communities that need it.

Holly Lynch: My hon. Friend makes the important point that we recognised the importance of Syrian refugees being able to speak English, but we have not delivered the funding to extend that programme to other newcomers to our country. We should reflect on that.

Ahead of the publication of the national ESOL strategy in the autumn, I was glad to see that the Government's immigration White Paper, published in December last year, commits to

"an ambitious and well-funded English language strategy to ensure that everyone in this country, especially those with newly recognised refugee status, are supported to speak the same language."

However, these proposals contain no new funding for English language teaching, which the strategy will have to address later this year. The ability to speak English is important for many reasons, not least, as I have mentioned, because it is integral to integration. If someone cannot speak English, their ability to find work, meet and converse with people and access everyday services is severely restricted. For someone to be trapped in a world where they cannot interact with those around them will leave them desperately isolated and vulnerable.

There is strong public support for ESOL, not least because it would be a sensible investment. Research undertaken by Refugee Action—I am pleased to see members of the team in the Gallery—shows that it would cost £42 million a year to ensure two years' ESOL for each refugee arriving in the UK, which would in effect be fully reimbursed to the taxpayer within the first eight months of that individual's employment at the national average wage.

The Casey review looked at opportunity and integration. Published in December 2016, it made it clear that good English skills are fundamental to integrated communities and particularly important as a means of empowering marginalised women and other socially isolated groups. However, when it comes to working with those groups in particular, as much as I welcome learning in the community, I am sympathetic to some of the points already made about how effective learning in the community needs to be. I have seen good examples of that and I have seen bad examples.

The Women's Activity Centre in Halifax, which does a great deal to support older, isolated women, predominantly from the Kashmiri community, for whom

the inability to speak English is a significant contributor to loneliness and isolation, was approached by an organisation that offered to come in and deliver ESOL. The organisation came in, signed everyone up, took some photos and then brought in an eastern European interpreter who unfortunately could not communicate with that specific group of learners at all. After two lessons, on realising that this approach was futile, they failed to return, letting all those women down. When funding for ESOL is so precious, knowing that dedicated funds can be wasted in that way, delivering no social benefit to those who most need it, is painful for everyone involved.

I have been working closely with Sisters United in Halifax—truly inspirational women who are working alongside Refugee Action to support its "Let Refugees Learn" campaign. Refugee Action has called for refugees to have a minimum of eight hours formal, accredited tuition a week for their first two years in the UK, which, as I have mentioned, would cost £42 million a year, although that would be repaid within the first eight months of a refugee's being in work. Alongside this, I lend my support to Refugee Action's "Lift the Ban" campaign, which seeks to promote integration and facilitate opportunities to improve language skills by allowing refugees to work while awaiting a decision on their status.

ESOL provision represents value for money. We know that the demand is there, but at the moment the provision is not. If we are looking for ways of ensuring, now more than ever, that we foster healthy, integrated communities, investing in ESOL would be a really constructive way of supporting those aims.

2.56 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries; many thanks for squeezing me in at the last minute. I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for introducing this important topic and for securing the debate.

It is only two weeks since Refugee Week, when Citizens UK came into Parliament with a young man from my constituency from Syria, Mouteb, who spoke for the first time in beautiful English, even though he had never been to school before because he was in a refugee camp. He appeared in a beautiful school uniform and looked so proud, which was such a wonderful tribute to the work done with refugees when things go well. The group that he is with is supported by Citizens UK but is part of the Government's Syrian community sponsorship programme, which I am sure the Minister is aware of. That programme could stop in September 2020 if it is not renewed. I hope that the Minister will think about passing that on to Home Office colleagues, so that this important programme, which is a great example of community cohesion, can be maintained.

One local sponsor, who goes to the Methodist church in Muswell Hill, said:

"Community support leads to more successful, faster integration of new migrants than local authority support, and the involvement of people across communities in resettlement can, in time, change the way a whole society treats refugees."

That is a real tribute to this group, from all different faith backgrounds, who have clubbed together to provide a sort of family around the family, if you like, for these Syrian refugees. Mouteb's speaking in a meeting in Parliament is a great example of that.

The other group I pay tribute to on its teaching of English as a second language is the JAN Trust, a fantastic organisation in my constituency that particularly helps isolated women, a group that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) mentioned. It helps women to escape the drudgery of housework and endless hours of childcare; much as one loves one's children, those hours can go on and on. Getting in front of a whiteboard and being taught by a lovely teacher—ESOL teachers happen to be lovely people, on the whole; that is a terrible stereotype, but they are—provides a wonderful escape for those women.

Holly Lynch: My hon. Friend is making an important point. I have worked with older women in my community who are at an age where they need regular medical appointments and support in the home, but because they are unable to communicate, not only do we deny them that escape, but they struggle to access basic services that the rest of us take for granted.

Catherine West: Absolutely: it provides a crucial line into a more purposeful existence as a member of the community. There is a real opportunity here, particularly for older women who might not necessarily have had education through to 18 or 21 in the way that many of our younger women do now. I often think about my own grandmother. She left school at 14 and had some quite unusual views, many of which we had clashes over. I often think that if she had had the opportunity to go to school to the age of 21, she would have made a fuller contribution in her different roles.

A lot of women, including those who escaped violence and conflict and who therefore stopped school very young, have this amazing lifeline through our colleges and places such as the JAN Trust, and with the support provided by Citizens UK. Further education colleges have been cut by 50% since 2010 and they are really struggling, but in my constituency, the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London is doing a fantastic job to provide a lifeline, not just for women but for all adults, to escape that terrible prison that people find themselves in when they do not speak the language of their host country.

I want briefly to mention the issue of teachers' pay. Six months ago, a fantastic teacher of English as an additional language came in to lobby me. She is a constituent, but teaches at City and Islington College, which has now merged with Westminster Kingsway and the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London. She said that if she taught in a school, she would be paid way more than for teaching ESL. I hope that the Minister will look carefully at the wage level, because in these difficult times it is important that we assist people to stay in these important roles in the public sector. Those on a relatively low wage also have lower pension contributions, and sick leave and annual leave entitlements can also be different. In general, that two-tier approach to teaching must be stopped.

I reiterate the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) that funding to support ESL be continued, or that the

Government at least pledge to continue that important work. It would be terrible to lose that. There are important campaigns, such as "Lift the Ban", which my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax mentioned, which aims to assist asylum seekers, once they have made their application, in being able to work more flexibly, and to start as quickly as possible. It would be a shame for English language classes not to go alongside that.

I moved a private Member's Bill a couple of months back and was extremely impressed by the range of people I met who would love to be in work. As we are all aware, many refugees come from well-trained backgrounds, perhaps with a medicine degree, or have backgrounds in pharmacy, teaching or engineering, and they arrive in the UK without any English. If they could learn English as quickly as possible, they would be able to work. The "Lift the Ban" campaign calls for the Home Office's occupation shortage list to be much more flexible and open.

I have raised that issue with the Home Secretary on two occasions in the House, and he said that it was under review. I also raised it with the Immigration Minister, who said that the Government were looking at it. In the way that our wonderful civil servants are used to passing on little notes to other Departments, I hope that the Home Office will look at this again with some urgency, particularly as we have people who are often very well qualified, but find it difficult to find work quickly.

Alex Sobel: Prior to entering Parliament, I helped the Cardigan Centre in my constituency to gain lottery funding for an ESOL café. Because they were asylum seekers, many of those people could not access ESOL elsewhere. They were learning English to try to enter work, but they could not, because of the ban. A lot of them had backgrounds from the occupation shortage list. There is a demand and there is this waiting. They cannot get statutory ESOL and have to use charitable ESOL. Those people face both those issues.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There is also a terrible issue with transport to colleges. For destitute asylum seekers, it is very difficult to manage on the current rate of £5.37 an hour. It is doubly difficult when they need to pay for expensive buses, particularly outside London. I understand from recent debates in the House that buses outside London are more expensive even than in our high-value city. There are costs associated with getting to lessons, and this all needs to be looked at in the round.

I thank you again, Ms Dorries, for allowing me to speak with very little notice. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston again, and all other colleagues who have made such fantastic contributions to the debate. I look forward to hearing the shadow spokespersons and the Minister's response.

3.5 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I am particularly grateful to you, Ms Dorries, for fitting me in, almost beyond the last minute. As I often am, I was inspired to speak by my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). Keighley often looks for

[John Grogan]

inspiration to Halifax—I say that as someone who was born in Halifax—and there are similarities between the communities.

In Bradford, there are 25,000 people who cannot speak English or do not speak it well. In Keighley, the figure is just under 3,000. Together with Bradford Council, I hosted a conference on integration in line with the Government's strategy earlier in the year. One of the top targets that we agreed on was to try to get that figure down in the next five years. We will never get it down to zero, but we will try to get everyone in Keighley speaking English, because it is a liberating and progressive thing to be able to speak English in our society.

We have heard the arguments about employability and loneliness and so on. Let me add one more that comes up, which I find works in the discussions I have with different communities: it is really up there if parents can to speak English. How can anyone possibly guide their children in towns such as Keighley, where many good things but also one or two bad things go on from time to time, and how can anyone make judgments about their children's friends and the activities they take part in, without speaking English?

It is a wonderful thing that there are so many groups in Keighley. The Sangat Centre works very much with the Kashmiri community. There is the Good Shepherd Centre, a redundant church that was not needed by the Catholic Church that has now become a vibrant centre; English teaching is one of the things that goes on there. In all the centres, there is a big waiting list for the free English lessons, which are largely financed by the community.

We must be inventive. In colleges of education—Keighley stands out in my mind, of course—people are sometimes reluctant to take examinations, but to get the funding, examinations are needed. The one course that really works in Keighley is in driving test theory with English language. Everyone wants to learn to drive in Keighley. Adding some English language teaching to that means it suddenly becomes even more popular, and it also suddenly becomes eligible for funding.

There is also innovation in some of the schools in Keighley. In St Andrew's, Holycroft and Victoria Primary Schools, English language lessons—and maths lessons as well—are held between 11 am and 1 pm, with a second session from 1 pm to 3 pm, so that parents can come along during the school day, knowing that their kids are at school.

Catherine West: Is my hon. Friend aware of Duncombe School, a school of excellence? It provides GCSEs in Turkish and other community languages, so that those who missed out—once again, it is particularly women—can complete qualifications in other languages, meaning that they are proficient in two languages?

John Grogan: That is an inspiration; that example is not from Halifax, but we can take inspiration from all round the country. Second chances are very important in learning.

I have little else to add, other than to say that we are grateful in Bradford and Keighley for the money that has come from the integrated communities programme,

which I hope will last for more than the current period of three years, because by the time it gets up and running we are halfway into it. To really integrate communities and use the power of the English language to bring about cohesion takes a while, and it can take years, so I hope that in the coming months Ministers will give greater certainty about the future of funding. We are excited in Keighley and in West Yorkshire generally about trying to make sure that eventually everyone in our society can speak English and participate fully in our society.

3.10 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing this important debate, and I congratulate all the others who were inspired to take part, even if they did so quite late on.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston spoke authoritatively about the problems faced by refugees struggling to learn English in England. She spoke fluently on an issue that she obviously cares passionately about and gave many relevant examples of why it is so important. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke about the all-party group on social integration and was able to inject an objective view as there are not many refugees in Henley. He gave us good information about the Council of Europe and the linguistic integration of adult migrants programme. I was not aware of it per se, but it is something that we can all take from here.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) referred to the 60% drop in ESOL funding in England and talked about the work of her all-party group in trying to push Government Departments into doing better. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) talked about funding for Syrian refugees and reminded us all that it is only two weeks since Refugee Week. I, too, was inspired by some of the refugees I met in Parliament during that time. She talked about funding, the JAN Trust and the wage levels of ESOL teachers. As a former further education lecturer, I can vouch for the fact that no one in FE is a slacker. You have to be nimble, light on your feet and able to do several jobs at once, but the sector will always manage to retain staff if they are paid appropriately.

Catherine West: I want to reiterate the point that someone often needs to be more skilled to teach in an FE setting than in a standard school setting. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Marion Fellows: I do indeed, based on my own long experience and that of my friend who is in the Gallery listening to this debate.

The hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) hosted a conference on integration and he talked about how the ability to speak English is liberating. I loved the idea of Keighley College doing a course in driving test theory with English. We often need a hook to draw people in and to get funding—again, another problem in further education—and that is a real winner.

The Scottish Government are committed to the principle that all Scottish residents for whom English is not a first language should have the opportunity to access high-quality

English language provision. Access to English language lessons allows people to acquire the language skills to enable them to participate in Scottish life: in the workplace, through further study, within the family, the local community and Scottish society, and through the economy. It is one of the joys of life to hear immigrants from all over the world speaking with a broad Scottish accent.

Language skills are central to giving people a democratic voice and supporting them to contribute to the society in which they live. Scotland's population at the last census was recorded as 5,295,403. The census also showed that more than 310,000, or about 5%, of that population over the age of three spoke a language other than English in the home. ESOL learning is crucial in supporting residents in Scotland for whom English is not a first language. It equips those residents with the communication skills necessary to contribute and integrate economically, culturally and socially, as we have heard from all the speakers today.

To support the delivery of the ESOL programme in line with the national strategy, during 2016-17 funding of almost £1.5 million was allocated to community planning partnerships, which are wide ranging in Scotland. As a result, almost 13,000 learners were recorded as accessing provision, a 24% increase on the numbers recorded in the previous year. Funding is necessary and must be given to promote ESOL. Some 20% of those learners achieved a Scottish Qualifications Authority accreditation, which represents almost 21% of the total number of learning opportunities made available. A total of 129 projects were proposed for the fund and 116 are reported as being complete, giving a 90% completion rate, which is, from my own experience, extraordinary.

Society has changed since the 2007 adult ESOL strategy for Scotland was first launched. Social, political and economic factors have impacted on ESOL provision; these include a change in the profile of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Scotland, and migrants become part of settled communities. There have also been changes to the requirements for English language skills for immigration and welfare benefits and the reform of public services following the Christie commission on the future delivery of public services report. Public services in Scotland are adapting to cuts in funding under Tory austerity, while technology becomes increasingly prevalent and public services and personal lives are challenged to maximise the use of technology, which someone cannot access and use if they do not have the language skills.

We know more about the ESOL provision in Scotland, including who delivers it, how it is delivered and what is delivered. As a result, the Scottish Government refreshed the English for speakers of other languages strategy for adults in Scotland. The refresh provides an updated and informed context for the provision of publicly funded ESOL in Scotland. It sets it in the broad context of learning in Scotland with the expectation that providers will look at the broader context to inform the direction of provision.

We in the Scottish National party believe that refugees and asylum seekers should be welcomed, supported and integrated into our communities from day one. The New Scots refugee integration strategy for 2018 to 2022 sets out a vision for a welcoming Scotland where refugees and asylum seekers are able to rebuild their lives from the day they arrive. The strategy commits to better

access to essential services such as education, housing, health and employment. It recognises the skills, knowledge and resilience that refugees bring, and aims to help people settle, become part of the community and pursue their ambitions. There is not a hostile environment for refugees in Scotland.

Catherine West: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for taking a second intervention. Would the Scottish National party join with others in the House to support the Lift the Ban campaign to lift the ban on asylum seekers working once they have done their paperwork?

Marion Fellows: Absolutely, because the ban undervalues people and the skills that they can bring into the UK. As has already been stated, many refugees bring really good skills with them. If they can then learn English, they can contribute a huge amount to the economy and our society.

In 2010, the literacy action plan emphasised the Scottish Government's commitment to raising the literacy skills of Scotland's citizens. The strategic guidance, "Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020", notes the importance of literacy and language skills for ESOL learners:

"Some adults whose first language is not English may have reading, writing and number difficulties very similar to those encountered by 'traditional' literacies learners, due to limited schooling in their first language or because they come from a mainly oral culture."

It is important to support people whose first language is not English to become full and active citizens. Those adults can make an important contribution to the economic success of Scotland, but to do so they must be able to read, write, speak and understand English. I talk a lot about Scotland, which is my role here, but much of what I am talking about could happen in England as well, with the political will.

For young adults, the 16-plus learning choices framework is a commitment in the senior phase of education that guarantees a place in learning for every eligible young person who wants it. It is the model for helping young people to stay in learning post-16. Provisions that support ESOL learners to find employment have great returns personally, socially and economically. Economic integration can help to reduce isolation in a new country. Increasing the opportunities for individuals to develop and use their skills as best they can is not just a strategy for improved economic performance. It is also an effective way of improving the satisfaction and security of work, promoting the health and wellbeing of individuals and enhancing the fabric of our communities.

Language learning remains an important curriculum area in schools and is supported by "Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach". That policy is aimed at schools, but it notes the potential of language learning in general. Work-based ESOL and ESOL for employability can be considered in the context of the Government's employability and economic strategies. Refreshing the employability framework for Scotland provides a framework that focuses on jobs and growth and recognises the importance of ESOL in helping to address inequality issues that impact on employability. Providers and practitioners report that migrant workers are now becoming part of settled communities in Scotland. ESOL learners in general are becoming less transient. In that regard, I thank those who work tirelessly to improve the lives of

[*Marion Fellows*]

Congolese and Syrian refugees who have settled in my constituency. Those people are welcome, and they contribute to our communities.

Refugee Action has made five recommendations for change and I think it important to restate them. It wants a fund to be created to allow all refugees to receive a minimum eight hours a week of formal, accredited English language teaching. It wants the Government to publish an ESOL strategy for England. It wants to ensure that all refugees have access to ESOL. It wants free English teaching to be provided to people seeking asylum in England from the point of their asylum claim. It wants a national framework for community-based language support to be facilitated. Community-based language support is so important. I have talked jokingly—but perhaps I was not joking too much—about asylum seekers and refugees speaking with a Scottish accent. That absolutely helps to empower them, and to embed them in their communities. When the weans start school at five the mothers know what is going on at the school gate.

All those asks are in line with the SNP Scottish Government strategy. Will the Minister commit to providing for them in England?

3.23 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. First I want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), on a speech that not only was superbly constructed but got to the heart of the individual issues. It gave us information about how to address strategy more broadly than the Government have previously done. That breadth was particularly apparent when she listed the different types of refugees she had been dealing with in her constituency, and when she said that starting to speak English fluently means people can get a good job and make their dreams come true.

That applies not only in Birmingham; the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) may have seen what I thought was a moving piece on BBC Oxford the other day about an Afghan cricketer who came to this country as a refugee and asylum seeker and now plays in the city league in Australia. It was the support of the people of Cumnor, and particularly the cricket club there, that got him through the Home Office barriers. It is important to talk about structure, but we should never forget individuals, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston did not do that. She rightly paid tribute to the report by Refugee Action and pointed out that there has been no new money. She also made the important point that informal ESOL learning groups are run by volunteers and community organisations. The Minister and I have often jointly supported adult education, but I recall her talking a couple of years ago, at the Learning and Work Institute, about the importance of informal learning and how to coax people into doing things that they might not otherwise do.

There is a moral as well as an economic case for the Government to address. I pay tribute to other Members for their comments and observations in interventions and speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) is of course the Labour Home Office spokesperson on such matters. He talked about

how provision for children is a key element of the matter, and also a barrier. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) made the important point that the European social fund had been a significant contributor to ESOL and asked whether the Minister would guarantee to match that. As far as I am aware, that will probably come substantially from the shared prosperity fund that the Government have talked about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and other colleagues tried to get some detail about that from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), in an excellent Westminster Hall debate two months ago—but detail came there none. I do not know whether the Minister today is in a position to say any more today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) talked about the importance of first steps and colleges. The hon. Member for Henley talked about the need to get people's motivation right, and about issues of loneliness and participation. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) rightly paid tribute to the work being done in her constituency, and also the work of the all-party parliamentary group on social integration. She and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) made a particular point about the needs of older women. The stats that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax gave and the two examples that my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green talked about powerfully illustrated that argument.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan), as well as telling us about the challenges in Bradford and Keighley, probably gave the most memorable soundbite of the afternoon, by combining driving with English, but it is an important point because people want to learn English for specific reasons. That relates to the discussion of and concerns about older people—not just older women—who need ESOL.

Finally, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) spoke on these matters from the Front Bench for the SNP, with her customary crispness and warmth. She illustrated some of the challenges, particularly in relation to teaching and further education in Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, and discussed changes in the profile and the specifics of what is happening in Scotland.

ESOL classes offer vital support for people across this country whose first language is not English. They offer them the ability to get the knowledge and skills they need to live more active lives. People rely on those services for many reasons—to be able to speak English and enter work, or as a starting point for education here—in order to feel able to integrate and participate in their communities. Those are important aims, and I know that the Minister will agree with me and colleagues present in Westminster Hall that we must give everyone the support and opportunities to achieve them. In fact, I hope there is cross-party consensus on the issue.

As I have already said, the Minister and I have at various times talked about motivation and the need to reach out to people. The Secretary of State himself has said:

“Improving literacy is vital to improving social mobility”.—[*Official Report*, 19 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 6.]

In her review of integration, Louise Casey said:

“English language is a common denominator and a strong enabler of integration.”

Indeed, one would expect Ministers to have been investing substantially in these services for years, given how important they say English language is. As I am afraid has been demonstrated today—it is too often the case—that rhetoric has not been matched in reality since 2010. ESOL funding has been cut by over 50%, from £203 million to £99 million. Sadly, it comes as no surprise that participation has also plummeted. In 2009-10 there were 179,000 learners on funded ESOL courses, but by 2017 the figure had fallen to 114,000.

Will the Minister at least acknowledge that the indifference or—let us be charitable—inability to provide funding since 2010 has contributed significantly, if not directly, to the decline in ESOL participation? I know that she will say that funding has increased in recent years, and it is true that there have been small increases in ESOL funding and in specific areas, which we welcome. The Syrian refugees settlement scheme has been talked about. Given that the Government knew, and now have proof, that additional funding is needed to provide ESOL to specific vulnerable groups, it is a matter of concern that they have not gone further. Will they move beyond that piecemeal approach and offer long-term, sustainable investment to deliver ESOL in all our communities? The fact is that the lack of investment makes it impossible for those who need these vital services to access them.

As shadow skills Minister, I have been talking a lot recently about our urgent need to empower two groups of people: young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in education, employment or training; and adults who are without basic literacy and numeracy, of whom there are probably between 5 million and 7 million. We cannot separate that from ministerial failure to fund ESOL properly—and not just in further education, but in the Home Office and with others who have shared responsibilities in this area. I appreciate that it is complex—I know what the silos are like in Government—but the Government have to deliver on the matter.

I hope that the Minister can tell us how many refugees and asylum seekers are not currently, and have not previously, enrolled in an ESOL course. I and many hon. Members of the House are concerned that they are not getting the support they need. Some 59% of respondents to a Refugee Action survey said that the number of hours of teaching they received were not sufficient, and 66% said that their current level of English did not make them feel ready to work in the UK. That is simply unacceptable. Can the Minister tell us what steps the Government are taking to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers get the support they need to learn English?

It seems to me that Ministers support that goal, because their own integrated communities Green Paper said that everyone should be able to learn English. I agree, but when will it become a reality? If we will the ends, we must will the means—to be more old-fashioned and colloquial about it, there is the old phrase: “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.” Well, no money has been saddled up to power the fine words and exaltation of the Green Paper, and the Government cannot say that they have not been given chapter and verse on what needs to be done.

I pay tribute to Paul Hook and all his colleagues at Refugee Action, which is a national charity that works to enable asylum seekers and refugees to rebuild their lives in the UK. It is the

“leading provider of reception and integration services”,

and in the past three years it has been indefatigable in reminding the Government and Members of the House where we need to go. I am quoting from Refugee Action’s July 2018 reaction to the Green Paper, which lists the problems for refugees. They include long waiting lists, difficulties enrolling in a class, inadequate learning hours, gender barriers, unsuitable classes and travel difficulties, many of which have been touched on in the debate. That is what Refugee Action said last year.

As we have already heard, Refugee Action has now produced a response to the integrated communities Green Paper. I have looked at it, and I am sure that other hon. Members will have looked at it, either the whole thing or a summary. It is an excellent summary of where we are, but unfortunately what it summarises is not good. Refugee Action makes the point that there has been a real-terms cut of almost 60% between 2008 and 2018. I have already mentioned the new research: 59% of refugees do not think that they have had enough ESOL teaching hours. To probe further into that, more than three quarters of parents said that a lack of childcare had been a barrier to their ability to attend English lessons. That bears out in anecdotal and other comments that colleagues have made.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that we have an enormous problem that results from that? There is isolation and there are resulting mental health problems, which add further costs to the national health service as a result of failing to provide these important preventive services.

Gordon Marsden: I agree. I do not wish to take us into another area, but although the significant cuts to the Sure Start programmes and children’s centres impact on native English speakers, they also have an effect on refugees and asylum seekers, particularly in areas where there is ethnic concentration and a large number of migrants.

Refugee Action’s recommendations have already been touched on. They include a fund to support all refugees to learn English; ensuring a minimum of eight hours a week teaching for refugees, which requires an investment of £42 million a year; an ESOL strategy for England; full and equal access to ESOL for female asylum seekers, with the right to access free English-language learning; and facilitating a national framework for community-based support.

This is an issue that I have taken up with the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults, Refugee Action and others over the past couple of years. I went back to an article I wrote in *FE Week* in March 2018, to see whether anything I said then was not up to date. Unfortunately, I do not think much has changed at all. NATECLA said that the

“focus on informal community learning...does not go far enough to address the needs of learners...it is sustained and accredited English language learning”,

[Gordon Marsden]

which rather supports the point that the hon. Member for Henley made on the need to have progression in those sorts of courses.

Following Brexit, when we will increasingly have to rely on a smaller pool of workers than we have done for decades, it will become absolutely clear that a skill system that is fit for the future must include a minimum competence in the English language for everyone living in the UK—and not just in London, but in other major cities. We should not neglect the challenges in smaller towns and rural areas where there are recent influxes or long-standing ethnic communities. However, ESOL funding has been whittled away, which has inevitably depleted the cohort of dedicated teachers. It is no good the Education Secretary waxing lyrical on ESOL and social mobility if the Department does not provide—either from its own resources, by lobbying the Treasury, or by combining with other Departments—the hard cash to go with it.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), met a group of Congolese and Sudanese refugees in her constituency earlier this year. She says:

“They told me about their experiences of seeking shelter and safety in my area and of the welcome they had received in my constituency. But they also told me that they were desperate for more opportunities to learn English”.

She wrote in an article:

“From my own experience, I know that the opportunity to learn alongside managing childcare responsibilities is crucial.”

Without the opportunity to do that, they will not be able to succeed.

This is not an issue that only well-meaning people in prosperous areas are concerned about. I have received quite a lot of letters on the matter from my constituents in Blackpool. I will quote from a letter that I received from Raven Ellis:

“Without the opportunity to learn English... Being denied this opportunity means refugees can’t integrate properly or find work. Even the smallest everyday things are hard—catching a bus, going to the doctor, or making friends with neighbours.”

To invest makes sound economic sense. The Government’s integrated communities Green Paper had some welcome proposals, but that justifies the need to move further in this area and not to continue to do nothing. Many things can be done informally. Conversation clubs and volunteers are great, but they cannot replace formal teaching. A recent survey by British Future, which talked to a large number of refugees and asylum seekers, bears out that point.

We know from history, and I know personally and practically from the history of the north-west in towns such as Preston, Barnsley, Oldham and Rochdale, as well as Blackpool—we do not have such a proportion of people needing ESOL in Blackpool—how key it is that communities, whether new or permanent, can assimilate instead of just co-existing separately. We also see that in other parts of the country, such as Yorkshire and Humber—my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) is not in his place, but my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley is—and ESOL is key to that. It is key to social cohesion and individual advancement. It is key to enhancing local productivity and the local economy, especially where the number of people who

need ESOL is high. It is also key to those people who are newly assimilated to learn to train and gain skills at whatever age. With that bundle of imperatives, I really hope that the Government, in whatever form or shape they take in the next six months, will put some effort into this area.

3.41 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). We all know—there has been agreement in the debate—that English language skills are crucial. Last week I had the privilege of meeting adult education providers in Birmingham, who spoke passionately about helping students to succeed. I also had a chance to chat to some of the students not just about progress they had made to date but about the progress they hoped to make in the future and what that meant for them.

We estimate that 1 million people—quite a big figure—living in England cannot speak English well or at all, and we know how important English language skills are. The Government make funding available for English language through the adult education budget, and via the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for community-based provision. There is also specific support for refugees via the Home Office. We are keen to ensure that funding offers the best value for money for those learning and those contributing through taxes.

When I looked at the funding streams available for English language, I saw that the Department for Education, MHCLG, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions all put funding into this area. The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) talked about silos, which are a problem because they are not always the most efficient way of delivering the services we want.

Last year, providers supported adults to access English courses with £105 million of investment from the adult education budget. We are developing a new strategy, as hon. Members will be aware, which we plan to publish in the autumn. I share Members’ frustration about Ministers always saying “in the autumn” or “in the spring” or “in the summer” because we are never quite sure when that is. However, we are keen to get the strategy out as soon as possible. I do not mean to be evasive, but it will need to be right before we publish it. It will set out shared aims across Government to ensure that the ESOL provision is effective. We will need to use evidence-based decisions about what we do, and we have undertaken research to ensure that we get it right, which has included speaking to teachers, colleges, adult community learning providers, charities and academics to understand more. Last week, we published a report that explores what barriers those who have not accessed English language support have faced, some of which have been highlighted in the debate.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston articulated extremely well the reasons why being able to speak, understand and communicate in English are critical to building cohesive communities. It has become a bit of political rhetoric to talk about cohesive communities,

but we know what that means. It has to mean more than co-existing, which the hon. Member for Blackpool South mentioned.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston also pointed out that specific first-hand experiences are important in highlighting some of the more general problems with accessing ESOL. She raised several points about the devolution of the adult education budget, which is important. I saw some of that in the west midlands. I met staff and some of the Mayors of the combined authorities a couple of weeks ago, and it will be interesting and useful to us all to note what they do in their local areas, because we can all learn from best practice and experience of delivery in different areas.

The hon. Lady asked four questions, which I think I will have answered before the end of my remarks. On her last question, I can only give my wholehearted support to the fact that we must be an inclusive and welcoming country, particularly for refugees, who have often been through a lot and also have much to contribute to the rich fabric of our society.

Catherine West: The Minister mentioned the notion of devolution, which is a personal favourite of mine. However, devolving only really works if the money is not top-sliced first. Will she please give assurances that any further devolution will not lead to cuts on the way down?

Anne Milton: Of course, around all this is the budget that we have available, and I know that the adult education budget has gone down in its totality. We have a spending review coming up. I am also a fan of devolution. It can make Governments slightly nervous as they hand over authority for something for which ultimately they will be held responsible, which can feel uncomfortable. But in an area such as this, devolution is the way to get solutions that work, because people know and understand their local communities, their population and the barriers in their area. Top-slicing is always a little trick of the Treasury; our job in the Department for Education is to ensure that nobody top-slices anything. We do not want top-slicing. However, as I said, there are a lot of complex funding streams, although not specifically for refugees.

I think it was the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) who asked whether I would give my word that money for ESOL will be replaced pound for pound. I cannot give any assurances, because the spending review is coming up.

Gordon Marsden: I am really sorry to interrupt the Minister, to whom I am listening carefully. I do not mean this in any way sardonically—the mood music coming from her is great—but my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) made a point about losing European regional development fund and ESL funding, and we do have a real concern about this area and others. Can the Minister give us any details on when we will see some nuts and bolts about the shared prosperity fund?

Anne Milton: I will refer to that later, but to answer directly now, there is a lot of work going on about the shared prosperity fund. In the Department for Education, we are very aware of the benefits delivered through the European social fund. Moral imperatives were mentioned, and that money plays a crucial part in giving people an opportunity to take a step on various paths in their

lives, as will the shared prosperity fund that replaces it. I cannot give details—not because I do not want to, but because I do not know.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), who is not in her seat, mentioned a German example. We always have much to learn from other countries, although we can rarely transfer ideas straight across because they will not necessarily work.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) evocatively referred to the prison that people inhabit when they cannot speak English. I have never been in that position, but it must feel like that if people cannot speak or understand any English.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) referenced the all-party parliamentary group's work and highlighted issues such as loneliness and isolation, which have been well articulated. He also referenced the Council of Europe's work. Europe gets many mentions in this place and elsewhere at the moment, but we rarely hear about the Council of Europe's work, so that was good because it does a lot of good work.

Several hon. Members mentioned the particular problems that women face, including cultural and more complex problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley also mentioned community provision. I saw an extremely good example of community ESOL where the local authority was working with primary schools to encourage women to come in to help their children with some of their SATs and end-of-year tests. That is a good vehicle for improving their English while helping them to help their children with the tests that they will sit in school. For women who do not find it easy to get to adult community provision, for a variety of reasons, it is a good way to bypass the barriers that they might face in their own homes.

The ESOL strategy emerged as part of the integrated communities strategy action plan. The strategy has involved officials across Departments, so we have a shared vision, including addressing the needs of refugees. As we set out in the integrated communities strategy, we want to create clearer and easier pathways, improve outcomes and get better value for the money that we spend.

We always come back to funding at the end of the day—funding matters. The hon. Member for Blackpool South and I have frequently discussed the financial pressures that FE is under, which we will look at in the spending review. Warm words from me do not necessarily bring more money—they are needed, but they do not guarantee it. I am sure that all hon. Members who are keen for things to be funded will lobby. Debates such as this add to the pressure on the Treasury. We rarely make a good case for education in a broader sense. For people who do not speak English, ESOL is the first step down a path that includes further education. It also enables refugees who have prior education—we have talked about refugees who are doctors—to come to life and feel that they are a useful member of the society and community that they have joined. We can also realise the benefits of that.

The 2011 census revealed that 59%—nearly 60%—of over-16-year-olds who could not speak English or could not speak it well were not in employment. According to the 2014 British social attitudes survey, 95% of people, which is higher than other figures that have been quoted,

[Anne Milton]

think that to be considered truly British, people must be able to speak English. About a third of those who completed entry level or level 1 ESOL courses in 2015-16 went on to sustained employment. Some 60% of completions in 2015-16 led to a sustained positive destination the following year in employment or learning, so we know it works.

Through the adult education budget, ESOL is fully funded for those who are unemployed, and all learners are co-funded at 50% of the course rate. For the academic year 2018-19, however, we are supporting those in work on low incomes to access the AEB through a pilot that allows providers to fully fund those on low wages. That is important and will directly help low-paid, low-skilled people who are motivated to move out of unemployment to progress further. We are continuing the pilot in the 2019-20 academic year for learners resident in non-devolved areas, and we will evaluate the 2018-19 outcomes to help to inform our decision on whether to fully implement the trial beyond 2019-20.

As many hon. Members have said, learning English is crucial for integration. In the year ending September 2018, the UK offered protection to 15,170 people. We have committed to settle 20,000 vulnerable refugees who have fled Syria by 2020. As of the end of March 2019, 15,977 refugees have found safety in the UK to rebuild their lives through the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. Refugees have immediate access to English language tuition. The Home Office and the Department have provided an additional £10 million so that refugees settled through the scheme can access language tuition.

We recently launched new teaching resources to support teachers working with refugees and others adults with the lowest levels of English language and low literacy, in recognition of the fact that they face the greatest barriers to learning. I hope that the English language strategy that we are developing will provide a shared vision for all publicly funded ESOL and will specifically address the needs of refugees. I note that, for those who come to the UK under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, additional funds are made available for childcare, which can be a huge barrier, and not just financially, for mothers and carers to learn English.

I could go on about devolution, which, as I said, is important. We will use the learning from that. I thank all hon. Members who contributed to the debate. Last year, the Department alone spent £105 million on ESOL courses and qualifications. We need to improve the quality and effectiveness of what is delivered by commissioning new teaching resources for pre-entry level learners and by funding local authorities to trial the co-ordination of provision in their area.

The key is to put in place a co-ordinated system where we do not waste resources and where scarce resources get to the frontline. We need effective teaching and high-quality teachers—the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green raised the issue of pay. We need to remove and overcome some of the cultural barriers. I also note the need to make sure that the system is fully integrated, so that people can learn English, access good employment and have continued training opportunities, and so that we realise the vision that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston set out, where communities do not just co-exist but are fully integrated.

3.58 pm

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. We have heard some excellent testimonies from hon. Members and their areas. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her work on the all-party parliamentary group on social integration. Some of the work that it has produced is in line with that of Refugee Action.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), who mentioned Paul Hook and his work as head of campaigns for Refugee Action. I also put on record my thanks to Refugee Action and Paul Hook, and the many organisations that work not just on access to ESOL for refugees, but on the “Lift the Ban” campaign, which has been mentioned. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting adult education providers in Birmingham and the students who attended there.

Although we welcome the strategy, we have not heard much detail, which is disappointing. The case has been made today for investing in refugees, which means more funding, because post-16 funding has not been protected—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Chagos Islands: UN General Assembly Resolution

[VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UN General Assembly resolution on the future of the Chagos Islands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and to have the chance to debate the issue of justice for the people of Chagos and the country of Mauritius. The topic is not unfamiliar to Westminster Hall, or indeed to the Minister, but recent developments at the UN warrant a fresh perspective. Last week, at Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions, the Minister said that I could expostulate as much as I wish on this matter. Well, it seems that my wish has been granted. Incidentally, Mr Speaker was not sure whether it would not be better to expatiate on the matter. Whether it is expatiate or expostulate, what most people involved in the historical and ongoing treatment of the Chagos islands situation experience is exasperation. The UK Government's obstinacy, especially in recent years, and their refusal to make any concessions to those seeking redress is astonishing and frustrating in equal measure. As I will show, it is becoming damaging to the UK Government themselves and to Britain's global reputation.

I pay tribute to the many campaigners and champions working on this issue, many of whom have been far more deeply involved and for far longer than I or any of my colleagues have. They include the Chagossian community—both the original islanders who were forced off their homeland and their descendants, who have not given up and will not give up on the dream of a right to return, and especially Olivier Bancoult, who has led the community for many years—the lawyers, including Philippe Sands, Richard Dunne and Richard Gifford, who have supported those efforts over the years; David Snoxell, the former UK high commissioner to Mauritius, who ably co-ordinates the all-party parliamentary group of which I am an officer; Tom Guha, who runs a grassroots support group; my good friend and constituent William Henderson, who lectures in international law at Glasgow Caledonian University and first made me aware of the issue; and hon. Members who have kept the issue alive, not least the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who chairs the APPG.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene very briefly, as a fellow member of the all-party parliamentary group. Does he agree that this is about the dignity of the Chagossian people? This goes to the heart of their right to return to their homeland.

Patrick Grady: Absolutely. The question of the future of that community goes to the very heart of this debate. It is encapsulated in the issues that arose at the United Nations. The people who support the all-party parliamentary group have provided invaluable advice and briefing in advance of the debate. They can all be assured of the ongoing solidarity and support of the Scottish National party—our former First Minister was a champion of this cause—and our allies in Plaid Cymru.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I agree absolutely with my colleague on the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), about the dignity of the people of the Chagos islands. I am sure that my hon. Friend will come to this, but does this not raise a critical issue for the UK: respect for the rule of law?

Patrick Grady: Absolutely—the rule of law and the rules-based international order, which the Government like to champion so much.

The immediate context of the debate is the overwhelming decision of the United Nations General Assembly on 22 May—by 116 to just six votes against—to back resolution 73/295, calling on the UK—in fact, demanding that the UK does this—to

“withdraw its colonial administration from the Chagos Archipelago unconditionally within a period of no more than six months”.

It called on

“the UN and all its specialised agencies to recognise that the Chagos Archipelago forms an integral part of the territory of Mauritius...and to refrain from impeding that process by recognising, or giving effect to any measure taken by or on behalf of ‘the British Indian Ocean Territory’.”

The resolution affirms that

“because the detachment of the Chagos Archipelago was not based on the free and genuine expression of the will of the people of Mauritius, the decolonisation of Mauritius has not been lawfully completed.”

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent case. The issue of the Chagos islands is not unique. Many other self-determination campaigns are looking at this case. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua. If this is not a just cause, how can there be justice for other islands and peoples like those of West Papua?

Patrick Grady: Speaking as a member of a self-determination movement, I wholeheartedly agree. I had the huge privilege of meeting Benny Wenda from the West Papua campaign recently. The SNP has a long history of solidarity with that cause. These are not difficult problems for the Government to solve. I will come on to why there are some good reasons why they should do so.

The UN handed down that resolution in the context of an advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice on 25 February, which reached exactly the same conclusions. It is a comprehensive, definitive statement made under the due process of the international rules-based order. The UK Government, who are a permanent member of the UN Security Council, self-define as a soft-power superpower, believe that Brexit will lead to a glorious new era of empire 2.0, have invested millions of pounds in a global branding exercise called “Britain is GREAT”, and repeatedly demand that any number of other countries around the world comply with decisions of the United Nations, have none the less chosen to reject the resolution pretty much outright. They have left themselves in a state of diplomatic humiliation and international isolation. The five other countries that supported the Government at the UN

[Patrick Grady]

were the Maldives and Hungary, Australia and Israel—neither of which are without critics of their own human rights records—and the United States of America, which is led by a man who is basically an international laughing stock. It is pretty damning stuff.

Whenever any of us has questions about whether blindly ignoring the advisory opinion of the ICJ and 116 other members of the UN General Assembly is a good idea for a country that is busy trying to extract itself from the biggest and most successful economic, social and political Union in history, the Government and the Minister simply double down. They say that Chagos has been under continuous British sovereignty since 1814 and has never been part of the Republic of Mauritius, but that ignores the fact that the islands were a dependency of Mauritius when it was administered first by the French and then as a British colony until 1965, when it was detached from Mauritius as a precondition of independence, the declaration of which was drafted by UK lawyers in 1968. It ignores the ICJ's findings that the colony, by definition, could not freely agree to detachment as part of its territory prior to independence.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is important to note that the judgment, so to speak, that came out of the ICJ was an advisory opinion, not a binding judgment. It is very important that we do not give the impression in this Chamber that it was more than it in fact was. Is the hon. Gentleman not overstating the case somewhat?

Patrick Grady: It is a very powerful statement that was made by a very significant number of countries, and it has left the United Kingdom isolated diplomatically.

The Government say that the UK needs to retain the Chagos islands in order to support the US military presence on Diego Garcia—as if supporting a base for weapons of mass destruction, which has helped facilitate extraordinary rendition, should somehow help us sleep more easily at night. However, the existence of the base is not dependent on British sovereignty, and it is only on the largest of the 55 islands. The rest remain uninhabited as a result of the forced deportation of the community in the '60s and '70s. It would be perfectly possible to settle there.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): A few years ago, I visited the Chagos island, including the outer islands. I genuinely do not think they would sustain life. Even on the main island, where clearly there is sustainment of life, because there is a big US base, the cost per person is astronomical. Is the hon. Gentleman as concerned as I am about Mauritius's motives? The Chagossians in Mauritius live in slum conditions in some cases. They are much better off in the United Kingdom.

Patrick Grady: I will have more to say about the UK Government's support fund, which has not been spent on trying to improve the lives of the Chagossians in the United Kingdom, but surely that is a decision for the Chagossian community itself. The principle of the right to return is in some respects at least as important as the ability to return.

The Government say, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) did, that the ICJ opinion and the UNGA resolution are advisory and not binding, but the opinion confirms that the existing legal obligations already emanate from international law. The effect of all that is that the UK Government have got themselves into a petty and unseemly row with the Government of Mauritius. The Prime Minister of Mauritius, in his response to the UN resolution, described the forced expulsion of the Chagossian population as

“akin to a crime against humanity.”

The Rome statute of the International Criminal Court includes

“Deportation or forcible transfer of population”

and

“Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering”

in its definition of crimes against humanity.

The UK Government have repeatedly expressed sincere regret at the actions of the British state in depopulating the islands. In a recent written answer to Baroness Whitaker, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon conceded that

“the manner of the removal of the Chagossians from the British Indian Ocean Territory in the 1960s and 1970s was wrong”,

so perhaps there is a case to answer. But instead of engaging constructively with Mauritius—instead of seeking some kind of arbitration method, seeking to build consensus around an alternative resolution at the UN or simply agreeing to take steps to implement the decisions—how has the UK reacted? How has the soft-power superpower, the defender of the international rules-based order, the Brexit Britain reinventing itself on the world stage, reacted? It cancelled the Queen's birthday party at its embassy in Mauritius. Tyrannical regimes and terrorist cells around the world must be trembling in fear. Despots cracking down on human rights and freedom of speech, and illegal traders in arms and drugs, must be watching in horror. Mess with the United Kingdom—upset this diplomatic colossus, Mother Britannia, which once ruled the waves—and there will be no gin and tonic or cucumber sandwiches for any of you.

The Minister has rejoiced in his reputation as deputy Foreign Secretary—I am not sure whether that was ever an official status or just a title bestowed on him by Mr Speaker—and surely, like many of his colleagues, he will be reflecting over the coming weeks on his legacy from his time in office. What a hero he would be if he used the next few weeks to right the historical wrongs that have been perpetrated in the Chagos islands. What a legacy he would leave for the new Prime Minister—he has served under both candidates as their alleged deputy—if the Chagos issue had been resolved and the UK's diplomatic standing had been picked up from rock bottom.

The Minister could arrange for a little more than £300,000 or so of the £40 million package that was promised to the Chagossian community to be spent. Let us start a genuine programme of facilitation that allows the original generation and their descendants at the very least to visit their ancestral homeland. To date, the management of that fund has been pretty shambolic. It was designed to

“improve the lives of Chagossians in the communities where they now live,”

but can the Minister tell us how much has actually been spent supporting projects here in the UK run by and in the interests of the Chagossian community? I understand that the FCO started a needs analysis to determine how that money could best be used, but that was scrapped, and since then there has been no news about how the Government intend to use the funds. Perhaps he can shed some light on whether that needs analysis will be picked up again or how the Government intend to use the money.

Will the Minister arrange to meet the all-party parliamentary group, perhaps with his colleague Lord Ahmad, to hear these concerns out in more detail and discuss a way forward? Even without acknowledging or complying with the full UN resolution, he could unilaterally reinstate the right of return for the Chagossian community—even a recognition in principle that that right exists would be an important first step. The UK Government's own feasibility study of resettlement found that it was "practically feasible", and a UK Government consultation with the community found that 98% of Chagossians are in favour of the right to return.

The Minister could work with his colleagues in the Home Office to ensure that all members of the Chagossian community on these islands are fully recognised as UK citizens should they wish to seek citizenship. He cannot argue on one hand that the Chagos islands are not part of Mauritius but have his Home Office colleagues argue on the other that new generations of Chagossians and their partners and spouses are not entitled to citizenship.

The Minister will be aware that the Select Committee on Home Affairs called on the Government to back the British Indian Ocean Territory (Citizenship) Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), which would give all Chagossians the opportunity to register as British nationals. The Foreign Affairs Committee has also called for urgent reforms to citizenship law for people from other overseas territories. At the very least, the Minister should grow his consultation and engagement with the Chagossian community. The Chagos archipelago was and is their homeland and, as the SNP has always held, sovereignty should ultimately lie with the people.

Even if the Minister moves on, this issue is not going away; he or his successor will continue to be held to account. I am afraid that I have not run out of written questions to keep Ministers busy. I still live in hope that the BIOT Administration will take up the permission so proudly granted by Her Majesty's Treasury for overseas territories to mint their own commemorative £1 coins. There are lots of ongoing issues with the management and development of the marine protected area—not least, perhaps, the fact that the people best able to exercise stewardship of it might just be the communities that lived on the islands for generations.

The scrutiny will not just be here in Parliament or in the UK. The UN resolution finishes with a request to the Secretary-General to submit a report to the 74th session of the General Assembly on the actions of the UK to implement its decision. The choice for the Minister and the UK Government is either to take the bold but obvious step of complying with the UN resolution or to face further embarrassment and isolation on the world stage.

The UK can show that it is serious about the rules-based order and being a soft-power superpower by submitting itself to the conclusions of that rules-based order. It can

show that it wants to be a good neighbour and to deal effectively and appropriately with its colonial legacy, or it can continue to promote splendid isolation and British exceptionalism. It can act as if rules are for other people and that might is somehow right, but that is a dangerous path to go down. It weakens and undermines, perhaps fatally, any credibility the UK Government might want in tackling other great international and diplomatic issues of our time. Mother Britannia can no longer get away with waiving the rules. As long as the injustice surrounding the Chagos islands stands out and remains unresolved, it provides an excuse for unco-operative regimes elsewhere in the world to ignore other resolutions of the UN and decisions of the ICJ. The UK and the Minister ought to do better.

I mentioned the solidarity and support that we in the SNP and our friends in Plaid Cymru have always had with the Chagossian cause. I just wonder what message the UK Government's intransigence on this issue sends to the devolved nations. We were told in 2014 by David Cameron that Scotland should "lead, not leave" the UK. Well, the overwhelming majority of MPs returned from Scotland want the right of return restored to the Chagossian community and want the UK to comply with its international obligations. If we cannot have influence on a matter such as this, what is the point? Would we not be better having our own seat at the top table, with our own vote at the UN General Assembly? Perhaps we should even look at reforming the whole system.

So here we are. Here is the Minister's opportunity to build his legacy. Let us not hear a rehash of the various written statements and written answers that have emerged from the FCO; let us have genuine engagement and dialogue, stand up for the rules-based international order and finally get the justice that the people of Chagos, and the Chagos islands themselves, deserve.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Thank you, Mr Sharma, for chairing our proceedings. I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing the debate—at least, that is what I thought 20 minutes ago.

I think it would be helpful if I set out the background to the Government's position on the British Indian Ocean Territory. The UK has administered the islands that make up the British Indian Ocean Territory since 1814, when France ceded the islands to Britain. It also ceded Mauritius, which then included the Seychelles. For administrative convenience, and following French practice, the islands were administered as a dependency of Mauritius until 1965, when, with the full agreement of the Mauritian Council of Ministers, they were detached to form part of the newly established colony of the British Indian Ocean Territory, which we know as BIOT.

Mauritius entered that agreement in return for certain benefits, including a sum of £3 million and a UK commitment to cede the territory when it is no longer needed for defence purposes. That UK commitment still stands. Mauritius affirmed the 1965 agreement numerous times following independence, and the agreement was held to be legally binding by a UN convention on the law of the sea tribunal in 2015. No international court or tribunal has ever found our sovereignty to be in doubt.

[Sir Alan Duncan]

In 1966, the UK agreed with the US to make BIOT available for the defence purposes of the UK and the US. The UK does not lease the territory to the US and receives no financial payment from it. The US presence on BIOT is governed by a series of letters, called exchanges of notes, of which the overarching agreement sets out that the whole territory should be made available for UK and US defence purposes for an initial 50-year period from 1966 to 2016.

On 16 November 2016, the Government announced that neither the US nor the UK had given notice to terminate the agreement. Therefore, the US presence on Diego Garcia will continue for a further 20 years until 30 December 2036. BIOT has been a key strategic asset and continues to be vital for defence use by the UK and its allies. The joint UK-US facility on the territory has helped us and our allies to combat some of the most challenging threats to international peace and security, including from terrorism, organised crime and piracy. It is increasingly important at a time of conflicts of international significance, and those functions are only possible under UK sovereignty.

When Mauritius took the matter to the UN General Assembly in 2017, it did so using the argument that our continued administration of BIOT means that the process of decolonisation remains incomplete. That argument completely fails to acknowledge the 1965 agreement. Mauritius's claim to sovereignty over the islands, which we strongly refute, is not a decolonisation matter, but a bilateral dispute between Mauritius and the UK. It is therefore disappointing that the matter should ever have been referred to the International Court of Justice by the UN General Assembly. It is an accepted international principle that states should not be compelled to have their bilateral disputes adjudicated on by the ICJ without their consent, particularly on questions of sovereignty. Circumventing that principle sets a very dangerous precedent.

Nevertheless, the Government have considered the Court's advice carefully. We have concluded that the approach set out in the advisory opinion failed to give due regard to material facts and legal issues that the UK Government explained in detail in our submissions to the ICJ. For instance, it did not take account of the 1965 agreement with Mauritius or the numerous affirmations of that agreement made by Mauritius since independence. Furthermore, it fails to address the fact that the UK and US have entered into a binding treaty obligation to maintain UK sovereignty over the whole territory until at least 2036.

When the UN General Assembly voted on the matter in May this year, following the ICJ advisory opinion, we fully expected a large number of member states to support the resolution in Mauritius' favour, framed as it was around the emotive theme of decolonisation. However, it is important to note that nearly 80 member states did not vote in favour of the resolution. Many of them shared our concern that Mauritius had circumvented the principle that the ICJ should consider bilateral disputes only with the consent of the states. Furthermore, some states explained publicly that they had voted in favour of the resolution out of respect for the ICJ and not necessarily because they agreed with the substance of the resolution.

The UK, too, respects the ICJ. Despite our concerns, we participated fully in the ICJ process so as to ensure that we could present accurate facts and arguments, including on why granting the Court jurisdiction on a bilateral dispute without the consent of both parties could have wider implications for all UN member states in the future.

The issue of sovereignty has recently become entangled with arguments about resettlement, which we have just heard. We need to remember that the outer islands are not just remote but tiny, the largest being no bigger than Hyde Park. They are also extremely low-lying and have no functioning infrastructure. The UK commissioned an independent feasibility study on the practicalities of resettlement, and the study recognised that there would be significant challenges. An interesting comparison to note in passing is that Scotland has 790 islands, of which only 94 are inhabited.

In my role as Minister for Europe and the Americas, I am proud to play my part in the UK's efforts to defend and strengthen institutions such as the UN and to uphold the norms that underpin the rules-based international system.

Alex Chalk: In his speech, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) suggested that the UK was somehow flouting international law, but we are a nation of laws. Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree with me that it would be a gross mischaracterisation to suggest that that has happened in this case? What we are discussing is not a judgment that is binding on the UK, but an advisory opinion, which is not; there is a difference. Does the Minister agree?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as indeed was my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge); and, in acknowledging what my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has just said, I say very clearly that the UK continues to be seen as one of the most prominent international champions of the rule of law across the globe.

The UK recognises the important role that the UN has played, and continues to play, on the issue of decolonisation, including in territories formerly administered by the UK. We will continue to engage fully in the UN General Assembly and to be a staunch defender of human rights institutions and norms. We will also continue to support the role of international courts when states have failed to meet their responsibilities. That is clearly not the case in this instance. We regret that this issue continues to occupy the time and attention of the General Assembly. The UK remains committed to seeking resolution of this bilateral sovereignty dispute with Mauritius through direct, bilateral dialogue.

I have to say, as I conclude, that I do rather sense—

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, just this once.

John Grogan: The Minister is very generous. I think that he was directly asked whether he or another Minister would come to the all-party parliamentary group to discuss this issue in more detail, out of respect for

Parliament. Is that date definitely in the Minister's diary now? Has the United Kingdom had any direct discussions with Mauritius about this matter? Was it not a little bit petty to cancel the Queen's birthday party, and was that a ministerial decision?

Sir Alan Duncan: The party was cancelled because it did not seem appropriate. That was not a petty protest; it just did not seem appropriate to have a celebration of that sort, given the mood. Given that there are likely to be changes in this Government within three weeks and the primary responsibility for this matter rests with my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, I cannot commit as the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) requests. It is the responsibility of Lord Ahmad; I merely answer on the issue here in the House of Commons.

I shall conclude, having listened to so many salvos from the hon. Member for Glasgow North, merely by saying that I feel the reasoned and clear legal points that we have always put as the Government do rather sit in contrast to the hon. Gentleman's speech, which I think can only be characterised as confected, specious, sarcastic nonsense.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Genetic Haemochromatosis

4.30 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. It is a great privilege to secure this important debate on genetic haemochromatosis. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for genetic haemochromatosis (iron overload). I want to raise awareness of the condition, within Westminster and beyond. I will explain what genetic haemochromatosis is and its prevalence within the UK. I will also look at how the condition fits into the NHS priorities. I will conclude with three asks to the Minister on behalf of the charity Haemochromatosis UK, which is represented here, and the APPG.

Until recently I knew nothing about the condition. Two or three years ago I visited the charity Haemochromatosis UK, which was based in my constituency, and the condition was explained to me. The lack of awareness of the condition and the importance of early diagnosis were brought to my attention. As a consequence of those discussions with the charity and some other hon. Members, some of whom are here, we formed the APPG earlier this year.

The APPG was based on the report published by Haemochromatosis UK in October 2018, which highlighted the previously underestimated impact of the condition, in terms of the number of people affected and the chronic effect it has on people's lives. The APPG first met in January and we met again in May to talk about the adoption of clinical guidelines, which I will refer to later.

What is genetic haemochromatosis? It is a genetic condition in which the body fails to control the absorption of iron. Some hon. Members may have heard it described as iron overload or iron overload disorder. Iron builds up within the body and reaches a highly toxic level. That can lead to a multitude of different health problems. Iron builds up particularly in the liver and the damage is progressive. At its worst, iron overload can kill through liver and heart failure.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I stand as an ignoramus on this matter, but I want to support my hon. Friend who is leading the debate, and I want to know more about the matter. Is this something that is in a baby from birth, and if not, what is the normal age at which it develops?

Mark Pawsey: This is a genetic condition that becomes apparent in some people who possess the gene. People are affected to a variable degree. I will come on to some of the debilitating consequences of genetic haemochromatosis, which include arthritis, joint pain, diabetes, fatigue, psychological or cognitive difficulties, skin conditions, menstrual problems in women, impotence, breathing and heart problems, abdominal pain, liver problems and hair loss.

Just because the condition is not widely spoken about, in either medical or public life, that does not mean that it is not prevalent in the UK. The white UK population of north-European extraction, particularly people of Celtic extraction, gives the UK the highest prevalence anywhere in the world. The condition is found around

[Mark Pawsey]

the world wherever the Irish and Celtic population has migrated to, including Australia, the Americas and South Africa.

One in eight people in the UK carry a faulty copy of the GH gene. That faulty gene is known as HFE. One in 200 people carry two faulty copies of the HFE gene. Those are the people at risk of iron toxicity. In layman's terms, people must have two copies of the gene in order to be affected by the condition. It is estimated that around 380,000 people worldwide have the genetic haemochromatosis mutation. Of those 380,000 people, 200,000 are under 40 years old, which is why early diagnosis is important. If we can diagnose the condition early, people will not be overlooked and can attend to their symptoms.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I thank him for outlining, for those of us who do not have as much knowledge, how prevalent the disease actually is and how important it is that we get services and treatment right. I thank my constituent Roger Keyte, who is a trustee of Haemochromatosis UK. He has done a good job educating me. I thank him and others who are working hard to help the many people who are affected.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That charity, which serves to raise awareness, has done a fantastic job, and that includes her constituent. I should point out that this is a condition rather than a disease, because a disease may be considered to be contagious.

I mentioned that the prevalence is higher in Ireland. According to the Irish Haemochromatosis Association, in Northern Ireland one in five people are carriers. The incidence among people of Celtic origin leads to some people referring to genetic haemochromatosis as the Celtic curse, a term that is not looked on favourably, but does underline the prevalence among Irish, Scottish and Welsh people, and the need for them and their doctors to be aware of the condition. I am delighted to see hon. Members representing Welsh and Scottish constituencies here, some of whom I know will contribute to the debate.

I have already mentioned that the condition is poorly diagnosed. Recent research shows that at least 45,000 people affected in the UK are loading iron as their bodies fail to control the absorption. Only 10% to 13% of these cases are diagnosed. For every patient diagnosed, between eight and 10 have the symptoms but have not been diagnosed. They are suffering unaware of what is happening to them.

Dr Ted Fitzsimons of the University of Glasgow has done a great deal of work in this area. He highlights that 80% to 90% of individuals who have this condition are unaware that they have it. They do not know what it is. They know the symptoms, which affect them, but they do not have an explanation for them.

Professor David Melzer, from Exeter University, and the Haemochromatosis Research Group have conducted a UK Biobank study of half a million patients, which was published in January 2019. They found that people with the double haemochromatosis mutation had four times the risk of liver disease, twice the risk of arthritis and frailty among older age groups, and a 50% higher

risk of pneumonia and diabetes compared with those who do not suffer from the condition. In the UK, there are currently 136,000 people with the condition aged 40-plus. The study found that of that generation of 136,000, approximately 12,200 will have had a hip replacement, which they would not have needed if they had been diagnosed earlier and treated for iron overload. However, the study has a caveat, as there is uncertainty about whether all those operations would have been avoided by early diagnosis. But as with any condition, we know that early diagnosis is crucial.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Two of my constituents, Jane and Andrew, have haemochromatosis and have contacted me about this debate, stressing the importance of early diagnosis. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it can be difficult sometimes for people to be clear about the symptoms, therefore making it can be difficult to get a diagnosis, and that we must work on that?

Mark Pawsey: The hon. Lady is exactly right. Very often, people suffer from the symptoms and persevere. They feel tired and just generally unwell, but they do not know why they are affected, so awareness of the condition among the medical profession when people present with those symptoms is vital in identifying those affected.

In terms of the additional demands placed on the NHS, we can estimate an extra 564 patients diagnosed with liver disease and 125 new liver cancer patients every year from among those with the condition. If we can diagnose it, enable patients to be aware of it and deal with it earlier, we can prevent it from making such a substantial demand on the NHS.

Bob Stewart: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. As I am half-Scottish, have had my hip replaced and feel tired most of the time, I am worried, but not as worried as doctors must be, because it seems to me that if someone goes to a general practitioner with normal symptoms like that, it must be bloody difficult for them to diagnose the condition. Everyone here is nodding, so I presume that is right.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. Next time he visits his GP, he can ask, armed with the knowledge that he has as a consequence of this debate, whether the condition might be something to consider.

Let me turn to the cost saving to the NHS. The basic test for iron levels in blood would cost only £1 per patient if routinely done at the same time as other blood tests. The test is not commonly done; perhaps it should be. Iron testing could be added to the NHS health check, which people receive at the age of 50. That might provide a pointer to some of the symptoms that my hon. Friend has referred to.

The UK Biobank study also indicates that the HFE gene is associated with significant morbidity, in particular associated arthritis and liver disease. Of course, because of the influence of the liver, there is a highly increased risk of liver cancer compared with the general population. There are approximately 6,000 cases of liver cancer per annum nationally, and the outlook for those with liver cancer is particularly poor. The survival rate for liver cancer is among the lowest of all cancers. Professor Ted

Fitzsimmons of Glasgow University estimates the cost of a liver transplant at around £100,000. That is a broadbrush estimate, which excludes personal costs such as loss of employment and the need for family members to help with caring. Again, we know that early diagnosis could not only improve the lives of those affected but result in significant savings for the NHS.

Since my involvement with genetic haemochromatosis began, one thing that has had an impact on me is the stories of patients affected by it. I will read out a couple of patient testimonies. One comes from another trustee of Haemochromatosis UK, Michelle Weerasekera. This is her account:

“I was diagnosed with genetic haemochromatosis after suffering from chronic fatigue for some time. I had visited my GP and been told to take folic acid and wouldn’t have returned had I not had a routine blood test carried out for an insurance policy that I was taking out.”

She therefore became aware of her condition accidentally. She continues:

“I returned to my GP, who, thinking that I may be anaemic, ran a ferritin test. This showed that my results were elevated and I was referred to a Haematologist. I had a FerriScan carried out which showed some stored iron in my liver but luckily with regular venesections”—

the taking of blood—

“over the last eighteen months I have managed to reduce my ferritin levels and am now in what is called the ‘maintenance phase’. I hope to soon become a regular blood donor”—

an issue that I will raise with the Minister later on—

“so that my blood can be put to good use. I know how lucky I have been by being diagnosed when I was. Having talked to my GP since diagnosis, I know that Haemochromatosis was not on his radar and this is why raising awareness is so important. Had I not returned to the GP, my body would have carried on storing iron and the outcome and my future health may have not have looked so positive.”

The second piece of testimony comes from another patient with genetic haemochromatosis, a young woman. Katharine Hough is only 27 and has had to fight to be taken seriously by the medical profession, largely because genetic haemochromatosis generally affects older people. The key point about Katharine’s concerns is that she is relatively young. She says:

“Despite the advantage of being diagnosed young, I have often had to fight to be taken seriously by the medical profession. Doctors seem to think it will not affect me as I am young and they are accustomed to solving health issues rather than helping to maintain good health and prevent problems.

I have had many cases where specialists think that, as I am a young woman and my symptoms are not as severe as those suffered by older people, I am healthy and have nothing to worry about. But I am only 27...If they stop and think for a moment to consider it, I should not have joint pains, and my knees should not hurt when I walk. I want to prevent further damage and not wait until my symptoms are very bad...It is my health and only I can fight for it.”

Both these stories highlight the importance of early diagnosis and increased awareness of the condition among GPs and other medical professionals.

The frustrating thing is that in a large number of cases treatment will alleviate many of the symptoms. The earliest intervention prevents many of the problems that I have described, including the build-up of iron in the liver and heart. In the vast majority of cases, treatment is venesection, which is essentially giving blood. Done intensively, this removes excess iron from the body effectively. Done regularly, it will maintain iron levels.

In simple terms, the body uses some of the stored excess iron to make red blood cells to replace those that have been removed.

Venesection is a safe and proven procedure. It is similar to donating blood, as those of us who donate blood will realise. The blood taken from a haemochromatosis patient is perfectly useable and would go some way to addressing NHS blood demand. However, blood taken in a venesection clinic is discarded, which does not seem to make sense. I will come back to that in my final remarks and asks of the Minister.

Why is this condition not higher on the UK health agenda? There are many and varied reasons, but one key reason is the lack of consistent clinical guidelines. What protocols exist are often non-mandatory, related to an individual trust, inconsistent and poorly adopted. The University of Exeter has conducted some research into the impact of iron overload, which shows wide inconsistencies in the experience of patients, and the prevalence of chronic symptoms arising from non-diagnosis is much higher in the UK than was previously thought. I am looking for the Minister to respond to the point about introducing guidelines. If there were guidelines, that could increase diagnosis perhaps as much as tenfold. That would prevent many people from developing the follow-on conditions, such as cancer, heart failure and diabetes, that I have referred to.

A consultant rheumatologist at St George’s Hospital in London, Dr Kiely, says that the cost of a typically large joint replacement is in the order of £10,000—which may be of interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Dr Kiely has also said that the big impact on healthcare costs would be in primary care, from delays in diagnosis. Those who suffer from genetic haemochromatosis suffer from less productivity when they are at work. They often have to take time off work, but also often want to continue at work. That leads to presenteeism, where people turn up for work but are ineffective because of the debilitating conditions that they suffer from. All those are costs to society, and are burdens that patients have to deal with.

A January 2019 editorial in *The Lancet* on gastroenterology and hepatology said:

“We wholeheartedly support the need to increase education and awareness of genetic haemochromatosis among clinicians to improve early diagnosis. The necessary tools are in hand, the guidelines are clear, and”—

very significantly—

“their implementation would be...cost-free. It is difficult to imagine a clinical problem that represents lower-hanging fruit for the...NHS. As such, there is no time like the present to elevate the priority of genetic haemochromatosis on the UK healthcare agenda.”

Professor Ted Fitzsimmons of the University of Glasgow, who attended the most recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for genetic haemochromatosis, has produced a set of guidelines for this condition. Those guidelines have been endorsed by a number of professional medical bodies, and the APPG would like them to be adopted and expanded on by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in order to improve and increase diagnosis, and to improve and, importantly, standardise care after diagnosis. We believe that doing so would put genetic haemochromatosis higher on the NHS agenda.

This condition fits into two of the priorities of the NHS long-term plan. First, the plan talks about prevention. Prevention of genetic haemochromatosis affecting patients

[Mark Pawsey]

means effective diagnosis before the damage is done. If we can identify it, we can save the NHS money and ensure that patients' health is protected early. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care drew attention to that in November last year, when he said that

"if we get prevention right, it holds the key to longer, healthier, happier lives and a sustainable, high quality health and care system... It's why...I made it one of my big three priorities".

There is no easier win than adopting prevention for this condition.

Another NHS priority is supporting people to age well. The University of Exeter report highlighted the impact of genetic haemochromatosis on our ageing population, and we know that the condition affects arthritis and frailty in older age groups and increases the risks of diabetes and chronic pain. It is an issue that we need to address.

My three asks of the Minister, which I hope she will respond to in her remarks, are as follows. First, what steps can she take to ensure that those who are affected are promptly and correctly identified, regardless of where they live? We have already heard that early diagnosis saves lives, yet so frequently people with genetic haemochromatosis suffer needlessly as a consequence of late diagnosis. Secondly, what steps can she take to encourage the NHS to adopt, share and embed the best practice we have referred to, both through screening and associated therapies, to ensure that venesection is available? We know from Haemochromatosis UK's 1,800 members that NHS standards vary widely across the country. With a single system, we could offer a consistent, world-class approach.

That brings me on my third point. How can the Minister encourage different areas of the NHS system to collaborate more effectively to realise the economic benefits of joined-up care, and also the benefits to the patient? One example would be making use of the blood taken during venesection, incentivising NHS Blood and Transplant to make greater use of genetic haemochromatosis patient blood to meet ongoing needs. It is astounding that the blood collected is wasted. That distresses many of the people affected by genetic haemochromatosis, who take the view that if they are going to have their blood taken, they would love for it to be used productively to support other patients.

Mr Sharma, I know that other Members wish to contribute. I look forward to the Minister's response to our asks at the conclusion of the debate.

4.54 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for genetic haemochromatosis, for having brought this debate before the House. It is an important subject; I asked for a debate on it earlier this year following the release of the University of Exeter's research, which showed that this condition was 20 times more common than was previously thought, so I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has secured this debate. I am also grateful to the charity Haemochromatosis UK, which is based in his constituency and whose website contains a wealth of useful information.

The hon. Gentleman has given a comprehensive opening speech, showing his understanding and knowledge of this condition, so I do not need to repeat it. Instead, I will talk about the research that was published this year and its implications. As we have heard, haemochromatosis is thought to be the UK's most common genetic disorder and is inherited in a recessive manner, linked to a faulty gene passed from both parents to their child. It was previously believed to seriously affect about one in 100 carriers, but the new research has suggested that the true level could be closer to one in 10 among women, and one in five for men.

Researchers at the University of Exeter analysed data from 2,890 people from the UK Biobank who had the specific mutation to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The research was conducted on subjects aged between 40 and 70, so the point he made about that research being limited in its age range was a good one. In the light of those findings, the UK National Screening Committee has said that it will look at the evidence on screening for haemochromatosis in 2019-20, as part of its routine three-yearly review. I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments about that.

The lead researcher, Professor David Melzer of the University of Exeter, has said that haemochromatosis is easy to treat if diagnosed early enough, which I think is the key point of this debate. However, the hon. Member for Rugby has observed that haemochromatosis can be difficult to spot, which is also a pertinent point. A lot of the symptoms can be very non-specific, and it is not a condition that is uppermost in the minds of general practitioners, which is why we are now considering routine screening. As we have heard, the treatment is relatively simple and involves regular venesection, or bloodletting. As the body makes more blood to replace that which is taken, it uses up the excess stored iron. That treatment, if started early enough, can avoid the complications of haemochromatosis that we have already referred to—liver failure, diabetes, chronic pain and severe arthritis—developing later in life.

I will illustrate the effect of having a diagnosis of haemochromatosis later in life by telling the story of my constituent, Paul Dicken. Paul has given me permission to use him as a case history, and I think his story will strike a chord with many haemochromatosis sufferers. He was diagnosed only this year after years of suffering from symptoms including liver, joint and stomach problems, for which he has been taking multiple painkillers over the years. Since his diagnosis, he has been having venesection, but he tells me that he now suffers from lethargy due to the frequency of venesection, no energy, muscle loss and joint pain. He has said that his depression is hitting a new low and, regarding his eventual diagnosis, has said that

"I was being asked for a long time if I had a drink problem because of my liver problems...but I don't drink and the haemochromatosis was only discovered because the doctor was worried about my white blood cells being high."

Paul's case is a clear example of how raising awareness of the disease among GPs and medical professionals might have helped him get an earlier diagnosis and spared him some of the painful symptoms and possibly inappropriate treatment he had. I am grateful to him for allowing me to tell his story. Testing for iron overload is simple and GPs should be aware of the transferrin saturation test, where a result of greater than 50% indicates

a risk of iron accumulation. If such a result is found, the patient should be referred to secondary care for further tests.

Bob Stewart: From what I have heard today, which is the entire encyclopaedia of my knowledge, it seems to me that we could cover the issue pretty well if every blood test included a check, because most people have blood tests at some stage—that happens fairly often these days.

Liz McInnes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but I issue a caveat about blanket screening: it has to be proven to be clinically effective and it must not throw up false positives and false negatives. The tests are fairly specific for haemochromatosis, but they will have to go through an evaluation process, as I am sure the Minister will inform us when she makes her closing remarks.

At this stage, I want to mention the biomedical scientists and clinical scientists working in our NHS pathology labs. Those often unsung heroes of the NHS are the people who will be performing the tests. Indeed, that was my profession before I was elected as the MP for Heywood and Middleton.

In closing, I want to say that it is important to discuss with any patient diagnosed with genetic haemochromatosis the desirability of genetic testing for other members of the family, as there is at least a one in four chance that a sibling will also have haemochromatosis. Family checks frequently lead to the detection of haemochromatosis before organ damage has occurred. That is important.

It is important we are having this debate. Early diagnosis will help save lives, help cut costs for the NHS and reduce unnecessary suffering for so many individuals, such as my constituent Paul, and families around the UK.

5.2 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on all the work he does through the all-party parliamentary group and on securing this debate. It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and hear about the experiences of their constituent. It is said that the Celtic peoples have a tendency for fair skin, freckles and being ginger. I do have fair skin on the odd occasion, I do have freckles and I am ginger, although Members might not believe it without a head of hair on me.

Having a name that in the ancient is Máirtín Ó Dochartaigh—Ó hAodha—I will send *Hansard* the spelling—it should come as no surprise that the Celtic curse, as the hon. Member for Rugby pointed out it is commonly known, looms large in my constituency. It has one of the highest proportions of the Irish diaspora anywhere in these islands. There is also the Celtic connection, in that Dunbreton was the capital of the Britons. I believe they moved to Wales around the year 600. We have a huge idea of what this means in terms of haemochromatosis. Let me be clear though, that just because someone is a Scot does not mean they are a Celt. We need to be clear on that, but the ethnic link with western Ireland—I am sometimes known as not only the Member for West Dunbartonshire, but the Member for Donegal—gives an idea of the genetic links of the condition.

I want to highlight my constituent, David McAleer, who is a well-known member of my constituency through Clydebank FC. David has given me permission to talk about him today. He wants to pay his respects to Dr Fitzsimons and his team for everything they do at the University of Glasgow. David got the condition diagnosed because his mum got diagnosed—this is not only about men—and after that, his younger brother got the diagnosis. His father on the other side of the family is a carrier, as are his two other brothers. Indeed, my own late father-in-law heard he had the condition later in his life, before he passed away. My brother-in-law went on to get tested, and he also has haemochromatosis. He lives a very lively life indeed.

It is important to state that we need some clear facts about the condition. In my constituency, on the basis of statistics and population—I am grateful to Haemochromatosis UK for the numbers—350 people would have haemochromatosis, but given the genetic make-up of my community, which is not that diverse in its Celtic make-up, I would assume that to be far higher. Early diagnosis is key in treating the condition and its long-term impact in other areas of healthcare provision, whether that is liver transplant—the costs of that vary across the UK—hip problems, bone issues or a whole range of other issues. There is a call to arms—it might not go down too well with some people—of offering automatic testing from birth to identify haemochromatosis in young people as quickly as possible, to deal with the reality of haemochromatosis and its broader impact on society across the whole UK.

It is notable that other major issues include alcohol consumption. In Scotland, we have for many years been confounded by high levels of alcohol consumption. Those are now reducing, and I congratulate the Scottish Government on pushing forward minimum pricing, but that is only part of a healthier lifestyle. We have to think about the type of food we consume, and how much of it, and, more importantly, about taking iron supplements. People should not take an iron supplement because they read in a magazine that it will help them feel better; they should go along to their doctor.

My clarion call to those watching today, especially in my constituency, is to go and talk to the medical profession about how they are feeling. They should try to get the test. It might not only save them a lot of time, but they will most probably save the NHS a lot of money and ensure that those in the medical profession in my constituency know more about the condition. I finish by congratulating the hon. Member for Rugby, the members of the Haemochromatosis UK who are here and the members of the APPG for the hard work they are doing on this issue.

5.7 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch, Mr Sharma. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing this important debate and I pay tribute to Haemochromatosis UK for its work supporting both the sufferers of the genetic condition and the all-party parliamentary group. If I may, I particularly thank Lisa Flude, who first brought the condition to my attention and has been an invaluable source of information and advice to me in recent months.

[Ben Lake]

As we have already heard this afternoon, genetic haemochromatosis is the most common genetic disorder in the UK and yet it remains largely unknown or unfamiliar. Too often it is poorly diagnosed and managed. Approximately 10% of individuals of white European descent in the UK—as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) pointed out, this particularly affects those of Celtic descent—or some 5 million people are believed to be genetic carriers of the mutated copy of the haemochromatosis or HFE gene, as the hon. Member for Rugby mentioned. Perhaps 100,000 or 200,000 people might have two mutated copies of the HFE gene and are then at the risk of iron toxicity or overload and the subsequent diseases and conditions that can emerge from that. Yet—this is the nub of the debate in my opinion—for every patient diagnosed with the condition, between eight to 10 are left undiagnosed and unaware of the risk to their health. It is some risk, too: although genetic haemochromatosis is easy to diagnose and to treat, if left untreated it has serious consequences.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) referred to the two recent studies led by groups from the Universities of Exeter and Connecticut. They have shown that the condition quadruples the risk of liver disease and doubles the risk of arthritis and that individuals with the condition are at higher risk of diabetes and chronic pain. In addition to those serious health complications of iron overload, individuals with genetic haemochromatosis can suffer from fatigue, muscle weakness and joint pains. Unfortunately, those symptoms are often mistaken for the signs of ageing or tiredness, but together they can still prove debilitating. Yet genetic haemochromatosis can be diagnosed and treated effectively when detected. The treatment, as we have already heard, entails venesection. I will not go into that any further, but it is a safe process that should be widely available across the UK.

Given the pervasiveness of genetic haemochromatosis and the serious impact that iron toxicity has on an individual's health and wellbeing, the case for ensuring consistent and effective diagnosis of the condition across the UK is clear. It is not a condition for which there is no treatment or diagnosis. The problem that we face is the lack of consistency, or standardisation, as the hon. Member for Rugby put it, in the application of clinical guidelines.

A survey of health boards across the country showed that even where protocols are in place they are often non-mandatory and differ between boards. Sometimes they are discipline-specific, which can be problematic in itself when we consider that haemochromatosis is often treated by a range of specialists, including hepatologists, haematologists and gastroenterologists.

Introducing standardised guidelines, and ensuring their consistent application, has the potential to increase diagnosis rates tenfold. Early diagnosis prevents so much unnecessary pain and suffering. I hope that the Minister can explore the introduction of more standardised guidelines or patient pathways for the diagnosis of this condition, as it would vastly improve treatment and management of the condition.

If further persuasion were needed, improved diagnosis and earlier treatment of genetic haemochromatosis has the potential to save the NHS considerable resources in the long term, as other Members have mentioned. Iron overload can cause a range of cancers, heart failure, diabetes, and joint disease. Researchers have found that, for men, 1.6% of all hip replacements and 5.8% of all liver cancers occurred in those with two HFE genes. The treatment of those conditions exerts incredible pressure on both primary and hospital care, without considering the impact that multiple appointments over years by patients with non-specific chronic conditions have on primary care.

I am conscious that you want me to finish, Mr Sharma, so to conclude, addressing the current lack of national or standardised guidelines and thus improving the rate of diagnosis of genetic haemochromatosis could reduce the unnecessary suffering of thousands of individuals, while saving the NHS much-needed resources. As somebody more eloquent than I put it, it is a no-brainer.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I am sorry, I was conscious of the time—I want the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson to respond as well. I call Gavin Newlands.

5.12 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Sharma; it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I will start, as is customary, by congratulating the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on genetic haemochromatosis, not only on securing today's important and historic debate, but on setting out in such detail the nature of the condition, its prevalence, the symptoms and the available treatments, such as they are.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of the great work of Professor Ted Fitzsimons at the University of Glasgow, and of the fact that not only do the majority of people with the condition not know they have it, but thousands of hip replacements may not have been required, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) also mentioned. I wholeheartedly endorse the three asks that the hon. Member for Rugby made of the Minister, and I look forward to hearing her response.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke of research involving nearly 3,000 individuals and the possibility of screening for GH, as I will call it from here on in to avoid tripping over it. She concurred with the hon. Member for Rugby that, given the symptoms, without screening the condition will remain difficult to diagnose.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) spoke of his fair skin and freckles, and of being a ginger. He also spoke of the Celtic curse. I am not sure about the Celtic curse, but he is certainly known for his Celtic verse, as we heard during his contribution. He also spoke of his constituent, David McAleer, and his GH story, and of Scotland's relationship with alcohol, and what we are doing to tackle that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion—I never pronounce his constituency correctly—spoke of how, for every person diagnosed, around eight to 10 go undiagnosed. He also mentioned the serious impact that iron toxicity has on health and wellbeing.

I, too, am a member of the all-party parliamentary group. The reason I am a member is because my dad has genetic haemochromatosis. I have not been tested myself yet, but I should, and will, endeavour to do so at some point in the near future. My dad was unaware of his condition; it turned up in a routine blood screening. He felt fine and had no symptoms that he was aware of at that point. My dad had further checks, including several ultrasounds, an endoscopy and a liver biopsy. When he was diagnosed, he did some digging around on the internet and found that he absolutely should not touch oysters. Google says lots of things, but apparently oysters could prove fatal. He told me and I had a look, and it also said that he should regulate his alcohol intake. When I pointed that out to him, he did not want to know that fact, but he was quite happy to accept the point about oysters—that is my dad for you.

My dad was not put on medication. We have already heard that the treatment is venesection. I am told that the normal ferritin level is around 50 to 60, or thereabouts, but when my dad was diagnosed his level was around 2,400, so it was quite high. He still did not have any symptoms at the time. He went on a weekly course of bloodletting for some time, and his levels are now normal. All he does now is go for a venesection every few months and watch his diet, particularly breakfast cereals, most of which are fortified with iron. Most concerning for him is the fact that he cannot eat Stornoway black pudding any more.

As we know from everyone who has spoken so far, early diagnosis is key. The Scottish National party welcomes the debate, as it offers an opportunity to raise awareness about GH and its symptoms for the first time in the history of the House of Commons. We also welcomed the “Living with the Impact of Iron Overload” report released last year.

Early diagnosis would reduce the demand on primary care services from tens of thousands of chronically affected patients, for whom the underlying cause of GH remains unidentified. Some Members have already outlined the substantial economic benefit of early diagnosis on top of the health benefits to the individual. The cost of a blood test to detect iron overload at an early stage is a few pounds at most. The cost to the NHS of a liver transplant, arising as a result of the lack of early diagnosis, could be close to £50,000.

The Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network—SIGN—collaborates with clinicians and health and social care professionals to develop evidence-based guidelines. Were SIGN to publish guidelines regarding GH, we would welcome that. Introducing guidelines would have the potential to increase diagnosis as much as tenfold.

I thank the hon. Member for Rugby again for introducing this important debate and for bringing this condition to the attention of the House. I look forward to working with him and the rest of the APPG in keeping the pressure on the Minister, the Government and the NHS.

5.18 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for securing this important debate, and for his excellent and detailed speech, which set the scene. I congratulate him on establishing the

all-party parliamentary group on genetic haemochromatosis earlier this year. I have set up a number of all-party parliamentary groups and am a big believer in them. I know how important they are in getting things on, cross-party, in this House. I am pleased that he was able to bring the condition to the House's attention.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate—in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and the hon. Members for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands)—as well as my hon. Friends who made helpful interventions.

As we have heard, GH is a genetic disorder that causes the body to absorb excessive amounts of iron from the diet. Iron overload occurs in one in every 200 people and is now recognised as the most common genetic disorder. Although GH cannot be prevented, its symptoms and health implications can. When untreated, GH can cause serious health problems, including fatigue, weight loss, irregular periods, type 2 diabetes, early menopause and depression.

GH was previously thought to be a low-level health risk, but a study by the University of Exeter found that the genetic condition usually quadruples the risk of liver disease and doubles the risk of arthritis and frailty in older age groups. As hon. Members have already said, treatment of those conditions comes at a huge cost to the NHS, so it is important to ensure that symptoms are prevented by diagnosing GH early and advising on how to avoid iron overload.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend must have extra-sensory perception because I was going to ask if she agreed with everybody else who stressed the importance of early diagnosis, and she just did.

Mrs Hodgson: Excellent. If something is worth saying, it is worth saying more than once.

With early diagnosis in mind, I have a number of questions for the Minister; I will rattle through them quickly. What assessment has she made of the diagnosis pathway for patients suspected of having GH? How early are patients diagnosed after presenting with symptoms, and which diagnosis route is the most successful and least painful and invasive for patients? Is that diagnosis route available across NHS trusts and clinical commissioning groups? When someone is diagnosed, is it routine for their family to be tested and treated?

GH can be aggravated by environmental and lifestyle factors, so can the Minister assure the House that patients with GH are clearly advised on how to care for themselves if they have the disorder? Are patients given direct advice on their diet and on alcohol and tobacco consumption? As we have heard, that can make the condition easier to manage, if the advice is taken on board, of course—often people do not want to hear what is good for them, myself included. Where necessary, is support available to help patients reduce their alcohol consumption and to quit smoking?

As we know, diet, alcohol and tobacco consumption have huge health implications for all society and cost the NHS millions in treatment. It is therefore crucial that public health services are available to everyone to

[Mrs Hodgson]

allow them to live healthier lives, especially patients with GH, who are more susceptible to health problems relating to the heart and liver.

I never miss an opportunity to call on the Minister once again—if she can; it might be above her pay grade—to reverse the public health budget cuts that have decimated our vital public health services. I also urge her to ensure that when the prevention Green Paper is published—I have heard rumours that it could be as early as Monday—patients with any existing conditions are also taken into consideration for prevention, so that their symptoms can be controlled, too. I look forward to her response.

5.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I know that I am pressed for time, so if I do not respond to all comments I will happily write to hon. Members. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for securing this important debate on genetic haemochromatosis. I also thank his fellow members of the APPG and all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in the debate for highlighting the disease, which affects so many of us. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) in particular, with her scientific knowledge, made a very good speech.

The Government are dedicated to improving the lives of all patients who live with rare diseases, as set out in the NHS long-term plan and the rare diseases strategy. Clearly, early diagnosis and treatment is key to prevent the development of the conditions that can arise from GH. I hope to be able to answer all the questions raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and others.

One part of diagnosis is genetic testing. That is a more recent development in haemochromatosis and is used to determine whether a mutation in the HFE gene is present, which can lead to iron overload. In January 2019 the NHS long-term plan set out the ambition to focus targeted investment in areas of innovation, including genomics. Last year NHS England launched its genomics medicines service, making the UK the first country in the world to integrate whole genome sequencing into routine clinical care. The GMS aims to provide consistent and equitable access to cutting-edge genomic testing to England's population.

The first national genomic test directory, which underpins this service, was published in March 2019. It specifies which genomic tests are commissioned by the NHS in England, the technology by which they are available and the patients who will be eligible to access them. GH is included in the directory. To ensure that the directory remains at the cutting edge, it will be updated on an annual basis to keep pace with scientific and technological advances. We are developing a national genomic healthcare strategy, which is overseen by Baroness Blackwood, and that is happening alongside work with the Office for Life Sciences.

Hon. Members have referred to the UK National Screening Committee's 2016 evidence about whether testing should be offered—as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton said, that raises massive ethical questions. That was because not all people with the faulty HFE gene—as somebody who is half-Irish, I am

now concerned—will go on to develop the condition. At the time, no evidence was found that provided that committee with evidence that a screening programme would be effective. However, it is important to take account of new evidence and developments as they emerge. The screening committee is always keen to consider new research and will be looking at new evidence to screen for hereditary haemochromatosis in 2019-20. I assure the House that I will follow that with great interest.

GH is not currently part of the NHS health check, but Public Health England routinely publishes open calls for proposals for new content to include in the check, which they consider in view of evidence, cost, clinical effectiveness, feasibility of implementation and health equity. On NICE guidelines, the British Society for Haematology has already published guidelines on the management of GH. They were last updated in 2018. NHS England is the body with responsibility for commissioning new clinical guidelines from NICE. If anyone considers that guidance from NICE would add value, proposals for such guidelines can be made to NHSE.

The shadow Minister made some points about the public health budget and the Green Paper, which we have often discussed. They will of course be subject to best evidence in the spending review. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby talked about patient blood meeting ongoing national needs for donated blood, red blood types and associated blood products. NHS Blood and Transplant has been working in close partnership with Haemochromatosis UK to engage with patients with GH and to inform them that they are able to have their blood removed through blood donation. During National Blood Week in June this year, articles and social media posts were used to inform patients about the procedure for donating blood at a blood donation centre. NHSBT is continuing its work to ensure that patients are informed about the life-saving gift that they can give.

Patients who want to donate blood instead of having venesections have to meet the criteria set out by NHS Blood and Transplant for all donors, and they are advised to have iron check-ups with their consultant. Patients who want to donate blood need to call the NHS Blood and Transplant national call centre to inform it of their condition. That will allow the haemochromatosis patient to donate blood at a donation centre more frequently than the rest of the population.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members and the members of Haemochromatosis UK who have helped us to raise awareness of this condition, because there is a significant gap in our understanding. Hon. Members have rightly pointed out that this is the first time we have discussed GH in this House. I fully recognise the need to raise awareness about GH among healthcare professionals and to provide training. I reassure the House that the Government are committed to ensuring that those affected by rare diseases receive high-quality care.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered genetic haemochromatosis.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 3 July 2019

CABINET OFFICE

Common Frameworks and Intergovernmental Relations

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Today I have published four documents providing an update on progress towards the formation of the common UK frameworks. These include;

- a progress report on the formation of the common frameworks;
- a document outlining key phases necessary to deliver the common frameworks and;
- an outline framework relating to hazardous substances planning.
- a set of draft principles for intergovernmental relations.

Publication of these documents reflects the considerable programme of work we have undertaken with the devolved administrations as part of our preparations for EU exit and beyond.

Together with the devolved Administrations, we continue to make significant progress in the development of common frameworks. This work is underpinned by the framework's principles agreed with the Scottish and Welsh Governments in October 2017 at JMC(EN). Since then, the UK Government have published two iterations of the frameworks analysis, in March 2018 and April 2019 respectively, which set out all the policy areas where EU law intersects with devolved competence and our approach in each. We have also published three statutory reports setting out progress on common frameworks under the terms of the EU (Withdrawal) Act. These reflect the fact that, based on the good work done to date, the UK Government have not brought forward any section 12 regulations under that legislation. The Scottish and Welsh Governments have in turn agreed not to diverge in areas where policy discussions are ongoing.

The documents published today reflect the latest developments in this area of work and are intended to underline the UK Government's commitment to transparency in this area, and facilitate a more detailed process of scrutiny by Parliament and wider stakeholders.

I am also enclosing a set of draft principles for intergovernmental relations. A review of intergovernmental relations was commissioned by the Joint Ministerial Committee (Plenary), consisting of the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales on 14 March 2018. The UK Government and the devolved Administrations continue to work closely with on this joint review of the existing memorandum of understanding between us.

The draft principles for intergovernmental relations were developed jointly by a working group of representatives of all four administrations. The principles are intended to establish a solid foundation for the ways in which all four administrations will work together in the future.

They will be presented for formal adoption to a future Joint Ministerial Committee (Plenary) and, subject to the timing of its re-establishment, to a new Northern Ireland Executive for its endorsement.

The UK Government and the devolved Administrations are committed to making rapid and substantive progress on the review. This will include agreeing a joint plan of next steps, developing a clear timeline covering all four remaining workstreams of the review. This will focus in particular on dispute avoidance and exploring options for an independent element in the process for resolving any future intergovernmental disputes which might arise.

The attachments can be viewed online at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-03/HCWS1687/>.

[HCWS1687]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Law Services

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): Today, I wish to inform the House about the release of two new services by The National Archives, operating in the capacity of the Queen's Printer, which will help aid legal certainty and support research in preparation for EU exit.

Yesterday, I signed regulations for the commencement of the relevant powers and duties under part 1 of schedule 5 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which placed on the Queen's Printer the statutory obligation to make arrangements for the publication of EU legislation relevant to the UK after exit.

At 9:00 today, The National Archives released two new services. First there is a new online collection of documents and data, relevant to the UK, drawn from the EUR-Lex website: the official source of EU law, delivered as part of the Government's official web archive. This is available for the public to search and will be updated until exit day, when it will be frozen and act as a permanent historical record of the relevant EU documents on our exit from the EU.

Secondly, The National Archives has added relevant EU legislation to www.legislation.gov.uk, the official legislation website, in order to allow the public to locate the law as it applies to them postexit. This brings together EU legislation that will be retained in UK law on exit with details about the corrections made by UK statutory instruments for EU exit and will show the 'as amended' UK applicable versions of the texts. This service includes a full timeline of changes pre-exit and will incorporate the amendments made by UK legislation postexit, with annotations so users can verify the text of the legislation for themselves, if they wish.

The Government have commenced these powers and duties now because these services are ready and their availability will be useful to those, such as businesses and the legal sector, who need to understand what the law is and will be on exit.

[HCWS1686]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 3 July 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
NORTHERN IRELAND	1185	NORTHERN IRELAND—continued	
Being Part of the UK: Benefits	1193	Northern Ireland Centenary	1185
City Deals: Scope.....	1192		
Devolved Government: Restoration.....	1186		
Istanbul Convention and Northern Ireland Law			
on Domestic Abuse.....	1189	PRIME MINISTER	1195
Leaving the EU: Talks on Restoring Devolution....	1189	Engagements.....	1195

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 3 July 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	67WS	EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION	68WS
Common Frameworks and Intergovernmental		EU Law Services	68WS
Relations.....	67WS		

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**not later than
Wednesday 10 July 2019**

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 3 July 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1185] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Prime Minister

G20 and Leadership of EU Institutions [Col. 1211]

Statement—(Prime Minister)

Counter-Daesh Update [Col. 1231]

Statement—(Rory Stewart)

Plastic Pollution (No. 2) [Col. 1248]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Mr Carmichael)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 3) Bill [Col. 1250]

Read a Second and Third time and passed

Income Tax [Col. 1252]

Motion—(Jesse Norman)—agreed to

Dangerous Drugs [Col. 1262]

Motion—(Mr Hurd)—agreed to

Backbench Business

Whistleblowing [Col. 1273]

Motion—(Norman Lamb)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 1310]

Schools in Winchester [Col. 1312]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Red Squirrels: Potential Extinction [Col. 523WH]

NHS Dentists: Cumbria [Col. 547WH]

English for Speakers of Other Languages [Col. 555WH]

Chagos Islands: UN General Assembly Resolution [Col. 579WH]

Genetic Haemochromatosis [Col. 588WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 67WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
