

**Monday
8 July 2019**

**Volume 663
No. 326**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 8 July 2019

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JUNE 2017)

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS—The Rt. Hon Jeremy Hunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT—The Rt Hon. Rory Stewart, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP
MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Rt Hon. Claire Perry, MP (Minister for Energy and Clean Growth)

Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation and Interim Minister for Energy and Clean Growth) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Kelly Tolhurst, MP

Andrew Stephenson, MP

Jake Berry, MP §

The Rt Hon. Lord Henley

Cabinet Office

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Oliver Dowden, MP

Chloe Smith, MP

Kevin Foster, MP §

Defence

SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

The Rt Hon. Mark Lancaster, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, MP

Stuart Andrew, MP

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Margot James, MP (Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Ashton of Hyde

Rebecca Pow, MP

Mims Davies, MP

Education

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Nick Gibb, MP (Minister for School Standards)

The Rt Hon. Anne Milton, MP (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills)

Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Agnew of Oulton

Nadhim Zahawi, MP

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Robert Goodwill, MP (Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Thérèse Coffey, MP

Lord Gardiner of Kimble

David Rutley, MP §

Exiting the European Union

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP

MINISTER OF STATE— Lord Callanan

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Robin Walker, MP

James Cleverly, MP

Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Duncan, MP (Minister for Europe and the Americas)

The Rt Hon. Dr Andrew Murrison, MP (Minister for the Middle East) §

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN)

The Rt Hon. Mark Field, MP (Minister for Asia and the Pacific)

Harriett Baldwin, MP (Minister for Africa) §

Health and Social Care

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Stephen Hammond, MP (Minister for Health)

Caroline Dinenage, MP (Minister for Care)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Seema Kennedy, MP

Jackie Doyle-Price, MP

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford

Home Office

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP (Minister for Immigration)

The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP (Minister for Security and Economic Crime)

The Rt Hon. Nick Hurd, MP (Minister for Policing and the Fire Service and Minister for London)

Baroness Williams of Trafford (Minister for Countering Extremism and Minister for Equalities)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Victoria Atkins, MP

Housing, Communities and Local Government

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Housing)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Jake Berry, MP §

Heather Wheeler, MP

Rishi Sunak, MP

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

International Development

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Rory Stewart, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt. Hon. Dr Andrew Murrison, MP §

Harriett Baldwin, MP §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Baroness Sugg, CBE §

International Trade

SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—George Hollingbery, MP (Minister for Trade Policy)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Graham Stuart, MP

Justice

LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Robert Buckland, QC, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Paul Maynard, MP

Edward Argar, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Law Officers

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Cox, QC, MP

SOLICITOR GENERAL—Lucy Frazer, QC, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Leader of the House of Commons

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL—The Rt Hon. Mel Stride, MP

Northern Ireland Office

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—John Penrose, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—

Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Scotland Office

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—

Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Transport

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Michael Ellis, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Nusrat Ghani, MP §

Andrew Jones, MP

Baroness Vere of Norbiton §

Treasury

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY AND PAYMASTER GENERAL—Jesse Norman, MP

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Robert Jenrick, MP

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—John Glen, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Julian Smith, MP

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

Mike Freer, MP

Alister Jack, MP

Rebecca Harris, MP

David Rutley, MP §

Jeremy Quin, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

Nusrat Ghani, MP §

Iain Stewart, MP

Jo Churchill, MP

Amanda Milling, MP

Michelle Donelan, MP

Matt Warman, MP

Wendy Morton, MP

Kevin Foster, MP §

UK Export Finance

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP

Wales Office

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

Kevin Foster, MP §

Work and Pensions

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Alok Sharma, MP (Minister for Employment)

Justin Tomlinson, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Guy Opperman, MP

Baroness Buscombe

Will Quince, MP

Office of the Leader of the House of Lords

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

Her Majesty's Household

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Earl Peel GCVO, DL

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Dalhousie

MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord de Mauley

TREASURER—Christopher Pincher, MP

COMPTROLLER—Mark Spencer, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Craig Whittaker, MP

CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Taylor of Holbeach CBE

CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown

BARONESSSES IN WAITING—Baroness Vere of Norbiton §, Baroness Sugg CBE §, Baroness Goldie DL, Baroness Barran MBE, Baroness Stedman-Scott DL

LORDS IN WAITING—Viscount Younger of Leckie, The Rt Hon. Lord Young of Cookham CH

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt. Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Bridget Phillipson, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY—Mr Charles Walker, MP

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP

CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. John Bercow, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS

Sir David Amess, Ian Austin, Mr Adrian Bailey, Sir Henry Bellingham, Mr Clive Betts, Mr Peter Bone, Sir Graham Brady, Ms Karen Buck, Sir Christopher Chope, Sir David Crausby, Geraint Davies, Philip Davies, Ms Nadine Dorries, Mr Nigel Evans, The Rt Hon. Sir Roger Gale, Mike Gapes, The Rt Hon. Dame Cheryl Gillan, James Gray, The Rt Hon. David Hanson, Mr Philip Hollobone, Stewart Hosie, The Rt Hon. Sir George Howarth, The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, Mrs Anne Main, Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Albert Owen, Ian Paisley, Mark Pritchard, Mr Laurence Robertson, Andrew Rosindell, The Rt Hon. Joan Ryan, Mr Virendra Sharma, Sir Gary Streeter, Graham Stringer, Mr Charles Walker, Phil Wilson

SECRETARY—Kenneth Fox

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The Rt Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Jane McCall (External Member), Dr Rima Makarem (External Member), The Rt Hon. Mel Stride, MP (Leader of the House), Valerie Vaz, MP, The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP, Pete Wishart, MP

SECRETARY OF THE COMMISSION—Marianne Cwynarski

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Robert Cope

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE

Dr Rima Makarem (Chair), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, Mr Clive Betts, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Jane McCall, Bob Scruton

SECRETARY—John-Paul Flaherty

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD

Mostaque Ahmed (Finance Director and Managing Director, Finance, Portfolio and Performance), Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Carlos Bamford (Managing Director, In-House Services), Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Sarah Davies (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Committees), Mandy Eddolls (Managing Director, HR and Diversity), David Hemming (Managing Director, Strategic Estates), Eric Hepburn (Director of Security for Parliament), Tracey Jessup (Director of the Parliamentary Digital Service), Dr Edge Watchorn (Managing Director, Participation), Penny Young (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information)

SECRETARY OF THE BOARD—Rhiannon Hollis

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY—Peter Barratt

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER OF STANDARDS—Kathryn Stone

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 663

THIRTY-EIGHTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 8 July 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Veterans: Recognition

1. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to recognise officially the sacrifice that veterans have made for the UK.
[911762]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): My Department commemorates the contribution and sacrifices of our armed forces veterans through occasions such as D-day and Armed Forces Day. We keep such events under review and ensure that veterans are properly considered and represented.

Jack Brereton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. Next year, the early May bank holiday will move to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day. Does she agree with me that we should do much more to recognise the service and sacrifices of our veterans and that it would be a fitting tribute permanently to rename one of our existing UK bank holidays Veterans Day?

Penny Mordaunt: We should always look to do more to honour the sacrifices that individuals have made. Armed Forces Day is supposed to be the day that we do that, and I have asked my officials to undertake some work so we can ensure that Armed Forces Day is a day for them, not just about them. It is incredibly important that we ensure that our veterans, our service personnel and their families can really enjoy the day, not have to do extra shifts. On that point, I would praise Salisbury, which held Armed Forces Day this year for the nation. It arranged some amazing events for the public and also put on some spectacular events for serving personnel, families and veterans, including free concerts.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I know the Secretary of State would agree that there is a real need for a permanent memorial for veterans who have fallen in the two world wars and in all the wars that have followed. Will she join me in praising the communities of Evanstown and Gilfach Goch in my constituency, which have spent the last 18 months refurbishing the memorial and tracing veterans from the Gilfach valley? Will she ensure, where memorials have fallen into disrepair, as some have, that the MOD has funding to help refurbish them?

Penny Mordaunt: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating that organisation and all the organisations across the country that are not just looking after historic monuments to and commemorations of our armed forces, but ensuring that the history of those individuals is properly recorded. Support for different memorials is split across Departments, and local government is involved, as obviously is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for certain memorials. If he writes to me about the specifics, I will ensure that the relevant Department hears his plea.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): One group of veterans who undoubtedly deserve our respect are the veterans of Northern Ireland who served for years on Operation Banner to uphold the rule of law against the IRA, yet some of them now face subsequent investigation—even up to 50 years on, even including Chelsea Pensioners—while those in the IRA are off

scot-free with letters of comfort from Tony Blair. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that, as some have recently suggested, to

“treat both sides the same”

is not only patently ludicrous, but a deep insult to all those veterans without whose courage there would never have been a Good Friday agreement in the first place?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend will know my views on this matter. Although we have obligations under the Stormont House agreement and have to approach these things in different ways, our obligations to our veterans—whether they have served in an operation on UK soil or overseas—are the same.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Throughout his brave service in our forces in Northern Ireland, Germany and Kenya, my constituent Tony Pitt was exposed to asbestos that led to a cancer diagnosis in 2017. He is now in the impossible position that he has just six months before the immunotherapy treatment that is keeping him going runs out. Will the relevant Minister meet Tony and me to discuss his case, as surely the high standards set by the armed forces covenant do not envisage our veterans crowdfunding to stay alive?

Penny Mordaunt: That sounds like an appalling situation, and I thank the hon. Lady for raising it. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), will be very happy to meet Tony, and I will get my officials to talk to the hon. Lady after this session.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend to ensure that, all these years later, someone in the Ministry of Defence checks on veterans from Northern Ireland who were grievously hurt there—such as Lance Corporal William Bell and Private Mark Young from my own company, when 17 people were killed—to make sure that they are having a good life, or as good a life as possible?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be very happy to look at the cases of those two individuals. It is vital that we have a clear line of sight on what is happening with individual cases. We still need to make improvements to veterans support, and part of the problem relates to the need for continuity and to ensure proactively that people are getting the care they need.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The best way to recognise our veterans is to ensure that they are well served today, yet SSAFA research shows that only 16% of veterans believe they are well served by the armed forces covenant. How is the Secretary of State auditing the armed forces covenant, to ensure that local authorities are applying it proactively?

Penny Mordaunt: The prime organisation that holds everyone to account for delivering the covenant is the Veterans Board, which will meet again very shortly.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The whole of Wiltshire was delighted to welcome the Secretary of State, together with the Princess Royal and a whole host of other luminaries, to Salisbury last Saturday to celebrate

Armed Forces Day. Of course, it is right that we think very carefully about veterans and their needs, particularly those suffering from the physical or mental after-effects of warfare. None the less, does the Secretary of State agree that the purpose of Armed Forces Day is to think very carefully about the 200,000 fit, healthy and committed young men and women who are today serving our armed forces, to celebrate their commitment to their duties and to wish them well as they do it?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my hon. Friend and again praise Salisbury for its work in ensuring that service personnel and their families had an amazing few days. As we take the event forward, however, we need to ensure that, as an additional Saturday on which to work, it does not put a burden on our armed forces. We should be doing more free events, and businesses across the land should consider how they can contribute to making that day special.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that one way to honour our veterans population is by fully implementing the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. She will also know that the reason why our Departments do not adhere to the spirit of the covenant is the sectarian intransigence of Sinn Féin. Is it not wrong that the people from whom our armed forces community protected us are precluding our offering service to our armed forces in return? Will she take steps to ensure full implementation?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman completely. We are talking about the armed forces of the United Kingdom. Wherever they are serving, wherever they are based and wherever they are from, I want them to be able to take part in events, and I also want to ensure that the public services provided to them are as they should be.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The importance of support for veterans should unite the whole House. Given the appalling track record of outsourcing, will the Secretary of State explain why her Government have invited private contractors to bid to run the medal office and certain veterans services?

Penny Mordaunt: I acknowledge the work that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has done on veterans support, including through the gateway and the veterans strategy, on which we are currently consulting. I have also been doing work in the Department, looking at our obligations and how we are constituted.

Veterans: Universal Credit

2. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for armed forces veterans in receipt of universal credit.

[911763]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As veterans are civilians, the majority of care comes from other Departments and devolved Administrations. The Ministry of Defence works closely with other stakeholders to target and improve veterans' access to services, including those who are eligible for universal credit.

Mr Cunningham: The Minister has just spoken about the relationship between the MOD and other Departments. A study by the Forces in Mind Trust charity has found that ex-service personnel have an overwhelmingly negative experience of universal credit and the fit for work test. What is he going to do about that?

Mr Ellwood: When those who have served in uniform depart for civilian street, it is very important that they are aware of the benefits for which they may or may not be eligible. Our transition programme now includes making sure that we improve the understanding of what armed forces personnel veterans can receive. I am pleased to say that the Secretary of State is working with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make very clear that universal credit is available for those who are eligible.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss further how we can create the position of an armed forces covenant ombudsman, who would be an advocate for those who, like the constituent of the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), cannot get the resources they need from our public services and whose MPs are also unable to make progress?

Mr Ellwood: I am aware that my hon. Friend has done a huge amount of work on this important matter, not least by lobbying me many times. She will be aware that the armed forces covenant is growing—we now have almost 4,000 signatories—but it is important that if somebody signs the covenant it meets their expectations. If it fails or falls foul of that, we need a system to recognise that. She raises a very interesting idea. I have spoken to the Secretary of State about it and we would be delighted to meet her to discuss it further.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does the Minister recognise that the question raised by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) is an addition to the litany of failures for those leaving the armed forces trying to access universal credit? Let us bring this issue to a head. Does he not now agree that it is time to support my Armed Forces Representative Body Bill to ensure that the armed forces can speak with one strong voice when they leave the armed forces as veterans?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises this matter almost weekly, but he misses the point. We ensure that we look after our veterans and they know whether they are eligible for universal credit. We do that by ensuring synergy and joint working between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Defence, not just in this area but in health and education and right across the piece. The armed forces can push these issues forward. We need to hold Departments to account, and we do that through the Veterans Board.

Mr Speaker: For the benefit of people observing our proceedings who are not Members of the House I would simply add, non-pejoratively, that raising something weekly in the Chamber is a very modest effort. Raising things daily, or in some cases several times a day, is by no means unknown in, or condemned by, the House of Commons. It is perfectly normal.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Has the Minister had the opportunity to discuss with the Department for Work and Pensions the symptoms and expectations relating to post-traumatic stress disorder and how it impacts on veterans applying for benefits and occasionally having to visit offices to receive the benefits they deserve?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that question. It has been raised many times and it is important to put it in context and in perspective. Not everybody who joins the armed forces will be affected—just two in every 1,000 people—but they need the attention and support that they absolutely deserve. The Secretary of State is meeting the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to discuss that very matter.

Outsourced Contracts

4. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the quality of service provided through contracts outsourced by her Department. [911766]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (**Mr Tobias Ellwood**): The Ministry of Defence regularly monitors the performance of all contractors, including outsourced key services. This is done via the use of contract performance indicators and action is taken when standards are not met.

Bambos Charalambous: Capita has completely failed to fulfil its contract for Army recruitment. This service should now be brought back in-house. When will the Government accept that their dogmatic insistence on outsourcing everything imaginable to the private sector is failing our armed forces and the taxpayer?

Mr Ellwood: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's assessment. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, may have the opportunity to speak on this matter in a little bit more detail in a later question, but we are seeing a change in the trend. More people are showing an indication of interest in the armed forces. It is important we translate that into ensuring they actually sign up, but last year alone we had 77,000 applications of interest for the armed forces. I think that is a good step forward.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The Ministry of Defence has a target of spending 25% of its budget with small and medium-sized enterprises by 2022. What progress has been made towards achieving that target?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. It is not just the big companies—aerospace and defence companies—we must look to support, but the SMEs, which are in every one of our constituencies. I am assured by the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), the Minister with responsibility for procurement, that that is exactly what is happening.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It was good to see members of the armed forces and the Secretary of State herself at the Pride event in London at the weekend.

Last year, a departmental assessment of the privatisation of the fire and rescue service at the Ministry of Defence gave Capita the highest possible risk rate. Two months ago, following a court challenge and an £80,000 payment to Serco, the lead competitor, Capita was finally given a contract worth millions to deliver services all over the world, despite the huge financial risk. Why was £80,000 paid to Serco to allow that to go ahead? Does that not show up the whole problem with privatisation at the Ministry of Defence?

Mr Ellwood: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's assessment; it is important that we provide value for money. The defence budget is under pressure, as are all other Departments. He is absolutely right to say that Capita was going to be given the contract. It is subject to a legal challenge and we have to wait to see that mature, but let us not forget that even on Labour's watch we had the outsourcing of fire contracts to other organisations, not least in Cyprus as well as at other bases including Aldermaston. This is not new; it is something that we have to advance.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): A recent report by the Public Accounts Committee found that less than half of personnel would recommend the housing maintenance service provided by the company, Amey. Amey's performance is so bad that the MOD has introduced a compensation scheme for maintenance issues, but unbelievably, the Department pays even when Amey is at fault. Will the Minister outline why hard-working taxpayers are expected to foot the bill when the MOD's contract has failed to deliver?

Mr Ellwood: The issue is to do with the key performance indicators, as I think the hon. Gentleman will agree. According to the standards that we see, 97% meet the requirements. We find that those indicators are set too low, and the Secretary of State is very conscious of that and of the need to raise them. We are reconciling the defence real estate to make sure that we improve accommodation, but I will not hide away from the fact that this has been very difficult, and we owe our armed forces personnel much, much better.

Veterans: Monitoring Schemes

5. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support mentoring schemes for veterans. [911767]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Our resettlement programmes continue to develop to ensure that the transition from service to civilian life for all personnel is conducted as smoothly as possible. I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the fact that 95% of personnel who participate in our career transition programme are in work or education within six months of departure.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that encouraging reply. What case will he be making, as part of the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, to increase support for charities that provide mentoring for veterans, including particularly those in the criminal justice system, such as Care after Combat, which does brilliant work in that area?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises two issues. I join him in paying tribute to Care after Combat; what it does to provide support for those who find themselves imprisoned or on the wrong side of the law is absolutely brilliant, and we should all tip our hats to that. However, we must also recognise that the defence budget is under strain. It was affected by the spending review and austerity measures. In 2011 and 2016, we were obliged to find £5 billion-worth of efficiencies, which we did. We have subsequently been asked to find another £7 billion-worth of efficiencies. There is only so long that we can do this before it starts having an impact, and that is why it is important that we argue now, with the next spending review coming up, that we need more money for defence.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If we are to get this resettlement programme right for all our veterans, do we not need to make sure that we have properly assessed the medical injuries that they sustained during their period of service? In that light, is it not a shame that while the United States of America makes sure that every single person in the perimeter of a bomb blast is assessed for brain injury, we are not yet able to do that? We may still be misdiagnosing people who are suffering from PTSD when they have actually had a brain injury.

Mr Ellwood: I know that the hon. Gentleman knows a lot about this issue. He is absolutely right to say that the advancement in the science now reflects the fact that even if someone can walk away from a blast, they can be affected long term by what has happened, and we are learning from the Americans on that. We have our transition programme, which can last up to two years to make sure that we manage the transition from the world of the armed forces to civilian life, but I absolutely agree with him that more can be done in this area.

Armed Services: Optimal Size

6. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What recent estimate she has made of the optimal size of the UK armed services. [911768]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): This Government have invested heavily in strengthening the UK's armed forces so that we can deliver the tasks that we require of them, from maintaining the nuclear deterrent to defending against threats in airspace, and from supporting the police in counter-terrorism to providing disaster relief. We are committed to maintaining the size of the armed forces and Joint Force 2025 will offer us choice, agility and global reach.

Mr Sheerman: The Secretary of State might be aware that my father and two brothers served in the British Army, and I am very concerned at the moment should we be threatened with invasion. Our Army is down to 82,000 men and women, yet the Russians have 1 million in their army and 1.5 million in reserves. Could we really defend this country if push came to shove?

Penny Mordaunt: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's family members who have served, but yes we could defend ourselves. Just the other week, I was with HMS Albion and others from the nine Joint Expeditionary Force nations. There were 44 ships and submarines. It was the largest Royal Navy deployment in that region—just off

Lithuania—for 100 years. Yes, we could defend ourselves, and the size of our trained and untrained strength is growing.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is positive policies that this Conservative Government have implemented, such as the armed forces income tax compensation for those serving in Scotland and the decision to secure the long-term future of my base, RM Condor in Angus, that mean we can continue to recruit in Scotland. Will the Secretary of State commit to visiting RM Condor to see at first hand the Government's great work in Angus?

Penny Mordaunt: These are the armed forces of the United Kingdom. We should celebrate them and ensure that our basing is spread across the four nations, and I would be delighted to visit at the earliest occasion.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): With Devonport-based HMS Montrose forward deployed, we now need to consider how we can rotate crews effectively, not just on the Type 23s, but on the Type 31s, which hopefully will also be Devonport based. What advances and learnings have arisen from the forward deployment of HMS Montrose that could be applied elsewhere?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is right. We can ensure that we are much more operationally effective and that people have a better quality of life while serving in the armed forces by enabling crews to be sent out and rotations to happen without their having to come back to base port. We continually learn from those exercises. It is another example of how the fleet is changing, and I think it suits everyone that it does.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call the good doctor, Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I am pleased that the Secretary of State mentioned HMS Albion in an earlier answer. Does she recall that it is not that many months since her predecessor had to fend off moves to scrap HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark and to reduce the size of the Army by 11,000, the Royal Marines by 2,000 and the RAF by 1,250? Does she accept that there is a fight to be had with the real enemy here, and that is the Treasury?

Penny Mordaunt: I should declare an interest, as HMS Bulwark was the last ship I served on. I am very glad that she and Albion are still going. We are approaching a spending review, and I think we need to do more to tell the Treasury and the nation how much defence brings to this country—to the prosperity agenda, social mobility, research and development, innovation, and many other things. We need to tell that story because we need to keep our armed forces strong.

Mr Speaker: When the Treasury is up against the right hon. Gentleman, they ought to know when they are beaten. I say that having known him for 36 years in October.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Not only have RAF personnel numbers fallen by more than a quarter since 2010, but the Government are consistently failing to train enough pilots. Some 350 are currently on the waiting list, and the problem is going from bad to worse, the backlog having doubled in the past year. When will the Secretary of State get a grip on this situation and ensure that things are put right?

Penny Mordaunt: The pipeline for our pilots is one of the first things I asked about when I entered the Department. The numbers are improving, but it is an area where we are fragile; it is probably one of the areas where we are most fragile. That said, I would gently point out to the hon. Lady and the Opposition Front-Bench team that last I heard the leader of her party wished to reduce the headcount of our armed forces to zero.

20. [911782] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not the case that recruitment is very dependent on the state of the economy? It is very difficult to recruit when there is high employment, so, in a way, do we not need a Labour Government to get recruitment up, because only a Labour Government are guaranteed to create huge unemployment and a declining economy?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his cunning plan to get recruitment numbers up, although, given the Leader of the Opposition's stance towards our armed forces, there might not be any places to be vacant.

UK Personnel: Local Support Services

7. **Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the availability of local support services for service personnel based in the UK. [911769]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (**Mr Tobias Ellwood**): Every local authority has signed the armed forces covenant, and the MOD works with local authorities and partner organisations to ensure that there is fair access to local support services.

Stephen Gethins: MPs provide a valuable local service, not least for our military personnel, and I am grateful to Lieutenant Colonel Fraser McLeman and his team at Leuchars for the help that they have given me in that regard. The MOD recently sought to cancel one of my surgeries before the decision was overturned at the last minute. Will the Minister explain why there is a four-week wait following requests for surgeries by military families, and will he ensure that surgeries are cancelled only in exceptional circumstances—not least when they are held in local community facilities, where surgeries such as my own have been held in the past?

Mr Ellwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone in which he has raised this matter. He had the courtesy to raise it before questions. I should be delighted to meet him afterwards to see whether we can bring about some reconciliation and make this work.

Armed Forces Personnel

8. **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of Army personnel. [911770]

13. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [911775]

16. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [911778]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): We remain committed to maintaining the overall size of the armed forces, including the Army. A range of measures are under way to improve recruitment and retention, and those measures are kept under constant review. Importantly, the services continue to meet all their current commitments, keeping the country and its interests safe.

Toby Perkins: The Minister, along with every other Conservative Member of Parliament who was elected or re-elected in 2015, was elected on a manifesto promise that there would be a standing Army of 82,000. That has never been achieved since 2015, and, indeed, on 1 April the size of the fully trained Army was down to 75,000. The Minister may claim that the Government are meeting their commitments, but one commitment that they are not meeting is the commitment to an Army of the size that they promised in their manifesto. Is that still their policy, and, if not, can the Minister tell us at what point the policy was dropped?

Mark Lancaster: Let us just see whether we can debunk this myth that Army numbers are somehow in freefall. On 1 May, the total size of the British Army, including the Brigade of Gurkhas, both trained and untrained, was 85,430. As of 1 June, one month later, according to the most recent figures that we have, the total size of the British Army, including the Brigade of Gurkhas, both trained and untrained, was 85,730. That is an increase of 300.

Susan Elan Jones: In 2010, there were 30,000 more fully trained armed forces personnel than there are today. Does that concern the Minister and does it concern the Government, and if it does not, why not?

Mark Lancaster: As we enter the 21st century, we must accept that the armed forces are about more than simply mass. That is precisely why we are investing in technology, and it is why the battlefield of the 21st century will be a very different beast from that of the 20th. I am concerned about the drop below that figure that we have seen in recent years, but, as I have just demonstrated, we are turning the supertanker around. The size of the trained strength of the British Army can only be increased if it has untrained recruits. As I have demonstrated, we are now seeing an increase in the number of people joining the Army, and that is a positive development.

Nick Smith: By when does the Minister think that the size of the Army will reach the Government's target of just 82,000 fully trained personnel?

Mark Lancaster: I am not going to predict exactly what that date will be. We are seeing an increase month on month, but that does not apply to all establishments: for example, Sandhurst has only three intakes per year and Harrogate has only one. I cannot give the exact date when the target will be hit, and I do not think that the hon. Gentleman would really expect me to, but I believe that we are now heading firmly in the right direction.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I visited Carterton Community College last week and observed the striking success of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics programme set up there by RAF Brize Norton. Does the Minister agree that such programmes not only teach young people important life skills, but provide the inspiration that may lead them to take up careers in the Royal Air Force or other armed forces, which will help to increase service numbers?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Indeed, there are many good reasons why young people would wish to join the armed forces, not least because our armed forces are now the largest provider of apprenticeships in the United Kingdom.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In 2012, we had 220,000 armed forces personnel; that number is now 190,000. Are there things that we were doing that we are no longer doing, or have we maintained operational readiness with fewer people?

Mark Lancaster: That is quite a complicated question, particularly when we get into the question of readiness and the ability to hold people at the appropriate readiness for the threat that we face. As I have said, technology has changed significantly; for example, not every aircraft we have in the air is now manned by a pilot. We are investing in a number of things which mean that we require less overall manpower to deliver the effect we require in the 21st century.

Veterans: Education

9. **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve access to education for veterans. [911771]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): When armed forces personnel put their hand up and decide to leave the armed forces, most of them participate in a transition programme, and that includes the opportunity to complete examinations such as A-levels and GCSEs—or O-levels in our old language—as well as tertiary education. It is very important to give them the best opportunity once they depart into civilian street.

Sir David Evennett: Does my right hon. Friend agree that veterans having better access to education could be of huge benefit to them and upskill them so that they are ready to get back into the workforce? Furthermore, it would help reduce the barriers many veterans face on their return to civilian life.

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As the Secretary of State said, one of the advantages of having an armed force is that personnel provide such

important skill sets while serving, but they can all be translated back into civilian street. It is important that we make people and society in general aware of the skill sets that are available—grip, tenacity, leadership and determination—and we must also make sure we translate military qualifications into civilian ones, to give personnel the best opportunity in life.

Mental Health Provision

10. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve mental health provision for service personnel. [911772]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): We can be proud of the changes we have introduced through the armed forces mental health and wellbeing strategy—which I inherited when I came into this job from my predecessor as Armed Forces Minister. Of all the things we have been involved in, we can be particularly proud of changing the stigma associated with mental health issues in the armed forces, getting more people to talk about it and moving it towards parity with physical injury. There is still much work to do, but we are heading in the right direction.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Minister for that response and congratulate the Government on what they are doing. Will the Minister set out what steps his Department is taking to achieve that parity of esteem, which is so important to serving personnel?

Mr Ellwood: The challenge we faced was that people were reluctant to come forward. They thought that if they put their hand up and said there was something wrong with their mind, that would somehow impact on their ability to be promoted or hold them back in some way. They would keep their problems to themselves, which would then incubate and eventually they would have to quit the very thing they loved: the armed forces. We have changed that with our focus on promoting better resilience, prevention to stop these things happening, and earlier detection and treatment. From putting that all together we are seeing far better results with people staying in the armed forces and not being hindered or affected by mental health issues.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): According to the Centre for Mental Health, there is not a greater likelihood of veterans experiencing mental ill health than the rest of the population, but there is a significant increase in the likelihood of their having problems with alcohol, so can the Minister tell us what he is doing specifically on the issue of alcohol misuse among veterans, which is something I see in my community?

Mr Ellwood: I am really pleased that the hon. Lady has put this in context because a myth is perpetuated that those who join the armed forces will be affected by mental challenges, but she is right that there are other challenges that we face, not least with alcoholism. We work closely with a number of charities, and we are also doing work as part of the transition services so that people are aware of where they can get treatment early on.

Fleet Solid Support Ships

11. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): When her Department plans to make an announcement on the award of the contract for the fleet solid support ships. [911773]

19. **Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): When her Department plans to make an announcement on the award of the contract for the fleet solid support ships. [911781]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): Subject to normal approvals, we anticipate that a design and build contract will be awarded in 2020.

Christian Matheson: This has been a shambolic process in which overseas bidders have dropped out and the Government have begged them to rejoin the bidding process. Have Ministers not read the report by the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) on the importance of defence spending to the UK economy? Is it not about time that the Government stopped this whole process and started offering the bids to UK-based shipyards, so that we can get the benefits of this major Government contract?

Stuart Andrew: I remind the hon. Gentleman that we do have a team UK bid in there, and I am pleased to see that. As I have said on many occasions, we are trying to ensure that we get the very best price for all the capability we need. If we were to cancel this competition now, we would put at risk the services that we need for the carrier. That being said, we have been listening to all the debates and the many questions on this matter, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union stating that the option to support onshore defence funding for shipbuilding should be a red line in our future relationship with the EU. Of course, that will apply only to future programmes.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Other countries such as France and Italy classify these vessels as warships, meaning that they have to be built in domestic yards. Why will the Minister not just guarantee that a UK contractor will be the successful bidder and give a much-needed boost to UK industry?

Stuart Andrew: As I have said, the EU has raised questions about the classification of some of those countries and the decisions that they have made. Also, some of those vessels are manned by those countries' navies, whereas ours will be manned by the auxiliaries.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): All of us on the Opposition Benches were heartened to hear the Defence Secretary say recently of the Ministry of Defence that

“we can and we must buy British”.

That would represent a welcome shift from her predecessor's tendency to simply buy off the shelf from abroad, but the British shipbuilding industry needs action, not just warm words. So will the Minister now reconsider the Government's short-sighted decision to put these ships out to international tender, and build them here instead?

Stuart Andrew: As I have just announced, my right hon. Friend has made that policy decision. I also remind the hon. Gentleman that we have significant orders in UK shipyards. There is 20 years of work on the Clyde, for example. I cannot think of any other industry in the UK that can say that it has 20 years of work on its order books.

VE and VJ Days: Anniversary

12. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What plans she has to mark the anniversary of VE Day. [911774]

17. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What plans she has to mark the anniversary of VJ Day. [911779]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): The nation will be forever grateful to the greatest generation, who lived and fought through the second world war. The Government will provide opportunities to mark the 75th anniversaries of both VE and VJ Days next year. The move of the May bank holiday to Friday 8 May has already been announced, and planning is under way for the commemorative events. Details will follow very soon.

Maggie Throup: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. My father is a veteran of the second world war; he served in India and Burma. Like many other veterans, he will be unable to get to any of the national VE Day celebrations due to his fragility. What more can be done to ensure that all our brave veterans feel part of these important commemorations?

Penny Mordaunt: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's father for his service. Those who have served in our armed forces must be able to take part in those commemorative events. Indeed, they make those events; it is their stories and their presence that make them what they are. My Department will be writing to local government, and particularly to the armed forces covenant champions, to remind them that events must be accessible and that we must think about how to include in those events veterans who are too frail to travel.

Sir David Amess: I am absolutely delighted with my right hon. Friend's announcement, but will she please reassure me that equal expenditure and prominence will be given to VJ Day? These heroes have been forgotten for too long, as the late Lord Louis Mountbatten said, and they suffered terrible atrocities in the Japanese prisoner of war camps.

Penny Mordaunt: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The events are tailored in regard to their tone and scale and the number of people attending them, and we might not be able to guarantee that the cost will be split exactly between the two events. That might differ, but the prominence of the events will not differ. That will be the same.

Defence Procurement: Jobs

15. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What recent estimate she has made of the number of jobs that defence procurement supports in the UK. [911777]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): MOD official statistics show that our spending with UK industry in 2017-18 directly supported 115,000 jobs across the country.

Mark Pawsey: I thank the Minister for his work to ensure that the propulsion systems for the Navy's Type 26 frigates will continue to be built in Rugby and for the security and future opportunities that that will give much of the workforce. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that we train up the next generation of skilled engineers to continue that vital work?

Stuart Andrew: I recognise the important role that my hon. Friend played in ensuring that the GE facilities were maintained in Rugby. I agree that it is absolutely vital to ensure that the defence sector has the right skills to meet all our needs. Many of our suppliers have well established programmes and schemes to ensure that that happens, and we continue to work through the Defence Suppliers Forum and the Defence Growth Partnership to ensure that those skills and training are maintained.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab) *rose—*

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Ah! Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Or, as one might say, R2-D2 and C-3PO.

Mr Jones: The Secretary of State highlighted in an earlier answer the importance of the prosperity agenda for defence contracts. I know that the Minister has read the recent report on shipbuilding and ship procurement in the UK by the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding. Will he tell the House what weighting will be given to prosperity in awarding the fleet solid support contracts?

Stuart Andrew: I was looking at the two right hon. Gentlemen and wondering whether it was more like Waldorf and Statler, but I will not be so rude—although I have just have been. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: when we look at the contracts, not just for the shipbuilding but for the content within, there are huge opportunities for the UK supply chain, where much more of the value exists. I recognised that in his all-party group's recent report, and his and other right hon. and hon. Members' work will inform much of the decision making on our future policy.

Mr Speaker: Come, come, young Spellar—your turn now.

John Spellar: I hope that the Minister will also acknowledge the great role of the Defence Committee, under the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) as Chairman, and the trade unions in maintaining the facility at GE Rugby and seeing off GE's attempts to close it. May I bring the Minister back to the solid support ship contract and ask him to answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)? What weighting is given to prosperity? Will he please stop blaming the European Union, when every other country in the European Union looks after its own industry and supports its own yards and its own steel industry? Why will he not show some gumption and do the same?

Stuart Andrew: I thought I had shown some gumption. As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that the policy will be changing—

John Spellar: Why don't you change it now?

Stuart Andrew: I have just explained that the timelines are critical in the current competition, because the existing fleet that will offer support to the carrier will be coming to the end of its life. We have to have that capability. Surely he thinks that is more important than just trying to score a political point.

Royal Fleet Auxiliary

18. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve (a) pay and (b) industrial relations in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. [911780]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Members of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary are MOD civil servants. Their terms and conditions, including their pay, are subject to civilian rules for the wider public sector. As such, pay is subject to HM Treasury civil servant pay guidance. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary continues to engage with the maritime trade unions and has further meetings planned to discuss pay.

Grahame Morris: I point out to the Minister that in 2018 the Royal Fleet Auxiliary carried out about 64% of the tasks credited to the Royal Navy. Nevertheless, the pay cap, which has been lifted for Royal Navy personnel, is being maintained for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. We in this House value the contribution and dedication of the seafarers who keep our Royal Navy at sea. What steps has the Minister taken to resolve the current dispute?

Mark Lancaster: I think it is fair to say that the whole House values the role of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Indeed, last summer I spent the most fascinating week on board RFA Mounts Bay in the Caribbean to see the work being done in preparation for the hurricane season. I have explained the conditions under which the Royal Fleet Auxiliary's pay is reviewed, as civil servants, but I reassure the House that of course we would like to see a constructive end to this dispute, and I am confident that that will be the case.

Topical Questions

T1. [911787] **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): I welcome *The Sun's* campaign. We will shortly bring forward the first stage to legislate on closing down litigation against our armed forces for historical allegations. Although we hold our armed forces to the highest standards, we have seen that so much litigation against them has not been in the pursuit of justice. Although I note and pay tribute to the work of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), on the veterans strategy and the veterans gateway, the MOD is not constitutionally responsible for veterans. The MOD, as a consequence, has not directly commissioned services and support for veterans, which has meant that some services we provide for serving members of the armed forces that could benefit veterans have not been available

to them. I believe that needs to change, so we are consulting partners on changing the MOD's constitutional role with regard to veterans.

Mr Baron: The all-party parliamentary group on the British Council, which I chair, has been overseeing an inquiry into aspects of the UK's soft power capabilities. How does defence diplomacy fit into the Government's overall soft power strategy?

Penny Mordaunt: Defence engagement, in all its forms, is vital to promoting the UK's influence, values and intentions around the world, whether it is promoting stability and prosperity, tackling environmental challenges or responding to natural disasters and humanitarian need. Our strongest relationships with some nations are military to military, and we need to make sure that the contribution of defence to the objectives of One HMG is really understood.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): At a time when Army numbers are consistently falling, it is all the more important that we draw on the widest possible pool of recruits. Why, then, has there been a 45% increase in the number of officer cadets admitted to Sandhurst from independent schools, compared with just a 7% increase from state schools? I know the Secretary of State is personally committed to creating a level playing field, so could she set out what she will do to seek out the brightest and best from all backgrounds?

Penny Mordaunt: If the hon. Lady had listened to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces earlier, she would know that our trained and untrained strength is actually not decreasing. The number of recruits coming in is actually going up, but social mobility is important. Of course the MOD can always do more, but our armed forces are one of the greatest agents for social mobility in this country. They are one of the largest education providers in this country, and we ought to continue encouraging them to do more.

Nia Griffith: I am a little disappointed by that answer because when it comes to officers, there is a lot more that can be done. It is not just those from state schools who face barriers: just 10 of this year's 600-strong cadet intake to Sandhurst are from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds—just 10. According to the MOD's own statistics, the regulars and the reserves are also missing the Government's 2020 target for BAME representation.

Will the Secretary of State now commit to a root-and-branch review of recruitment barriers to ensure that we have properly staffed and fully representative armed forces?

Penny Mordaunt: We already have a very clear idea of the barriers that exist and of the barriers that existed in the past, which is why our community engagement programmes are so important and why, since coming to the Department, I have protected those budgets.

T3. [911789] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Will my right hon Friend join me in thanking the North Staffordshire armed forces committee, the Queen's

Park Partnership and everybody who took part in the recent Armed Forces Day celebrations at Queen's Park in my constituency?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in thanking everyone who took part in Armed Forces Day at Queen's Park. I understand that regular personnel, veterans, reservists and cadets were all represented in that celebration, and I applaud the county, too, for its work on several events held across Staffordshire.

T2. [911788] **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): One area where the MOD has been performing well is on diversity in LGBT circles. I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in welcoming the contribution of so many armed forces personnel, and indeed MOD civil servants, at the Pride march in London on Saturday, where I was alongside them. Many of them were proudly wearing campaign medals. However, I have to share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), because when I looked at recruitment figures for my constituency. I saw that there was very little recruitment from black and minority ethnic, and ethnically and religiously diverse, areas. Does the Secretary of State agree that much more needs to be done on that if we are to have truly representative armed forces?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree that more needs to be done, and indeed Members of this House can help us do this as well. Community engagement is vital—[*Interruption.*] Indeed, I understand that the hon. Gentleman is doing his bit to ensure that that happens. We have to ensure that our armed forces look like the individuals they are there to defend and protect. They are there for us all; they are our armed forces, and that must be the view and sentiment in every community in the UK.

T4. [911791] **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Given the increasing threat that drones pose to our national security, as recently highlighted by the insightful BBC documentary "Britain's Next Air Disaster", what assessment has my right hon. Friend made of our armed forces' ability to respond to a potential drone strike, and what investment is her Department making in new technology to rapidly neutralise such threats?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): My hon. Friend raises an important point, and the MOD takes the threat of the nefarious use of drones very seriously. Using the defence transformation fund, we are working with the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, international partners and industry to further develop our counter-drone capabilities, and of course they will be used to protect defence infrastructure wherever they are needed. More broadly, a lot of the responsibility for protecting other sites in the UK lies with the police, but we will always be there to help if needed.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The last time the Secretary of State was at the Dispatch Box, we discussed an internal MOD policy on torture that contravenes domestic and international law. She promised a review. Has the review happened? Has the policy been dumped?

Penny Mordaunt: That review has concluded. I have looked at it and the policy will be changing.

T5. [911792] **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): Inspirational charities such as Combat Stress and Greater Manchester-based Veterans Garage tackle issues such as depression and social isolation in our former servicemen and women. What assessment has the Minister made of the barriers veterans could face on their return to civilian life?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): There is something unique about our armed forces: the sense of belonging, duty and pride one has in working in such a collegiate operation. Leaving that armed forces environment and going into the civilian world can be a culture shock, which is why we have our transition programme, which can last up to two years, to support people. Occasionally, however, extra help is needed, and I pay tribute to Combat Stress for the work it does in providing that support if it is required.

T7. [911794] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): For all the warm words from the Armed Forces Minister about Army recruitment moving in the right direction, is the truth not that for every single year we have had a Conservative Government the size of the fully trained Army has been smaller than the year before? Is it not time that he confronted the reality we are facing and stopped trying to kid people that this is moving in the right direction?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I think the figures I have quoted speak for themselves; we are now increasing the size of the British Army.

T6. [911793] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): Too many military personnel continue to live in substandard housing, despite the Government spending £135 million on refurbishment, so what more can they do to make sure our armed forces get the standard of accommodation they deserve?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. We have a rebuild programme, whereby £4 billion is being put in to make sure we provide that state-of-the-art accommodation for our future defence capability. However, I agree with him that we need to do more to make sure we provide the type of housing that the recruits we want to bring in to the force deserve.

T8. [911795] **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): With the latest NHS statistics identifying that about 60 veterans a day are seeking professional assistance for mental health issues, what steps is the Department taking to ensure that our service personnel receive the tailored, bespoke mental health services they need and deserve?

Mr Ellwood: I should just clarify the difference between those who are serving and those who are veterans. In the case of veterans, each health authority now provides the transition, intervention and liaison service, to give veterans the mental health support that they deserve. In the case of those who are serving, as I touched on before, our mental health and wellbeing strategy is doing far more, which is why more people are putting their hand up to say, "I need help." That is a good thing.

T9. [911796] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the future role of our F-35 jets, given the successful completion of their first operation?

Mark Lancaster: Having achieved initial operating capability from land in December 2018, and with the successful completion of its first operation, the Lightning programme is now focused on delivering initial operational capability for carrier strike, which is planned for December 2020.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Within four weeks of the Salisbury incident last year, Russia Today and Sputnik published 138 separate and contradictory narratives and 735 articles about the chemical weapons poisoning of the Skripals by Russian agents. There were dozens of different narratives on the rise of Novichok, its use, how it was not Russia's fault and how Russia was the victim of a witch hunt. It is one of the examples that Russia is deploying in hybrid warfare. What plans does the Secretary of State have to announce the role of the cross-Government use of the Fusion doctrine? How able are the Government to expand the use of the 77 Brigade, if needed?

Mark Lancaster: I declare my interest as deputy commander of the 77 Brigade, which means this is a subject close to my heart. Hybrid threats present themselves in many domains, so we utilise a whole-of-Government approach to protecting the UK against such activity. The MOD works collaboratively with other Departments, in line with the Fusion doctrine, to support that approach.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Just a couple of weeks ago, we saw the RAF livery on the first of the UK's new Poseidon P-8 aircraft. Will the Secretary of State come up to RAF Lossiemouth to see how the base is preparing for the new aircraft and for hundreds of additional personnel? She will also be able to see the work done by Boeing and local firm Robertson to construct the Poseidon facility.

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to visit Lossiemouth. This is a critical capability that is returning to us. The manufacture of the second aircraft is on delivery for January 2020.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State commit to spend more to protect UK intellectual property, which is the underpinning of our high-tech defence industry?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We had that extra £1.8 billion in the most recent Budget because this is the exactly the sort of area we will look at. I assure him that I have regular meetings with industry and with the forces to talk about those very issues.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I am sure my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would agree that the reserve forces are a crucial component of our armed forces generally, so will she update the House on how retention and recruitment is going? Specifically, are we managing to get former regulars to rejoin as reserves and bring their expertise with them?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We continue to utilise reserves and now have a target to ensure that they are used on operations, which helps with retention. I am pleased to say that the size of our reserve forces continues to grow.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Defence Equipment and Support procures for the Ministry of Defence, but constituents who work there tell me that morale has plummeted since it became a bespoke trading entity, and it is now the joint worst-performing department in the civil service top people survey index. Will Ministers look into this?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady raises an important point. The staff survey results were frankly disappointing, but I assure her that a tremendous amount of work has been done with the workforce to improve the situation. We look forward to seeing improved results in the next survey.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I think I should call a shy and understated Member who requires encouragement: Mr Mark Francois.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The A400M is an emerging procurement disaster. We have paid £2.6 billion for an aircraft with appalling reliability, bad engines, a virtually broken gearbox, problem propellers, massive vibration problems and an inability to deliver paratroops. There was recently a NATO ministerial meeting of the partner nations to decide what to do about the disaster. What was the outcome of that meeting?

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the issues with the A400M. I can assure him that I attended that ministerial meeting: it was an extremely robust meeting with industry. The performance has been totally unacceptable. We are now expecting EuroProp International, the engine manufacturer, to be more empowered to negotiate the support solutions that we need. Airbus Defence and Space has also been held to account, but, following the problems with the engines and gear boxes, those parts will be replaced on each of the aircraft by the middle of next year.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Coming back to the fleet support ships, will the Minister tell us whether the savings from tax and national insurance of workers building these ships will be one of the criteria used for a successful UK bid?

Stuart Andrew: As I have said on many occasions when answering these questions, we follow the Green Book rules with the Treasury, but we will continue to have those conversations with the Treasury about the wider prosperity agenda that our defence industry brings to the UK.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Rates of pay have an important role to play in retention and recruitment, particularly perhaps among the younger, newly recruited members. What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to introducing the concept of the living wage to our armed forces?

Penny Mordaunt: I think that that is what we should be doing. Our armed forces have been exempt from that, so I have said that we must do it. It would mean a pay increase of a couple of thousand pounds for the lowest paid soldiers, sailors, airmen and women, but I think that that is what we should be doing. That is certainly my policy.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Canadians and Australians are applying to build more Type 26 frigates than the United Kingdom now is. Part of the reason is that they have invested in world-class purpose-built new shipyards whereas the UK has not. Will the Secretary of State review our 2015 decision to cancel the purpose-built shipyard for Type 26 and ensure that we get the investment needed to make our industry world class?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman will know that that was a decision made by BAE Systems, and it is ultimately responsible for it. The fact is, as I said earlier, that we have 20 years of work at those shipyards. I cannot remember them having such significant orders under the previous Government.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): There does not seem to be any lack of applicants to join the armed forces, so can the Minister tell us what progress is being made to shorten the time between application and the start of basic training?

Mark Lancaster: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. May I also thank him for inviting me to Armed Forces Day in Stirling last weekend? He was a wonderful host.

There has been a project to try to reduce what we call the time of flight. I am delighted to say that that has had good results, with the time of flight now being halved, and we are looking to roll that out across the whole of the recruiting programme.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): If the future accommodation model is pushed through by the Government, which looks very likely, will the Minister guarantee that no member of the armed forces will be pushed into the private rented sector against their wishes?

Mr Ellwood: No, the purpose of the future accommodation model is to provide opportunity and a series of options, whether people live inside the wire, rent or get on the housing ladder. That will enable us to attract more people to join the armed forces.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) *rose—*

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) *rose—*

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Ah, the three musketeers.

Drew Hendry: The number of service personnel in the highlands has fallen by 22% since 2012 and 10% over the past year alone. Is that a sign that the Government are starting the early rundown of Fort George?

Mark Lancaster: The announcement on Fort George under the better defence estate strategy remains as it is, but the hon. Gentleman will know of our commitment to our armed forces personnel in Scotland. I am sure that he is delighted that he will shortly have the whole of the submarine fleet based in Scotland.

Alan Brown: In a ministerial response to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), the Minister stated a whole raft of subjects on which armed forces personnel need support and advice. Did he not make the case for a representative body for the armed forces?

Mr Ellwood: I do not need to do that, because we have had this question so many times that I have given the answer so many times.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Let me change the tone. A service is taking place in Tallinn today to commemorate the 107 members of the Royal Navy and the five members of the Royal Air Force who fought and died for the independence of Estonia and Latvia. I am sure that the Secretary of State wishes to come to the Dispatch Box to pay tribute to those who gave their lives and to reinforce the United Kingdom's commitment to the Baltic states in their battles today.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to do exactly that. We owe those individuals a huge debt of gratitude. I was recently on board HMS Albion with the chiefs and Ministers of those nations and the other joint expeditionary force nations, discussing how we can take our partnership forward.

UK Ambassador to USA: Leaked Emails

3.40 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I know that many in the House, and no doubt—[*Interruption.*] Oh, sorry.

Mr Speaker: Blurt it out, man.

Tom Tugendhat: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the leaks from the UK ambassador's office in Washington.

Mr Speaker: Thankfully we will hear more from the hon. Gentleman ere long—hopefully very fully.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Her Majesty's Government utterly deplore the serious breach of classified information; it is totally unacceptable. As the Prime Minister has already said, we retain full confidence in the British ambassador to Washington, Sir Kim Darroch, for whom we have enormous respect as a distinguished and long-serving diplomat.

The Prime Minister and the British public expect our ambassadors to provide Ministers with an honest and unvarnished assessment of the politics in their country. We pay our ambassadors to be candid, just as the US ambassador here will send back his candid reading of Westminster politics and personalities. But it does not mean that this is the same as what the British Government think. A cross-Government investigation led by the Cabinet Office has been launched, which I can reassure the whole House will be thorough and wide-ranging.

Tom Tugendhat: I apologise for the slightly false start. I am extremely concerned, as I know many others in the House are, by the leaking of communications from the UK ambassador's office in Washington that has been widely reported over the weekend. I fear that we are developing a culture of leaks, and that will be extremely detrimental to the UK because leaks damage our reputation, have an impact on our ability to function effectively and undermine our relationships with our allies.

Although I understand that the Foreign Office has opened an inquiry into this leak, I have today written to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to ask that she also opens a criminal investigation into the leak. I have asked her for reassurance that all necessary resources will be made available to ensure that the source of the leak is determined, as a priority. I have also today asked the Foreign Secretary for details of the leak inquiry: who commissioned it; whom it will report to; whether it will be published; whether serving Ministers, officials and their predecessors will be compelled to participate, and what happens if they do not.

This leak is not just a problem for the Foreign Office; it affects the entire Government. I have heard already today reports of senior serving military officers who are increasingly concerned that the reports that they write may also not be kept secret. I have written to the Prime Minister to share this view and to ask her to ensure that

all relevant parts of the Government are asked to help to investigate the leak and to urge her to respond robustly to prevent similar incidents from occurring. I want confirmation from the Minister that this issue is being treated with the seriousness it requires, at the heart of government. He has already spoken powerfully to condemn it. I would like him to treat the issue with the seriousness with which he has already begun and to order a criminal inquiry. Does he agree that whichever parts of the Government can help to look into the source of this leak—including the security services—should be asked to assist with the matter urgently and that any actions short of these steps will send out a dangerous message that the UK is reckless with information and cavalier with the trust placed in it?

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and supportive statements over the weekend. I share his deep concerns about this unacceptable leak for exactly the reasons that he has clearly set out, and I reassure him that it is being treated with the full seriousness that it deserves. There will be a cross-Government investigation, led by the Cabinet Office. Obviously, it is not for me to prejudge the inquiry, but I can assure him, and the House, that it will be comprehensive and that, as with all leak inquiries, it will endeavour to report its findings clearly—and if evidence of criminality is found, then yes, the police could be involved. The most important focus is to establish who is responsible for this despicable leak.

Again, I am grateful that my hon. Friend's experience in the Army and in international affairs has been able to lend a voice of authority to the condemnation that we should all wish to express.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I also thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for securing it. We have already heard powerful statements from him, from the Minister of State, and indeed from the Minister's current boss—the Foreign Secretary—and the Prime Minister denouncing the leak and the damage that it will do to the confidence of our civil servants working abroad to honestly feed back their insights and opinions on the situations that they are best placed to assess.

Let us remember why this is so important. Forty years ago, the Iranian revolution reached its climax. The Shah's army withdrew to barracks rather than fight their fellow citizens in the streets of Tehran and effectively ceded control of the country to Ayatollah Khomeini. It was an event that sent shockwaves through the middle east and triggered deep soul searching at the Foreign Office: how had it failed to see this coming in a country that was regarded as such a close ally and such a vital trading partner? The concern was great enough that the Foreign Secretary, David Owen, commissioned an internal inquiry conducted by the late Sir Nicholas Browne into what had gone wrong.

The conclusions from Sir Nicholas became a cautionary tale for the entire diplomatic corps about the need for UK representatives abroad to keep making sound objective judgments about the countries in which they are based, oblivious to political bias or strategic interests. Kim Darroch was working in the Foreign Office when that report was published. He learned the lessons from it,

[Emily Thornberry]

and now he has been betrayed. He has been hung out to dry even though his only crime was to tell the truth. He told the truth about Donald Trump, and that was because it was his job.

I do not want to get into all the conspiracy theories as to where the leaks came from or whatever personal ambitions or rivalries have driven them. Instead, I have a simple question for the Minister: as well as the leak inquiry that the Government are now undertaking, will he also commit to providing an update of Nicholas Browne's recommendations to reassure all our diplomats abroad that when they feed back their reports they do not need to fear politically motivated leaks and they can—as, for the good of our country, they must—keep telling the truth?

Sir Alan Duncan: First, may I thank the right hon. Lady for her very measured response to this? I am very grateful, particularly as I know that she personally has some quite strong views about America and the current regime. She is absolutely right that the importance of candid advice is paramount. If that does not exist, our really wonderful diplomatic network is seriously diminished. Indeed, I remember—I am just old enough—the Iranian revolution and the conclusion reached that the then ambassador, Sir Anthony Parsons, had painted too rosy a picture, in his telegrams, of the Shah's regime. Therefore, frank reporting is absolutely crucial.

I can give the right hon. Lady the assurance she seeks that we, as Ministers in the Foreign Office, can always reassure ambassadors that, if they speak truth unto power, they will never be personally criticised for doing so. Indeed, sometimes the more awkward it is, the more we respect and praise them for their honesty and their perceptions.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that all our ambassadors are expected to report frankly and privately, especially on the substance of incoming Administrations in the country to which they are accredited? Will he confirm that Sir Kim Darroch, who was only doing his job, should not be pilloried for that? Should not my right hon. Friend also send a message from this House that Sir Kim has not only the confidence of Her Majesty's Government but the confidence of Parliament?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that the ambassador will be very heartened by the message that my right hon. Friend is asking the whole House to give him, and I hope that all in it share the view expressed by my right hon. Friend. Indeed, we do have full confidence in Sir Kim. He is expected to report, and it is unfair that little bits have been taken out of context, in some cases to sensationalise the contents of his diptels—diplomatic telegrams. Over the two and a half years of this Administration, his telegrams have been extremely balanced, and if they were ever to be seen in their entirety, which they might be in 30 years' time, the picture painted of what he has been saying would be very different.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for raising this issue and for the action that he has rightly taken. I also thank the Minister for making a strong statement; that is the correct thing to do. That said, there are Members

in his own party for whom everyone else is collateral in this Brexit mess and the damaging infighting it has caused, which has nothing to do with the best interests of the citizens they are supposed to serve.

Officials, and especially ambassadors, must be able to provide frank advice to Ministers about foreign leaders. The Minister recognises the value of officials being open to Ministers without fear or favour, even if others in his party do not. Given the seriousness of this leak, what action does he feel should be taken? If an elected official is involved, does he feel that that person is worthy of ministerial office?

Furthermore, I have seen some reports that people think it is a good idea to have Mr Farage as the UK ambassador in Washington. He is leading his second party that has been overwhelmingly rejected both by the people of North East Fife and by Scotland as a whole, and it will be rejected again, should he stand. Does the Minister agree that Mr Farage, with his extreme views, is utterly unfit for the post of UK ambassador to the USA and should have no place in any Administration of which the Minister is a part?

Sir Alan Duncan: This is not about Brexit. This is about an utterly disgraceful leak, and whoever is responsible needs to be traced and punished. We would make no distinction between a Member of Parliament, a Minister, an official or anybody else in trying to trace and punish who has leaked these documents. In respect of the hon. Gentleman's comments about Nigel Farage, fortunately, for the good of our diplomatic reputation, he has ruled himself out of wanting to be ambassador to Washington.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Although Mr Farage has ruled himself out, the question still arises of what the effect would be if Sir Kim felt that his position had become untenable and, instead of retiring in a few months' time as planned, he had to go earlier. One effect would surely be that an outgoing Prime Minister had a say in the replacement, rather than the new Prime Minister. Would it not be sensible for Sir Kim to be encouraged to stay in post, so that there is no temptation for an outgoing Prime Minister to appoint to a plum job one of her inner circle?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have no wish whatsoever to comment on the process by which any future ambassador to Washington will be chosen. All I will say is what I said earlier: we have full confidence in Sir Kim Darroch, and he retains the entire confidence of the Government and all of us who serve as Ministers in the Foreign Office.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is clear that whoever was responsible for this was not thinking of the national interest. The whole House supports Sir Kim Darroch in doing his job, which is to report home without fear or favour. Does the Minister think that the expression of support for the ambassador's position from the Prime Minister and others has been slightly undermined by the Foreign Secretary saying that he did not agree with the ambassador's assessment? It would be helpful to the House if the Minister could explain why that is the case, because it seems to many of us that Sir Kim was only reporting what lots of other people can see for themselves.

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was making a distinction between what is analytical reporting and what is said to be the view of the Government. In that sense, he was absolutely right to try to draw that distinction and he, I and everybody else have full confidence in Sir Kim Darroch.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): These toxic and unjustified attacks on the President of the United States and his Administration are completely—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Sir William Cash: They are regarded by many people as completely unjustified. As Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, I was more than well aware of Sir Kim's own prejudices in relation to the EU. Surely it is not his so-called frankness that should be the issue, but his lack of judgment that disqualifies him from his post.

Sir Alan Duncan: I regret to have to say that I consider my hon. Friend's intervention deeply unworthy. Sir Kim Darroch is a diplomat of calibre and of integrity. Nothing in his reporting from the embassy could ever be construed as an attack on the President of the United States. All of it was reporting of the highest quality, which we expect of our diplomats and diplomatic network.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I commend the Minister and indeed the Secretary of State for International Trade for defending our ambassador? Will the Minister take this opportunity to guarantee that our need—our desperate need—for a trade deal with the US will not stop our ambassador from speaking frankly, and will he also take this opportunity to dismiss the idea of the conspiracy theorists that this is some deep-state, anti-Brexit plot by the establishment?

Sir Alan Duncan: Rather, I would say that everything we are witnessing is a sign of a very deep and serious relationship between our two countries, in which so much between us is assumed, on so many layers in so many areas, on a basis of trust that nothing—incidents such as this could be listed among such things—will ever get between us in that way. So the relationship is solid and no conspiracies can be put forward to suggest that this is either a Brexit plot or a trade deal plot: this is straightforwardly a despicable leak and we will endeavour to find out who did it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Inevitably, however, there will be aspects of the ambassador's role that will now be much more difficult to carry out, won't they?

Sir Alan Duncan: But as with so many diplomats, Sir Kim Darroch has the style and confidence that will make sure that he can.

Mr Speaker: Marvellous!

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It is inconceivable that a leak intended to damage our serving ambassador in Washington came from a fellow civil servant, so will the Minister confirm that the telephone and email records of serving and former Ministers and special advisers in the Foreign Office will be part of the

investigation? Given the close relationship between the journalist who received this leak and leading pro-Brexit politicians, what does he think was the motivation behind it?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I have been rather puzzled over the weekend about what the motivation could be, because any kind of scenario I put into my head does not seem to add up. On his question, that will of course be for the inquiry. I would merely point out that one of the leaked documents was from two years ago and three were from about eight to 10 days ago.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my confidence that this episode is most unlikely to have any lasting effect on our relationship either with this Administration or with the United States in general? May I commend the Government for taking the right tack, which is to condemn the leaker and to back our diplomat?

Sir Alan Duncan: I certainly condemn the leaker, and I certainly back our ambassador and his entire team in what is an excellent embassy. I very much hope that this causes no upset. I imagine that some of the reports from the US embassy in London will be saying some quite interesting things about the state of our politics. That will not necessarily represent the view of the ambassador or the US Administration; it will be people reporting from post back to the capital about what they think is going on. That is what they are there to do.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Foreign Office simply cannot function or do its job properly on behalf of all of us unless a confidentiality guarantee is written into the whole fundamental system. In the 1930s, the British ambassador in Berlin regularly reported back in a way that sought to please the Prime Minister here, as well as the Führer in Germany. Is it not absolutely vital that all our ambassadors and high commissioners around the world are certain that their job is to tell the truth, not only about the country in which they are resident, but to Ministers here, whatever those Ministers may think?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who, of course, has experience as a Foreign Minister, so he knows this process very well. It is not the purpose of an ambassador to ingratiate themselves with anybody; they are there to tell the truth, and it benefits everybody when they do, but leaks of this sort make that more difficult. I very much hope that our ambassador to Washington will not in any way feel browbeaten by the media onslaught. He has the full support of every single person in this House of Commons.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): When the Minister for the Americas first saw these leaked diptels, was there anything in them that surprised him?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, because obviously I had seen them before. I have had the benefit over two and a half years of seeing all reporting of this nature from Washington. I say again to the House that it is very balanced. Picking out a few little bits that can be construed as critical of what were, in fact, analyses at a critical time in Washington

[Sir Alan Duncan]

politics is a distortion of the broad picture of support and understanding, of a very high quality, that has come from Washington over the past two and a half years.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): As the Minister has said, Sir Kim Darroch was doing his job, and the kinds of things that have been reported have been reflected in many other accounts of the White House, including in published books. What is more interesting is why this was leaked and what the consequences might be. We have already seen this morning a full, broad, nationalist, right-wing attack on the civil service as a result. What guarantee can we have that the new regime taking over government at the end of the month will not indulge in that kind of nationalist, right-wing attack on institutions such as the civil service and the judiciary, which are essential for a representative parliamentary democracy?

Sir Alan Duncan: The new regime, as the right hon. Gentleman calls it, will have to speak for itself when it has taken its place. There is something else that this House should condemn very strongly: the comments of Nigel Farage, who immediately jumped on the political bandwagon, as he saw it, and called for the ambassador to be sacked. For many people, what little respect they might have had for him will have evaporated even further when they heard that.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply to the extraordinary question from my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). Those of us who have had briefings from Sir Kim, both in his current role and when he was at UKRep, will know how balanced and professional they are, so I am very grateful to the Minister for the position he has taken. I also hope that a message will go out right across the diplomatic service, and to Ministers and potential future Ministers, that all the agencies resourced by our Government will be used in inquiries and that those found to have done this will really regret having done so.

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend serves on the Intelligence and Security Committee, and so is familiar with the organisations that I think he is suggesting should be deployed. The Cabinet Office will use all its means to delve into this matter and try to find the culprit. I wholly agree with him that if we succeed in tracing who did this, they should regret that moment for the rest of their life.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Sir Kim Darroch has always given honest and frank reports, no matter which party he has represented. Whenever delegations go to the US, it is vital that the briefings they receive are honest and impartial, and they always have been. A positive thing happened this morning during my journey to the station: so many people I spoke to who had tuned into Radio 4 turned off the minute Nigel Farage was brought on to comment, because they felt his opinion on Sir Kim was so appalling.

Sir Alan Duncan: I would rather like to echo everything the hon. Lady has said. I also heard him on the radio, and after throwing something at it, I switched it off.

The Washington embassy is a remarkable institution. The number of people who go through it every year is enormous, yet the staff and the diplomatic team cope marvellously—with style, dignity and a warm welcome—and make everybody feel they have been paid proper attention to. I commend them for everything they do; long may it continue.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does the Minister agree that if the person leaking has signed a declaration on the Official Secrets Act, then the Act would appear to have been broken, and a breach of the law will have taken place? The police will have to be called, because the matter appears to be criminal.

Sir Alan Duncan: The inquiry will be thorough, and whatever the law says, it will be followed appropriately.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses to these questions. He is always very balanced. Does he not agree that the leak of this information is simply not good enough and that steps need to be taken to prevent such leaks? Will consideration be given to amending disciplinary proceedings for those in public service to underline the severity of the consequences for their personal career and the fact that they may have to answer a case in law?

Sir Alan Duncan: We have the Official Secrets Act so that people can answer in law. Ministers are bound by the ministerial code. Whether there should be any increase in the severity of punishments that might be applied is probably a longer-term question. In the meantime, it is important that the inquiry finds out who did it and absolutely nails them.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend see any link at all between the timing of this appalling leak, and the fact that just over a week ago it was announced in the media that Sir Mark Sedwill coveted the position of ambassador in Washington?

Sir Alan Duncan: Forgive me, but I find these conspiracy theories rather tiresome. They are a diversion from the focus we should have, which is to appreciate the severity of what has happened; find the culprit; and unite, across the House, in making sure that we all agree on the matter and support our ambassador to Washington.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Minister and I share something in common: we both throw things at the radio when Nigel Farage comes on. Why the BBC continues to persist with him as a commentator is completely beyond my comprehension. That leads me to my question. Can the Minister assure the House that this leak was not politically motivated and did not aim to ensure that senior members of his Government could place a political ambassador in our most important embassy in the world?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have to give the same answer I gave some moments ago, which is that that smacks a bit of a conspiracy theory. The motivation behind the leak is difficult to analyse and assess. What matters is the fact that there was a leak. That is what we have to focus on and address.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress the enduring links between the United States Administration and ours, but can I pick him up on one small point? He said in answer to a question that if it was found—as it clearly should be—that a criminal offence had taken place with this leak, there could be a prosecution. Surely there should be a prosecution.

Sir Alan Duncan: Any decision to prosecute, as my hon. Friend appreciates, is a matter for those authorities who assess the evidence and then make the decision, so it would be inappropriate for me to suggest that something is certain, although I accept that he was asking about what would happen, conditionally. However, I hope he will appreciate that our view is that the investigation should be deep, thorough and severe, and that we should follow the law if we find the culprit.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): We need to call this out for what it is: the individual or individuals responsible for this leak have betrayed this country, and those attempting to justify it and to attack our ambassador and our civil servants are guilty of deeply un-British and deeply unpatriotic behaviour. I have been on the receiving end of diptels, and I agree with the Minister about how balanced they are and how crucial they are to good decision making in government—not least after the Chilcot report and what that taught us about decision making. Will the Minister therefore tell us what steps are being taken to increase the security around the circulation and handling of diplomatic telegrams?

Sir Alan Duncan: On the preamble to the hon. Gentleman's question, I say: well said, in every conceivable respect. I agree with what he said. A review of classifications and security decisions of this sort in our communications, and their distribution, will, I am sure, be looked at, but I hope that he appreciates that our first priority must be to investigate the leak.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): This is an extremely serious leak of not just one highly sensitive diplomatic cable, but a number of them over a relatively long period. I endorse the request from the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), and several other hon. Members that the police be called in and that a criminal investigation take place. However, until that happens, will the Minister confirm that the Cabinet Office inquiry, which he has announced today, will be led by the Cabinet Secretary personally, who, of course, has had experience of heading up sensitive inquiries in recent months?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Cabinet Office inquiry will be cross-Whitehall, and will report in the normal way up the line of seniority.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): There has been some speculation about how long Kim Darroch will remain in his post. Given his excellent record, and the fact that he is clearly talking truth, regardless of the possible implications for the relationships with the country concerned, would not the best answer to President Trump and some in this House be for the Minister to recommend that Sir Kim Darroch's term be extended

beyond the end of this year, so that he can continue to comment on the uniquely dysfunctional and inept Trump presidency?

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his extremely unhelpful ingenuity. Any decision about when Sir Kim finishes in Washington will not, I hope, in any way be influenced by the events over the weekend.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Whoever leaked these signals will have signed the Official Secrets Act, which means that they should not divulge anything "confidential", "secret", "top secret" or above. This is the act of a traitor, and whoever has done it, we should deploy everything that we have against that person under the Official Secrets Act.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes; our Government, diplomacy, ministerial activity and the actions of civil servants all need to be underpinned by trust, and trust means that people have to be able to keep confidences, not leak inappropriately—or leak at all—and not divulge information that should not be leaked. This is a total and inexcusable breach of trust, and without that trust, Government cannot function. I hope that the investigation that has been started will be able to find out who did this.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister's tone today is spot-on, and right and proper. Given that the leaks took place over two and a half years, will he examine how many people have had access to all that material? Will he also confirm that the United Kingdom Government, not the American Government, choose the ambassador to the United States?

Sir Alan Duncan: We of course appoint ambassadors as we see fit, in the interests of the country and the bilateral relationships they serve. As I understand it, the leaked emails are two years apart—one cluster is very recent and one is from two years ago—so it is not quite right to say they have been leaked consistently throughout that period, but we do not know if there are any others in the wrong hands that might subsequently be leaked. I say for the umpteenth time that I hope the investigation is successful and that we get to the bottom of this breach of trust.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Typically, how many named individuals would be on the circulation list for a diplomatic telegram from Washington—10, 50, 100, 1,000?

Sir Alan Duncan: Once the telegram has done all the rounds to all posts and various layers, I would guess the number is probably well in excess of 100. It will be quite a large number, but depending on the classification of a document, it will either be restricted or more widely distributed, so the numbers vary a lot.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) pointed out, the journalist behind these stories has close links to the Leave.EU campaign, and specifically to Arron Banks, who is being investigated by the National Crime Agency in relation to overseas donations in elections in this country. Given that backdrop, does the Minister agree that it is essential that we also look at the possible role of hostile powers in this leak?

Sir Alan Duncan: We do not at this stage see any evidence of third-party intervention of that sort. The first premise is that it is a leak from within, but we do not rule out any options, and that is what the investigation is there to study closely.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): This leak is both reprehensible and deeply unpatriotic. Once the investigation is concluded, will its outcomes be reported to the House, along with the lessons to be learned?

Sir Alan Duncan: I imagine that the results, whatever the outcomes, would definitely be made public—in what form, I am not in a position to say, but I am sure that if someone is found, the world will soon find out about it.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Cui bono? Given the untrustworthiness of the American Administration, and their filleting of their own Departments, such as the State Department, in a way that is ideologically driven, because they do not find them trustworthy, what assurance can the Minister give the House—I hope he is blunt, because I think I know the answer—that the future occupant of 10 Downing Street will not carry out the exact same type of ideological purge in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at the end of the month?

Sir Alan Duncan: Appointments in any subsequent Administration will be a matter for that Administration. We will of course have to wait to see who is in it.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): In common with other right hon. and hon. Members, I have had meetings with Sir Kim Darroch in the past, and they have been both a pleasure and an honour. We have a convention in this place that we do not name officials, which is why today's statement is all the more frustrating. Does the Minister share my concern that this is part of a trend? A clique within British politics is undermining the civil service, as was referenced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). It has attacked Olly Robbins and called for him to be sacked; it has attacked Sir Mark Sedwill; and now it is deliberately seeking to undermine

our ambassador to Washington. Is it not about time we put a stop to these people who are undermining how British politics works?

Sir Alan Duncan: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Standards of decency are slipping, and they need to be restored.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): This is an unprecedented leak, but is the Minister at least relieved that the incompetency and failure of the man who is likely to become the next Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is in the public domain, and he does not have to worry about the ambassadors of other nations doing a similar job?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, permitted to make whatever judgments he wishes to make.

It would appear that that was the last question. Let me say to the House, first, that I am very grateful for the cross-party support that has been displayed. It is a credit to the House that this exchange has been so dignified and purposeful. Secondly, let me reiterate once again our full support for Sir Kim Darroch as our ambassador. Thirdly, I hope that through your channels, Mr Speaker, we can also convey to the President of the United States our respect for him personally, for his office, and for the enduring relationship—which I hope will endure for ever—between the United Kingdom and the United States.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the Minister of State for the way in which he has handled this important set of exchanges, and I thank all colleagues for participating in the last 41 minutes of expressions of opinion and questioning of the Minister.

For my own part, let me say that this is an extremely serious matter. I last saw Sir Kim Darroch when I was in Washington in May and had an extremely good and informative meeting with him. He is not merely a highly capable but, frankly, an outstanding public servant. I simply want to express the hope, in the light of the rather venomous and misplaced personal attacks that have been lobbed in his direction today, that he will not in any way be cowed; rather, I hope and trust that he will be fortified by the expressions of opinion about that public service that we have heard this afternoon.

NHS Pensions: Taxation

4.21 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to make a statement on the implications for patients of the taxation of NHS pensions.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The Government keep public sector pay and pensions policy under constant review in the context of the wider public finances. For the majority of savers, pension contributions are tax-free. The annual allowance is a fiscal measure that operates across all registered pension schemes in both the public and private sectors, alongside the lifetime allowance. The measure is kept under review by the Government to ensure that the benefit of tax relief on pension schemes remains affordable.

Some senior clinicians face pension tax charges owing to the increase in the value of their pension accrual. I understand that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is currently engaged in discussions with senior representatives of the British Medical Association. The Government are taking this issue very seriously, and that is the right place for those discussions to be held. However, the House will recognise that the same tax rules must apply identically to everyone in the same situation, regardless of their employer. It is simply not possible for the tax rules applying to senior clinicians in the NHS to be different from those that apply everywhere else.

I understand that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is to publish a consultation on proposals for a new 50:50 scheme providing pension flexibility for clinicians in the NHS. The scheme will give senior clinicians in England and Wales more choice in respect of their pension accrual, and will thus control tax charges. Since last autumn, all members of the NHS scheme on the taper have been able to elect for the pension scheme to pay any tax charges now, and so avoid any impacts on take-home pay, in return for an actuarially fair reduction in their pensions.

I recognise the concerns that have been raised, and I assure the House that the Government will continue to monitor the impact of pensions policies on public service delivery.

Andrew Selous: The unforeseen consequences of recent pensions legislation, initially supported in all parts of the House, are now resulting in very worrying consequences for the NHS as hospital doctors who have regularly worked weekend overtime to get waiting lists down are understandably refusing to continue to do so because they are being made worse off as a result. Can we imagine a conversation between couples along the lines of, "So you are leaving me and the children again this weekend to go voluntarily to work to make our family worse off?" It is not going to happen, is it? The same applies for GPs, many of whom are now doing fewer sessions each week than they want to and their patients desperately need in order not to be made worse off by breaching their annual pension allowance.

We do not have conscription for healthcare staff; we cannot force them to do weekend overtime or more sessions than they want to, and it is not surprising that they choose not to if they are being made worse off as a result. For example, in *The Guardian* this morning we

learned of one senior anaesthetist who worked 27 Saturdays last year in order to reduce waiting lists and has now said he cannot afford to work any extra Saturday shifts this year because it would give him a large tax bill he cannot afford to pay.

Very few doctors have earnings that exceed the adjusted income threshold of £150,000, but due to the inclusion of hypothetical pension growth as income, doctors are being affected by tapering. This is different from what the Chancellor said in Treasury questions on 21 May when he said that someone has to be earning over £150,000 a year before the tapered annual allowance affects them. Taxable income and adjusted income are very different as regards pensions taxation.

The Government should also be aware that members of the imposed 2015 pension scheme had no option but to become a member of multiple schemes including the GP CARE—career average revalued earnings—scheme and as a result incur significantly higher annual allowance tax bills than those members who are protected members in only the final salary scheme. This means that all full-time consultants who are a member of more than one NHS pension scheme will be affected by the tapered annual allowance and will need to reconsider how much work they do for the NHS to mitigate these tax charges. Furthermore, this punitive pensions tax penalty means that doctors are not just working less but are retiring earlier than they would like to in order to avoid significant additional tax charges. In a survey of more than 2,400 consultants, more than half cited pensions taxation as a reason for their decision to retire early.

I therefore have five questions for the Chief Secretary. As the 50:50 pensions accrual option proposed does not remove the unintended consequences that are forcing doctors to reduce the work they do, can this be included in the consultation so that this issue is raised? Once the scope of the consultation has been extended to cover this essential aspect, can it then be launched as quickly as possible? Can the consultation be brief as the issues are well-known and well-rehearsed, and can the Government then respond quickly to it and if necessary legislate given that there is likely to be cross-party support for these important measures to protect the NHS? Can timely pensions statements be provided to all NHS staff who are affected by these measures? Finally, can the Government confirm that they understand the urgency and importance of this issue and that they will act without delay to prevent a deteriorating situation from getting even more acute?

Elizabeth Truss: The answer to my hon. Friend's first question is that the Health Secretary is currently in discussions with the British Medical Association and other health representatives about precisely what can be done, and of course the consultation will come out shortly. Some of the issues he mentioned in terms of legislation will clearly be a matter for the new Prime Minister and Administration, but the fact that my hon. Friend has raised this urgent question today will draw to people's attention the urgency of this issue and one would expect it to be considered very early on by a new Administration. The point I was trying to make earlier is that there is a fundamental distinction between how we deal with the issues in the NHS, on which the Health Secretary is leading, and the broader issue of our pension system, which is there to encourage people to save. That has to be considered in a holistic manner so we cannot

[Elizabeth Truss]

just design it around one workforce. It has to be designed to work for everybody in both the public and private sectors. That takes time of course, and we are working through some of the conclusions of the reforms that took place a few years ago.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for asking this urgent question. It follows a Westminster Hall debate two weeks ago on this issue, when Members from across the House raised concerns about the Government's mismanagement of the interaction between their pensions relief policies and the NHS pension schemes.

The worst-case scenario that we all feared has become a reality. Hospital leaders are raising the alarm that waiting lists for routine surgery have risen by up to 50%. Unless this issue is dealt with, there is a risk that the approach of the end of the financial year will lead to even greater levels of working to rule after the summer.

The changes that have led to these issues relate to the interaction of the taper, which George Osborne introduced in the summer Budget of 2015, with other rules on tax reliefs and the three NHS pension schemes. Despite decisions being taken around these measures some time ago, there appears to have been next to no communication by the Government with representative groups about this issue until the crisis had already begun. That is very different from the "constant review" that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has just referred to.

It is fair that tax reliefs should be consistent with other core principles of taxation and that the pension allowance should decline progressively for those people who earn high incomes. However, at issue here is the interaction of that system with the NHS pension schemes, on which the representative organisations maintain they were not properly consulted. Many consultants are only now becoming aware of their liabilities. I asked two weeks ago, and I ask again, whether the Government believe that their communication with those affected has been sufficient. Furthermore, does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury believe it is acceptable that many of those affected have not even received pension statements in a timely manner, due to delays by Capita? Surely that is only exacerbating these problems.

The Government have maintained—the Chief Secretary to the Treasury did this again a moment ago—that this issue will be solved by the 50:50 pension option proposed in the NHS people plan released last month. However, a number of representative bodies have already expressed concerns about this option. So my third and last question to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is: what discussions has her Department had with the Department of Health and with those representative bodies about the 50:50 scheme? It has been painfully clear from the Westminster Hall debate, and again this afternoon, that there has been an abject lack of co-ordination across Departments on this issue.

I am sure that many of us are concerned about the lasting impact of today's crisis. NHS staff retention is already poor. This issue is one of many affecting dedicated senior staff, with large numbers raising concerns about levels of stress and a general lack of resource. A whole variety of Government failures is driving these retention problems. Today's crisis is likely to add to this, with

confusion over pension relief pushing many to retire earlier than they previously would have done, or encouraging some to opt to take on additional private work. I am concerned not only for those consultants but for their patients. There are currently 100,000 NHS staff vacancies; that is one in 11 of all NHS posts. This latest failure will see yet more delays for people in desperate need of care, unless the whole of this Government, working together, get a grip.

Elizabeth Truss: We acknowledge that there is an issue. That is why the Health Secretary is poised to launch the consultation—

Hon. Members: When?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Elizabeth Truss: That is also why the Secretary of State is meeting representatives of the medical profession today. The hon. Lady asks whether the 50:50 scheme is enough and whether more can be done. Those are precisely the issues that the Health Secretary is discussing with those representatives of the medical profession. Of course he is working hand in hand with the Treasury to find NHS-specific solutions to deal with the problems that we all acknowledge and that have been raised today by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). We all acknowledge that.

The important thing to remember is that, while we need to look for NHS-specific solutions—which is precisely what the Health Secretary is working on—the broader issue of taxation cannot be looked at just for one profession. The broader issue of the pension system has to be looked at in the round and in the whole. I am not going to stand at the Dispatch Box today and announce an entirely new pensions policy. We are pragmatically dealing with the situation that has arisen in the NHS, and of course we continue to review our pensions system to ensure that it makes financial sense for those people contributing to it as well as for the Exchequer. We pay more than £50 billion-worth of pension tax relief and it is important that we get value for money for that—that is why the reforms were conducted earlier—but of course we continue to review the arrangements to ensure that they are providing value for money as well as the right incentives for people to save for their later age.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In west Berkshire and Wokingham, we desperately need to recruit and retain more doctors and other senior medical personnel. Will the Treasury look at the 60% tax rate that kicks in at £100,000 for a band of income above that? A lot of important public service workers, not just in the NHS, are caught in that band and are paying higher marginal tax rates than people earning a lot more.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point. In general, I am in favour of lower taxes and a simpler tax system that always rewards those who go out to work.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Tapering lifetime allowances have already driven many senior doctors out of the NHS in their late 50s. The issue now is the tapering annual allowance, which is reduced by £1 for every extra £2 earned. This issue was raised

in 2017; it has not just come to light. In May, the Chancellor talked about a threshold of £150,000, yet the problem kicks in at £110,000, and many senior consultants and GPs earn above that. The average extra bill is £18,500, but many have faced tax bills of almost £100,000. The British Medical Association survey shows that three quarters are citing this as a reason to retire. At the moment all income, including non-pensionable income, is included. That does not make sense, so can that be changed? It is not just earnings, but the growth of a pension, yet people might not live long enough for that to be income, so why is it counted? The BMA does not think that the 50:50 approach will solve the issue, so will the Treasury have open consultation and, because this is about interaction with the pension system, look at all the options? Otherwise, we will face a workforce meltdown.

Elizabeth Truss: As I said, the consultation will be launched fairly soon—the Health Secretary is looking at that—and people will of course be able to feed their views into it.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It is welcome to see a Treasury Minister answering this question; it was a Health Minister in the Westminster Hall debate. As a former cancer Minister, I was incredibly proud of our Government's 75% ambition, and I doubt whether there is a Member in this House who does not support that. The news from my trust is that this pension issue is hitting radiology, which is hitting cancer diagnoses. Theatre lists are being cancelled because we cannot get anaesthetic cover, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned earlier, so may I stress to the Minister the urgency of the situation? We need to grip this and fast, because the longer this goes on and the further it falls, the harder it will be to retrieve. Urgency is the key word here.

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure my hon. Friend that I spoke with the Health Secretary earlier today. We are seeking to get the consultation out as soon as possible. The Government have been working on this now for a number of weeks.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): This matters first and foremost because of the impact on patient care, not only through increased waiting times in hospitals but in patient's ability to see a general practitioner out of hours. May I stress the urgency of the situation, as others have? Patients cannot afford to wait for the extended process of finding a new leader of the Conservative party.

May I briefly flag up another issue? One of my constituents, who wrote to me recently to say that he had requested an update on his pension, was told that it would take three months. He was then informed that Primary Care Support England had not updated his pension records for three years and that he would have to wait a further three months once they had been updated. Will the Minister also look at the delays facing doctors trying to get an update on their situation?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I will raise that matter with the Health Secretary. It is for the NHS to make sure that its pensions are properly administered. As I have said, we are dealing with this

issue urgently. We are not waiting for the election of a new Conservative Prime Minister to do that. My point about a new Prime Minister was that general tax and pension reforms are not likely to be happening in the next two weeks.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Will she confirm that this problem, as she said at the beginning, was created in 2016? Working hard for a few weeks now is probably necessary, but it ought to have been possible, by paying attention to the representatives of consultants and GPs and to those in these sorts of areas with similar earnings, to realise that this problem should not have been allowed to continue for quite so long. Will the Minister's advisers look at the British Medical Association's "Frequently asked questions", which in February spelt out many of these issues? I ask, for the sake of those involved and the patients they wish to serve, that there should be a bit more speed—I almost gave it in Latin, but I might have sounded like a Tory leadership candidate. Get on with it, please.

Elizabeth Truss: I am strongly receiving the message in favour of urgency.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): My local hospital made it clear today that the 50:50 contribution proposal will not solve this problem because, as other Members have said, the problem is the taper. The problem is in the Treasury, not in the Department of Health and Social Care. How many more people have to wait longer for their operations before the Chief Secretary to the Treasury focuses on her day job and gets a solution to this problem?

Elizabeth Truss: The answers to the problems within the NHS lie within the Department of Health and Social Care, which is why the Department is launching a consultation. As I said earlier, we need to make sure that the pension tax system is designed around all employees. Of course NHS employees are extremely important, but we need to make sure the system works for all employees. That is a longer-term task, but we are specifically looking at the 50:50 idea in the consultation. No doubt the Health Secretary is talking about other ideas that could be introduced, and I am sure he is very interested in the right hon. Gentleman's views, too.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): We have created the most unbelievably complicated tax system. If working additional time makes the pension pot larger, there could be a 55% tax charge when taking those surplus benefits, and restrictions on the annual allowance are resulting in these large tax bills.

It is not surprising that many health professionals are choosing not to do the extra work or are simply retiring earlier. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) makes a key point, because extra earnings would take many of these people into the slice above £100,000 to £125,000, where a 62% tax charge applies.

This is not just an NHS problem. My concern is that we are putting a brake on those entrepreneurs who want to create enterprise, jobs and the tax payments of the future. A simple step would be to get rid of the lifetime allowance.

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need a simpler tax system that has the right incentives throughout. It is a major task for the new Prime Minister to ensure that our tax system is simpler and has proper incentives. My hon. Friend can raise these issues during the consultation, but there is no doubt in my mind that the British tax system is too complex at present.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am taken aback by the Minister's complacency. We all know that patients are suffering because of this policy. What can be done to ensure that doctors who want to do the right thing by taking extra work and doing extra shifts are not left out of pocket?

Elizabeth Truss: I disagree with the hon. Lady. We are taking steps to deal with this issue, and the Health Secretary is currently meeting representatives from the medical profession to discuss this in more detail. Wide-ranging reforms to the taxation and pension systems are not things to be wished overnight; they have to be properly worked through.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I add to the sense of urgency by speaking up on behalf of the chief executive of my local community hospital trust? This is affecting not only clinicians but senior staff, too. They want to continue in many cases, but now they are leaving. These are highly valuable, experienced people whom we need to run these trusts. Please can we sort this out as soon as we can?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right about ensuring these people do not face very high marginal rates and an undue tax burden, which is precisely what the Opposition propose—they want to see taxes raised for higher earners.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Chief Secretary keeps saying this is a matter for the NHS, and certainly the problems it has created for waiting lists and operation times are a problem for the NHS, but does she not accept that this problem has been created by the Treasury? The Treasury needs to look at how to resolve the problem, and it needs to consider what is creating these problems within the NHS, rather than passing the buck to the Health Secretary.

Elizabeth Truss: There are specific issues affecting the NHS that the Health Secretary is rightly looking at and is about to conduct the consultation on. As I have said, the Treasury constantly reviews our tax system to make sure that it has the right incentives in it and that it is helping people to save for later years.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): In addition to the important points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), would it not be simpler and fairer to restrict pension relief to the basic rate and scrap all annual and lifetime allowances?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his policy suggestion. I am afraid that during this urgent question I will be unable to commit to it, but it is certainly an interesting idea.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Constituents have been raising this issue with me. Not only have clinicians been affected, but patients have been left waiting longer for treatment, which seems totally unnecessary, given that the problem is that clinicians who are willing and wanting to work are in a position where they would not be earning money for working. They are not prepared to sacrifice that family time to come in to do those extra hours that they have been doing for many, many years. This problem could be fixed very quickly if urgent action was taken by the Treasury. I am glad the Health Secretary is meeting representatives from the BMA, but will the Chief Secretary make a commitment that someone from the Treasury will meet the BMA? After all, this was a problem created in the Treasury.

Elizabeth Truss: I would be interested to hear precisely what the hon. Lady is suggesting the Treasury does. The Treasury has to look at the pension tax system for all professions and occupations, and it is right that the Health Secretary speaks specifically to those operating in the medical sphere and the Treasury looks at the broad overview.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): For the first time, I find myself in agreement with the contributions from the Front Benchers from the Opposition and the Scottish National party. This problem has been coming down the track for at least three years and nothing has been done to stop it. The last thing the NHS needs is senior doctors refusing to work overtime at the weekends and our waiting lists getting worse, not better. The Chief Secretary has bravely come out to bat for the Treasury today, but we must avoid this silo mentality between the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care. This is a problem for the whole of the Government, and she and the Health Secretary need to get it sorted out urgently.

Elizabeth Truss: We are working closely with the Health Secretary on this issue, and that is the right way to do things; it is right for the Health Secretary to deal with organisations such as the BMA and it is right for the Treasury to look at the overview. The Chancellor has looked at this over the past three years, and I am sure the representations my hon. Friend has made today will be taken very seriously by him.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is the responsibility of the Treasury to ensure that all public services are operating as efficiently as they can be, and that remit extends beyond NHS England; it extends across all parts of the NHS in the United Kingdom. Indeed, a friend who is a trainee surgeon in Glasgow was just telling me that the entire ear, nose and throat elective list was cancelled this weekend in Glasgow because of a shortage of anaesthetists. That arose because cover could not be found, owing to this perverse incentive we are discussing. Will the Chief Secretary therefore ensure that she writes not only to NHS England but to her counterpart in Scotland to ensure that this issue is effectively understood and the evidence is collated from all parts of the NHS in the UK?

Elizabeth Truss: I will certainly make sure that is the case.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The workforce are the No. 1 priority in the NHS, along with delivering the NHS plan, but we seem to be dealing here with a case of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing. When the right hand of the NHS is rightly commissioning Baroness Dido Harding to do a workforce plan, the left hand of Treasury policy is undermining that. Will the Chief Secretary make sure that Baroness Dido Harding's work is fully integrated into the work she is doing on this.

Elizabeth Truss: Yes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Around six weeks ago, I raised this issue with the Prime Minister, who was sitting next to the Chancellor at the time, and I was told that they would come back to me. Since then, nothing has happened, and lots of my constituents—consultants and members of the public—are concerned about the deterioration in the situation at the hospitals. Surely the Chief Secretary or the Chancellor could sit down together with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and thrash this out.

Elizabeth Truss: I will make sure this is immediately drawn to the attention of the Prime Minister.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I place on record the fact that I am married to a GP, although she is unlikely to be affected by the changes.

I recently attended a briefing for Fife's elected representatives at which Fife Health and Social Care Partnership confirmed that an inability to recruit GPs means that the out-of-hours GP service in Glenrothes will remain closed almost permanently. We were given an update on the worrying number of GP practices—more than one in five—that are having difficulty recruiting and retaining GPs. The director of the partnership told us in terms that the pensions issue is a real one for medical staff, not just for GPs. In that context, it is not acceptable for the Treasury or, indeed, the Home Office, under reserved powers, to lob a hand grenade into our health service and expect the four devolved health services to fix the problem. Will the Chief Secretary tell us what assessment was made of the impact of the changes on the health service? Will she undertake to publish that assessment in full?

Elizabeth Truss: This is a matter that took place before I was a Minister in the Treasury, but I commit to find the relevant paperwork and send it to the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Chief Secretary accept that such changes to the pensions process make it seem not worth while for consultants to do overtime, as they are taxed at a high rate multiple times? Furthermore, this will have a detrimental effect on waiting lists and, more importantly, on people's lives. Will she be prepared to rethink the changes to ensure that those whom we need to work overtime and go the extra mile are not horrifically penalised for doing so?

Elizabeth Truss: A number of issues have been raised in respect of the complexity of the tax system and the need for further tax reform. I am sure the Treasury will take that seriously.

Higher Technical Education Reform

4.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the consultation on higher technical education in England at levels 4 and 5, which we have launched today.

Over the past year, the Government have undertaken a comprehensive review of classroom-based higher technical education, which provides an alternative to apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5. Qualifications at this level sit between level 3 qualifications, such as A-levels and the new T-levels, and level 6 qualifications, such as bachelor's degrees. As part of the review, we gathered evidence and listened to many further and higher education providers, awarding organisations, employers and others. The consultation launched today sets out our proposals to address the multiple related challenges and opportunities that we have identified through the review.

We want higher technical education to be a prestigious choice that delivers the skills that employers need, that encourages more students to continue to study after A-levels or T-levels and that attracts people of all ages who are looking to upskill and retrain. The proposals in the consultation are the next step in our programme to reform technical education. We want to build on the introduction of T-levels and our investment in apprenticeships as part of our modern industrial strategy to improve productivity and help people to progress in their work and in their lives.

The Government's review of higher technical education found that there is growing employer demand for the skills provided by higher technical education, but we also found that the uptake of higher technical qualifications is low by international standards, has fallen over time, and is low by comparison with other levels of education. Some higher technical qualifications and courses are well recognised and valued by employers and students, but overall there is low awareness and varying quality, with the range of terminology, qualifications and provider types creating a complex picture that is hard for employers and students to navigate.

The starting point for our reforms is to raise the prestige of higher technical education more widely and strengthen its value to employers by putting their needs and quality first. Improving quality now—to demonstrate the value of higher technical qualifications—will lead to increased uptake of higher technical education in the future. To do this, we are proposing an approach to make it clearer which higher technical qualifications provide the skills that employers want. This will be delivered through the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, signalling which qualifications deliver the knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in employer-led national standards. As we want qualifications at this level to be understood and recognised as high quality by employers, their involvement in qualification design is crucial, so they will be at the centre of our reforms.

Alongside our proposals on qualifications, we also want to grow high-quality higher technical education provision, boost leadership and encourage greater specialisation and close collaboration so that providers can more effectively and efficiently respond to the local skills needs of employers. We will do that by working

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

with the Office for Students to demonstrate the quality of providers, so that there is more high-quality provision delivered across higher and further education, including through our flagship employer-led national colleges and institutes of technology. The Office for Students will develop a set of technical ongoing registration conditions specifically for providers delivering courses leading to higher technical qualifications. These will align with the model used to assess the quality of applications for the institutes of technology programme and act as a precursor to access full public funding for approved higher technical qualification provision.

Finally, we want to make higher technical education a positive and more popular choice by raising awareness and understanding of the new suite of qualifications approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in colleges and universities and among potential students and, of course, their employers. We will improve the information, advice and guidance available to potential students and boost employer knowledge of how these qualifications can address their skills needs. At the same time, we will improve the accessibility of higher technical education through flexible delivery and improve signposting of financial support, so that as many students as possible have the chance to get the qualifications that are right for them.

We know that change will not happen overnight. Higher technical education has been an area of relative neglect over decades, and we want to work with everyone who wants to improve higher technical education. I strongly encourage everyone with an interest to contribute to the debate so that we can build the world-class technical education system that our students deserve and our country needs. I commend this statement to the House.

4.58 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement following on from the media coverage today.

Last year, the Secretary of State made a speech at Battersea power station, which foreshadowed the Government's announcement of this review today. Since 2010, Labour has said repeatedly that vocational and technical education must be put on an equal footing with academic routes to get the high-skilled workforce that we need. That imperative, given Brexit, has now accelerated, so we welcome the Government's statement, but while we welcome the words, a lot of the details are still lacking. Will this be an entirely new suite of qualifications, or a rebranding of existing ones? Will the Minister confirm whether the Government are unveiling a plan to rebrand the existing qualifications rather than actually delivering meaningful policy change, and where do degree apprenticeships fit in with this?

The Department's own policy paper acknowledges that Britain's departure from the EU and the end of free movement may also accelerate demands for higher technical skills, so does the Minister agree that the reckless no-deal policies advocated by both candidates for his party's leadership would damage our economy and create even greater skill shortages? Julian Gravatt, deputy chief executive of the Association of Colleges, has said that "we're nervous that the focus on reforming qualifications ... could divert attention from the post-18 review recommendations",

which Mark Dawe at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers has echoed. Can the Minister tell the sector which of these recommendations his Department will implement?

All year, Members from across the House have been telling the Department that FE funding has fallen to critical levels. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found it was £3 billion down in real terms between 2010 and 2017-18. Will the Minister commit urgently to a funding uplift to ensure those world-class colleges and providers can produce the skilled workforce we need? Is the Department proposing a national approval of qualifications, and will those qualifications be given additional funding?

The Minister talks about the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and of the Office for Students in his consultation, but with resources already stretched and concerns from the sector about delays in standard approvals and registration, how does the Minister envisage the IfA taking on this extra responsibility? What additional resources will be allocated to it? Will the IfA or the OfS be in the driving seat on delivery?

The Minister said that improving information, advice and guidance would be crucial to deliver the skills base we need, but how does the Department intend to do this with no extra resources available? This morning, the Secretary of State told *The Guardian* that he would be happy for his own son, aged nine, to take one of the new HTQs. Is it therefore not imperative that we start looking at and talking about information, advice and guidance in schools at a much earlier age—at just that sort of age—to spark inspiration and aspiration in technical careers?

What will be the status of the qualifications getting swept up in these changes? Will the Department ensure that qualifications are not just future-proofed but back-proofed? I ask because the Department tells us that mature students make up the majority of current higher technical students, and in 2015 over half of all HT students were studying on a part-time basis. Can we be clear that these qualifications will not be junked by the Government and employers if they have to retrain?

The Labour party has been developing our national education service and lifelong learning commission with the principle of progression at the heart of skills policy. To do that, we must have a proper feeder process for social mobility and social justice. This comes substantially through level 2 apprenticeships, but we have seen a 21% drop in them recently. How will the Department address that and get people to these higher-level qualifications? The Secretary of State says that students will move on from T-levels to a higher technical qualification, but can the Minister or the Secretary of State, who have failed so far to outline how students will transition from GCSEs to T-levels, tell us how students will move on from T-levels to HTQs?

A review of these qualifications is welcome, but given existing take-up failure with advanced learner loans, there is no guarantee it will be a game changer. How will the Government make it possible for institutions to get the staff they need to deliver more level 4 and level 5 qualifications? If T-levels are going to be a feeder into them, who is going to teach them: existing FE, school, college or training staff, recent providers, or perhaps graduates doing crash courses in T-level teaching?

This announcement will require a big infusion of money beyond the existing £500 million by 2022 and a whole new approach to prioritising continuous professional development for FE staff, which the Government have consistently ignored, will be needed. The Department's policy paper says that providers struggle to recruit and retain staff, so when will the Department address the fact that FE lecturers and other staff have seen their pay fall by thousands of pounds a year in real terms since 2010 and are still being paid thousands of pounds less than their colleagues teaching in schools?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. He asked a number of questions. I will attempt to address most of them, and if I do not I will happily write to him after this statement. He asked whether there will continue to be one type of recognised qualification at this level. Of course, he will know that there are individual examples of high-quality qualifications that are well recognised by employers—pharmacy, for example. These qualifications cater for a diverse set of situations and students, including people from a range of backgrounds studying for various purposes and a large volume of adult learners. We propose to maintain this diverse and competitive market through an opt-in system that enables more than one qualification to be approved against a given occupational standard. We want all higher technical qualifications that provide the knowledge, skills and behaviours that employers need to get the recognition they deserve. This is in contrast to the position for T-levels, where, as recommended by the Independent Panel on Technical Education, only one qualification is approved per occupation or group of occupations.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue of wider funding to deliver reforms. Of course we recognise that financial arrangements, or incentives, are important in delivering these reforms. We want to ensure that public funding for the delivery of higher technical education is focused on providers that meet the Office for Students's proposed technical ongoing registration conditions.

We will be considering funding proposals as part of the spending review. The hon. Gentleman has heard that from the Dispatch Box on many occasions, but it is an important consideration. We are also seeking views through the consultation on how we can support providers to develop their workforce and engage with employers through non-financial incentives. I remind the Opposition that the funding that is available for investment in apprenticeships will reach over £2.5 billion in 2019-20—double what it was in 2010-11. So more money is going into the system for these apprenticeships.

On the hon. Gentleman's slightly frivolous point about the negotiations with the EU, we do need to deliver a Brexit by 31 October. I am surprised that the Opposition have changed their position on this considering how many of their heartlands in the north feel about that issue, but I will leave it there. We have made no-deal preparations in the Department and I feel confident that we will be ready if that is the position—not that we want it to be. We want a deal, of course.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. I very much agree that we have to make sure that employers, families and those who might take these qualifications will understand that we are making the greatest advance perhaps not in

the last 70 years—perhaps in the last 110 years, since people like William Garnett started getting technical colleges going all over the country.

I hope that we will avoid the mistakes that were made a few years ago in the recognition of training centres, where Worthing College and Northbrook College, which is now part of the Met, in my constituency were disqualified from recognition because some stupid question had a tick-box exercise where, if the right word was not included, the college was disqualified. In the same way, no college in Birmingham was approved. That had to be put right. We have to watch what the apparent invigilators are doing and make sure that they see common sense in all they do.

Lastly, my hon. Friend's advisers ought to look at the words by Graham Hasting-Evans of the charity NOCN in *FE Week* today about the importance of making sure that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education has the capacity to do the job it is being asked to do.

Nadhim Zahawi: I take on board my hon. Friend's comments and advice that we make sure that this is not a tick-box exercise. I will certainly look at the words of Graham Hasting-Evans on the capacity of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. We obviously want to get this right through the consultation.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister acknowledged that take-up of higher technical qualifications is lower in this country compared with our international competitors. I commend him for the statement and its curriculum objectives, but would he acknowledge that the low take-up is not just a result of the curriculum but is about a deep-seated cultural resistance to young people going into technical education? It needs buy-in from parents, teachers and the careers service, and the capacity of further education to deliver. Will he undertake to ensure that those issues are addressed as well?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he has been a passionate advocate for technical qualifications for many years, since before my time in this place. I served under him when he was Chairman of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, and he advocated a similar view then. He is right to talk about the aspirational value of technical qualifications. Part of the reason for the move towards degree apprenticeships was to begin to deliver that aspirational value to not only potential students but their parents. I take on board everything he says. He is right that, if we look at the take-up, something like one in 10 adults in this country holds these qualifications, versus one in five in countries such as Germany. Some will say that Germany has a very different economic model, but the evidence suggests that employers in our country have a real appetite for these qualifications and, therefore, it is only right that we do this, and do it well.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. John Ruskin said that the value of learning is not in what one gains from it, but what one becomes by it. People, through the acquisition of practical accomplishments and skills, grow and add to the nation's productivity. I simply say to the Minister these two things. First, the hon. Member for Blackpool

[Sir John Hayes]

South (Gordon Marsden) is right about the pathway from entry-level practical skills through to higher-level qualifications. Secondly, good existing qualifications such as the HND and BTEC must be valued, because they are well understood by employers, learners and providers alike. I hope that, in this review, we will not end up throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and we will take account of all the good work that is done in our FE sector.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's comments. He is right to warn the House that we do not want to lose excellent qualifications that are clearly recognised. I hope that my comments in response to the hon. Member for Blackpool South reassured him.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I welcome the Government's efforts on higher technical education and their attempt to provide different qualifications as alternatives to university education. Renaming this form of education is intended to assist employers to understand the qualification. However, it may cause greater confusion for employers, because naming them "technical" qualifications does not take into account the fact that some subjects studied at this level are in the creative arts and are not defined as technical. Has the Minister taken that into account?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady raises an important point—we must never forget what an important export and potential employer the creative arts are, and our position in the world in that sector. She is right to raise that, and it is something we have to be cognisant of.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I very much welcome the work that the Department is doing in this important area of education. Last Friday, I visited Midland Group Training Services—MGTS—in Redditch, which has just been awarded a contract from Morrisons to train all its food technology engineers across the country. That is a major coup for our area. Does the Minister agree that it is really important that technical education responds to digital and creative needs, which are ever changing? How will we meet that challenge in the future?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for her excellent question, and I congratulate MGTS on its contract. She rightly raises the ever faster moving nature of the economy and its changing shape, including some technological disruption. That is precisely why we want employers to co-create these technical qualifications. I do not think that the Government are able, on their own, to move to where the markets are. Businesses understand that better than anyone else, which is why we want them to be at the heart of this.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) about how we encourage more people to participate in technical education and obtain the qualifications, what specifically does the Minister think we need to do about the fact that we still do not have enough girls and women taking up technical subjects? We are missing a huge pool of very good people who could make a career in technical subjects.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I spent a year as David Cameron's apprenticeship champion, looking at the introduction of the levy and making sure that we would deliver that well, which I think we did. She is quite right to say that we need to encourage more young females to think about technical qualifications and of course STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—which is dear to my heart as a chemical engineer. I certainly think that the best way forward is to have more female role models engaging with schools, making sure that children are exposed to the potential for a career from technical education.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Technical qualifications are absolutely vital, and I welcome the Government's move down this road. In South Dorset, or Dorset as a whole, we need a centre of excellence in which these technical qualifications can be taught. Weymouth College, on which all the young in South Dorset and around rely, simply does not have the facilities. What we would like, please, is a new centre, and that costs £18 million.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his rather opportunist question. I shall make sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who has responsibility for further education, is cognisant of the fact that South Dorset needs an upgrade of its college, or a new college altogether. I suspect that will be above her pay grade as well, but I think I will leave it there.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): May I draw the Minister's attention to the final question asked by the shadow Minister, my fellow Fylde coast MP, which was about the challenges in the FE sector in recruiting and retaining staff? I know from my recent visit to Lancaster & Morecambe College that FE colleges are really struggling to compete with other potential employers, which are not just schools in our area, but higher education institutions. What will the Minister do on that, and how can he address these concerns of the FE sector, in which pay has been held back since 2010?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I visit FE colleges because of my portfolio—they do brilliant work on supported internships for students with special educational needs and disabilities—and I have to say that I hear a similar story about the financial challenges, which is where all this sits. I hope that from my earlier comments, and what she will have heard from my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who has responsibility for further education, she will see that we are very much cognisant of the fact that more investment needs to go into FE. We have a spending review coming up, and my right hon. Friend will be putting her best foot forward in that negotiation. This is obviously to do with the challenge of finance in the FE sector.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My hon. Friend will have seen the announcement last week by Jaguar Land Rover of a massive new investment in the Castle Bromwich branch near my constituency. It is a real vote of confidence in our nation, despite Brexit. However, JLR needs an enhanced skills base. Does he agree that raising awareness

of any new qualifications is key, so that they are not just alphabet soup, and so that we break down barriers of prejudice about non-degree qualifications? No more targets—let us respect, as a society, technical qualifications.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, the JLR announcement was equally welcome in Stratford-on-Avon, because many of my constituents work at the head office in Gaydon, where, as JLR recognised in its announcement, a lot of its engineering know-how and innovation are based. He is right to remind the House that if we obsess over a target for 50% of young people to go to university, we end up neglecting the FE sector, and that is something we in this Government will not do.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's clarification that there is no desire to throw the baby out with the bathwater and that high-quality qualifications such as BTECs and HNDs, which have served generations of students well, have nothing to fear from this review; indeed, they may well do well from it. How will the Government ensure that this review builds on the good work that the Augar review did in recognising the need for growing capacity in further education if it is to deliver effectively for the future?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I am grateful for his comments about not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The consultation and the eventual infrastructure, if I may describe it in that way, should and will fit seamlessly with the Augar review and whatever we do on HE.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): This morning, I was at General Electric's transformer factory in Stafford. It is the only manufacturer of large-scale transformers in the UK, and clearly higher technical education and apprenticeships are vital for GE. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the situation for companies do not pay the apprenticeship levy because they are below the threshold? Those small and medium-sized enterprises are absolutely vital to our economy. Since the introduction of the levy, has there been greater uptake of apprenticeships among such companies?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He is right to focus his concern on the non-levy paying business community. We dropped the contribution from 10% to 5% to make sure that those SMEs can feel confident in participating and in taking on apprenticeships. We continue to monitor their progress.

Business of the House

5.21 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I should like to make a short business statement regarding the business for tomorrow and the remainder of this week.

TUESDAY 9 JULY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 10 JULY—Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, followed by general debate on tackling climate change, protecting the environment and securing global development.

THURSDAY 11 JULY—General debate on 20 years of devolution followed by debate on a motion relating to leasehold reform. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee on the recommendation of the Liaison Committee.

I shall make a further business statement in the usual way on Thursday.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I thank the Leader of the House for providing an extra day to debate the very important issue of Northern Ireland? As he is amending the business for this week, will he consider allowing a debate on the message from the Lords on setting up a Joint Committee? It has to report by 30 September, so could he further amend the business?

Mel Stride: First, may I thank the hon. Lady for her thanks—let us keep the thanks going—for the additional time for the Northern Ireland Bill? This important issue was raised during Thursday's business statement, both by the hon. Lady and by the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), and I am pleased that we have managed to come to an arrangement for extra time.

I take on board the hon. Lady's comment about the message from the Lords in respect of the Joint Committee, and I will give that further thought.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for the second day. Will he confirm whether this is a change of approach from the Government? In future, will they always, in timetabling, treat Northern Ireland business as urgent and give it extra time, or is this a one-off for other reasons?

Mel Stride: As to whether this is a one-off, we will continue to listen to the House and make sure that appropriate time is available for the business of this place.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I also thank the Leader of the House for the very short business statement? It seems like business is being organised on the hoof again. That was a feature of that Government's handling of business a few weeks ago, when any significant business seemed to fall or be hastily rearranged by a business statement like today's. Can we please just get back to business as usual? There is no reason why the Leader of the House could not have announced the extra day during last Thursday's business statement. I do not understand why the business has had to be hastily reorganised.

[Pete Wishart]

The changes might not bother the Leader of the House and his colleagues, who will get to spend a full seven weeks with their children during the school holidays, but we are right in the middle of the Scottish school holidays; we have to make arrangements, and change our plans to be here. I know he could not care less, and all previous Leaders of the House have seemed to care very little, about our childcare arrangements. Even my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), our spokesperson for Northern Ireland, has childcare issues this week.

Can we please get back to organising business properly? There is nothing wrong with announcing business two weeks in advance and sticking to it, like we used to do. Let us have no more business that has been hastily arranged on the hoof. Let us get back to something resembling normal in this place.

Mel Stride: I feel that we cannot win. On the one hand, when I bring the business to the House on a Thursday, right hon. and hon. Members ask me questions and press me to make changes; on the other, when we come to the House with a change, we are criticised for apparently making up the Order Paper on the hoof. I would say it is a matter of listening to the House. The hon. Gentleman has, understandably, raised this issue of school holidays, I think in the context of recess dates, in the past. I have said to him, and I say to him again now, that if he wishes to meet to speak about Scottish school holidays in the context of the business in this place, I am very happy to do that.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who speaks for the Scottish National party on business of the House, about the ordering of business. I am a member of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which met in Luxembourg from last Wednesday to today. Getting information about what was going on in the House this week was really quite difficult. I do not understand why, when there is so little business in the House, we cannot have notice two weeks in advance, as we have had for many years, so that we can plan our diaries, make arrangements and table amendments in good time.

Mel Stride: As I have already stated, while I fully accept the benefits and value of having advance notice of, and certainty about, the business of the House, the reality is that we should maintain the ability to be flexible, sometimes at short notice. Points were made to me on Thursday, including by the shadow Leader of the House and the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), about the time allocated for this business. I am pleased that on this occasion we have been able to respond.

NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION) BILL: BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken in two days in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be completed at today's sitting and shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at the moment of interruption.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken on the second day and:

- (i) shall be taken as shown in the first column of the following Table, and in the order so shown, and
- (ii) shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

TABLE

Proceedings	Time for conclusion of proceedings
New Clauses, new Schedules in Committee of the whole House relating to abortion, marriage or civil partnership, historical institutional abuse, or pensions of the kind mentioned in paragraph 28 of the Stormont House Agreement (victims' pensions).	Four hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.
Remaining proceedings in Committee of the whole House; any proceedings on Consideration; proceedings up to and including Third Reading.	Six hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(5) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill:

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill and, accordingly, the Bill is amended in accordance with Standing Order No. 83N(6)), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(10) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(12) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(15) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

(16) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(17) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(18) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.

(20) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(21) No private business may be considered at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.—(*Jeremy Quin.*)

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not certified the Bill for the purposes of the Standing Orders relating to territorial application and devolved legislative competence.

5.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I beg to move that the Bill be now read a Second time.

As the House will be aware, at the end of April, following the appalling killing of Lyra McKee, the Government announced a new set of political talks to restore all the political institutions established by the 1998 Belfast agreement. With the support of the Irish Government, and in accordance with the well-established three-strand approach, we established five working groups involving all five main Northern Ireland parties. Each of the groups has been led by independent facilitators who are all respected current and former senior Northern Ireland civil servants. Over the past nine weeks, over 150 meetings in a range of formats, including roundtable meetings with all five main parties, as well as the UK Government and the Irish Government, and bilateral meetings, have taken place. I want, in particular, to thank the five working group leads for their efforts in supporting this process and the parties for their constructive engagement to date.

There have been signs of an emerging consensus between parties on the programme for Government; the use of the petition of concern; and transparency. On the issues of identity and languages, and on the sustainability of the institutions, the parties have engaged actively. Here, too, there has been some agreement, but no overall consensus on these issues has yet been found. The two largest parties have, over recent days, been considering how an accommodation can be reached on the remaining and contentious issues. From the outset, the Northern Ireland parties have been clear that they want to see the institutions restored, but after nearly 10 weeks the people of Northern Ireland expect to see results. No one should be in any doubt that the fact that this has not yet happened is a huge disappointment.

While I continue to believe that an agreement is achievable, I also have a responsibility to prepare for all scenarios. Provisions allowing limited decision making to ensure the effective delivery of public services to continue in the absence of an Executive expire on 25 August. After that, the Northern Ireland civil service will revert to the restrictions applied to decision making by civil servants following the Buick High Court judgment, leaving Northern Ireland without sufficient powers to ensure good governance from 26 August, continuing indefinitely.

In a few weeks, Parliament will rise for the summer recess and there will be no further opportunity to legislate before the existing provisions expire. The Bill will extend the period for devolved government to be restored by two months, from 26 August to 21 October, with provisions that allow for a further extension of the Bill from 21 October to 13 January next year. A new deadline of 21 October creates the time and space that parties need to reach an agreement, and there is provision for a short extension with the consent of both Houses.

During this period, civil servants in Northern Ireland can continue to take decisions to protect public services, where they are satisfied that it is in the public interest to do so and with regard to the guidance that I issued in November last year. The Bill will also place a duty on me, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to publish a report to Parliament on or before 21 October, setting out what progress has been made towards the formation of an Executive—if that Executive has not already been formed. That will allow Parliament to have continued oversight in the steps that the Government are taking to restore devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Let me be clear: this legislation is only, and can only ever be, a contingency plan. Today, I mark 18 months in my role as Secretary of State and, in that time, I have stood here on numerous occasions to make clear my commitment to restoring devolution. The Bill does not change that and it does not—and cannot—remove the imperative for a restored Executive. Even with the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018, numerous decisions are going unmade—important decisions that are needed to improve the delivery of hospital care, reform the education system and improve major transport and infrastructure links. We need to see the Executive back now—not next week, not next month, not in October, but now. I will continue to work intensively with all five main Northern Ireland parties to make that ambition a reality and will continue to offer all the support that I can.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I absolutely echo the Secretary of State's sentiment that we would like to see the Executive restored now, but if we are going to put this right and ensure that we do not have a repeat in future of what we have had over the past two years and more, that requires reform and a commitment to ensure that never again can one single party hold the entire population of Northern Ireland to ransom and leave them without a Government for such a lengthy period. We need to put that right.

Karen Bradley: I want to make sure that we not only restore the institutions, but do so in a sustainable way, because the people of Northern Ireland deserve to see government. Not only is it 18 months since I took this job, but tomorrow, it will be two and a half years since the Executive collapsed. We can never again be allowed to go for that period of time without government in Northern Ireland. I know the commitment that the right hon. Gentleman's party has made to this, and the commitment of other parties, but let us be clear: the issues that caused the Executive to collapse and which have meant that we have not had an Executive for two and a half years remain, and we need to find a way to bridge that gap. I am bringing this Bill in with the utmost reluctance, but I am doing it to ensure that we have continuity of good governance arrangements in Northern Ireland. However, this is not and can never be a replacement for effective, devolved power-sharing, where locally elected politicians make decisions on behalf of the people who elected them. I know that the right hon. Gentleman agrees with that point—we have discussed it on a number of occasions—as does everyone in this House.

That is why it is clear that ultimately, agreement cannot be imposed by the UK Government, the Irish Government or anyone else. It requires the consent of

Northern Ireland's elected representatives. Twenty-one years after the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was reached, the need for all the institutions that it established to be fully functioning is there for all to see today in Northern Ireland.

We need to see the same spirit from Northern Ireland's political leaders today that drove those who made that historic agreement 21 years ago, but while the parties continue to work towards securing an accommodation, the people of Northern Ireland should not have their services put at risk. Responsible government is about making provision for all scenarios, just in case those contingency plans are needed. I hope therefore that the House will support the Bill and will join me in urging all parties to come together.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): How does the Secretary of State assess her duty to propose a date for an election? In the absence of these measures, would she have had to call an election in the very near future, or would she have had the power to name a date at some point in the future, rather than perhaps six or seven weeks after the existing powers had lapsed?

Karen Bradley: The role and duty of the Secretary of State to call an election is as set out in the St Andrews agreement and legislated for in this House. It is very clear that the Secretary of State has a duty to call an election, and there are timeframes set out for that. The Bill removes that duty, but it does not remove the discretion to call an election, if it is felt that it is the right thing to do.

I hope the Bill does not receive Royal Assent. That is a slightly odd thing for a Secretary of State to say, but I hope that the Executive will be restored before Royal Assent so that we have government in Northern Ireland and there is no need for the Bill. The Bill will ensure that all contingencies are covered. It does not preclude the Secretary of State from calling an election should they wish to, but it does mean we have the flexibility and discretion to give the talks the best chance of success. Ultimately, that is what the people of Northern Ireland want, and that is why we want an accommodation reached as soon as possible that restores the Executive immediately. On that basis, I commend the Bill to the House.

5.36 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I am also bound to remind the Secretary of State that it is 909 days today since Northern Ireland had proper governance. When the Secretary of State brought the original Bill before the House, 652 days had elapsed. I need to remind the House that this is not simply an absence of institutions; there is a vacuum of both politics and decision making that is unprecedented since the signing of the Good Friday agreement. It is unprecedented and very dangerous. It is dangerous for the credibility of the democratic institutions established under the Good Friday agreement.

The Secretary of State referred quite rightly to the brutal murder of Lyra McKee as one of the triggers that brought the parties back to the talks process, but it should not take the brutal murder of a young woman to impel people—be they the Secretary of State or parties in the Northern Ireland—to do their duty. The absence of power sharing is also directly dangerous. For individuals and communities, the absence of those decision-making

processes has meant things not being done, and as a result conditions are deteriorating for people across Northern Ireland.

The precedent in the past was very clear. The law is very clear. Where talks and elections have been unable to resolve a situation, succeeding Secretaries of State have brought in direct rule. This Secretary of State and her predecessor were not prepared to do that. I say to the Secretary of State, as she is entitled to say herself, that there has been a failure by the five parties—perhaps, more fairly, of the two parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin—to get round the table and make power sharing work over those 909 days, but she cannot absolve herself from her own responsibilities. Until the law was changed last October, there had been 651 days of drift, during which time decisions were not being made and there was simply no ambition to bring through that decision-making process. Serious decisions were not made because the Secretary of State and others shied away from the controversial decision-making process it involved.

The Secretary of State's critics would say to her—and I do understand this—that one of the issues is the Prime Minister's reliance on the votes of the Democratic Unionist party in the Chamber. A brutal and harsh reality is that if one of the parties in Northern Ireland has a very different status from the rest, that tips the balance. Another reality, however, is that this is not good legislation.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the only party in Northern Ireland that is out of step and, indeed, tips the balance in these circumstances is Sinn Féin, which has consistently refused to go back into Stormont although all the other parties would have gone back yesterday?

Tony Lloyd: I am afraid not. Inevitably, it takes different parties to come together to form an agreement. While I understand the political imperative of the finger-pointing that takes place between the DUP and Sinn Féin, the reality is that neither party, in the end, was prepared to reach a position in which matters could be brought to a conclusion—although I should remind the right hon. Gentleman that in the spring of last year Northern Ireland was very close to an agreement, which was then frustrated. We can look back in the history books—and I shall read the right hon. Gentleman's autobiography with great interest—to see how the blame is allocated, but what is certainly true is that people were very close to a deal at that time. So it does take more than one party to reach an agreement.

Let me now make a point about the adequacy of the Bill. What it certainly does is protect the Secretary of State from being subject to judicial review for being in breach of the duty to call an election if there is no legislative change or no Stormont Assembly, which was a real threat at one time, but I must disagree with the right hon. Lady's observation that the Bill is about good governance. It is not about good governance; it is about a very marginal protection for Northern Ireland civil servants so that they can make decisions for the people of Northern Ireland. However, most of the decisions that really matter are not being made by the Northern Ireland civil service, and not simply because of Buick. It was the case long before Buick that they did not have the capacity to make those decisions without political cover. The Bill is not about good governance; it is about a very partial way of keeping things ticking over.

[Tony Lloyd]

One of the odd aspects of this situation is the fact that the backdrop to the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive has been a period in which Brexit has been the biggest issue in United Kingdom politics, not simply in terms of the relationship between the UK and the European Union but, in particular, in terms of the relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland. During that period of the Brexit conversation, there has been no voice for the Northern Ireland Executive, no voice for the non-Westminster parties in Northern Ireland, and no voice for the people of Northern Ireland, who voted overwhelmingly—let me rephrase that; they voted significantly—in favour of remain. There has been no voice for the business community, no voice for agriculture, and no voice for the many people who have spoken to me, and to the Secretary of State, about the need for a Brexit settlement that will not be damaging and dangerous for the people and the economy of Northern Ireland.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The Secretary of State has spoken about an extension until 21 October, and the hon. Gentleman has been talking about Brexit. During that period, the House might well be very preoccupied with the dangers of a no-deal Brexit, and debating the possibility of our crashing off the cliff. Is this timetable sensible for the consideration of complex issues in Northern Ireland?

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend—has raised a very interesting point, and it is exactly the point that I was about to make myself. The two candidates for the leadership of the Conservative party—one of whom will, we assume, be the next Prime Minister of this country—are currently vying with each other to be the most no-deal Brexit candidate. That is very dangerous for Northern Ireland, and we know it would be disastrous for the whole United Kingdom economy. Those who read the article by Carolyn Fairbairn, the director general of the CBI, this morning will have seen a very well argued case for why the whole United Kingdom would suffer, but because she knows Northern Ireland she also makes the point that a no-deal Brexit would be massively dangerous for Northern Ireland.

The simple reality is that we know the following from many different sources. As the outgoing Chief Constable of the PSNI warned, the hard border across the island of Ireland which would inevitably follow a no-deal Brexit would become a potential target for the terrorists. A hard border, by making a target for terrorists, would lead certainly to members of the PSNI being put at risk and also potentially people more generally across Northern Ireland. Those are a serious warnings that we ought to take very seriously.

The Prime Minister said in an answer earlier this year that technical solutions effectively involving moving the border would still mean there is a border. Some involve equipment that could come under attack and some involve a degree of state surveillance that, frankly, I think would not be acceptable to the people of Northern Ireland. We have a very real situation here: a crash-out Brexit is massively threatening to the people of Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland more generally.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has expressed the view today and on many other occasions that a crash-out Brexit would be against the terms of

the Belfast or Good Friday agreement and this would cause many problems for the people of Northern Ireland. Does he equally believe that any attempt to legislate individually or separately for matters that should be within the ambit only of the Northern Ireland Assembly would also be outside the spirit of the Good Friday agreement?

Tony Lloyd: I do not accept that. In the end, Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. In the absence of governance for Northern Ireland, it is inevitable that there will be consideration here in Westminster of what that means for the people and the institutions of Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: If that is what the shadow Secretary of State really does believe and he is not just being selective for his own interests, would he not then agree that, in the absence of devolved government in Northern Ireland and given that there are important decisions to be made about infrastructure, schools and hospitals, he should be calling on the Secretary of State to introduce direct rule?

Tony Lloyd: I shall come on to exactly that point, but let me continue with this question of a hard border across the island of Ireland and the question of crashing out. The reality is that we know as well that there is not simply a threat around terrorism with that hard border, but there is also a massive threat to the economy of Northern Ireland and the movement of goods, including agricultural goods and manufactured goods, which is why the business community and the farmers union in Northern Ireland are both absolutely consistent in their view that that would be massively damaging to the Northern Ireland economy.

But there is a separate issue that the Good Friday agreement involves, and it is very different in the Northern Ireland context from anywhere else in the United Kingdom: the whole question of identity. Identity matters in the Northern Irish context: identity and respect for people's different identities is the heart and soul of the Good Friday agreement, and we simply cannot allow that to be damaged by crashing out of the European Union—a crash-out Brexit.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): We have heard so often in this House about a hard border; who is going to implement a hard border?

Tony Lloyd: That is not a difficult question to answer. The European Union would insist on a border across the island of Ireland. There is no doubt about that. There can be no question of Northern Ireland acting as some kind of back door for smugglers. I am old enough to remember the days when gates were left open on the border and cattle would wander across, by morning and night. Those days have not entirely gone, and we know that smuggling still takes place between Ireland and Northern Ireland, but the European Union would not allow the institutionalisation of any facility that made the smugglers' lives easier.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My question is along similar lines. Let me just probe a little further. I once asked the Prime Minister this question nine times in a seven-minute session without getting a satisfactory answer. If there were to be this dreaded hard border,

who would actually construct it? The British would not construct it, and the Irish Republic would not construct it. The shadow Secretary of State says that the EU would insist on it, so would the EU construct it? If so, how would it do so?

Tony Lloyd: The construction industry would itself suffer from a hard Brexit. The border would be constructed, and there is absolutely no doubt that there would have to be controls to prevent smuggling. This is a simple phenomenon.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. He says that he can remember the time when gates were left open and animals wandered across the border. He suggests that we would have to avoid that. I am intrigued by this. For the life of me, I cannot understand how he believes that the EU Commission, with all its powers, is going to be able to instruct cows not to wander across the border and not to find holes in hedges, gates that have been left open or lanes that have been left unpatrolled. Could he please tell us how this will work, because I am intrigued?

Tony Lloyd: I am always very generous to the right hon. Gentleman, because his questions are always interesting, if erroneous. The integration of the economies of the UK—particularly Northern Ireland—and the Irish Republic is massively more sophisticated today than it was all those years back. Creating a smugglers charter would be very dangerous. We know—I say this advisedly—that there are already criminal gangs in Northern Ireland who make their money and control other people on the back of the capacity for the illegal transport of goods, services and people. We should treat this with great care.

I will now try to bring my remarks to a conclusion. I say to the Secretary of State, to the Democratic Unionist party, to Sinn Féin and to the other parties that the cost of no Assembly would be enormous in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Indeed, the cost of no Assembly has already been enormous for individuals in Northern Ireland. In particular, it has been big for the victims of historical institutional abuse, at least 30 of whom have died since Lord Justice Hart produced his report. Some of those victims will be in Westminster on Wednesday, and they deserve resolution of those issues. Those who are already deceased will never see that justice. Because of the dysfunctional education system Northern Ireland, we know that schoolchildren are being denied the quality of education that they need. That cannot be given back to them. But perhaps it is health that we ought to look at most closely.

In Northern Ireland questions last week, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) rightly raised the issue of growing cancer waiting lists. There is a simple equation with cancer: early detection means an increased chance of cure; late detection means an increased chance of death. The lack of reform in health is costing people's lives. The lack of decision making as a result of no Assembly—because the Government would not move towards an insistence that the Executive should re-form, or towards direct rule—will now be costing lives.

That is exactly what we are debating here tonight. We will support this piece of legislation because it will be necessary to get us through the summer and to give the new Prime Minister, and possibly a new Northern Ireland

Secretary, the chance to resolve the way forward. We can support this until October, but to go beyond October would be very dangerous.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. This gives me an opportunity to apologise to the House for being slightly late for the beginning of the debate. We are here today because the talks process has unfortunately not brought forward a functioning Assembly. As we have not had any Members of the Legislative Assembly working in a functioning Assembly for two and half years, will he please join me in calling on the Secretary of State to exercise her power to cut the salaries of the MLAs? It is absolutely outrageous to the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland that, even though they do not have a functioning Assembly, it is still costing the taxpayer an absolute fortune.

Tony Lloyd: I am bound to have sympathy with the hon. Lady's comments. We know that the Secretary of State took those powers, but we are still waiting for them to be seen, and, as in other areas, we need to see action.

We will support the Bill tonight, but the Secretary of State told us in October last year that this was a temporary and undesirable measure that would be needed just once, possibly with an extension, and she has to recognise, as we come here again several months on to refill the bucket at the same well, that we are now running out of patience. The Government are running out of credibility and we do not believe that they have a strategy to move Northern Ireland onwards. We have to do better.

5.57 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. If you will allow me this brief indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is an opportunity for me to thank Members from across the House for electing me to chair the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and to pay tribute and give thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for making it a contest. It is lovely to see my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes in her place today. I want to commend and put on record my thanks to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). I also want to pay tribute to two hon. Members from the Opposition Benches: the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey)—a distinguished member of the Committee—and the terrier-like member of the shadow team, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), both of whom have announced in recent days that they will not be seeking re-election to this House at the next general election. No one can doubt their affection for Northern Ireland or their determination to progress these issues.

This Bill comes at a pressing time for two reasons, and the speeches from the Dispatch Boxes on both sides of the House illustrated them clearly. It would be remiss of me not to put on record what I am sure would be the uniform view of the Select Committee—namely, that it is unfortunate that we have to have another piece of emergency Northern Irish legislation. If we are to seek to deal with Northern Ireland and its politics as we deal with any other part of the United Kingdom, we need to try to remove the otherness of how we deliver the politics of Northern Ireland through emergency legislation.

[Simon Hoare]

That will be of particular pertinence as we move through the progress of the Bill and deal with the amendments, about which I will have a word or two to say.

The thrust of what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said about the *raison d'être* underpinning the Bill is clear and compelling. It was welcome to hear what the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) said about the Opposition supporting the Bill because, at the end of the day, politics can intervene in all these debates and issues.

This Bill comes about by dint of necessity and is informed by two pressing issues. The first is clearly the lack of a functioning devolved Assembly serving the people of Northern Ireland. As has been made clear in interventions and from both Front Benches, that 909-day absence should be a badge of shame and despondency for everybody involved, but it should not be an excuse to give up hope. As we know, it took the taking of the life of a young woman—a young journalist with her future in front of her—to kick-start the talks and to provide the imperative to get them back up and running.

The talks usually collapse at the end of week nine, or the start of week 10. I believe we are now in week 10. They cannot be allowed to collapse. If there is one thing that has heartened me over the last few weeks in my conversations with representatives of most of the parties involved in the process, and on both sides of the border, it is a clear and tangible determination to see those talks bear fruit. I do not detect that anybody is merely paying lip service to them or playing nice. People are now absolutely apprised of the political duty to make those talks successful and to get devolution back up on her feet.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern and that of many in this House and outside that, although many thought there would be change after the murder of Lyra McKee, dissident republican organisations were in Londonderry and other parts of Northern Ireland at the weekend showing their colours, strength and numbers? Does he not feel that strong action needs to be taken against those dissident republicans, who it seems have not changed their way?

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. The full weight of the law should be brought to bear on anybody, from any side of the debate, who occasions acts of terror, fear, the destabilisation of the economy or the disruption of civilian life in Northern Ireland. I do not care what colour they wear, what stripe they are or what faith motivates what they think they are doing; the full weight of the law will and must be brought to bear on them. I was very encouraged by the meeting I had, alongside members of the Select Committee, with the Garda Commissioner a week or so ago. I am seeing the incoming Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland this week, and I hope to hear from him, as we heard from the commissioner, an absolute determination to ensure cross-border co-operation in pursuing and bringing to justice anybody who occasions such acts, irrespective of who they are, where they are from or what their motivation is, to face the full brunt of the law. The ordinary people—the Mr and Mrs Smith of Northern Ireland—deserve that, and we cannot fight shy of it.

To respond further to the hon. Gentleman, this weekend—I shall be in Belfast for some of the weekend with the PSNI—should be a good opportunity for Unionists to demonstrate their passionate belief in the Union, and to do so in a responsible, peaceful way, acting as a beacon of what it is to be an engaged citizen in Northern Ireland. I hope that is an opportunity—I am fairly confident it will be—that those organising and taking part will take.

That is one of the backdrops against which this legislation has been introduced: the absence of devolution. The second, as highlighted by the shadow spokesman, is the timetabling of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. For those of us who are concerned about that and who have listened to and taken part in discussions with a variety of opinion—which for me ranges from the Justice Minister of the Republic to representatives of the National Farmers Union, with whom I was speaking this afternoon at an NFU summer reception that I sponsored—it is abundantly clear that it is in the interests of Northern Ireland and of the economy, peace and success of the island of Ireland for the UK to leave with a deal.

Some of the language has not, I suggest, given anybody who has an interest in, and affection for, Northern Ireland a vast amount of confidence. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) suggests that we should operate the border as we do between Westminster and Camden, it shows to me a rather woeful understanding of the history and the pressing problems. When the United States of America effectively says to the Taoiseach, “Go ahead and build your wall. I’m building one in Mexico and it’s gonna be great”—that word that the President always uses—that shows a worrying trend on this issue.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the language is very important. Does he agree that it is equally important for all of us, both in Northern Ireland and across the UK, to understand that this mythical concept of a hard border is not going to come about, not just because none of us wants it in the Republic, Northern Ireland, the UK or the EU, but because it would be physically impossible for anyone to build it?

Simon Hoare: I want to deal with that point, because it was raised by the hon. Gentleman's deputy leader, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), with the shadow Secretary of State. While I wish that what the hon. Gentleman has said were true, I do not have his confidence. We neglect two things at our peril. For the first time—they would argue—in 800 years, the Republic of Ireland is part, and will continue to be part, of the big team that is the European Union. By dint of its membership, the Republic has, perfectly properly, subcontracted—for want of a better phrase—to the Commission the negotiations of the withdrawal agreement with the United Kingdom Parliament. Therefore, any notion that representatives of the UK and Irish Governments would get together, come up with a plan, take it off to the Commission and say, “As far as we are concerned, this works,” is, I would suggest, for the birds. The Irish are just not going to play that game.

Because the Republic wishes to be an active, positive, proud member of the European Union, I do not think it is eccentric to suggest that, whatever it is that the

European Union demands of the Republic to police, protect and patrol the only land border between their single market, of which we will no longer be a part, and ours, that would not be an eccentric proposition. Is it an easy proposition to deliver? Of course not. It would be damn difficult. But as we know, where there is a will, there is a way, and frankly some of the proposals that we are hearing for alternative arrangements are for the birds.

Dr Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend is tremendously courteous. May I congratulate him on doing what the Prime Minister and the shadow Secretary of State did not do? He seems to have got very close to giving a straight answer to the question. The straight answer appears to be that, if the European Union decided that a hard, impermeable, fenced border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic needed to be built, the Irish Republic would accept its orders from Brussels and construct it. That seems to be the answer, does it not?

Simon Hoare: I will not go into the materials and whether it needs to be a physical gated fence but, in essence, my right hon. Friend is correct in his interpretation of what I said. The Republic will remain part of the European Union, and support for membership of the European Union is going up in the Republic. As has been pointed out by innumerable Republic politicians, favourable opinion polls rarely go down when an Irish politician sets their face against the will of an English or a British politician, and we need to be cognisant of that history.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman's belief that the Irish Government would give in to any demand from the EU that disadvantages their own country is not founded on any fact. The EU has been trying to get the Irish Government to change their corporation tax for I do not know how long, and they have refused to do it.

If the EU were to decide to put a fence along the border, and if the Irish Government were to accept the EU's decision, does the hon. Gentleman think the EU would be able to find the 50,000 troops to police that border? It took 50,000 troops and policemen to police the border during the troubles, and we still had the smuggling of guns, animals, cigarettes, alcohol and fuel—the lot. If they are going to seal our border, they need to think very carefully about how they do it.

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely on the money, and I do not think anybody in this House should in any way undervalue the difficulties and challenges of sealing the border. By the same token, we have never quite appreciated, in this House or in this country, the very deep and passionate belief in the merits of the single market and the communautaire spirit that exists within the European Union. I am convinced that the Republic will do everything it believes to be necessary to maintain its credentials as an active and proud member of the European Union and to preserve the integrity of the Republic of Ireland. It is, as I say, not an easy task to deliver but, if pushed, it is a huge risk to presuppose that the cards will all fall in our favour at the witching hour, and I do not think we should be doing it at this time.

Lady Hermon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his election as Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

The Republic of Ireland has never indicated that it has any intention of sealing the border, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Despite the fun being poked at the suggestion, any hardening of the border will do two things: it will embolden Sinn Féin to campaign even harder for a border poll to change the constitutional status of Northern Ireland from being part of the United Kingdom to being part of a united Ireland; and, dangerously, it will embolden dissident republicans, whom the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned. If there is any hardening of the border, any additional cameras or whatever, they will be emboldened to increase their violence, which is already unacceptable. It is lethal, and we do not want it to be renewed or encouraged in any way.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady is right on both counts, and I say this as a fellow Celt—as a Welshman—of a Unionist tradition.

Dr Julian Lewis: Hear, hear.

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is from Swansea—I am a Cardiff boy—but nobody is perfect.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is right, because we will play with fire if a policy is pursued that adds an accelerant to the demand for a border poll. It saddens me to say it, but I am not convinced that we, as Unionists, would win that poll.

Mr Gregory Campbell: We are.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman may very well be convinced.

I am also certain that, even if we were to prevail and that precious Union were to be maintained, it would open yet again, and one could not refuse it, a request for a second independence referendum in Scotland. I am saddened to say it, but I do not want to wake up to find myself a subject of the United Kingdom of England and Wales.

David Simpson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that if this mythical hard border were put in place, the Republic of Ireland would be the biggest loser? The leadership of the Republic of Ireland knows that its economy would go down the tubes.

Simon Hoare: What I accept is that the biggest losers would be Northern Irish farmers, which is something we have to avoid at all costs.

Sammy Wilson: I am sure the hon. Gentleman did not intend it, but does he realise that the comment he just made about a border poll and the likelihood of winning it is exactly the kind of language Sinn Féin want to hear? Of course, the trigger for a border poll in the Belfast agreement is a belief that the people of Northern Ireland have changed their mind on wishing to remain part of the United Kingdom. Is he saying that, in his short time as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, he has detected such a change, despite the fact that election results show a vast majority of people still believe that the Union is the right option?

Simon Hoare: As any of us who campaigned to remain part of the European Union will understand, it is rather risky to risk something as precious as our Union through a border poll. I hope this will give some comfort to the right hon. Gentleman: I did not say what I said about adding an accelerant to the narrative agitating for a border poll to give succour in any way, shape or form to those who require it. It will simply boil down to demographic mathematics to some extent.

I always think of Chamberlain's extraordinary line about Czechoslovakia being a faraway country of which we know little, and the one thing we have to understand is that too many people in Great Britain view the politics of the island of Ireland, north or south of the border, as being distant, faraway, different and other. Most of us are bewildered by the lack of interest in and knowledge of the affairs of an important part of our United Kingdom.

We have to understand that those who wish to reunite the island of Ireland—I make it clear that I am not one of them—would point to the fact that the Republic is a modern, liberal, outward-looking European state. It is not the Republic of Ireland of 25, 30 or 40 years ago. The country has changed, and people's perceptions of it have changed, too. I do not want to be part of anything that risks fragmenting and fracturing our United Kingdom. The ramifications of doing that would be enormous for Northern Ireland and for Scotland, and it would fundamentally undermine the integrity of the United Kingdom. That is why I support the Bill brought forward by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State: it dots the i's and crosses the t's, allowing civil servants to continue implementing existing policies while two important matters are, we hope, brought to a successful conclusion.

What are those two important policies? The first is a successful restoration of Stormont. We need a fully functioning devolved Assembly, to provide the plurality of views of Northern Irish society and give confidence to the Government of the Republic, the European Commission and Westminster that a stable, devolved Assembly is functioning in Belfast. The second key criterion is successfully landing a deal that works for the United Kingdom as a whole, the Republic of Ireland and the Commission. If we can get that right, in this shortening window of time—the timetable is reflected in the Bill—we are all off to the races; everybody will have had their piece of cake and will have got the result they need. But a no-deal exit, and no restoration of devolution, would be a bad recipe, made of unpalatable ingredients, to ask the residents and citizens of Northern Ireland to digest. I hope that this House will stand firm in supporting the Bill and setting its face against either of those outcomes, which would be deleterious to the people of Northern Ireland.

6.21 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the lecture—sorry, the contribution—of the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), whom I congratulate on his election to Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I found myself agreeing with much of his contribution, which is unusual, but it was good to see him trying to win friends and influence people on the Democratic Unionist party Benches so early in his reign.

There have been developments in the situation in Northern Ireland, both positive and tragic, since the last time we debated this extension, meaning that I have not simply dusted down my last contribution on the subject, although elements will remain familiar. The positive developments have of course, sadly, been driven by the shocking terrorist murder of Lyra McKee, whose loss is still felt deeply across Northern Ireland, but it would be remiss of me not to welcome the talks that have been ongoing since May. In wishing all parties involved well, I urge all of them to be open-minded and open to concession in order to bring about the restoration of not only the Assembly and devolved government, but democracy itself to the people of Northern Ireland, and to do that as quickly as humanly possible.

Nevertheless, I have to reiterate once again that we are extremely disappointed that it has come to this. We, of course, accept that in the circumstances, amid the ongoing legislative vacuum in Northern Ireland, this Bill is again necessary. On the subject of developments, we welcome the Government response, published on Friday, to the submissions to the legacy consultation. Dealing with the legacy of the conflict and meeting the needs of victims and survivors has remained one of the pieces missing from the peace process. It is vital that this issue be dealt with in a comprehensive and inclusive fashion; all sides and all victims must feel that their specific hurt has been addressed and that their needs have been met. There have been a number of consultations over the past decade, but what has been missing is the political will to implement the recommendations that have come from these various reports. The SNP has certainly supported the implementation of the legacy institutions that were agreed by the Governments and the Northern Irish parties in the Stormont House agreement in December 2014.

The SNP believes it is essential that devolved government finally returns to Northern Ireland. In the face of the threat of a no-deal Brexit, the political vacuum cannot be allowed to continue. The murder of Lyra McKee was a terrible reminder of the dangers that a political vacuum can cause in Northern Ireland. Politics must be seen to be working again.

The SNP also welcomes the continued attempts by the two Governments and the political parties to secure a return to local government in Northern Ireland, but it is important that the passing of this Bill is not seen as a sign that the ongoing talks can be delayed until the autumn. To be fair, the Secretary of State said that in her opening remarks. Put simply, the people of Northern Ireland have been waiting too long without a Government. Public services, already facing severe financial strain, have been doubly impacted by the absence of vital political decision making and direction. The Northern Ireland civil service must be commended for its efforts over the past two and a half years, but the limited powers afforded to departmental leads is no substitute for a functioning Government.

Particularly amid ongoing austerity, the absence of decision making is straining Northern Irish public services. Decisions are urgently required to provide direction and funding to those services. As we have heard time and again in this place, current conditions are placing particular pressures on health and education. Let me give one example. Figures released in June showed that some

87,500 patients were waiting to be admitted to hospitals in Northern Ireland, which is an increase of 8.5% on the figure for the same period last year. The Prime Minister can make any amount of desperate speeches about reforms to devolution, but it is intolerable to have budgets for Northern Ireland being passed in this place.

A no-deal Brexit would fundamentally undermine the political settlement achieved in Northern Ireland and across the island of Ireland in 1998. The outgoing Chief Constable, George Hamilton, and the Garda commissioner have confirmed that a no-deal Brexit would necessitate additional security along the border. In addition, the UK's own economic analysis, released in November 2018, showed that GDP in Northern Ireland would take a hit of 9%. Sadly but unsurprisingly, both Tory leadership candidates have refused to rule out no deal, despite the stark warnings of what it would mean politically and economically in Northern Ireland.

It is a fundamental problem that Northern Ireland has been without a Government throughout the entire article 50 process. It is unacceptable that the region that will be most affected by Brexit has had no official input. The UK Government have consistently ignored the fact that the people of Northern Ireland voted to remain in the European Union, just as those in Scotland did. The confidence and supply agreement between the Tories and the DUP has not just denied Scotland billions, but undermined the delicate balance of political relationships in Northern Ireland. Both the British and Irish Governments have been tasked with being co-guarantors of the Good Friday agreement. The criticism has been repeatedly made that the UK Government, constrained by the deal with the DUP in Westminster, have failed to apply political pressure in the talks when necessary for fear of the consequences to their slim majority in this House.

Lady Hermon: Let me put a scenario to the hon. Gentleman. Does he believe that if MSPs did not sit for two and a half years, the people of Scotland would be happy for them still to receive their salary, with just one cut having been made? Will the SNP therefore join me—I have called on the Labour party to do this—in calling on the Secretary of State to use her power to reduce the salaries of the Members of the Legislative Assembly? We have no functioning Assembly and no expectation of having one any day soon, and it is a disgrace that MLAs continue to receive their salaries. Will he endorse that view?

Gavin Newlands: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have sympathy with what she says about the MLAs' salary situation, because it is imperative that they get to the table and get the Government back up and running, but this is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland; SNP Members do not generally vote on or intervene in these issues.

Lady Hermon: I listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said in the earlier part of his speech. He mentioned the pressure on finances for hospitals and for our health and education services in Northern Ireland. Will he reflect on what he has just said? I would be more convinced that he was worried about those issues if he

were to reflect on the fact that MLAs have received well over £12 million in salary since the Assembly collapsed in January 2017.

Gavin Newlands: I hear what the hon. Lady says, and she is obviously and understandably passionate about the issue, but it is for the parties in Northern Ireland to get back to work and justify their salary. It is not for the SNP and its Members to justify that situation; it is for the MLAs and the parties in Northern Ireland to do that.

The confidence and supply deal has also undermined the devolved settlement by breaching the Barnett formula, and so denying the Scottish people a total of £3.4 billion thus far. If a new confidence and supply deal is struck with a new Prime Minister in the coming weeks, there simply must be a guarantee that any financial package will be subject to Barnett, and that Scotland will receive its fair share of central Government spending.

On the importance of restoring Stormont, I turn back to Brexit, which is wreaking havoc on every aspect of politics on these islands. Indeed, it has cost the Prime Minister her job and looks likely to lumber us with the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Despite the Conservatives' hustings over in Northern Ireland, the complete ignorance shown by the would-be Prime Ministers has been shocking, as the hon. Member for North Dorset illustrated. No doubt that has been frustrating, to say the least, for the Secretary of State, particularly at this sensitive time.

The broader instability caused by Brexit is a central reason why it has proven so difficult to restore the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. There are many reasons why the Executive and the Assembly collapsed, but Brexit has prolonged the impasse. The fate of Brexit is in many ways tied to the process in Northern Ireland, so it is vital that Northern Ireland's voice be heard. As Members may have heard said from these Benches on the odd occasion, Scotland voted by 62% to remain in the EU, but it also bears repeating that 56% of voters in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. The Government have continued to ignore those voices, and now we all face a new Prime Minister seemingly hellbent on a hard Brexit and the economic vandalism that that will bring.

As we all know, Northern Ireland will be hit hardest by a disastrous no-deal scenario. All sectors state that that must be avoided at all costs. According to the Government's own figures, crashing out would shrink the Northern Irish economy by 9%. Business leaders have warned that that would be the equivalent of another financial crisis. All this despite the fact that the people of Northern Ireland voted to remain. Such massive economic damage could easily be avoided if the UK decided to revoke article 50 and keep the best possible deal for all parties, which is full EU membership. It is, of course, also open to the UK to pursue a policy of staying in the European single market and customs union; there would then be no need for new economic land or sea borders, and trade and relationships—business and personal—would continue to flourish between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and beyond.

To conclude, we will not oppose the Bill for all the reasons I have outlined. On the various amendments tabled by the Labour Front-Bench team and others for Committee tomorrow, it is a long-held principle that we

[Gavin Newlands]

on the SNP Benches do not vote on matters devolved to other parts of the UK that solely affect that country. We are not blind to the circumstances in Northern Ireland, but we intend to stick to that principle.

I have spoken to campaigners on the issues concerned, and have been open and honest with them. Whether or not we as individual Members of Parliament are sympathetic to their cause, we fundamentally believe that legislation must be made with the agreement of the people or their representatives. I recognise that that position may displease some, but these issues and many others highlight the real and urgent necessity for the talks to succeed quickly. We sincerely hope this is the last time that a Secretary of State has to come to the House to seek such an extension, and wish her and all the parties involved the very best as they try to restore the democratic institutions of Northern Ireland.

6.32 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands).

I seem to be one of the few people in the Chamber who feels uncomfortable with the legislation. It is now two and a half years—a world record—since the Assembly last sat. Every week since then, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has heard about the impact that having no devolved government is having on the ordinary lives of ordinary people in Northern Ireland, whichever community they are from. We have heard about Police Service of Northern Ireland funding; about the fact that Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom without a cancer strategy; and about the suicide strategy. Suicides have doubled since the Good Friday agreement, yet the Protect Life 2 strategy is gathering dust on a shelf somewhere in Stormont, while young men in particular are taking their own lives.

We have heard about equal marriage and abortion. I think most people know my views on abortion, but the devolved Assembly must be the place to make such decisions. The absence of any decision making means that people who want to spend the rest of their lives together are not able to do so.

We have heard about air passenger duty, which may seem a minimal issue by comparison to some of these life-and-death decisions, but it is an area of co-operation under the Good Friday agreement. The Select Committee recently heard about the impact of air passenger duty on short-haul flights and the difference that is making to Northern Ireland's economy compared with that of the Republic of Ireland, where there is no air passenger duty. That might seem a trivial example, but it is a massive issue for the economy of Northern Ireland.

On school reforms, we have heard from Sir Robert Salisbury himself about the imperative to reform schools, particularly rural ones, in Northern Ireland, but the civil servants there cannot make a decision because political judgments need to be made.

Although necessary, this legislation is just kicking the can down the road. The Select Committee heard from MLAs from various parties that there is unlikely to be an Assembly. We have to be realistic here: we can keep saying that we wish they would get back round the table, that we want them to get back round the table and that

we want an Assembly, but the reality is that MLAs are saying to us that it is unlikely that there will be a functioning Assembly before the end of the year, so we are heading towards three years without an Assembly for the people of Northern Ireland, with no decisions being made.

What are we saying to the civil servants in Northern Ireland? We have heard about the Buick ruling. Every day, the civil service there is making difficult decisions that they could be challenged on in court. These civil servants did not go into their jobs to have to make political decisions in the absence of Ministers. With the can kicking we see with this legislation, we are enabling parties such as Sinn Féin to keep going round in circles and not to get back seriously to the table.

I fully agree with the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) about MLAs' salaries. It was £9 million and it is now £12 million that has been spent on their salaries, although the Secretary of State has reduced their salaries quite significantly. They say they are doing constituency work, but while they are being paid a decent salary—probably more than the average man and woman in Northern Ireland—they have no incentive to get back round the table. There are MPs in Northern Ireland who can do that constituency casework, and there are now MEPs in Northern Ireland who can do that constituency casework. Until MLAs' salaries are reduced significantly, if not completely, they have no incentive to get back round the table.

We are now starting to see cross-community marches throughout Northern Ireland. We had the “We deserve better” marches: 14 organised protests with thousands of people joining rallies to demand that their elected representatives get back to work and get back to running Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland absolutely deserve better.

In this place, we need to show leadership. We need to take hold of the situation and look at the various issues. For me, there are three options on the table for us here. I am not in favour of direct rule in any shape or form, but we have to look at some of the significant issues and, in the absence of an Assembly, ask the people of Northern Ireland which issues that matter to them they want legislation to be passed on first.

We passed some small-scale legislation on the renewable heat incentive, but because we had to do that in such a rushed, emergency way, we did not make a very good fist of it. We now see farmers in Northern Ireland being paid significantly less for their tariffs compared with competitors in the UK and southern Ireland.

On institutional abuse, David Sterling has begged for this place to pass legislation because, as we have heard, more than 30 people who were affected and abused have died waiting for compensation. People want justice and they want compensation.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the issue of historical institutional abuse. Does it concern her that there are people in this Chamber who are perhaps more concerned about other issues that divide people in Northern Ireland than about something like historical institutional abuse, which unites all the political parties? It is something that we could be doing together, united, rather than some of the issues in tomorrow's amendments that are going to divide people very much.

Maria Caulfield: I fully support what the hon. Lady says, because issues such as historical institutional abuse have cross-party support in Northern Ireland and in this place and would be quick and easy to deal with. That would bring justice to those people who suffered at the hands of institutions over many years.

Ian Paisley: I wholeheartedly agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). Other issues include the contaminated blood scandal, which is another issue on which there is cross-party support. It would not be controversial and could be done, but it is not being done; instead, people seem to want to pick at a particular crisis point that causes great anxiety and, indeed, great opposition across parties and across the community in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Lady agree that some of the proposals and some of the amendments would result in really bad legislation on issues that people care passionately about?

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely agree that it is important. We know from the emergency legislation on the renewable heat incentive that we passed in this place a few weeks ago that, when we rush through legislation and attach it to other pieces of legislation, it does not work out well. There is absolutely no scrutiny of what is happening in Northern Ireland. It is only the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that is doing any scrutiny at the moment, so this is a case not just of who is passing the legislation, but of what scrutiny is happening to ensure that that legislation is effective.

Although from my perspective—as someone who comes from an Irish nationalist Catholic community in the south of Ireland—it would break my heart to see direct rule imposed on Northern Ireland, we cannot in all honesty let the current situation go on. The history books tell us about the civil rights movements in Northern Ireland in the '60s when Catholic Irish communities fought for one man, one vote. We celebrated 100 years of women getting the vote, but the Catholic communities in Northern Ireland have only had a vote since the '60s. They have one man, one vote, but no representation in this place and now no representation in Stormont. I would prefer that we were passing legislation in this place on issues that unite people, such as those related to contaminated blood and historical abuse—issues that make a real difference and that have a real impact on people's lives.

I have already touched on the suicide strategy. Death rates from suicides have doubled in the 20 years since the Good Friday agreement was signed. Establishing a strategy would make a real difference and save lives. There is no mental capacity legislation in Northern Ireland, and yet, a few months ago, we replaced the existing mental capacity legislation here with updated legislation to protect healthcare professionals, who make difficult choices for people who have lost the ability to make decisions, and to protect the most vulnerable patients who no longer have the capacity to make decisions for themselves. In Northern Ireland, if a person lacks capacity, there is no legislation to protect them or their loved one, and there is no legislation to protect the healthcare professionals looking after them.

Then there is the issue of public sector funding. Time and again, we hear about health funding and about education. Teachers had to fight tooth and nail and almost had to go on strike because no one could make a

decision about giving them a pay rise. We hear about the PSNI from the chief constable, who, from one month to the next, does not know if he has the budget to pay the wages of the staff. Two and a half years on, that is no way to be running a country. We must show some leadership here. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road when we know that parties such as Sinn Féin are using this as an opportunity to score political points. They have no intention of getting back round the table.

Apart from this legislation, I have three options for the Minister. The first is that we start to pass laws in this place that have cross-party support in Northern Ireland and in this place that can make a real difference to people's lives. The second option would be to have an election. The longer that we leave the situation as it is, the closer we get to when the natural elections would be held. It is now two and a half years—three years in January. If an Assembly suddenly got up and running, they would have only a year and a bit to make any policies and to come to any decisions, so let us look at that as an option. The third option, and we have touched on it before in this place, is the Assembly of the willing. There are parties across the community that are willing to get back round the table in Stormont, form an Assembly and an Executive and start running the country. We seem to manage fairly well in this place without members of Sinn Féin taking their seats. I am pretty sure that the same would be true in Stormont. When there are MLAs from across the community and from parties such as the Alliance party willing to take their seats and willing to make those decisions, we should get them working. The only people suffering at the moment are not those of us here in this place, but the people of Northern Ireland. Whether we are talking about abortion, on which everyone here knows my views, equal marriage, the renewable heat incentive or air passenger duty, it is the ordinary people in Northern Ireland who are suffering every day that ticks by without an Assembly.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Lady talks about Sinn Féin. Does she agree that, although its members do not take their seats here, we seem to do fairly well without them? The door is open for them to come in. In the absence of their doing so, when there has been much talk about, and reference to, other politicians who do not carry out their full range of duties and who are getting paid, we should remember that this House has a decision to make about the members of Sinn Féin who do not attend here and who claim hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money. That does not seem to be raised half as much as other issues.

Maria Caulfield: I do not want to attack any political party, but we do have to call out those Members, particularly when communities who fought civil rights movements in the '60s to get representation do not have representation in this place or in Stormont. We should call them out. If anyone else was not turning up at work, their wages would be stopped pretty quickly. If people want to make points of principle, fine, but do not take the money that goes with the job.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My very good and hon. Friend is talking absolute sense. It is about time that we imposed option one, which means, despite our not having direct rule, making some laws that will help

[Bob Stewart]

the people in Northern Ireland. We should also impose option three, which is creating a Stormont of the willing and getting on with it. We have mucked around for two and a half years. That is a disgrace, and it is time that we showed some leadership. It is also about time that the Government showed some leadership on that, too.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

I do feel quite strongly on this matter. I would bet a lot of money—not that I am a betting person—that we will be back here in October, looking to extend things further, and then again in January. There are other political reasons why some parties do not want to get round the table, and their focus is not necessarily on the Assembly. My hon. Friend is quite right: we need to show leadership in this place for the good people of Northern Ireland. We are a United Kingdom, and it cannot be right that, week after week, we see in the Select Committee that Northern Ireland has been left further and further behind, whether it is in health, education, police and many other issues that we will be debating tomorrow.

I am starting to feel uncomfortable about voting for more can kicking and about allowing this process to go on much longer. The people from all communities of Northern Ireland deserve much, much better than this. If the politicians and the MLAs will not get round that table, we either start an Assembly of the willing with those who will do so, or we need to start making some decisions in this place.

6.47 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). Her final statement, outlining the choices facing the Government, which was very pertinent and important. As she said, we cannot continue to remain in this situation, which I have described as limbo, where we have no decisions at all being made in part of the United Kingdom. In western Europe, we are the only part of a modern advanced democracy where people who are entirely unelected and unaccountable wield enormous power. And that power is mainly used to do nothing, to stop things—they say that they can't, that they won't and that they have no remit, which is an appalling state of affairs in a modern democracy. The only people I suppose who have more power than the permanent secretaries in Northern Ireland are people like European Commissioners, probably equally unaccountable to many people as well. We are leaving the European Union to restore accountability, but in Northern Ireland we are passing legislation to increase and prolong the rule of permanent secretaries in Northern Ireland—with a few exceptions, of course.

There have been certain times when the Government have brought forward legislation to intervene—the Budget is the biggest example, but there are others. We remember that, as part of the Stormont House agreement, Sinn Féin members actually supported and were willing to have direct rule on the issue of welfare payments, because they did not want to put up their hands for welfare reform, changes and cuts in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and were quite happy to see it transferred to Westminster. We talk about their opposition, but to those Members who think that direct rule is such a terrible thing in

Northern Ireland that nationalism would be outraged, I say that they should just remember that Sinn Féin actually encouraged it and wanted it to happen when it came to difficult decisions in Northern Ireland. Sometimes people actually find it very convenient to allow Westminster to take these decisions when it suits them, but, of course, it is an absolute constitutional outrage when it is a different type of decision to be made, and then all sorts of terrible consequences can emerge.

Bob Stewart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who is a good friend, for giving way. Is it not ironic that if Stormont was to be reconstituted without Sinn Féin and we started passing a few laws, Sinn Féin MLAs might suddenly want to come to the table and be part of it, because their electorates might say, “Get in there and speak for us, because you're not speaking for us at the moment and that should happen.”? In a way, doing something like this might actually encourage change.

Nigel Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. There is some merit in incentivising people to get in, take responsibility and get devolved government up and running, whether that is by a coalition of the willing, as it has been put in Northern Ireland, or by saying, “We're going to get on and make some decisions here.” It might actually encourage people who are reluctant to get into the Assembly, and who claim that they are interested in equality, rights, health, education and all of that, but do not make it a priority. They do not even make Brexit a priority; they say that there are other issues that are more important to them. If those decisions were made, it might incentivise them to get in there and take their place round the Executive table.

It needs to be said—Members of my party have already said this—that the Democratic Unionist party and the other parties, apart from Sinn Féin, would form the Executive tomorrow without any preconditions. The position we find ourselves in is the direct result of conditions being imposed by one party. Of course we have to try to find an agreement to get the Executive up and running, and we are fully committed to the talks process currently under way in Northern Ireland. There are grounds for belief that we need to continue to work at that and to work our way through the issues, although we have also said that it would be far, far better to talk about the issues that are of concern to Sinn Féin, which are not by any means the big issues that there were in the past—they certainly do not compare with the outstanding challenges we face in health and education, jobs and investment, infrastructure, and all the issues that the hon. Member for Lewes mentioned, on which there is a large degree of consensus.

We are suggesting that we should get the Executive up and running to deal with all those issues and have the talks in parallel, alongside dealing with the issues that matter to all the people of Northern Ireland. That is the sensible way forward. Sadly, when that was suggested about a year and a half ago by our party leader, it was rejected within 20 minutes by Sinn Féin. That is an incredible position to adopt. If they really cared about equality and rights, health and education, and our children and older people, they would want to take the powers to deal with those issues. Instead, we are told that there are other issues that take precedence. I go around to the doors and talk to people. Our party has a

good record of engagement with people on the doorsteps and out there among the communities. That is why, alone of the four major parties in Northern Ireland, our vote went up in both the council and the European elections, which is unique in this House—apart from for the Liberal Democrats, maybe, who sadly are not present for this debate. The fact of the matter is that our record was vindicated in those recent elections, although we want to see an Executive that is inclusive of everyone.

Sammy Wilson: My right hon. Friend has given us a long list of issues that need to be addressed and that could be addressed if an Assembly was up and running. Despite the fact that the shadow Secretary of State has today tried to make excuses for Sinn Féin, does my right hon. Friend accept that their excuses are becoming increasingly thin and threadbare? Last week, they could not even turn up to talks because they were preparing for 12 July, strangely enough. Here is a party that claims to be nationalist and republican, yet they could not turn up for talks in the preparation for 12 July.

Nigel Dodds: I suppose it is a sign of the success of Orangefest that it is now so inclusive that even Sinn Féin is now taking time off to prepare for it. I do not think there is any reason why the talks should not continue over the summer—even, if necessary, in a different form. I do think there is any need to say that the talks should cease.

With the indulgence of the House, I want to mention a couple of issues that have been raised during the debate, one of which is Brexit. I am not going to dwell on it, because there will be plenty of opportunities to talk about Brexit in the coming days, but I accept that it is to our detriment that we do not have the Executive up and running. Indeed, we have made that point to Sinn Féin: if they are concerned about Brexit, which is such a major issue, why do they boycott the Executive, the Assembly and, indeed, the Parliament of the United Kingdom, to which they are elected? Those people say that they have no voice, but they have stripped themselves of their voice, although they are heard by the Government, who meet them and everybody else. But if they voluntarily say, “I’m not going to turn up and I am going to boycott things,” they can hardly blame everybody else.

We have heard that an Irish hard border is now inevitable in the event of no deal. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) on his elevation to the chairmanship of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and I wish him well. We look forward to continuing our conversations and working with him. But I thought that his speech was somewhat depressing and that it placed more emphasis on the pessimistic side of Unionism, instead of talking it up and so on. I am not as pessimistic as he is on the outcome of a border poll, nor regarding the conditions in which a border poll would be called. I think that people have a better understanding of Northern Ireland than they did of Czechoslovakia in 1938, given the number of debates we have, the view of the Conservative and Unionist party and our work with the Conservative party on these issues.

One issue that the Irish Government are now having to face up to, and one that they are not terribly comfortable about addressing, is the question put to them increasingly and very recently by the German and French Governments

—that is, “In the event that there is a no deal, what will you do in Dublin to police or protect the single market?” Given that the Irish Government have been very clear that they will not impose any hard border—checks, controls and all the rest of it—in the island of Ireland, there is only one inevitable outcome; and there is a precedent for it, isn’t there? Nobody in the Brexit debate ever mentions the issue that has now actually been solved in the question of Brexit: the free movement of people.

We talk a lot about the free movement of animals, goods and services, but one of the biggest issues that people forecast might be a problem was the free movement of people on the island of Ireland. In fact, a lot of the documentaries and various TV programmes concentrated on how, years ago, people used to be stopped at checkpoints, were not allowed to come over the border to work, socialise and all the rest of it. But nobody is going to interfere with the common travel area. The common travel area—which, of course, predates European Union membership—works so successfully because there are no checks between the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom, but the checks are done at all points of entry into the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom.

The Irish Republic is, as the hon. Member for North Dorset has said, a modern and very Europhile country, which is part of the EU—and it is absolutely proper that it should be if that is what it wishes to be—but it has voluntarily agreed not to sign up to all the Schengen arrangements to protect the free movement of people on the island of Ireland. And yet we are told that, to protect the single market in terms of goods, services and all the rest of it, there will have to be a hard border in Ireland. Of course there does not have to be. As Members of my party have said over and over again, there is no desire or political will on the part of any party in the Irish Republic, here or in Europe to impose such a border, nor would it be physically possible. It cannot be done—so let us dismiss some of the notions out there.

Lady Hermon: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Nigel Dodds: I am sure that the hon. Lady will have the opportunity to make her points in her speech, when I look forward to being able to interrogate her on some of them.

Somebody has said that this would be a smugglers charter—as if we do not have differential rates of VAT now. We have differential rates of excise duty and different immigration systems. This House may be surprised to know that, believe it or not, the Garda Síochána—the Irish police force—and the PSNI, the Northern Ireland police force, do stop cars and public transport either side of the border and check the occupants’ passports. They do carry out checks on the island of Ireland and have done so for many years. We recently passed laws in relation to countering terrorism that gave them more powers at the border. We have traffic cameras on the border. When travelling from Belfast to Dublin, there are police cameras and security cameras. So the idea that somehow the world is going to end in these circumstances is complete and utter nonsense.

Lady Hermon: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Nigel Dodds: No. I have already indicated my position to the hon. Lady. I look forward to hearing her speech—I am sure she will make one on a matter of such importance to the House.

Another issue that was raised was what might happen now in terms of elections. One of the options that the hon. Member for Lewes mentioned was that we could have an election. Under the law, that is the default position in due course. Of course, as I said, we have no concerns about another election in Northern Ireland. The position of the Democratic Unionist party is that we are not particularly convinced that that will actually advance things terribly. I do not think the results would be all that different. I was rather surprised by the Electoral Commission saying how outrageous it is that we are being denied the opportunity to have an election in Northern Ireland, since if we were to have an election when this legislation runs out, it would be the third Northern Ireland Assembly election in three years—and we have already had five elections since 2016. We had the Assembly election in 2016, another Assembly election in 2017, the UK-wide referendum in 2016, the general election in 2017, and the local government elections and European elections in 2019. It is not as though the people of Northern Ireland have not had the opportunity to express their views. During that time, the issues have been well explored and well debated, and people have had their say. We do not worry about an election—I am just wondering what on earth it would actually accomplish.

The way forward is to get the Assembly up and running or, as the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), seemed to indicate, to get on with taking decisions here. He talked about the position of the Northern Ireland parties, but it is sad, on this Bill, to see a breakdown in the normal cross-party, bipartisan approach on Northern Ireland. Labour has tabled amendments on a series of matters that are devolved in Northern Ireland, that are the preserve of the Assembly and the devolved space. We have the long list of issues that the hon. Member for Lewes raised, including historical institutional abuse, contaminated blood, justice, schools, health and the mental health and suicide strategy, but all that is left to one side.

Of the issues that it is now proposed to legislate on, I am quite easy about some of them in terms of their substance. However, Labour Members have been told, and understand, that this not only breaches the principle of devolution but is deeply unhelpful to the current talks process in Northern Ireland. That has the real danger—they are well aware of this but have proceeded nevertheless—of setting back the prospects of getting an agreement over the coming weeks. When the shadow Secretary of State is dishing out criticism to others and talking about failures of others, they really need to look at themselves and examine whether this is actually the most sensible approach, given that the purpose of this legislation is just to keep a stand-still position for another couple of months. Even though we believe that that is an entirely unsatisfactory position, at least it is better than having no powers at all and nothing happening in Northern Ireland.

On the issue of MLAs' pay, I am all for docking the pay of those who do not want to work. Of course, those who do want to work are being held back by those who do not. I would like to see a bit more concentration and attention on the millions—tens of millions—of pounds

that have been given to Sinn Féin without any accountability. Without having to put in any receipts or being subject to the same parliamentary procedures as the rest of us, it is getting the equivalent of Short money to spend on political campaigning. There is not a word about that. It is as though it does not matter. The reality is that these people take their seats and get their money but do not do their job in this Chamber. On the issues about elected representatives not turning up and not being able to do the job, these people do it voluntarily. Most MLAs are prevented from doing their work by the actions of Sinn Féin ironically. So we need to have a little bit of balance in all this.

I say to the House that we will support this Bill as it goes forward. We do not believe that it is right to introduce amendments that interfere with the devolved space. We are looking at amendments that would apply UK-wide and would bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. Very, very soon the Government will have to recognise that they cannot go on with this current position. It has been described as kicking the can down the road. We can call it what we like, but we have to get decision making back into a proper shape for whatever happens over Brexit. We have to do it for the sake of our health service and getting the waiting lists under control, for our schools, which are suffering a resources crisis, for people with mental health problems, for the suicide strategy and the Bengoa report—all these massive issues. We need to give the police the proper powers that they have in the rest of the United Kingdom to tackle unexplained wealth—and gangs. We in Northern Ireland need the power to do that more, perhaps, than other parts of the United Kingdom, given the continued existence of paramilitaries and their insidious influence in communities.

We are probably now nearing the end game in relation to this limbo land. If we do have direct rule, it will then of course be open to Members of this House to legislate across the board, but what I object to is the selective choosing of areas on which to legislate while ignoring the vast range of issues about which people are so concerned.

7.8 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds)—we agree on so many subjects. In my brief contribution, I will pick up on one particular theme that he raised.

I am sure that all hon. Members will regret that we are here today to debate this Bill, which extends, yet again, the time for forming an Executive in Northern Ireland. We had all hoped, when we debated a similar Bill last autumn, that the Executive and Assembly would be back in place by now. I hope that the Secretary of State will therefore give us an update on, as she said last year, the

“clear goal of restoring the devolved power-sharing Executive and Assembly.”—[*Official Report*, 6 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 347.]

As that has not happened, this Bill is being brought forward with the stated—and limited—intent of safeguarding the continued delivery of public services, achieved by clarifying the powers of the Northern Ireland civil service to take certain decisions in the absence of Ministers.

Like last year, numerous amendments have been tabled to the Bill to raise important points about policy in the Province. The wide-ranging scope of the amendments reinforces the need for the Assembly to be back up and running as soon as possible, but as I said last year, this short Bill should not be about deciding on key devolved policy issues, which are more properly decided by the people of Northern Ireland and their elected accountable representatives. This Bill is very narrow in scope and that narrow scope should be respected. It is not a Bill that should be used to upset the devolution position. Will the Minister comment on that when he concludes? As the House of Commons explanatory notes say, "It is simply a series of measures to continue to manage the current period without Northern Ireland Ministers."

Ian Paisley: Is the hon. Lady aware of the briefing passed out this evening by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, which indicates that the amendments tabled to the Bill are about usurping the powers placed in Northern Ireland and bringing them back here? It goes on to say that one amendment would force an oral statement to be made in the House of Commons that would normally be made in the Assembly.

Fiona Bruce: I shall comment briefly on that and, if necessary, in more detail in Committee.

This House has agreed that many areas of law and policy should be devolved to the different countries that make up the United Kingdom. Devolution means we accept that we have differing policies in different jurisdictions, and how money is spent can differ between them. There are amendments tabled to the Bill that seek to allow Westminster to materially alter some sensitive areas of the law. I hope the Government will continue to argue that those are matters for Northern Ireland, as has consistently been the Government's line to date. Will the Minister confirm that? In the debate in the other place on last year's Bill, the former Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, said:

"the only statutory authority with authority to alter the statutes and statutory instruments is the Legislative Assembly of Northern Ireland and Ministers of that Assembly. There is no power whatsoever in the United Kingdom Parliament to interfere with that while it is devolved."

That is the position we should uphold.

I am especially concerned about the amendments tabled to the Bill that seek to change the law on abortion in Northern Ireland. I will speak further to those amendments should they be selected for debate in Committee, although I sincerely hope they will not be, as they are out of scope. As Lord Mackay also said in that debate,

"The position is that abortion has been made a devolved subject."—*[Official Report, House of Lords, 30 October 2018; Vol. 793, c. 1233.]*

I hope that the Members who tabled those amendments will consider withdrawing them before Committee tomorrow.

7.12 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my neighbour from the north-west of England, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). I do not intend to detain the House for long, not because I do not have a lot to say, but because I hope that I will get the chance to say it tomorrow if my amendment is selected and I am lucky enough to catch the Chair's eye.

Today, two friends and colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)—announced that they will not be standing at the next election. I hope we have the chance to pay further tributes to them, but given that we are discussing Northern Ireland business, I will do so now. For many years, they have both shown passion for and commitment to Northern Ireland and raised issues about it consistently in the House. On a personal level, ever since my very early years of political activism in the Labour party, they have both strongly supported me and given me very wise counsel—often conflicting counsel, but wise none the less. I have retained a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North rejecting me for a job in his office as his parliamentary assistant, but he was kind enough to say that it was because I was over-qualified for the job.

I am afraid that I have to adopt a somewhat more negative tone when talking about the Government's approach to this business. I commend the Leader of the House for making good on his promise that we would get more time to debate these issues, but quite frankly, as they say in my erstwhile part of the world—South Armagh—the Government were trying to pull a stroke, and they got caught. They were trying to force this legislation through the House in a matter of hours, to avoid any debate or discussion on the numerous issues listed by the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and particularly to avoid the possibility of amendments on what Democratic Unionist party Members understandably say are more contentious issues, but which none the less are being debated and discussed widely among the community in Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. I have received dozens and dozens of emails from constituents and those who are not constituents urging the House to respect the devolution settlement. Since it was the Labour party, led by Tony Blair as Prime Minister, which led to the successful conclusion of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement and put in place the devolution settlement, how do the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues feel that this House is showing respect for the devolution settlement in Northern Ireland by tabling their amendments?

Conor McGinn: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. If she will allow me, I will come back to that later in my remarks.

I want to, perhaps unusually, issue a defence of politicians in Northern Ireland. In particular, we should recognise the commitment that has been shown by Members in this place—I know that the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) and the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) have been involved in the talks—to meet their responsibilities here, but also to be intensively involved in negotiations in Belfast.

I know lots of politicians in Northern Ireland who represent the many different political parties there. I am yet to meet one who does not want to do a good job. I am yet to meet one who does not care about the people they represent. When people say, "They should just get on with it and come to an agreement," it reminds me of people in my constituency who say to me, "We should

[Conor McGinn]

just get on with Brexit.” Actually, what they want is for us to get on with their version of Brexit, and that is similar to the negotiations in Northern Ireland.

I understand that people are frustrated; that is one reason why I tabled the amendment. But to say, “Just get on with it” does not take into account the fact that what politicians in Northern Ireland are trying to find agreement and a common way forward on are issues that have been intrinsic to the terrible conflict we had and, indeed, over many centuries of Irish history. They are not easy to resolve. Of course, compromise will need to be found, but 20 years on from the Good Friday agreement, these are essentially the most difficult issues that we are left to deal with.

I want to be clear about my interpretation of the Bill’s scope. I hope that this is not an arbitrary change of date. The Secretary of State presumably has given some thought to the period of extension and why it is needed. The Bill is not just about standing still. It gives the Government the power to introduce regulations by statutory instrument. It is an acknowledgment and an admission of failure by both Governments and the political parties to find an agreement. However difficult it might be to do that, as I have acknowledged, there has not been much sign of progress since the Assembly collapsed in January 2017. There is a huge democratic deficit in the representation of people in Northern Ireland in what was their devolved legislative lawmaking body, because quite simply, laws are not being made. We have heard about the myriad issues affected by that.

I have tabled an amendment on the extension of equal marriage to Northern Ireland, to bring it into line with the rest of the United Kingdom and, indeed, the rest of the island of Ireland. People in my constituency who love each other and who happen to be of the same sex can get married. If people in Cardiff, Edinburgh, London, Dublin, Cork and Galway can do so, why should people not be able to in Belfast? It is a simple contention, and one that the Secretary of State knows I have made many times before.

I hope that the Government will acknowledge that I try to be circumspect in my interventions in Northern Ireland and the degree to which I speak on it and make my views known because I have always been clear that I am an MP from Northern Ireland, but not an MP for Northern Ireland. I am not a proxy for any person there and I cannot claim to have a mandate to represent any person there. However, I hope that the House accepts that I do care deeply about the place I still call home and that, when making interventions or pronouncements on issues affecting it, I do so because I want to be as helpful as possible.

That is why I am disappointed at the attitude of the Government on this particular issue. I and the Love Equality campaign have tried to be generous and patient, and we have not received an awful lot of reciprocity. There is no tangible progress to which we can point. We also need to say very clearly when we are talking about devolution and respect for the devolution settlement that the Assembly has not met since January 2017. The Government have not functioned since 2017, so when we are talking about devolution in Northern Ireland, are we talking about a concept, rather than a reality?

The fundamental point about my amendment, to answer specifically the point made by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), is that it does several things. First, it respects the ongoing talks process. It invokes, in fact, the date set by the Secretary of State as the next deadline for progress on restoring the Assembly as the date by which to have taken some action on this issue. So it is a challenge to politicians in Northern Ireland—whether they are passionate about being the ones to introduce same-sex marriage themselves or equally passionate about opposing the introduction of same-sex marriage—to get the Assembly back up and running. That is the first thing.

The second thing is that we would then legislate for same-sex marriage here if the Assembly is not back up and running by October 2019 because, as I have contended and challenged, LGBT people in Northern Ireland should not have to wait any longer for their rights, and this is an issue about rights. However, were the devolved institutions to be restored, which is something I know we all want to see, the power would revert to the Assembly, so if it so chose, it could simply change the law. I hope this would not be an interim step—in truth, I think it would be inconceivable that the Assembly would seek to overturn it if it were introduced here. None the less, that is the fundamental point. So it is my strong view that the amendment is respectful of devolution and that it is in scope of the provisions of the Bill, which are directly about the formation of the Executive.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has my wholehearted support on this Bill, not least as a proud devolutionist. I represent Wales and I am proud of our devolution settlement. We all want to see the devolved Administration functioning again in Northern Ireland. The very patient, calm and constructive way in which he has constructed the amendment and the way he has set it out is exactly the way to go forward. Does he agree that, fundamentally, this is about listening to those people whose rights are currently being denied in Northern Ireland? They have spoken to many of us, and I speak to many of them on a regular basis. They have seen the Assembly actually vote in favour of equal marriage and, indeed, all the polls show that they want to see this happen, so we need to have that deadline and we need to see progress for them.

Conor McGinn: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. As he says, he is a proud devolutionist, and I think that colleagues from Scotland and Wales would find it inconceivable, in the event that the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly did not sit or their respective Governments were not taking decisions, that we would not discuss or debate these things in Westminster.

Sammy Wilson: Regardless of how the hon. Gentleman tries to twist and turn on the issue, the one thing he cannot deny is that the amendment and the path he has taken actually does impinge on the devolution settlement because it interferes with an issue that is the prerogative of the Northern Ireland Assembly, whether or not it is sitting. But if he has decided that it is justifiable to do this, can he tell us why it is not justifiable to overturn the devolution settlement altogether and deal with issues—schools, hospitals, transport, infrastructure—that affect far more people than the issue he is talking about? If he is prepared to interfere with the devolution settlement,

why is he not prepared to interfere with it to help the majority of people—huge numbers of people—across Northern Ireland by having intervention by the Government?

Conor McGinn: The first point is that this is an issue about rights, not about policy. The second point is that I think, and hope, I have made it clear that I certainly do not want to impinge on the devolution settlement because the power will be retained by Stormont when an Executive and Assembly are functioning. I think there is quite a significant distinction between an Assembly and Executive that exist in the ether or as a concept, and an Executive and Assembly that are meeting, taking decisions and doing work on an issue that affects quite a lot of people in Northern Ireland. There is overwhelming public support for addressing the issue.

Having said that I was not going to speak for long, I realise that I have now spoken for longer than I intended. I just wanted to be clear about my motivation for tabling the amendment and the thought that has been given to it so that it respects the devolved settlement. It also respects the need for decisions to be made about important issues in Northern Ireland. Most of all, however, what my amendment does is respect equal rights for all people in the UK and Ireland.

7.26 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). We have possibly set a precedent in the House, in that he and I are both from south Armagh; I moved to Belfast South, the constituency I represent, when I was 18. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on many things, but we do agree on some. I have been contacted by many scores of people from across my constituency who feel as strongly as he does on these matters.

Like the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), I have been contacted by hundreds of people, by email and letter, who have said very clearly that they want these matters to be dealt with in the devolved Assembly. I was elected to this House just two years ago, and it is a matter of considerable sorrow to me that throughout those two years, we have not had a Northern Ireland Assembly. Like some other hon. Members from across the House who have spoken, I am a strong devolutionist; I believe firmly that the laws and policies that impact most on people's lives should be made as close as possible to the people, and that means that decisions on the many issues that are devolved should be made by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

We have been two and a half years with no Government in Northern Ireland. I have stood up many times in this House and indicated my sorrow at that. I welcome such measures as the Bill as necessities—they have to be brought forward—but I do so in sorrow, because we do not want to be here. It is not desirable to have this type of legislation passed by this House, or, as we have made clear, to have direct rule. It is not sustainable, fair or right that decisions that impact fundamentally on people's everyday lives in Northern Ireland continue to be made not in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State outlined the process that is under way. For some listening to this debate, it may have sounded a little as though the Bill has guillotined the

process—as though this was the end of the process, and as though there is now a further extension until October. I do not believe that to be the case. The DUP has entered into the talks process in good faith, and we will continue to work hard, because we want to get Stormont back up and working. That is the objective with which we entered into these talks, and that is our aim.

I say to everybody across the House that we are very clear that whatever agreement comes out of the process must be fair and sensible. When we look back over the decades in Northern Ireland, we see that the only type of agreement that has ever worked is one that has commanded broad consensus and agreement across the communities. That is what we are trying to achieve. One thing we will not accept is a bad deal for the people of Northern Ireland.

It is not the case—I challenge the shadow Secretary of State on this—that everybody is to blame. Almost all parties in Northern Ireland are willing to go back to work, to form an Executive, to govern and to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. One thing is stopping that: Sinn Féin collapsed the Assembly and refuses to go back until it gets a stand-alone Irish language Act. That is the barrier, and one party put it up; we need to be very clear about that. That is not sustainable, and we are working incredibly hard in the talks process to address the issues of sustainability. It is completely unfair for any single party to be able to throw a tantrum over a particular issue and say, “I’m not going back into the Government. Nobody in Northern Ireland will have things decided on health, education, childcare, infrastructure or the economy until we get exactly what we want.” That cannot be allowed to continue. Sinn Féin needs to stop the silliness and get back into government.

Sammy Wilson: If, for the convenience of the people of Northern Ireland, we were to give in, does my hon. Friend accept that in future months, when another impasse was reached, or when Sinn Féin wanted something else, it could use exactly the same tactic and bring the Assembly down? The Assembly would continually be held to ransom by people who have no conscience when it comes to hurting the population.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I absolutely agree. I have worked very closely with government over the past 10 years and more of devolution—since 2007—and we have had to get through some very difficult and challenging issues, including bad behaviour by a number of parties, one of which was Sinn Féin, and what it was implicated in. We tried to keep the show on the road and the institutions going. It was not the DUP that collapsed those institutions. We were, and still are, prepared to sit down and talk.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) has outlined our reasonable proposition, which is, “Get back into government now and we will set the parameters to ensure that you have confidence that we will genuinely and in good faith engage with the issues that you want to talk about. If you feel that we are not doing that, we are prepared to put in place, at this stage, a mechanism that would allow you to collapse the Assembly.” There are no risks for them in getting back into the Assembly under that arrangement. My party leader had barely sat down after making his speech before Sinn Féin issued a press release rejecting

[*Emma Little Pengelly*]

that completely. If it wants change, there is a way to get that that actually delivers for the people of Northern Ireland. People are angry and frustrated, because they want basic services to be delivered by the people they elected to deliver them.

During these types of debates, a small number of issues are repeatedly discussed that I know are incredibly important to people. Day in, day out, a number of issues are continually raised in my constituency surgery, and I know it is the same for my right hon. and hon. Friends. Before I touch on them, I want to make it absolutely clear that we need to be realistic. I hear people across Northern Ireland saying all the time, “If only there was an Assembly, I wouldn’t be sitting on this waiting list,” and “If only there was an Assembly, I would have this or that, and the Government would be doing this or that.” I am not naive. I do not believe that all those issues will suddenly disappear if the Northern Ireland Assembly is restored in the morning; of course Governments will still have constraints.

We need to be very careful about the expectation we give people. However, if the Assembly is restored, people will be there to make the decisions; the people of Northern Ireland can approach their elected representatives and make their case; policies can be scrutinised by the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Committees; and we can develop policy. Importantly, this Bill does not provide the capability to make a range of required legislative proposals; it does not allow civil servants to do that.

Before I go into a little detail about some of those policy areas, I want to pay tribute to the many civil servants operating under incredibly difficult circumstances. I say that with a little bit of a smile because my husband is a senior civil servant in one of the most challenging departments, the Department of Health. It is fair to say that I would not like to be in that situation. It is a very difficult set of circumstances. The Department of Health is in a slightly better situation—ironically, it may seem—because the Northern Ireland Assembly agreed the Bengoa recommendations and a transformation plan prior to the collapse of the Assembly, so my husband has been able to make decisions under the terms of that policy. He has been able to carry out consultations, some of which are controversial, and the findings will have to be considered. However, there are many things that he cannot do, and it is the same right across our civil service. I pay tribute to the incredible work that civil servants have done in very difficult circumstances that they should never have found themselves in.

I want to touch briefly on education. Recently, I started special autism clinics and surgeries right across my constituency, because so many people who come through my door face challenges on special educational needs and autism in particular—everything from trying to get their child statemented, to being on the school waiting list for up to a year or two before they can get their child seen. Parents know the help that their child needs, but they cannot get it at the moment. We need a fundamental review of special educational needs and autism services across our education system. The system is not just creaking; it is breaking, and it is children who are suffering.

I challenge the hon. Member for St Helens North: what about the human rights of a child who is waiting for an autism assessment, but cannot get it for years because there is no Government to carry out the fundamental review? Those are rights, too.

Maria Caulfield: Children in Northern Ireland still have statements, whereas children in the rest of the United Kingdom have education, health and care plans. The hon. Lady is quite right to say that the system is not working for children in Northern Ireland with special educational needs.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. That issue is under discussion. In the talks process, we are talking about a whole range of policies that could go into a programme for government, and one of those must be the reform of educational provision, particularly for those with special educational needs. I have been fighting very hard for that, and I think there is consensus across all the parties, but we need the Northern Ireland Assembly back to get that in place.

I speak to many teachers and, in particular, headteachers. Their budgets are under incredible pressure. I know that the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs has taken evidence on the issue, but it needs to be resolved. Schools are crying out for financial help. That is the type of issue that DUP Members of the Legislative Assembly, and MLAs right across Northern Ireland, want to talk about.

Often in Northern Ireland, particularly at this time of year, politicians get criticised for talking about flags and bonfires. I and the vast majority of people I know agree that those issues need to be addressed, but what we want to talk about and focus on is education, public services, affordable childcare and tackling health issues. At the moment, we are prevented from doing so meaningfully, because those issues are, on the whole, devolved and there is no Northern Ireland Assembly.

We do not have 30 hours’ free childcare in Northern Ireland. Just before the collapse of the Assembly, work was under way to introduce a comprehensive affordable childcare programme, but that does not help parents in Northern Ireland at the moment who cannot access the same support, tailored for Northern Ireland, that people get across the rest of the United Kingdom. These urgent issues are impacting on hard-working families, whose household budgets are really feeling the pressure.

On health, we have a GP crisis. I was not feeling that well last week and phoned up my GP. I was told that the waiting time for an appointment was two weeks. Frankly, I felt that by then I would hopefully be feeling okay. There is a GP crisis across Northern Ireland; we do not have enough of them, practices are under huge pressure, and waiting lists are growing. It is the same across the entire health service. We need decisions made on the budget, and health transformation that will fundamentally tackle our huge waiting lists. People come to my constituency surgeries and my constituency office with letters saying that it will be two or three years before they can access a pain clinic and get some help.

I want to challenge the idea that those issues do not relate to rights. These are fundamental rights. What about the person on a cancer waiting list? What about their fundamental right to life when, because there is no Northern Ireland Assembly, they are sitting on a waiting

list and could well die before they get the intervention they require? This is rights denied—rights to basic public services. That is wrong, and it must be addressed. There is a party denying rights in Northern Ireland across health, education and fundamental support for ordinary human beings, and that party is Sinn Féin.

Bob Stewart: The hon. Lady is making a really good speech. What pressure is building up in Sinn Féin MLA areas? All the problems she outlines must be replicated there, so what pressure are Sinn Féin MLAs facing from their own constituents? It must be just as powerful as what is happening in South Belfast.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank the hon. Member for that contribution. I do not see what happens in Sinn Féin constituency offices, but I can only imagine that the issues of health, education, poverty and the need for basic public services are the same right across the community. It does not matter if you are Protestant, Catholic, nationalist, Unionist, new incomer or ethnic minority—the needs are the same. Everybody is suffering from Sinn Féin's decision to continue to refuse to allow the Northern Ireland Assembly to be restored. I hope that they are hearing the message loud and clear: come to the table, come to a sensible and fair agreement, and get Stormont back up and working for the people of Northern Ireland.

There are a couple of other issues I want to touch on. I do not want to speak for too long, so I will go through them very quickly. There are some key pressure points. All political parties have heard representations in relation to the social security mitigation package. We put in place a number of mitigations in terms of welfare reform. The Northern Ireland Assembly agreed that the NIA budget would pay for that. If a decision is not made, upwards of 40,000 people will have bills coming through their doors or much-needed help withdrawn. The package requires legislation, and so, under the terms of the Bill, cannot be implemented by the permanent secretaries. If the legislation is not passed by September, 40,000-plus people will be considerably worse off. This is a real issue that will impact on real people in need.

I was very much involved in setting up the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry. I sat on the project board, along with Sinn Féin, when we worked on the legislation. I sat on the project board with Sinn Féin whenever we looked at implementation. We looked at inquiries across the world and one of the things we decided to do was put a date in the legislation for the inquiry to report. We did that because we did not want the inquiry to roll forward for years and years. We built in flexibility so that the chair of the inquiry could come back and request more time, but we knew, right from the passing of the initial legislation, the date the inquiry was due to report. I sat on the project board with Sinn Féin while we liaised throughout the duration of that inquiry. I think it was about two weeks before the report was due—the chairman of the inquiry had made it clear to all members of the project board, including Sinn Féin, that the report was on time—when Sinn Féin chose to collapse the Assembly.

There were two big outstanding issues: the budget for Northern Ireland and the HIA report. Before Sinn Féin collapsed the Assembly, I made the case to Sinn Féin. I said to the then Finance Minister, "Look, there are these two issues. You can choose to collapse the Assembly, we can't stop you from doing that, but what is the

necessity about time? We can take these two weeks and pass a budget to support public services. We can wait for the HIA inquiry to report." It decided not to.

We have now moved on. This is not about the politics; we want and need those victims to get support. This issue requires legislation and that is being held up because there is no Northern Ireland Assembly.

Sammy Wilson: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about Sinn Féin refusing to bring forward a budget before collapsing the Assembly. The reason for that was that it could not face up to the hard decisions required to bring forward a budget. Is that not another reason why Sinn Féin is resisting going into the Assembly at the moment? It does not want to bring forward a budget. It would much prefer somebody else to do the hard lifting, rather than take the hard decisions that politicians have to take.

Emma Little Pengelly: I believe that the last Sinn Féin Finance Minister—I think it was perhaps the first Sinn Féin Finance Minister of our devolved Government—has the rather dubious title of being the Finance Minister who did not bring forward a budget, which was his core duty. Yes, of course there are difficult decisions to be made in a budget. There are serious questions to ask as to why he did not hit the deadline and did not bring forward those proposals.

There are many other issues I could reference. We do not have the high street fund in Northern Ireland. That money comes into our budget as what is referred to as a non-ring-fenced or unhypothecated Barnett consequential. We cannot force permanent secretaries to dedicate the money for that cause or for other projects for our economy such as the Streets Ahead programme.

I want briefly to mention the victims' pension issue, which is associated with legacy. Over the course of the past week, I met the Victims' Commissioner and many victims who were horrendously injured during the troubles. Those victims are now getting older and have particular issues with their finances. They do not have work-related pensions, because they did not have access to the workplace. They need this help and support. Again, that requires legislation and it has not been brought forward. There are many, many victims across Northern Ireland who require additional support.

I want to pay tribute to Bea Wharton, who was buried today. She was the last remaining mother of the Kingsmills victims. She was an incredibly strong and passionate woman who fought right up until her last breath to try to get justice for her son and the other victims of that terrible, terrible sectarian atrocity. I want to pay tribute to her and her family at this very difficult time. She was in her early 90s when she passed away. She fought every day of her life for justice, but justice was denied. Victims and survivors need that support.

The DUP cares passionately about Northern Ireland and the future of Northern Ireland. We want Northern Ireland to thrive. We want our young people to have an incredible future, with good jobs and a strong economy where people are happy and healthy. The best way to do that is to get back to work. Sinn Féin can do that tomorrow morning. Drop the silliness, get back to work and let us talk about these issues, while we deliver basic public services for the people of Northern Ireland. That is what the people of Northern Ireland want. That is what the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

7.49 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I have spoken only on rare occasions about Northern Ireland since ceasing to be shadow Secretary of State in 2015. That is not because I do not care or feel indifferent to a place and people that I grew to have a great deal of affection for. It is partially because I believe that it is right to allow one's successors the space to shape their positions, but if I am honest, it is also because of my sheer exasperation with the failure of Northern Ireland's politicians to show leadership.

The silent majority of people across the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland have had enough of the blame game and name-calling. They want their politicians to do the job that they are elected to do and are paid for: to reconstitute the Executive and the Assembly. That would be the responsible thing for politicians to do in any democracy, but in a society emerging from conflict, the stakes are perpetually higher. In a vacuum, the extremists, rejectionists and terrorists exploit instability at every opportunity. I did not use the term "post-conflict", because that is not appropriate in a society that is not only still nursing the traumatic wounds of its past, but held back by a decade of austerity.

So why are we here again seeking neither to reconstitute the Executive and Assembly nor to impose direct rule? Frankly, it is because neither of the two largest parties are willing to make the compromises that are so essential in any power-sharing system—a commitment to brave and uncomfortable compromises, which existed not so long ago on all sides, to deliver an end to bloody conflict and create a peace process that, for all its imperfections, has stood the test of time.

Brexit is inevitably a major obstacle to progress when Sinn Féin and the DUP hold such polar opposite views. As an ardent campaigner to remain, I believe that the result of the referendum must be respected and implemented. I also believe that leaving with no deal would be a massive risk to the economy of the United Kingdom, but I believe, too, that—as some hon. Members have said—the south of Ireland would be the biggest loser from such an outcome. I say gently to some of my friends in the DUP that the people of Northern Ireland in no way gave them a mandate to become fully paid-up members of the European Research Group.

If we are to see progress, it is also important to recognise that other issues that pre-date Brexit are salient to the current stalemate. Brexit is not the only reason why we have this stalemate. As hon. Members have said, and I know this from first-hand experience, Sinn Féin is unwilling to make any of the difficult budgetary decisions required of all political leaders in any society dealing with finite resources. It wants to be purist and free to pursue its political ambitions in the south. This means opposing all cuts. If it was part of the leadership in Northern Ireland, it would have to make difficult choices. This could be used against it in the south. Nobody should underestimate the power of that reason in terms of Sinn Féin's current position.

I am sad to say that the DUP, despite its domination of the Unionist vote, is unwilling to make compromises on some issues that would undoubtedly upset its base.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I know that when the hon. Gentleman was the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, he earnestly engaged with and sincerely considered the views of all parties in

Northern Ireland, and he dealt with us all very honourably. However, if he has been listening to the course of this debate, does he not recognise that in August 2017, we did compromise? We said then, "Set up the institutions and we will legislate for the Irish language," yet it was rebuffed in 26 minutes. I am disappointed to hear that he has not factored that into his speech, but he cannot claim that we were not prepared to compromise, nor are we still today.

Mr Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a great deal of respect, for his very kind remarks about my period as shadow Secretary of State. Of course, I accept that during this long journey of stalemate, there has been a willingness to make some compromises, but it really does not ring true to say that the reason that we are in this position today is exclusively the responsibility of one party or the other. That is simply factually untrue. If he allows me to continue with my speech, I will cite some other reasons why we have been unable to make progress.

This is a crucial message to the DUP: good leadership may be the ability to motivate core supporters, but there is a difference between good and great leadership. Great leadership is a willingness to sometimes say difficult things to one's own supporters. That is the case throughout history, and in fact, the DUP and other political parties in Northern Ireland in the past have been willing to do so.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman will remember very well his visit to my constituency and particularly to the community groups in Newtownards. He will also recall that they were very much opposed to the Irish language becoming a political tool in the process. When it comes to reflecting that public opinion in Strangford and elsewhere, I do so every day because that is what my constituents tell me. We should not ignore our constituents or try to push them in a way that they do not want to go.

Mr Lewis: I have massive respect for the hon. Gentleman—we agree on so many things—but there are occasions when politicians and leaders need to say to their followers and their base, "Actually, we need to do things differently in the pursuit of a bigger cause." I accept that if the gap grows to such an extent between a politician and the people who support them, it will inevitably lead to the demise of that politician, so it is a difficult calibration to achieve in any dynamic in terms of political relationships. However, all the great changes that have been made through political history have required, at one time or another, politicians to say difficult things to their supporters, particularly in cases of conflict, war, terrorism and a lack of stability. I do not think that the Irish language Act even featured in the conversations I had when I visited the hon. Gentleman's constituency, because, as others have said, that is not the burning issue of the day for any section of the population in Northern Ireland, to be frank. The issues are jobs, education, health or opportunities. It is wrong to say that the Irish language Act is the be-all and end-all for the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, let alone the other community.

Jim Shannon: We have to be honest about the position in Northern Ireland and look at the facts. Nationalist people and nationalist parties do want the Irish language Act. The Unionist people we represent do not see it as

the burning issue. The hon. Gentleman is right: health, education, roads and jobs are the key issues, but the nationalist parties see that as their key issue and their No. 1 priority.

Mr Lewis: I do not personally believe that that is a burning issue compared with other issues in the nationalist community either, if we are honest about the discussions that we have with them. I was not going to mention this in my speech, but I will say it to the hon. Gentleman: when I was the shadow Secretary of State, I was very proud to have commissioned the Heenan-Anderson commission. Deirdre Heenan and Colin Anderson did a serious piece of work on tackling social injustice and inequality in Northern Ireland—the breeding ground of sectarianism and division. If Northern Ireland does not tackle the lack of social justice and the lack of equality, it will be the breeding ground for the alienated and disenfranchised younger generation. This was not a party political or ideological document. It is sad that no political party has seized on that document—which did not just identify the scale of the problem, but came up with some very practical, tangible solutions—and sought to engage with Deirdre Heenan, Colin Anderson and all the stakeholders in business and civil society who participated in that process to see whether some of its recommendations can be implemented.

Let me move on with my speech—I was recounting some of the factors that have caused the current stalemate. One that I do not think is mentioned often enough is the fact that the UK and Irish Governments have struggled to fulfil their honest broker role since 2010. Tory-led Governments in the UK have needed DUP support to govern, informally in the coalition period and subsequently openly in the form of a confidence and supply arrangement. This has had an impact not just on Brexit but on the willingness of the Westminster Government to apply any serious pressure on the DUP to compromise.

By the way, this is a very important point: I do not condemn the Government or the DUP for the relationship that they have developed. How could I, because this is precisely the relationship that the Labour party would have sought with the DUP had the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) emerged as the leader of the largest party in the 2015 general election? I know that better than anybody else because I was leading the work that would have made that possible. It is therefore somewhat hypocritical of Opposition Members when they criticise either the Government or the DUP for the nature of their relationship. Let us be clear about history: in 2015, the Labour party would have done exactly the same had the political conditions existed.

Ian Paisley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his candour on the secondary point. Any party wanting to be in government would try to make such arrangements. We have to be fair to the Government though. They have not tried to use their position to get gains out of our support for the confidence and supply arrangement. In fact, it was steadfastly opposed—there has at times been a brick wall between our party and the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office on issues that we wish we could have influence over. It is only fair and proper that that be on the record. The Secretary of State has kept herself completely away from those arrangements.

Mr Lewis: To my mind, it is extraordinary that the Prime Minister failed to avoid alienating the DUP in the position she adopted on Brexit. I would have thought it would be her top priority in the discussions. What clearly happened was a trust issue as much as a substance issue, in that things were said in private about the Government's position on Brexit and the opposite in public.

On the specific issue the hon. Gentleman raised, I am sorry but I do not withdraw my contention that since 2010 the fact that the Government have been dependent on the DUP to govern, unofficially between 2010 and 2015 and officially since then, has understandably made that Government, at a prime ministerial level and possibly at a Secretary of State level, unwilling to exercise the kind of pressure for compromise that was exercised in the past. That is just a statement of fact. The progress in Northern Ireland was largely a consequence of the honest broker role that the Government in the south and the Government in Westminster played during that period, and the change in that dynamic here has undoubtedly had an impact.

A change in dynamic has made a difference in the south as well. In the south, Sinn Féin is now a serious political challenger to the two leading parties. This inevitably changes the nature of the relationship and inhibits the trust between the Government in the south and Sinn Féin that has been so important to progress in the past. It is not credible to deny that those massive changes in political dynamic have had an impact on the ability to get the parties to compromise.

David Simpson: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned Sinn Féin. Would he accept that Sinn Féin's results at the last election in the Republic were nothing short of disastrous?

Mr Lewis: I have enough problems expressing opinions on the state of politics in the UK without intruding on private grief in the south of Ireland. I am not really qualified to judge. I would say this to the hon. Gentleman though. There is no doubt that a massive factor in Sinn Féin's unwillingness to participate in government in Northern Ireland is its unwillingness to make tough and difficult decisions because in the south of Ireland it wants to give the impression that such decisions are not required. If it participated in government in the north of Ireland, it would have to be part of making such difficult decisions.

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman is making some excellent points. Does he agree that with the prospect of a general election looming in southern Ireland, Sinn Féin will not get back round the Assembly table until after that election, because it would affect its electoral chances? We are making concessions for it here and holding out hope of it getting back round the table, but the southern Ireland scenario is affecting its behaviour.

Mr Lewis: The hon. Lady is probably absolutely right. It is realpolitik. If Sinn Féin is consistent in how it has behaved over several years now, it will not make any move to help reconstitute the Executive and the Assembly until the election in the south of Ireland is done and dusted. The hon. Lady makes a fair point.

I want to raise a final factor that I think has changed the dynamic. It will be uncomfortable for some, and some will not agree, but it is a factor that should not

[Mr Ivan Lewis]

be underestimated. I had the benefit of working with some of the individuals concerned. Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness, however people might have disagreed with them, in their roles as First and Deputy First Ministers were leaders of calibre and pragmatism. I do not believe that such leadership exists at the present time.

I now want to turn to issues that are inevitably divisive and that other Members have touched upon.

Gavin Robinson: Unlike the rest of your speech!

Mr Lewis: They cannot be put on hold forever. Equal marriage and abortion generate strong feelings in all societies, but this is especially the case where religion has played such a central role in a sectarian divide. I do not support those in the House who want to use the current political stalemate to impose solutions from Westminster, but courageous leadership from the Government would mean using this period to allow the people of Northern Ireland to make their voices heard on these issues. The Government should bring forward legislation to hold one referendum covering abortion and equal marriage, and they should be consistent. As with Brexit, they should commit to introducing the necessary legislation if the people of Northern Ireland chose to vote for change.

I understand those who argue that these issues are about fundamental human rights and therefore should not be subject to a referendum, and I also understand why people may be a little cautious about referendums on anything in the present climate, but there is currently no other credible way forward or one that can achieve a solution in the foreseeable future on these issues, which are so divisive. I believe in universal human rights, including the right to religious freedom, but I also believe—this is very important—that societies scarred by conflict require very delicate handling. Wading into these issues as though Northern Ireland is simply like anywhere else misses an important point about societies emerging from conflict.

Conor McGinn: Sure, what would I know about it?

Mr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is entitled to his position. Other people who know as much as he does have an entirely different opinion.

Conor McGinn: I would make two points. First, the hon. Gentleman's constituents in Bury and mine in St Helens who are gay did not have to win a referendum to be able to marry the person they love. Secondly, I gave a lot of thought to my amendment on same-sex marriage and to the sensitivities in Northern Ireland. I do not claim to be an expert in any way, shape or form, but I have considered the matter very carefully.

Mr Lewis: I do not dispute the fact that the hon. Gentleman, in every intervention he has made on Northern Ireland over a very long period—it is his home, not mine—has sought to be sensitive. A referendum is not the ideal solution, but to those who believe in gay marriage and believe that the rules on abortion need to be changed and brought into line with those in the rest of the UK, I would say that that will not be achieved by these amendments, given the parliamentary arithmetic.

My solution provides an opportunity to achieve a breakthrough that cannot be achieved otherwise, given this perpetual debate and stalemate around the Executive and Assembly and given the parliamentary maths.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I do not necessarily agree with the hon. Gentleman's position, but in his defence a referendum would at least refer the issue back to the people of Northern Ireland. It would be perceived as immensely arrogant were the House to dictate to the people of Northern Ireland on subjects that we have already acknowledged across the House are extremely sensitive.

Mr Lewis: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. This should constitutionally be a matter for the people of Northern Ireland. We should not disregard the history of Northern Ireland or the nature of the sensitivities and the fragility that prevail. Too many people refer to Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society. That means ticking boxes saying, "It's resolved, it's all sorted, Northern Ireland has moved on." Anybody who lives in Northern Ireland or cares about it knows that that is not the case. The hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) understands that better than anyone. When we consider these issues, we have to take account of those realities.

I understand that my solution will not be supported by many. Campaigners will say, "We believe in universal human rights, and anything other than that is a dilution of our principles." However, in the current climate, given the parliamentary maths and the stalemate over the Assembly and the Executive, there will no gay marriage or changes in the abortion law in Northern Ireland. That is a fact. We can table as many amendments as we want in this place, but that is the reality, as is the position of the current Government. I therefore suggest that the Government take a brave and courageous step, and, in respect of these sensitive issues, give serious consideration to the option of a referendum. As part of that, they would have to commit themselves to legislation to enact the outcome of the referendum, if it required legislative change.

I will support the Government tonight because I believe this to be the least worst solution, but there needs to be a wake-up call for the leading parties in Northern Ireland. They think that the regrettable failure of leadership can go on for ever because they dominate the vote in their respective communities—that is the political reality of Northern Ireland—but around the world, the certainties of elites and establishments are being shattered. We are seeing Brexit in our own country, and we saw Donald Trump defeat Hillary Clinton. Those are two examples of the crumbling of elites and establishments who thought that they were in the ascendancy.

If the current leaders continue to fail in their duty to run Northern Ireland, they may wake up one morning to find that the silent majority of Unionists and nationalists has been raised in support of credible alternatives. That may be hard to believe, but never say never in the context of the current turbulence around the world. Northern Ireland should and can have a great future, but its people are being let down by its leaders. Victims of violence and institutional abuse are being given neither justice nor closure, and too many young people are being left behind because austerity means that too many of the promises of the peace process have not been delivered.

Let me point out to the Secretary of State that as a consequence of austerity, the investment that Northern Ireland should have had following the peace process has not been delivered to the level at which it should have been delivered, despite some of the deals that have been done with, specifically, the Democratic Unionist party. Overall, the people running Northern Ireland have not received the peace dividend that they were promised because of austerity, and that needs to be taken into account in future budgetary decisions about Northern Ireland.

It is sad that politics is sharpening the sectarian divide when it should be healing and weakening the divides of the past. The silent majority in Northern Ireland deserve better. It is time that politicians on all sides did their duty, and put the people of Northern Ireland first.

8.12 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). When I intervened on him, I reflected on his tenure as shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and spoke warmly about him and, despite his speech, I meant it. I have to say, however, that a number of contributions this evening have been jaundiced and negative about the political situation in Northern Ireland, have been warped politically, have not taken account of contributions in the House, have not taken account of commitments made publicly, and have not taken account of the rational, sincere and at times politically difficult and contentious positions that we adopt to resolve issues at home in Northern Ireland.

In her excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) referred to times throughout the last 10 years when we did everything to sustain government in Northern Ireland. I had been in the House for about three months when the IRA shot dead a constituent of mine, Kevin McGuigan, who lived in Short Strand. He was killed by an organisation that we are told does not exist and does not hold on to arms—an organisation that had been, to that day, inextricably linked to Sinn Féin.

There was a huge crisis in Northern Ireland, and the Ulster Unionist party walked out of government having decided that enough was enough. However, we knew that, should we do the same thing and should the Assembly fall, it would be incredibly difficult to put it together again, so we bought time. We went through a very unedifying process of rolling resignations to keep the institutions alive, while at the same time seeking from, and gaining from, the Chief Constable security assessments that gave us the courage and faith to continue.

We could easily have walked away. We could easily have thrown our constituents, and the entire society of Northern Ireland, into an abyss. But we did not do it because we believe in devolution, we believe in power sharing and we believe that, no matter how difficult it may become and how diametrically opposed we may be to our neighbours in Northern Ireland, there is value in the existence of democratically electable institutions in Northern Ireland and huge merit in the existence of an engaged political class—a forum in which people can present their issues and seek resolutions.

We all recognise that, in politics, we must turn up here day after day. We do not get everything that we want, but we must try, we must present positive arguments and we must champion causes in our communities. That is why I found it depressing to hear the hon. Member for Bury South say that there was a failure of leadership. There are politicians in this place who are not prepared to tell their own people what they need to hear, but my colleagues and I put ourselves in difficult situations every day doing just that, and I have to say that representatives of the other side of the community put themselves in dangerous situations every day doing just that. From a position of leadership, we are saying what is right—recognising the political parameters in which we operate and recognising the positions that we hold, but doing just that.

When 1,800 tyres were removed from a bonfire yesterday in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South, we could easily have hidden from those who thought that it was a good idea to burn tyres and pollute our community. We could easily have stood back and said, “These are all very difficult issues and we cannot resolve them.” But we do not do that in these circumstances because it is important not to. We stand up to those who threaten violence in our communities against our communities. We stand up to those who sell drugs in our communities and destroy our communities. We are not afraid to take positions of leadership when that is required. And—as I mentioned in an intervention that was quickly dismissed—we are not afraid of compromise either. That is not a dirty word. It is not wrong to recognise that other people have an aspiration that is different from one’s own.

However, we cannot set aside competing aspirations either. We should not be here this evening, but the thrust of this debate and the reason for the Bill is the fact that we are faced with a political situation in which one party, whether we in this Chamber like it or not, has decided that if it does not get what it wants, it will pick up the ball and walk off the pitch.

It was encouraging to hear the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) talk about a coalition of the willing. One of the key strands of the talks in which we have been engaging is the sustainability of the institutions. She mentioned that there was some muttering of “That is not power sharing” from the Benches in front of me. Who says that it is not power sharing? Why can we not have a coalition of the willing across the community divide—across the sectarian divide—which recognises that people come from different traditions, but want to share things?

We do not have power sharing at the moment. We have a refusal to share power and, when one party does it, the entire society of Northern Ireland suffers. That is not right. That is not sustainable government. That is not a basis for progress. I have to say that if, over the forthcoming days, weeks or months, we end up with a talks process that has not produced a change in the way in which the system operates, and has not told the public at large that this cannot happen again and never again can institutions be brought down at the behest of one party because it does not get what it wants, that talks process will have failed.

Similarly, I am not going to spend a lot of time talking about amendments that may or may not be selected tomorrow, but, just as I would be critical of the

[Gavin Robinson]

contribution by the hon. Member for Bury South—he is not alone in this—I also have critical comments to make of the shadow Secretary of State. I am sorry to say that. I am sorry to reflect this evening that, over the course of 21 years of a peace process in this country, the Government and the loyal Opposition have always stepped in tune, have always walked together, have recognised sometimes that decisions are being made that do not suit or are not quite palatable, but recognised that that is in the best interests of society in Northern Ireland, yet over the course of this Bill what we see are amendments that are purely partisan.

If this was about rights, there are more than one or two issues. If it was about progress, there are other issues to be progressed. But I do find it a little rich when we are engaged in trying to restore devolution in Northern Ireland that we have politicians in this Chamber who think it is their duty to cherry-pick, to virtue-signal and to pluck out a couple of issues here and there that they wish to progress, to the exclusion of all others. It does not need to be repeated ad nauseam because my colleagues have mentioned the litany of issues that we need to see progressed in Northern Ireland, yet they do not feature. If it is about coercion, which is what the hon. Member for Bury South was getting to, to encourage us to get back into talks, I think it is counterproductive. If it is about changing the rationale of other parties in Northern Ireland, those who tabled these amendments should not have been so selective. Is there one amendment being proposed by that side of the Opposition Benches that is going to cause difficulty for Sinn Féin or nationalism? There is not one. This is partisan and regressive. It turns back the tide of 21 years of constructive contributions from both Government and Her Majesty's Opposition.

I do not suggest that Northern Ireland politics are easy or that everyone should agree with my view. I started my speech in that vein but, if we respect devolution and if we want to see the institutions up and running and take decisions on the issues that we can, the only people who are preventing progress on the issue of same-sex marriage are Sinn Féin. They could have the Stormont Assembly restored tomorrow. They could have its first plenary session—not to put anyone under pressure during their holidays—on 1 September and the first thing they could pass is a motion on same-sex marriage. But they are not facilitating, agreeing or permitting a restoration of those institutions. They say it is a political request that they have and they say it is an aspiration, but they are doing nothing to deliver it. And the same can be said on the issue of the Irish language. We are criticised for not compromising, but we committed to legislate for the Irish language and yet still were rebuffed.

Conor McGinn: The hon. Gentleman knows I have a great deal of respect and affection for him. I am sure he would want to clarify that he is not suggesting for a moment that any of the amendments proposed by me or colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench are at the behest of Sinn Féin. On same-sex marriage, I have worked very closely with the Love Equality coalition and with representatives from all political parties, including, I might add, his own.

Gavin Robinson: For the avoidance of doubt, let me assuage the hon. Gentleman's concerns—although in the context of this exchange, I am not sure “affection”

was the appropriate word, but I will take it in the spirit in which it was offered. I know the hon. Gentleman's sincerity on the amendment he is putting forward and I also know the sincerity of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on the issue that she put forward. I did not mention either of them when I was making my remarks. It was the Front Bench that I was focusing on and its amendments. I am not going to frustrate anybody's ability to table an amendment in this place. It is not my position to do so.

I engage with Love Equality. I got castigated for accepting a petition from them. They know my position and I know their position. I see no difficulty whatsoever in engaging positively and constructively. I get criticised for doing the things that I think are important, from a position of leadership, yet I still think it is the right thing to do. The same is true of my constituent Sarah Ewart, who I am sure will get mentioned. She is the most lovely lady who has had a most horrendous time. She is seeking a political answer to an issue that has dogged her personally for the last number of years, with no success. I think that she believes and hopes that she will get an answer through the courts in September. I think she believes that it is appropriate that such issues are dealt with locally. But I am not going to frustrate the political aspirations of others. They can put them forward but, if they respect devolution, if they believe that what I and my colleagues are engaged in in the talks has a purpose, and if they want to put us to the test, let us do it. But do not cherry-pick on a partisan basis.

I want to make just two brief points. I should not be here discussing this this evening. I should be in my constituency—although knowing we have parliamentary duties—dealing with some of the contentious issues that are being raised around bonfires and community tension. I mentioned the removal of tyres from a bonfire last night in Belfast South. I was pleased to see voluntary action this evening by some of the bonfires in east Belfast to remove tyres and pollutants from our community. These are sensitive issues. At the same time, I will have people criticising me and wanting to drag me through the streets to say I do not stand up for the right to celebrate our culture, and from the other side of the coin I will have people saying that I do not do enough, I do not challenge and I do not control. But I will always stand up for the interests of people in my constituency.

Lady Hermon: It is awfully kind of the hon. Gentleman to give way; I am extremely grateful to him. May I take him back to his constituent Sarah Ewart, who is a most remarkable and very courageous lady? What will happen when the Supreme Court rules in the autumn? It has already indicated and Lord Kerr, a former Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, made obiter remarks last year in the case taken by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission that the abortion legislation in Northern Ireland is deeply unsatisfactory. If the Supreme Court rules in favour of Sarah Ewart, will not the United Kingdom Government and this House have an obligation to bring our legislation in Northern Ireland into line with our human rights obligations?

Gavin Robinson: Of course, if there is a finding of incompatibility, a declaration will be issued to that effect and the requirement will lie on the United Kingdom Government to consider that declaration of incompatibility; that is a statement of fact.

I, like the four speakers before me, stood up and said I was not going to speak for long and I have no intention of speaking for much longer because there are contributions to be made tomorrow on the specifics of whatever amendments are selected. But I want to draw the Minister's mind back to the engagements that we had during the passage of the rates and budget Bill and to raise an issue that will not feature; it is not politically sexy or attractive. It is not an issue that people spend a lot of time thinking of. But I have raised it continually: the re-designation of housing associations and co-ownership.

One small, discrete issue that has a huge, meaningful impact on communities in Northern Ireland is that, because of the lack of Stormont, we have not reclassified our housing associations and the co-ownership scheme in Northern Ireland cannot avail itself of financial transaction capital. It cannot avail itself of the funds necessary to continue. The Minister made a commitment that the Government would legislate to rectify this small anomaly but, if that does not happen prior to the recess, 11% of all first-time purchasers who could avail themselves of co-ownership support will be unable to do so, and those who are starting life or at the lower end of the social spectrum will not have access to the finance required for their own home, unlike in the past when we have had £127 million of property purchases. I ask the Minister to give some assurance that a resolution will be found on this small but discrete issue. It is something that would not ordinarily trouble Parliament. It should have been resolved long ago and it will come to a head in the next number of weeks. The commitment was there. I would like to see progress on this.

8.29 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) in paying tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound); the latter is sitting on the Front Bench. I have known him a very long time. I shall always be incredibly grateful for his support and enthusiasm in teaching me the power of the woggle, the necker and small children to effect great change in this country. He will be missed by many in this House, because he is a great friend of scouting.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for setting out so clearly and emotively the passion that people feel at this time and for talking about it from a constituency perspective. Sometimes in this place people forget just how powerfully we feel, because of how we spend our lives. I hate it when people talk about politicians being out of touch, because we do nothing but be in touch, whatever political party we represent. We live, breathe and feel the frustrations of our constituents, and we are all here tonight because we feel their frustration that this piece of legislation was put forward six months ago as a temporary stopgap in the hope that progress could somehow be made. It was suggested that it was a necessary evil.

I am pleased that the Government have recognised that they should not try to suggest that this new piece of legislation is just a narrow, small change in the date, when what it is doing is extending those quite substantial powers to make legislation and change the law in Northern

Ireland that were given six months ago on what was presumed to be a temporary basis. The Bill requires scrutiny; I particularly contest its powers around statutory instruments, which we know have been controversial in other areas of policy. Indeed, many of us have already sat on Statutory Instrument Committees about making direct change in Northern Ireland. We need to scrutinise not just the date, but the use of those statutory instrument powers. I am also conscious that the civil servants have said that they feel uncomfortable about the position they have been put in and about the fact that this legislation has been pushed through Parliament as an emergency measure, when, as people have said, we are now looking at three years without any change in the situation in Stormont.

I have been working on the Back Benches with colleagues in every other party—except the DUP at the moment—on these issues because we recognise that there are two sides of the coin. This relates particularly to the amendments that I want to support tomorrow. The human rights issues that they raise go to section 26 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which charged this place with the responsibility to uphold our international obligations, even when there was an Assembly in Northern Ireland. It is important for those of us who are proud of devolution, of being able to give power to people and of ensuring that they can exercise it, that we recognise the check and balance that this place provides in that process. Section 26 speaks precisely to that when it comes to human rights.

There is a specific definition of human rights. It is not about a single policy area; it is about a set of rules and obligations that we as the United Kingdom have signed up to for generations, and now find that we particularly need to uphold. This relates to a woman's right to choose what happens to her body and to a person's right to choose to marry who they love and have that recognised. Human rights speak to basic freedoms—not the freedom to do what we want, but the freedom to be who we are without feeling that that makes us second-class citizens. These are core freedoms that each of us has come into this place to uphold. They are issues on which we need to work together.

Ian Paisley: I understand the hon. Lady's position, although it is very different from mine. Does she recognise that there is not a right to terminate an unborn life under the European convention on human rights?

Stella Creasy: I recognise that the hon. Gentleman and I are on different sides of this, but if he will forgive me, I will come to the international obligations that we as a country have signed up to that I believe are relevant in considering this Bill. This Bill allows for action in the absence of an Assembly, but it does not absolve us of our responsibility to comply with international obligations.

Sir John Hayes: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will make a little progress and then happily take an intervention from him.

For me, there is a simple point. This weekend, many of us will have proudly celebrated Pride. We will have seen the rainbow flag and talked about the importance of standing up for the rights of gays, lesbians and transgender people across the world. We have seen persecution in

[Stella Creasy]

Chechnya and in Europe under the Orbán legislation, and we have stood up and said that we as a nation want to be a beacon. We have even said that we should kick countries out of the Commonwealth that do not uphold gay rights. There was an outcry in this country when people saw legislation introduced in Alabama under which doctors are prosecuted for performing abortions, while Georgia is saying that no woman can have an abortion later than six weeks, by which time most women do not even realise that they might be pregnant.

There is a simple rule for those of us who have been consistent—as I hope that the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) would recognise that many of us have been—whether we have fought the global gag rule, or stood up for the importance of international development investment in maternity healthcare. We cannot argue that we are beacons of human rights around the world if we do not get our own house in order. We are told consistently by the international agencies that we have signed up to that we have a problem in Northern Ireland—in particular, that we are treating women there as second-class citizens. This Bill speaks to what we do in the absence of an Assembly that is able to fulfil those international obligations. If those obligations do not mean anything, what does this place do, when sometimes it has to speak for those whose voices cannot be heard?

I was at the Council of Europe two weeks ago, when the Government were boasting about being about to ratify the Istanbul convention on violence against women, but the legislation that the Government have introduced to try to do that will not even cover Northern Ireland. The Bill before us will not deal with the gap, so women in Northern Ireland will not have protection from stalking. They do not have coercive control legislation, and will not get the support of the domestic violence commissioners, yet the Istanbul convention is a piece of international legislation that we have signed up to and committed to. We have said that it speaks to our support for human rights.

On abortion in Northern Ireland, in the years since we had an Assembly, we have been directly criticised by the United Nations. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has explicitly said that the UK cannot invoke its internal arrangements to justify its failure to revise the Northern Ireland laws that violate the convention by denying women in Northern Ireland the same rights as women in my constituency of Walthamstow or the Minister's constituency: the right to have a safe, legal and local abortion.

Sir John Hayes: Now that the hon. Lady has made progress, let me deal with the two points that she has raised that I want to contradict. First, as the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) said, it is highly debatable whether abortion falls into the category of rights that she has described. Indeed, people such as Professor Mark Hill, QC, contradict that view. Secondly, in any case, as she will know, the legislation that underpinned devolution in 1998 largely devolves matters of international obligation to the Northern Ireland people, so if even she thinks this is a right, it is a right that should be decided upon by the people to whom we have devolved power, else devolution means nothing.

Stella Creasy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I gently suggest that he goes back and reads section 26 of the 1998 Act, which explicitly does not do what he says it does. It explicitly says—[*Interruption.*] With respect, I listened to him; I hope he will listen to me, because this is the debate that we need to have about this legislation. I have listened to him—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady has the right to respond to the intervention.

Stella Creasy: The 1998 Act explicitly says that the Westminster Parliament retains responsibility for upholding those international obligations.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked about the concept of abortion as a human right. I understand that he has quoted a QC, but again I would point him to those international bodies, including the Vienna convention, that say that we cannot absolve ourselves of those international obligations through our internal arrangements, and the UN Committee against Torture, which just this month said that the situation in Northern Ireland was

“likely to result in severe pain and suffering, such as when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, when the life or health of the pregnant person is at risk and in cases of fatal fetal impairment.”

We are being explicitly challenged on human rights, and there are grounds in the Istanbul convention—[*Interruption.*] The right hon. Gentleman shakes his head. Above all else, this Bill is about how we help to ensure that people in Northern Ireland do not have the current gap. We need to say that those international obligations are equally our responsibility.

The right hon. Gentleman might disagree about those obligations, but he cannot deny that, right now, there is a gap on this very issue. That is why it is right that we have introduced proposals to try to address the gap, so that people in Northern Ireland are not put at a disadvantage. He shakes his head again. Perhaps he will listen to our Supreme Court, which has found that the situation in Northern Ireland is incompatible with article 8 of the European convention on human rights with respect to fatal foetal abnormalities and to women who become pregnant due to rape or incest. It said the law in Northern Ireland is “untenable” and needs “radical reconsideration”, as it treats women like “vehicles.”

The courts are looking to this Parliament, because the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 was passed by Westminster, so it needs to be dealt with by Westminster, which would need to enable the people of Northern Ireland, if the Assembly were back up and running, to craft their own laws on this issue. The right hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. Either we take responsibility for the impact of UK-wide legislation crafted in this place and for the international human rights obligations that we as a Parliament have sworn to protect, or we say that it is okay to treat some of our people as second-class citizens and not give them the services we give to others.

Emma Little Pengelly: I think I raised this point in our previous debate. There is no barrier to the law changing in Northern Ireland. There has been some confusion on the idea that the law needs to change here to enable that to happen. It does not. Criminal law is fully devolved, so that can happen in Northern Ireland.

Stella Creasy: Let us be very clear. The reason why a woman in Northern Ireland who is raped, becomes pregnant and then seeks a termination faces a longer prison sentence than her attacker is because of the 1861 Act. It is because of that Act that, in November 2018, a mother faced a jail sentence because she sought abortion pills online to try to help her 15-year-old daughter, who was in an abusive relationship. This legislation is affecting the lives of UK citizens.

When these issues are not being dealt with due to the lack of an Assembly, and when the Government, who have sworn to fulfil these international obligations, are saying that we will just have a big exclusionary gap when it comes to Northern Ireland, what do we do as parliamentarians? We all swore to uphold the Good Friday agreement and joint equivalency.

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: Thousands of citizens in Northern Ireland have emailed their MPs in support of change. Thousands of citizens in Northern Ireland have said, "Please don't make us wait anymore," just as thousands have said they want the right to love whom they love, to marry them and to have that recognised. We know people want change, and we know that, in 2016, 70% of people in Northern Ireland said that no woman should ever go to prison for having an abortion, but that is the situation we are in. We know that 65% of adults in Northern Ireland—

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Little Pengelly: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: I have listened, and I want to meet my obligation to not make a long speech—an obligation that we have all been trying to uphold this evening. I promise that I am coming to an end, and I have taken interventions.

Ian Paisley: We have until 10 o'clock.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady has indicated that she is coming to the end of her speech, so do not continually ask her to give way; she is clearly not going to, and she is quite right to say so. Although there is quite a lot of time, we do have other speakers to fit in.

Stella Creasy: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We also know that 66% of the public in Northern Ireland think that Westminster should reform the law in the absence of a devolved Government. This Bill deals with that absence and the unlikelihood of our ever getting an Assembly set up in the current situation. DUP Members have very clearly set out many of the frustrations that might be preventing that, but above all, that does not mean that the voices and rights—particularly human rights—of the people of Northern Ireland should play second fiddle to political frustrations.

If we have learned anything in this place, it is that when we put politics ahead of people, we all lose out. I am also talking about our ability to listen to the voices of women such as Sarah Ewart, who are looking for change—women who tell us that they could not go

through another pregnancy because their last one nearly killed them in childbirth. We ask that every woman has the choice to not be forced to continue with an unwanted pregnancy. Women do not want to face prosecution because they stood up for their children.

Last year, 1,000 women travelled to England and Wales to get an abortion, but many more cannot travel; they might be in abusive relationships, they might have childcare issues or they might not be able to afford it. We have to remember that there is no right at all here, not even in instances of rape or fatal foetal abnormality. Current laws force women in Northern Ireland to carry a baby they know will not live. That cannot be a human right. That is torture, and we cannot keep waiting for the Assembly to deal with it. We do not expect citizens in England and Wales to go through a referendum on this; we cannot put that extra layer on the people of Northern Ireland in order for them to get their human rights.

If we take this course on the right not to be forced to continue an unwanted pregnancy, or the right to love whom we love, what other human rights will we sacrifice for political expediency? The right to life and liberty? The right to be free from slavery and torture? Freedom of opinion and expression? It is a slippery slope to start saying that the human rights obligations that we have signed up to do not matter when we write legislation. The amendments tomorrow and the ruse of those statutory instruments are crucial, and that is because of the words of Lyra McKee's partner, Sara Canning, who said to the Prime Minister at Lyra's funeral:

"I wanted her to know that Lyra and I had a right to be treated as equal citizens in our own country. Surely that's not too much to ask?"

We can pass legislation about the powers of politics and the powers of this place, but fundamentally the power of this place cannot be to deny the basic human rights of our citizens. The people who live in Northern Ireland deserve the same human rights as the people who live in England and Wales. Either we are champions of human rights or we do not deserve to call ourselves parliamentarians.

8.47 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I promise to be brief, as a number of Members have done, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I hope we can get some points across. I am very disappointed that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for whom I have a great deal of respect, even though we disagree passionately on this issue, did not want to give way and engage in a debate on some issues, because there are important facts that need to be put on the record. First, it is important to say that no woman has gone to jail in Northern Ireland on the issue that the hon. Lady so passionately raised—it has not happened. It does not happen. Lots of things are on the statute but do not happen. Women are not regularly taken off to jail and imprisoned on these issues in Northern Ireland. It might happen in other parts of the world but it has not happened in Northern Ireland.

The last time the Assembly debated the important and sensitive matter of abortion and abortion rights was in 2016, when 59 of the Members present—an overwhelming majority—did not want to change the legislation in the way that the hon. Lady has argued for

[*Ian Paisley*]

and 40 Members did. A considerable difference in opinion existed but a clear majority were against the points that the hon. Lady passionately made and is rightly entitled to hold. Those points are not, however, supported across the community in Northern Ireland.

The one point I did raise with the hon. Lady, directly, in an intervention, was: is the right to terminate an unborn life a European convention right? Terminating the life of an unborn child is not a right, according to the European convention on human rights. People can wave other conventions, decrees and subsections of meetings that have occurred around the world involving other conventions and other groups, but the totem—the one we are all signed up to and the one that will stay in place after we leave the EU—the European convention on human rights, does not uphold this “right” or see the termination of the unborn life as a right.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will know that our Supreme Court has determined that there is no general right to abortion, and in international law states are given considerable leeway about how they treat such matters. I could not reconcile any of that with a speech from the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I appreciate her passion, but passion is no substitute for sense.

Ian Paisley: The other point I wish to make is about what my constituents in Northern Ireland want. What do the people of Northern Ireland want? It is right and proper to say that the Labour party fought valiantly up to 2003 to get in place an agreement to ensure that the Northern Ireland Assembly would take crucial, key and tough decisions. I must say, there were times when we disagreed with how the Labour party went about it, but ultimately Labour signed off on agreements that allowed for that to happen. I am disappointed that those on the Labour Front Bench have now decided that on certain issues they can have a pick-and-mix approach to what the Assembly should or should not do.

Labour party Front Benchers should be steadfast, at one with and—if it is not too pointed to say this week, as we go into the marching season—in step with the Conservative party and the Government of the day when it comes to making sure that we do not break the established convention, which is that on these issues there is agreement that the Assembly in Northern Ireland should take decisions. The Labour party should not encourage otherwise or diverge from that by saying, “Well, on certain things that are contentious, or that we really like, or on which we are under pressure from our Back Benchers, we will support the notion that Parliament should legislate separately.”

There is a long list of priorities—it has been read out by other Members—many of which would be higher up list for the ordinary folk of Northern Ireland than some of the matters that people will raise tonight and tomorrow. We have to make sure that we have a consistent approach. We could say that we are going to have devolution and put all the energy and passion into that. The hon. Member for Walthamstow should put the same passion she has shown on this issue into encouraging the parties in Northern Ireland to get around the table, to get on with making that agreement and to bring governance back to the Assembly in Northern Ireland, because were that

to happen, perhaps some of the pithy matters that have been put on the agenda in this House would be properly discussed and debated, and laws would be either upheld or altered and changed as the case may be—as the Assembly would want.

Let me go back to the question of what my constituents want. In a recent ComRes survey, 64% of the general population of Northern Ireland agreed that changing the law on abortion in Northern Ireland is an issue that should be reserved to the Assembly in Northern Ireland. That 64% is an overwhelming number of people who want the Assembly to take decisions on that matter. That is why I say again that the imperative should be that we encourage the parties, including my own party, to get on with resolving the outstanding issues.

Sixty-six per cent. of women in Northern Ireland, irrespective of social, cultural or political background, want the Assembly to make laws on these issues. They do not want this place to make those laws. More importantly, as other Members have remarked, they do not want this place to rush into making legislative decisions on Northern Ireland on a hop, skip and a prayer approach, which results in really bad law. They want really good decisions to be made and good law to be put in place. They do not want decisions that are rushed and that leave us with bad law, especially on the sensitive issue of the termination of human life.

Lady Hermon: What happens if, with a fair wind, good leadership and courageous decision making, we actually get the Assembly up and running again? The hon. Gentleman has given the statistics for those in Northern Ireland who are in favour of allowing the Assembly to deal with sensitive issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Will he explain to the House—it would be very interesting, particularly in advance of tomorrow’s debate—what the DUP’s policy will be on reforming abortion legislation in Northern Ireland to make sure that the 1,000 women who are forced to leave their own home country to go to England or Scotland for an abortion will have some of their rights delivered in Northern Ireland? What is the DUP’s policy on that if the Assembly is up and running?

Ian Paisley: As my cousin knows, I will always give way to her on other matters in these important debates, but seeing the look of consternation on the face of Mr Deputy Speaker, I fear that if I were to go into a separate analysis of our policy and how we would implement it and put in place a common assembly sometime in the future, he may call me to order. I would happily debate that point with the hon. Lady if she were to raise it at a later stage. I would do so even if she were to bring forward an Adjournment debate on the subject. I look forward to debating that issue.

The point that I did leave out in the hope that my colleague, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), was going to intervene on me was this issue of bad law. I know that no one in this House—whether it is the hon. Member for Walthamstow or any other Member—wants to put in place bad laws, but sometimes the consequences of actions that we take lead to very bad laws. It may not be the intention, but it can ultimately be the impact. Certainly, the intention of some of the amendments that have been tabled would, in my view, really compromise matters relating to the sensitive issue of abortion rights. For example, they could lead to sex

selection abortions in Northern Ireland, and they could lead to a massive increase in the number of abortions of disabled life. We could see problems arise where there is no proper management or scrutiny of where abortions take place. All these issues have been flagged up by a number of groups that have been looking at the problems that would arise if a quick solution were found, which does not exist, to a very difficult set of circumstances that pertain in Northern Ireland. We need to tread cautiously on this issue and not just think about brushing away some pieces of law and some protections that we have, because suddenly everything will be open to change, and that could be very detrimental indeed. The changes could also have an impact in England and Wales: if we were to create a set of circumstances where the laws in Northern Ireland would be so open to abortion, basically anything could go. We would then have a set of circumstances in which Northern Ireland would be well out of kilter on this issue with the Republic of Ireland where I understand that abortion will be limited to the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. We would have a situation where it could be right up to the point of birth in Northern Ireland. That would be absolutely terrible and something that is clearly not the desire or the intention.

Stella Creasy indicated dissent.

Ian Paisley: I accept that it is not the intention of the hon. Lady, but it is the point that has been put forward on a number of occasions by experts on these issues.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate that we are veering into matters that should probably should be debated in detail tomorrow. As it currently stands, the Abortion Act 1967 bears no resemblance to what is actually happening with abortion today in the United Kingdom. It is really down to demand, and that was never the intention of the 1967 Act, according to those who were involved—I am talking about David Steel and others who brought the Act forward in the first place.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

Let me turn now to some of the other points that have been raised in the debate. I am glad that the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), is still in his place. First, let me congratulate him on his assumption of that role. I have, so far, enjoyed his chairmanship of the Committee and we are getting into some really meaty stuff. He has been excellent in terms of encouraging the Committee to get out reports. I think that we have published two reports under his chairmanship already. That is, of course, very good. *[Interruption.]* He may as well take the bouquets now, because brick bats might come at any point.

However, I was very disappointed with the Chairman of the Select Committee's analysis of the border poll issue. I do not believe that we are anywhere near the point that Northern Ireland should either have a border poll or that the opinion is so close in Northern Ireland that it would deserve a border poll. Indeed once again, the Belfast agreement lays out the terms and conditions for having a border poll: the Government must have tangible evidence to show that the overwhelming weight of opinion is that a border poll would be successful. That is not the case; it is nowhere near the case. Even the analysis of the most difficult elections that Northern

Ireland has been through shows that that is not the case, but there is a majority across both sections of the community to retain the link with the United Kingdom. To give way on that or to concede that point only encourages people who have the worst interests at heart for Northern Ireland and not the best interests. I certainly encourage the Chairman of the Select Committee to review his position on that and to consider whether he can analyse that situation differently and see from the evidence that there is not a wind of change in that direction. Yes, there is lots of talk about it, but it is from people who do not really care about the Union, never have cared and really have not changed. Gerry Adams has now been put in charge of the border poll issue; he did not have much success in the past 30 years in achieving any of his big goals and he will not have much success in achieving that goal either.

Those are the points that I want to leave before the House tonight. I look forward to the debate continuing and, indeed, to tomorrow's debate.

Jim Shannon *rose—*

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I did not expect to be called ahead of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), but thank you very much for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. There are a great many issues to speak on, some of which we will come to tomorrow. I hope to have the opportunity and more time to comment on them then.

To say that I am disheartened to be living through this déjà vu is a massive understatement. I will put it in the words of one of my constituents, who spoke to me only this morning: "I'm absolutely gutted." Those are the words of that gentleman. I am gutted for my constituents, who are good, hard-working men and women with families, whose day-to-day lives have been stymied because Sinn Féin refuses to be democratic and to put its demand list to the democratically elected Assembly.

We need to put the blame where the blame is—not with the democratic parties that are not holding up the process. My constituents see restrictions in secondary school places for their children and the threat of closure of one post-primary, non-selective school in a town of 30,000 in Newtownards, and they see no Minister to appeal to for common sense to enable that process to be stopped. They see waiting lists shooting through the roof—appointments for routine surgeries, with people sitting for two years in agony awaiting hip replacements. They see their children waiting for ear, nose and throat appointments for tonsil problems after nine months of pain. They see massive projects with shovel-ready funding in place that are not able begin because a senior civil servant fears overstepping his or her position. New builds are on hold. Primary and secondary school budgets are short of the moneys needed to keep them going. Principals from my constituency have expressed concern over their budgets for the coming year. The issue of

[*Jim Shannon*]

special needs is also a critical factor, which we have discussed in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, as hon. Members here who are on that Committee will know.

The one thing in this process that is clear to me is that when it comes to health, it does not matter if you are a nationalist or Unionist. Health issues affect everyone. When it comes to education issues, it does not matter whether you are a nationalist or a Unionist; they hurt you the same whoever you are. Potholes are not exclusive to the Unionist area or the nationalist area—they are everywhere. When it comes budgets and agreeing a way forward, those are things we clearly could do.

Benefits are now one of the biggest issues in my office, taking up some 25% to 30% of my office casework. That is a massive contribution. A working Northern Ireland Assembly could address the critical benefit issues of our constituents. Would it not be better if the Northern Ireland Assembly was in place, at least to be able to use some of the block budget, as we have in the past, to help to allay some of the fears on benefit issues?

The first food bank in the whole of Northern Ireland, a Trussell Trust food bank, was in Newtownards in my constituency. Is it not better that we slow down the rate at which people are referred to food banks? Poverty levels, especially among children, are at their highest for many years; we need an Assembly that can work, and that can only happen if we have a process that enables it to happen.

In the smaller realm of things, we have warm home schemes with budgets allocated, but as yet the previous scheme has continued. My constituents in their 80s who are sitting with their old boilers that lose as much oil as is used, damaging the environment and damaging their lungs, are being told, “Yes, you’re suitable, but, oh wait, we can’t do the new scheme just yet because—guess what?—we haven’t got a Minister in place, we haven’t got a Department, and we haven’t got the extra moneys that are allocated and necessary.” Again, the whole process builds up. There are also the roads budgets. Only last Thursday, the Transport Committee talked about the potholes programme. Then there are all the tarmacking schemes for new roads across the whole constituency. I have said before and I say it again—Members will be surprised if I do not—that the bypass for Ballynahinch continues to be a big issue for my constituency and the people I look after.

We are coming towards 12 July, and in my constituency we are very pleased to have a good bonfire strategy. Working through Ards and North Down Borough Council, we have managed to ensure that tyres are not put on the bonfires in my constituency, so we do not have the problem that is found in other areas. We have the opportunity of Orangefest, the traditional 12 July parade being held in Holywood, in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), where both communities are able to enjoy all the culture, history and tradition. We are very fortunate in my constituency of Strangford and her constituency of North Down to have good community relations, and long may that continue. I am a member of Kircubbin Volunteers Loyal Orange Lodge, and over the past number of years I have been there I have seen the two communities coming together. They all come out on the 12th day to enjoy the parades.

The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), who is no longer here, pointed the finger at some of the political parties. I was disappointed with that, because the Democratic Unionist party has made special efforts, through Dr Paisley, Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster, to move the political process forward. We have all gone on a road of change in our lives politically in terms of what we wanted in the past and what we were prepared to achieve. The political process in the Northern Ireland Assembly happened because politicians in the Democratic Unionist party—and, to be fair, politicians in Sinn Féin—felt at the time that the Northern Ireland Assembly was the way forward. It is good that that happened.

Bob Stewart: The elephant in the room is the fact that Sinn Féin just does not give a damn about the Northern Ireland Executive. A year and a half ago, we were talking about making moves very fast towards having direct rule, and each time we have pushed and pushed and pushed. It is actually in Sinn Féin’s interest to continue to procrastinate and to destroy the Northern Ireland Executive. We finally have to recognise that.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—he is absolutely right. The Sinn Féin of today is a very different body from back then. It was in a process where it wanted a political regional assembly to move forward; today, the obstacles and obstructions that it puts down are very clear.

With everything that is in me I echo the cries of my constituents. This is simply not good enough, and the Secretary of State must understand that. Last week, we lost one of our politics’ brightest stars to the private sector—my colleague Simon Hamilton. I warned about this during the previous extension debates. I said that we would lose those with mortgages and young families who love their country but have bills to pay and lives to live. They need job security like anyone else. They need to have fulfilment in their job like anyone else. We are in danger of losing more people like Simon, in other parties as well, who are invested in seeing their children live, grow and work in a prosperous Northern Ireland. That is not because Northern Ireland is hopeless, because it is not, but because they are being prevented from doing what they want to do and should be doing. Simon Hamilton was a visionary politician. He was also my election agent in the past three elections, and I thank him for that. He had a vision for Northern Ireland and wanted to be part of the process. Unfortunately, the fact that we are not moving forward has made him take this decision.

I echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) has said: we need a political process, and no longer can one party hold back others. We need to look at a different method. If five parties want to be involved in a democratic political process and a way forward, we should do that. No more can one party—Sinn Féin—hold up the process, as the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said.

MLAs are maligned as lazy and self-seeking by some in this House and those who perhaps do not understand exactly what they do, yet they are desperate to do their jobs properly. They are prevented from doing so by self-serving Sinn Féin, who could not break this nation with bombs, who could not domination through their machination regarding the voting system and procedure, and who have instead decided to cripple it from within.

I mean no disrespect, but that crippling was described to me as being aided and abetted by this Government—it has not been dealt with by a Government who have had their eyes on Brexit, as they must—at the expense of my constituents.

Many Members have referred to the hard border. The Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has said that there is no need for a hard border. The EU has said that there is no need for a hard border. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has said that there is no need for a hard border. When all those players say that there is no need for a hard border, we must ask ourselves why we would pursue that. My father came from Castlefinn in Donegal, and my mother came from Clady, outside Strabane. That did not stop my mother and father crossing the border and meeting each other. I would not be here today if they had not met—that is a fact of life. The border never stopped people crossing it to meet and get together.

We want to see Northern Ireland move forward, and this Bill does not do that. It keeps us treading water. The problem is that we are fast losing all energy and are beginning to drown, not because the funding or the ability is not there, but because the tough decisions are not being taken. They are not being taken by the people who need to take them, but are afraid of taking the wrong one. We need action, not to continue as we are.

Tomorrow, we will consider the amendments, if they are selected, on abortion and same-sex marriage. I will go into more detail tomorrow if I get the opportunity, but as of 7 o'clock tonight, I have had 443 emails from my constituents—31 of those were in favour of change, and the other 412 were not. I say to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy): listen clearly to what happens in my constituency. I will go into more detail tomorrow about all the issues in relation to abortion and same-sex marriage.

I will support this Bill. I have no option, unless I wish to see NHS staff not receiving their wages, no schools open in September and our civil service grinding to a halt. While there are few options, the Secretary of State and the Minister are not optionless and must create their options. They must introduce legislation to say that those who are elected must take their seats with no preconditions and be emphatic instead of inactive. The Secretary of State must do her job and make these decisions for Northern Ireland.

Our country is drowning. The Secretary of State and the Minister must be the lifeguards, stop patrolling around the edges and dive in to do something to save my constituents in Strangford and people across Northern Ireland. I support the Bill, and I ask the Secretary of State and the Minister to do their job and support the good, hard-working, decent people of Northern Ireland, instead of those who are hellbent on destruction.

9.13 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Having sat through the debate, I think it is quite clear that nobody really wants this Bill. It is a contingency Bill. We all hope that the discussions and meetings will bear fruit and that the Assembly and Executive will be up and running. We all want that to happen, and it is quite clear from what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that tough decisions are not being taken at the moment.

There have been compelling speeches from Members across the House—including the hon. Members for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) and for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)—about all the important issues that need to be addressed, such as health and education. I was struck by the speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who spoke about same-sex marriage, and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who made a compelling case for a woman's right to choose.

I want to refer to my experience on the recent prelegislative scrutiny Committee of this House and the other place on the Domestic Abuse Bill. As my hon. Friend has mentioned, that Bill was brought forward by the Prime Minister to make sure that we can not only sign but ratify the Istanbul convention on domestic abuse. That Bill is really important, and the one thing the Committee was concerned about was that there is no provision for Northern Ireland. As has already been said, issues of coercive control and stalking are not covered in Northern Irish law, as I understand it, and on that basis we would not be able to ratify the Istanbul convention.

The reason I am talking about that is that one of the recommendations from the cross-party prelegislative scrutiny Committee was that we ought to legislate for that in this place, but do so on the basis of a sunset clause for when the Assembly is up and running again, so it can then decide how it wishes to legislate for Northern Ireland. We felt so strongly about it that we thought that was the sensible approach to take.

I have borrowed from the approach of that particular Committee to table an amendment—I hope it might be selected tomorrow—saying that just as, under clause 3, the Secretary of State will provide a report on progress in bringing the Assembly back together, she could also put together a report on how this House, or the Westminster Parliament, could deal with the breach of human rights—women's human rights—in Northern Ireland.

We know the Supreme Court is going to find such a breach in the next few months. We are absolutely clear from what was said in Sarah Ewart's case earlier this year that there is going to be a finding of incompatibility. As we know—one of the DUP Members admitted it—that means it will fall to this place, the Westminster Parliament, to remedy that situation.

My amendment, which I hope we may be able to debate tomorrow, is to get the Secretary of State to do the work now—prepare, plan, talk to the parties—on how we can remedy the breaches of women's human rights in relation to the legal framework on abortion, while also recognising the devolution settlement by saying, if Westminster has to take some action, that there will be a sunset clause for when the Assembly is up and running again, just as with the Domestic Abuse Bill proposal made by the Committee I spoke about earlier.

This is an opportunity to move forward and be practical about preparing for the inevitable, which is the Supreme Court decision that is coming down the tracks. Whether people like it or not, we are going to have to face this, so let us get the preparation and the planning done now, and also recognise devolution by having such a sunset clause. This is obviously a matter for tomorrow, and I think it is a practical way forward.

9.18 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Lyra Catherine McKee has been mentioned two or three times during this debate. When we discuss Northern Ireland business, I sometimes think back to that incredibly, immensely emotional day in St Anne's cathedral on 24 April, when Members from both Front Benches were present and we heard that extraordinarily moving homily. I like to think that Lyra Catherine McKee, who represents the best and the brightest of young Northern Ireland but is no longer with us, is listening and looking down on us, and I hope we have not disappointed her tonight.

The rather unfortunate statement is frequently made, and it is a slightly obsequious convention for people to say, "This has been a great debate," but tonight we have heard some extremely fine speeches. We have heard excellent speeches right across the board on some extremely wide-ranging and difficult subjects, and I will come on to them in a moment.

It would be appropriate, as this is the first debate we have had on the Floor of the House since the death of Ivan Cooper from Claudy, who was well known and very widely respected throughout Northern Ireland, to say that the House should note his passing with sadness. We should also show our respect for the former Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, George Hamilton, who has now retired.

I was slightly embarrassed by the encomiums pressed on me by Members on both sides of the House. I have come to the conclusion that nothing succeeds in politics like dying or, if you cannot quite manage that, resigning. It is not often that my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and I are locked together—or paired, as it were—but the fact that we are both leaving is probably more of a matter of regret for me for her than for her for me. But never mind that. I am extremely grateful for the comments made, and in the meantime I hope to be around for a short while yet.

We have heard an extraordinarily wide range of speeches. Rather than go through all of them individually—you will doubtless be greatly relieved to hear that, Mr Speaker—I will just say that there was not a dud among them. We have heard from the hon. Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) made the extraordinary statement that Sinn Féin backed out of a meeting because of its preparations for 12 July. I assume that the republicans and nationalists I know tend to make preparations for 12 July by booking an Airbnb in Letterkenny, but I am not entirely sure what happened on this occasion.

We have also heard from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), the hon. Members for Belfast South (Emma Little Pngelly), for Bury South (Mr Lewis) and for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), which is Clem Attlee's old constituency. For the avoidance of any doubt whatsoever, may I say that woggles, neckerchiefs and various other things to which my hon. Friend referred are, in fact, scouting terms and the reference to young lads was purely coincidental? My hon. Friend was a senior officer of the Scout Association when I chaired the all-party parliamentary scout group, along with Bob Russell, lately of this parish.

We have also heard from the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), and it would not have been a Northern Ireland debate without hearing at length from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We were also delighted to hear a very perceptive speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson).

Of all the speeches we have heard tonight—this may be otiose because I am not the first person to have said it—the speech made by the hon. Member for Belfast South was extraordinary. It was one of the most remarkable speeches I have heard. She has made great speeches in this House before, but I have to say that she encapsulated the frustration, agony and annoyance that we all feel in this House, when she spoke so vividly, strongly and emotionally about her constituents' needs, which, after all, is what we are here for. She expressed that frustration and her inability to achieve what she and they want. It was an extraordinary speech and I have no doubt that it will be referred to many times in many places.

A dark cloak has been spread over everything we have spoken about tonight, and that is the dark cloak of a hard Brexit. Bearing in mind the particular focus and locus of this debate, we have perhaps discussed rather more than we should have the possible arrangements on the border. It is only necessary to say that I do not think that anyone in this House seriously suggests that a 300-mile border from Donegal to Dundalk, with 298 crossing points, can somehow be managed by some technological solution and a fantasy frontier with cameras up poles. When people talk about the border between Sweden and Norway, I often point out that there are more crossing points between Monaghan and Fermanagh than there are on the whole of the Norway-Sweden border. The point is that, if we are going to have a hard Brexit, God forbid, there has to be some sort of customs arrangement. I do not think that we need to get into discussions about the common travel area and Schengen; there has to be some sort of a customs union. That may not be popular in every single corner of the House, but it is at least logical.

The other point of sadness that has come over our deliberations today is the fact that we as a House are admitting failure and that we cannot somehow manage this process and encourage, support and bring back the Executive and the devolved Assembly.

It is salutary to listen to tonight's speakers and realise the depth of talent that exists in the political classes in Northern Ireland. There is no shortage of talent, energy, vision or absolute determination to serve their people well and for the best, but we need to move forward so that that energy can flourish and flower and produce the goods for the people of Northern Ireland, because God knows they really need it.

This has been an expedient debate. We know what it is all about. None of us wants to be here. It is a slightly St Augustine one: make me pure, but not just at this moment in time. We very much hope that we will not come back here, but we have to wish the Secretary of State and the Minister of State a fair following wind. We know what they are trying to do and we on the Labour Benches—although I have to say the 12 July marching analogy was slightly lost on me—will be walking in quickstep together, if not in lockstep.

In conclusion, there is one very serious danger that has not been touched on so far: if we continue to extend the existing arrangements, there is a real possibility of

an erosion of belief in the devolved institutions. People will lose patience in devolution. If we cannot come up with the goods, they will lose faith, they will lose hope and they will lose trust in the devolved Assemblies and the devolved institutions. We cannot allow that to happen to this great idea and this logic, which I think every one of us in this House approves of and supports: the idea of devolution and devolving, wherever possible, decisions to the lowest possible level; it is subsidiarity. All decisions should be made at the lowest level. I hope that everybody agrees with that. The problem is that people are losing their faith and their trust. Above all, they are losing their hope. We have to restore that faith.

Tonight, we take an unwelcome step. It is a step that none of us wants to take, but it has to be done. Please, please let this be one of the last occasions when we have to come to this House to seek an extension. Please, one day, may we all be there in Stormont for the reconvening of the Assembly and have the most enjoyable time. If I am still a Member of this House, I will enjoy that as my swansong. If I am not a Member of this House, I am going to crash your party anyway.

9.27 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): Amen to that, Mr Speaker. I think that is the only way to follow that one. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound). It is perhaps not his swansong—in theory, he has another couple of years before the end of this Parliament, should we run to full term—but he has been a wonderful adornment and one of the funniest Members of Parliament for a long time. We also heard tributes to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). She is a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and was temporary Chair while my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) was being selected and elevated to his place. Incidentally, it is good to see him, in his first legislative outing in that place, making a contribution today. But it will be sad to see the hon. Member for Ealing North go. We can see from his comments today why it will be sad.

This is a very short Bill. It is only three or four clauses long. It is a very simple extension of two dates and that is all it does. That has not stopped us from going on at quite some length about Brexit, hard borders, or not, in Northern Ireland and all sorts of other related matters, but at its heart it does something very simple indeed. It just extends the existing Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 by two dates: an initial period and then, at Parliament's discretion, a potential further short extension.

It is good to know that speaker after speaker and party after party has expressed their support for the Bill. I would like to put on record the Government's thanks to everybody, right the way across the aisle, for their support. It does matter, particularly when it comes to Northern Ireland, that we have cross-party support and, ideally, cross-community support. That support, however, is not unqualified or open-ended. As the hon. Member for Ealing North and many other Members have said, this is, frankly, wearing thin. We have been here before, and there is both frustration and a great deal of concern about the missed opportunities in all sorts of areas in Northern Ireland, including on health, education, suicide prevention and even potholes. These things are

not being done and decisions are not being taken. As many different Members said, this cannot continue for very much longer. In fact, I think the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) described it as the endgame and he was absolutely right.

Lady Hermon: The Minister just used the phrase “wearing thin”. I assure him and the Secretary of State that what is wearing thin is the patience of the people in Northern Ireland with the fact that we do not have a functioning Assembly, and adding to that and intensifying the annoyance is that MLAs continue to be paid. Will the Minister therefore commit this evening that, if the Assembly is not functioning again when we get to these dates in the Bill, the Secretary of State will use her powers to cut MLAs' salaries?

John Penrose: I agree absolutely with the first half of the hon. Lady's sentence. The sense of frustration and concern is not confined to Members on both sides of the Chamber this afternoon and evening, although that has been palpable; it extends right across all communities in Northern Ireland and she is absolutely right to make that point.

On the pay of MLAs, I gently remind the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already cut MLAs' pay not once, but twice. They are now down 27.5% from their initial level. That does not mean that further cuts might not be possible. I am sure that my right hon. Friend, who is in her place, will have heard what the hon. Lady said and will consider it carefully. I am afraid that I cannot give the hon. Lady any stronger a commitment than that, but she has made her point.

The concern and frustration that I mentioned were palpable from speaker after speaker during the debate. Again, this point was made by the hon. Member for Ealing North: that frustration and concern are twinned with a fear of the erosion of faith in the Stormont Assembly and the Stormont Executive, and in devolved government and democracy in Northern Ireland. Underlying everything that we have been saying is a worry that, if the democratic institutions in Northern Ireland are not working effectively, a peaceful opportunity to give vent to and give effect to differences of opinion and to make collective decisions in Northern Ireland is lost. If those opportunities are lost, that lends help and gives succour and energy to those who say, “Well, democracy is not the answer in Northern Ireland, but other forms of expression are.” We all know where that can lead and where that has led in Northern Ireland's tragic history, and we do not want to go there again, so it is very good to hear people saying that on both sides of the Chamber.

Bob Stewart: I ask the Minister and the Secretary of State whether there is the slightest scintilla—the slightest glint—that Sinn Féin will come to an agreement in the next three months, or are we just hoping that they might come to some sort of compromise?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. At the moment, the talks are still ongoing. There is still breath and life left in the negotiating room. Again, it is worth while recording that everybody here, in different ways and at different points during this debate, has made the point that they want those talks to succeed. This is not just confined to one side of the

[John Penrose]

talks or the other. Everybody is still in the room and it is absolutely essential that, while there is still hope and breath left in those talks, they must continue, because the alternative is far, far worse. That is the only legitimate reason for any kind of extension to the EFEF Act: there is still a glimmer of hope that this can be done.

It would give nobody greater pleasure than my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for this Bill to be one that never needed to come into force. As she mentioned in her opening remarks, she will be delighted if this Bill never needed Royal Assent because it was unnecessary, because the talks had succeeded and because devolved Government had been reinstated in Northern Ireland. With the possible exception of the hon. Member for Ealing North, who has promised to crash the party if it happens, nobody would be happier at the success of the talks than the Secretary of State, who has basically been locked in a series of meeting rooms in and around Stormont for the last several months, seeing very little of her family, in an attempt to get the thing to work. I am sure we all wish her well.

There were two main types of contribution to this debate. One was from colleagues prefiguring amendments they have tabled for tomorrow that they hope to catch your eye on and debate, Mr Speaker. They included my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Members for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). All of them, often from very different sides of the same issue, want to make sure that broader issues around the governance of Northern Ireland can be raised and debated tomorrow, in an attempt to move forward issues dear to their hearts.

The second type of contribution was much broader and more numerous. It came from people who said it was not wrong but it was sad that the Bill had to be used as a vehicle for these kinds of issues because it would be far better if Northern Ireland were being properly served by a Stormont Assembly, which could deal with the issues in the amendments to be discussed tomorrow in Committee and with many of the other issues raised, in many cases by Northern Ireland Members themselves, but by others as well, and which are much broader than the cultural issues—if I can put it like that. They are concerned with health, education, potholes, and everything else—the more mundane but absolutely essential warp and weft of government and of keeping the good governance of Northern Ireland up to date. Because decisions have only been taken in a very limited way under the existing powers and the EFEF Act, that has meant that Northern Ireland's public services have gently but steadily become more and more out of date. As a result, in many cases those services have become less efficient than they would otherwise be if they had been kept up to date, and more expensive and less productive in the way they are delivered.

That was the broader thrust of many other people's contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), a member of the Select Committee, gave a tour d'horizon with three options that we must all consider. I will happily pick them up with her when I have a bit more time to discuss with her how we can take them forward. We also heard from the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands),

the right hon. Member for Belfast North, plus a whole slew of other Northern Ireland colleagues, including the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and on and on.

The one thing I can promise is that this is not being rushed. We have two full days of debate—today and tomorrow—and then three days in the Lords, so there will be plenty of opportunity to debate this in more depth.

Gavin Robinson: I think I heard the Minister say the hon. Member for Belfast East goes on and on, but he knows the issue I want to raise. It is specific and discrete and concerns co-ownership. The Bill is ready and I understand that it rests with the Treasury. Has he got good news?

John Penrose: I did not say that the hon. Member for Belfast East went on and on, and nor would I ever do so. He is right to remind me of the pledge I was able to make from this Dispatch Box a month and a half to two months ago. I am afraid that I do not have a date for the introduction of the Bill for him, but he is right to say that the Bill has moved forward dramatically and is now in the necessary format for Westminster introduction. We do not have a date yet, but he is also right that the Treasury has a strong interest in moving this forward because it is to its financial advantage to get this change done, and where the Treasury wishes to lean is always a good place for any Minister to begin.

With that, I draw my remarks to a close. We have an entire day of this tomorrow when we can debate the amendments prefigured during this debate. Again, I thank all sides and all concerned for their broad support in principle for the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Committee tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Electricity Capacity (No. 2) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 5 June, be approved.—
(*Iain Stewart.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Tettenhall Medical Practice

9.39 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Wood Road surgery is a GP surgery in the Tettenhall Wood area of Wolverhampton, one of two sites run by Tettenhall Medical Practice. The practice wants to close the surgery, and to move all its patients to a site at Lower Green. Wood Road has more than 4,000 patients on its books. A high percentage are elderly people living in the area, and there are more meals on wheels deliveries there than in any other part of the city.

Many of those patients have no access to transport and will find it very difficult to get to Lower Green surgery, which is in a completely different part of Tettenhall. Many constituents have come to see me about Wood Road and to express their community's strong feelings about why it should stay open. This petition, which has only been open for two weeks, has been signed by 1,338 of my constituents in the area. It states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press NHS Wolverhampton Care Commissioning Group to find a way to ensure Tettenhall Wood Medical Practice can continue to provide services to local patients at its surgery in Wood Road.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Wood Road surgery of Tettenhall Wood Medical Practice is a vital element in the provision of primary care general practice in Tettenhall Wood, Wolverhampton; further that attending the practice's alternative surgery on Lower Street would increase the difficulty faced by elderly patients in Tettenhall Wood to access GP services; further that public transport links from Wood Road to Lower Street are not straightforward; further that there is a lack of parking availability at Lower Street; further notes the local petition on this subject that has attracted 1371 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press NHS Wolverhampton Care Commissioning Group to find a way to ensure Tettenhall Wood Medical Practice can continue to provide services to local patients at its surgery in Wood Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002487]

Precious Metal Markets

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

9.42 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to speak about this subject. In fact, my good friend the Minister may be a bit surprised that I wish to speak about it, because I think that he would, like me, agree with the biblical verse which states:

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust”

can damage them. However, I think he would also agree that trust in all things is incredibly important, and it is on that aspect that I wish to concentrate tonight, rather than the treasure that precious metals represent.

I am raising this subject for a number of reasons, which I shall go into in a moment. First, however, I must declare an interest, in that I have invested an extremely limited amount in precious metals as part of my pension provision.

My first reason for raising the subject is the importance of gold and silver as a store of value internationally. There are those who say that gold in particular is a relic of the past with little relevance to the modern financial system, but many countries do not seem to agree. Russia is steadily building up its gold reserves, which, 20 years ago, were well below those of the UK; now they are seven times as high. China rapidly increased its gold reserves in 2015. Several European countries, notably Germany and France, hold more than 60% of their reserves in gold. The United States—the owner of the world's main reserve currency, which would perhaps have the least reason to hold gold reserves—still believes in gold, which comprises some 73% of its official reserves. And what of the UK? With just 310 tonnes—pretty much the same quantity for more than 15 years—we hold 8.5% of our official reserves in gold. However, this debate is not about the merits of the UK's policy on official reserves, although I will refer to that briefly at the end of my speech.

If gold plays such an important role in nations' reserves, it is vital that the means of trading it and establishing its price on the exchanges be fair and transparent.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I sought his permission to make an intervention beforehand. Does he agree that there is a real need to safeguard investors and that the present procedures do not go far enough to protect them? They appear to be weighted on the side of the market, and this truly is not equitable or just.

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and that is what I want to talk about: trust in the markets—and I am asking questions, not giving answers, because I do not have them.

We should note that gold and silver both act as currency crosses, trading as components of the \$5-trillion-a-day foreign exchange marketplace. That is an astonishing figure. Clearly gold and silver are a very small part of the crosses market, but nevertheless they form part of it, and I have to say personally that I get increasingly worried by the huge volumes of daily trades on international

[Jeremy Lefroy]

markets and the vast amounts of derivatives that are outstanding at any one time. The last report I saw from the United States, I think from the last quarter, showed that something like \$200 trillion-worth of derivatives were open at that time.

My second reason for raising the subject is that considerable quantities of gold and silver—and indeed the other precious metals, palladium and platinum—are mined in low and middle-income countries. As with other commodities—such as coffee and cocoa, with which I worked for many years, and still do a little bit—the price has a major impact on the economies of the producers; it has an impact on those who work in the mining industry and on the taxation revenues of the countries.

The third reason is that London is at the heart of the global trade in precious metals and has been since the late 17th century. At a time when institutions and businesses are under intense scrutiny, it is vital that we in this country uphold the highest standards, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister entirely agrees with that.

Just last year, a former vice-president of a major US bank pleaded guilty in the US to spoofing precious metals markets

“hundreds of times with the knowledge and consent of his immediate supervisors.”

Sentencing has been delayed; the implication is that the person is assisting the US Department of Justice’s investigation into others, possibly both within and outside the bank. Spoofing is a technical term, defined in the USA’s Dodd-Frank Act 2010 as

“the illegal practice of bidding or offering with intent to cancel before execution”,

or, in other words, to deceive the market. In another case, in January 2018, Deutsche Bank, UBS and HSBC paid \$46.6 million in the US to settle Commodity Futures Trading Commission charges relating to spoofing in the precious metals markets.

I was first alerted to this subject by a constituent who had bought limited quantities of silver as an investment from Deutsche Bank while he was resident in Germany. Over the period in which he purchased the silver, the price peaked at \$48 an ounce in 2011, and declined to below \$20 by the end of 2014. It is always very difficult to determine the precise causes of a market’s movement; this was at a time of global uncertainty, financial stress in Europe and North America, and increasing demand for physical silver in electronics and other industrial purposes. My constituent stated in courts in both Germany and Birmingham in the UK that the bank had been manipulating the precious metals market. His cases were dismissed; nevertheless, shortly afterwards, in 2016, Deutsche Bank and others confirmed that market manipulation had indeed been taking place, and they paid penalties in the USA.

My constituent’s contention, with which I have considerable sympathy, is that it is the small retail investor who pays the price for such illegal behaviour of traders and the banks for which they work. The regulators, and hence the Governments, receive the fines, but investors find it almost impossible to prove a loss directly, because a number of factors affect market prices, not simply the illegal activity.

My intention in calling for this debate is not to seek any conclusions at this stage, or to go into the details of precious metals trading—still less of the complexities of derivatives contracts that piggyback on the metals—but rather to ask the Minister and the Government some questions and to call for action. My reasoning is that our country depends, more than any other major economy, on the stability of and trust in our financial services sector. The sector provides much well-paid employment, not just in London. Here I should express my regret at the job losses announced today in Deutsche Bank. At least 2 million people are employed in financial services throughout the UK, not just in London, and the sector contributes up to 10% of Government revenue. It also includes our heavy responsibility for and stewardship of the precious metals that we store and trade on behalf of most of the countries in the world.

I wish to ask the Minister a number of questions. First, have the Treasury, the Financial Conduct Authority or the Bank of England made an assessment of the result of the recent J.P. Morgan case involving the rigging of precious metals markets and its potential impact on the UK? After all, we are talking about financial institutions with a global reach. Secondly, do the UK authorities believe that any similar activity could take place, or has already taken place, in the UK, or by a bank domiciled here? Thirdly, if there is evidence that the manipulation of bullion markets by banks over a period has resulted in lower prices than would otherwise have been the case—that is clearly something to be proven—what recourse do producers and retail investors have against banks for that manipulation?

Fourthly, it is estimated that the quantity of so-called paper gold—that is, delivery contracts for gold—is approximately 100 times the quantity of available physical gold. That is not peculiar to the precious metals market; it happens with other commodities as well, but it is nevertheless a noteworthy situation. I accept that it is unlikely that most such contracts will end up requiring the delivery of physical gold, but what assessment have the authorities made of the risk that if delivery is required, those requirements might not be met? We have to take into account the steady increase in demand for gold—and, indeed, all precious metals—by states as well as by industry.

I suggest that, in addition to answering these questions, the Government commission an independent inquiry or review into the bullion market, particularly in the UK. Gold and silver are not simply commodities like coffee, cocoa, sugar or copper, vital as those are; they are a bulwark of the global financial system, the importance of which is possibly increasing. The UK is a relatively minor holder of gold as part of our reserves, but gold constitutes the majority of the reserves of many other countries. We have a significant role in the stewardship of the reserves of others, both physically and in their valuation. The trust that others place in our country and our institutions in this area matters enormously. An independent inquiry or review at this time would underline the fact that we value that trust greatly, and that we will strengthen controls wherever necessary. Indeed, I believe that some controls have already been strengthened in the recent past. Such a review or inquiry would also flag up risky or illegal activity and ensure that those responsible were brought to book, including by being required to compensate those who have suffered from it.

As I said at the beginning, my aim in this debate is to see whether there has been any activity in these markets in the United Kingdom that we should be taking a closer look at on behalf of investors, particularly the small retail investors who put some of their savings into these commodities; but it is also about the trust in our system in the United Kingdom. There is a huge amount of trust in the UK and its institutions. I believe that that trust is almost always well placed, but it can only continue to be well placed if we constantly scrutinise the system and check instances where we have an indication that things have not always gone well, or perhaps are not going well now, and take action quickly.

9.54 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for raising a set of complex but important issues with the rigour and grasp of detail in his analysis that has characterised virtually every speech that I have heard him make in his nine years in the House. I listened carefully to what he said and I am grateful for our earlier conversation, which helped me in preparing what I hope is an appropriate response to the points that he has raised. Although I cannot comment on individual cases, I would also like to express my sympathies for the constituent whose experience he referred to.

The precious metals market is an important part of our economy, as my hon. Friend said, and London is one of the most important gold trading centres in the world. They and markets like them have a real impact on individuals, households and businesses, which includes his constituent. Those markets underpin borrowing costs, exchange rates and the cost of food and raw materials, and they help firms and households to manage financial risks and investments. A well-functioning derivative market fulfils a vital role in that process.

Jeremy Lefroy: One point that I should have mentioned but did not is that precious metals, probably with the exception of gold, have many other uses—silver in antimicrobial products and platinum and palladium in exhaust pipes and reducing emissions—so they are extremely important, both as a store of value and in having real practical uses.

John Glen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and draws attention to the ever-expanding functional use of these metals in ever more sophisticated ways.

Precious metals allow businesses around the world to hedge their risks by reducing uncertainty about future prices. For example, a mining company can agree a price today for the gold that it will extract in the next year, safeguarding itself against potential future price movements and providing certainty over its income. Attempted market manipulation, such as the type that occurred in the US, undermines integrity, reduces public confidence and impairs the effectiveness of the financial markets. We take this extremely seriously, and it is therefore vital that we do everything in our power to detect and prevent such abuse.

Additionally, gold plays an important role in nations' reserve policy. The Treasury's role is to ensure that its choice for the strategic composition for the benchmark asset allocation of the reserves, including gold, meets the policy objectives of the exchange equalisation account.

My hon. Friend raised several important questions, which I will attempt to answer. I want to refer first to the significant volumes of derivatives and his question about the potential risk for financial systems. Derivatives are an important risk management tool and are used to hedge positions in underlying assets against adverse movements. They allow financial institutions to identify, isolate and manage separately the market risks in financial instruments and commodities. It is internationally recognised in forums such as the G20 that derivatives need sound risk management. Global financial regulators work to ensure that the derivatives market has robust oversight, monitoring, reporting and controls. In the EU, the legislative framework, which includes the market abuse regulation and the markets in financial instruments directive, does this.

The market abuse regulation, or MAR, provides the Financial Conduct Authority, as the relevant national competent authority, with the powers it needs to detect and prevent financial market abuses, such as insider dealing, unlawful disclosure of inside information and market manipulation. The regulation has been regularly revised and updated, most recently three years ago in 2016. MAR covers all financial instruments traded on regulated markets, multilateral trading facilities and organised trading facilities in the EU. It also covers financial instruments not traded on such markets, where the instrument's price or value is dependent on the price of a financial instrument traded on a regulated market, multilateral trading facility or organised trading facility. Included in this scope are exchange-traded commodity derivatives. This means that gold futures, for example, are in scope of MAR.

MAR imposes stringent requirements on UK trading venues and firms, which have a duty to detect and report market manipulation. Trading venues and firms are required to establish and maintain effective arrangements, systems and procedures to prevent and detect all types of market manipulation.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

John Glen: These arrangements must allow for the analysis of each and every transaction executed, and order placed, modified, cancelled or rejected. UK trading venues are also obliged to report to the FCA, immediately upon detection, all orders and transactions, including any cancellations or modifications, that could constitute market manipulation, attempted market manipulation or any other type of market abuse.

Jeremy Lefroy: Is my hon. Friend able to confirm whether there has been any indication, not necessarily just in precious metal markets, of this nefarious practice of spoofing within markets in the UK?

John Glen: I am just coming on to that, and I will make reference to some of the observations that have been made.

We are confident under MAR that where market abuse behaviour relates to exchange-traded commodity derivatives, as in the J.P. Morgan case, we have robust transparency systems and controls in place. Furthermore,

[John Glen]

in terms of enforcement, there have been examples in similar markets where traders have been caught attempting a similar type of market manipulation. For example, in 2013 a trader was fined almost £600,000 by the FCA for the manipulation of exchange-traded oil and gas futures.

The recent J.P. Morgan manipulation case in the US involved activity on a US-regulated exchange. The FCA's regulatory scope obviously does not extend to oversight and enforcement in the US market. The FCA's remit covers instruments traded on UK markets. The US authorities, therefore, have a remit over this behaviour, and it is in their competence to act against it on behalf of consumers.

On the manipulation of bullion markets, it is important to distinguish between the underlying market for commodities and the market manipulation of exchange-traded commodity derivatives. With regard to the former, precious metals are global commodities, where price is determined by the forces of demand and supply.

It should be noted that the Government have already taken action to ensure that specific commodity benchmarks for price setting are in scope of the market abuse regime. The London Bullion Market Association gold price and silver price—the global benchmark prices for unallocated gold and silver delivered in London—are within scope of the UK's domestic benchmarks regime, which is the world's first framework for regulating benchmarks. This means the administrators of those benchmarks, and those firms submitting to them, became subject to FCA authorisation and regulation. Manipulating the benchmarks is a criminal offence. The benchmarks are also regulated under the EU benchmarks regulation, which will supersede the UK regime when it comes fully into force in 2020.

My hon. Friend raised the potential risk of “paper gold” contracts, which are designed to reflect the market price of gold. Investors may use the contracts for hedging or speculative purposes, and without any overall intention to receive or deliver the physical asset. For example, a customer may have a claim on a bullion bank account provider for an amount of gold without physically possessing it.

This type of activity, relating to unallocated gold, does not guarantee an equal exchange for metal. Therefore, the risk that delivery is not met as part of the contracts

should not undermine the overall market, given that this delivery is not guaranteed and the risk is priced into the instrument.

The Government commissioned the “Fair and Effective Markets” review in 2014 to restore trust in fixed income, currency and commodities markets. This review made several recommendations for the commodities markets, including the benchmark reforms I spoke of earlier. The review also established the FICC Markets Standards Board—the FMSB—an industry body to improve standards in wholesale fixed income, currency and commodities markets. The FMSB has already produced several industry-led standards and statements of good practices that have seen widespread adoption. The FMSB also supported work by the London Bullion Market Association to develop and issue the global precious metals code in May 2017. The code applies to the LBMA's members' dealings in the bullion market. It sets out the standards and best practice expected from market participants in the global wholesale precious metals market. It covers a wide range of topics, such as conduct, information to clients and the avoidance of market abuse. The code applies to LBMA members, who must publicly attest their compliance with it.

To conclude, I am confident that the robust regulatory framework in place in our country provides the FCA with the right tools in its regulatory perimeter to detect and respond to these attempts and ensure that the market works in a way that is fair and effective for all who wish to participate. I thank my hon. Friend for raising these important issues in the manner that he has. I trust that this response gives him considerable confidence in the sophistication of the regulatory regime that we have in place. There is never room for complacency in these matters. I acknowledge the concerns he has raised and I will take them on board as we look to the future.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. The Minister does speak in a most learned fashion on these important matters, responding in kind to the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), both of whom have benefited from tutorials from those who are in a position to proffer advice, from a Department renowned for its intellectual cream.

Question put and agreed to.

10.6 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 8 July 2019

[Mrs MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

Dangerous Driving

4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 236952 relating to dangerous driving.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Moon. The petition calls for life sentences for causing death by dangerous driving.

To lose a child is the worst thing that most of us could imagine. To lose a child at the age of only four, mown down by a speeding driver, is something we do not even wish to imagine. Yet that is what happened to Mr and Mrs Youens, who started the petition. To listen to their story is to step into a world of horror. To hear about parents called to a hospital knowing that something must be dreadfully wrong; to see their child grievously injured; to have to follow the ambulance transferring her to Alder Hey, unable to go into that ambulance because the doctors were still working to keep her alive; and to hear their story of lying with their daughter until she died is something I do not have the words to describe. I cannot even pretend to plumb the depths of their grief, but I do congratulate them on their courage and tenacity in wanting something good to come out of that grief. They began that process when they allowed some of Violet's organs to be donated after her death to save other lives. Many of her organs could not be used because her injuries were so severe. Her parents have continued the process with the petition because, as they rightly say, they do not want anyone else to suffer.

Violet-Grace was with her grandmother when a car doing 83 mph in a 30 mph zone mounted the pavement. The car was stolen and had false numberplates. Violet suffered catastrophic injuries and died later. Her grandmother suffered life-changing injuries. The driver and his passenger did not even attempt to help, and they fled the scene. There is evidence that they had to step over the bodies of their victims lying in the road to get out of the car. The driver, Aidan McAteer, fled to Amsterdam to clear his head, as he said later, and smoke some weed. Clearly, he thought it was all about him. Eventually, he returned to this country and was tried and sentenced to nine years and four months. His passenger got six years and eight months. Neither showed any remorse, either at the time or later. In fact, they had their sentences increased while in jail for having illegal mobile phones and posting on social media. That does not seem much for a young life so cruelly taken and other lives destroyed in the process. As Mr and Mrs Youens said to me, the driver and his passenger will be out after serving less time than Violet-Grace lived.

The law does not cope well with such offences. It leaves families believing they have not had justice and the public looking on in amazement at what seem to be unduly lenient sentences. I met some of the families

today and heard their stories. They told me that they felt they were treated as though they were the criminals. They were not allowed to show emotion in court and were sometimes told not to sit in the court. They were not allowed to read out all their victim statement in case it upset the perpetrator. They sometimes felt that they were the ones on trial. These cases are not unique. There are a lot of them, and our justice system is simply not working for these people.

I have other examples. In February this year, a driver was sentenced for causing the death of a pedestrian and catastrophic damage to a house when he was driving at twice the legal speed limit. He was a lorry driver—a professional—and he got 10 years and six months. In March, Antonio Boparan was sentenced for causing the death of Cerys Edwards. She was only 11 months old when he hit her in 2008 and she was held to have died later from complications arising from her injuries. He got 18 months, having previously served 21 months for dangerous driving. Families have told me this afternoon of seeing people cheer in court because their sentence was so light and of people who did not go to jail at all. That matters for confidence in our justice system.

It is a long time since I practised law, and I know, from being around the courts, it is very difficult to make judgments on cases unless you have heard all the evidence, but I believe that in the most serious cases we ought to have life sentences available. As Mr Youens said to me, in the wrong hands a car is a lethal weapon.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a passionate and moving speech, and I am pleased to see so many families here. She, like me, will have spent far too many hours in grieving families' living rooms talking about these issues and their relatives taken away so swiftly. Does she agree that people who hire high-performance vehicles should be held liable if those vehicles that they give to others are then used in criminal acts of murder on our streets?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We need to do many things to reform the law. We have had numerous petitions on increasing sentences for death by dangerous driving, and on imposing lifetime bans for people convicted of dangerous driving.

I had a letter from Amy O'Connor, whose brother, Andy, was killed on his way to the gym one morning. It took 15 days to find the van and the perpetrator because the van had been hidden. By that time, it was impossible to do drug or alcohol tests, and the only thing the driver could be charged with—she understands why—was leaving the scene of an accident. She very reasonably asks why do we not increase the sentence for people leaving the scene of an accident when they have caused death or serious injury.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her speech. Although we need a change in the law to make life sentences available for death by dangerous driving, I cannot understand why, in the worst cases of death by dangerous driving, the Crown Prosecution Service does not bring a charge of manslaughter, thereby giving the court the option of a life sentence for the worst types of offending.

Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point on something that I will come to later. I understand why it is difficult for people to understand the law in this area, because we often punish the type of driving rather than the outcome. We used to have three offences—dangerous driving, careless driving and reckless driving—but the offence of dangerous driving as it was then was abolished under the Criminal Law Act 1977 because it was felt there was not sufficient distinction between dangerous driving and reckless driving. However, soon after, it appeared to people that the law was not punishing the most serious cases effectively. In fact, a review of the law by Dr Peter North in 1988 showed that many people thought that the law was not dealing with the most serious cases properly. Also, recklessness is obviously very difficult to prove, as it is subjective.

At the time, the Government were focused on dealing with drink-driving, to which I will return, because I think we can learn some lessons from it. The offence of causing death by dangerous driving was not introduced until the Road Traffic Act 1991. Even then, it was clear to many people that the law was still not being used effectively. There were widespread complaints that the Crown Prosecution Service was often charging people with the lesser offence of careless driving, because it felt that it was more likely to secure a conviction.

Attempts were made to address that, with advice to Crown prosecutors in 2007, and revised guidance in 2013 that set out some of the constituents of dangerous driving, such as excessive speed, racing, aggressive driving, ignoring traffic signs or lights, and failing to have regard for vulnerable pedestrians. Most of those elements were present in Violet-Grace's case. There were also attempts to deal with people's fears through changes to advice from the Sentencing Advisory Panel.

It is also fair to say that Governments of all colours tried to fill in the gaps in the law so that it operated properly. In the Road Safety Act 2006, the Labour Government introduced the offence of causing death by careless driving, and causing death by driving while unlicensed, disqualified or uninsured. In the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, the coalition Government introduced the offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. In the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, the offence of causing serious injury when driving while disqualified was introduced, punishable by four years' imprisonment and a fine. Causing serious injury through careless driving was punishable by a sentence of up to five years' imprisonment.

All those measures were welcomed by road safety campaigners and had widespread support across the House, but they still did not deal with people's fears that the worst offences were neither being dealt with nor sentenced appropriately, even though, in 2003, the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving had been increased from 10 years to 14 years. That matters because if the law is to work effectively people have to have confidence in it. It has to do three things: protect the innocent, punish the guilty and deter further offences. There was a widespread belief that that was not happening.

That belief was why, after a consultation, the current Government announced in October 2017 that they would increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years to life. At the time, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), who was then a Justice Minister, said that the decision had been taken to reflect

"the seriousness of the worst cases, the anguish of the victims' families, and maximum penalties for other serious offences such as manslaughter".

He said that the change would be introduced when parliamentary time allowed. The same thing was said in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who has also campaigned on this issue.

I must ask the Minister, why the delay? Everyone in Parliament knows that when we are not debating Brexit we have very little business. The proposed change could be dealt with swiftly, almost in a one-clause Bill. It would receive widespread support across the House and the support of the general public. I know that the Government want to deal with other issues, but why wait for a big Bill when we could get on and do this now? Surely we do not need to wait for someone else—God forbid, another child—to be killed before we act.

I would go further. In the Violet-Grace case, the car was stolen, which was clear evidence of criminal intent, and it had false numberplates, went through two red lights and was doing 83 mph. The driver had previous criminal convictions for burglary and failing to comply with a court order. He should have been charged with manslaughter—something the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) mentioned. This was a criminal act by a known criminal, with a complete disregard for other people's lives. However, that is not what the petition asks for; it asks simply for life sentences to be made available for the offence.

The petition also asks for a minimum tariff of 15 years, which I think is a little more problematic. Generally, our law does not set minimum sentences; it sets maximum sentences and leaves it to the trial judge, who has heard all the evidence, to set the tariff. Clearly, if we went down that road there would have to be changes to the sentencing guidelines to reflect that. My fear about setting a minimum tariff is that it might have the opposite effect to what is intended: it might make juries more reluctant to convict in some cases, and lead to the situation that we have seen before of people being charged with careless driving instead of dangerous driving.

The same, or at least a similar, problem comes with calling for consecutive sentences. Normally in our law, sentences are served concurrently for convictions arising from the same incident, and consecutively if they arise from different incidents. I understand entirely why families want consecutive sentencing for offences when someone has been killed and someone else has been seriously injured, but my fear is that the tariffs set would be lower. Therefore, those proposing the change would not necessarily achieve what they want. However, that could be looked at and considered.

It is clear that we should get on with increasing the maximum sentence, but that by itself is not enough. I referred to how we tackled drink-driving in this country. We did two things: we not only brought in the breathalyser and ensured that serious sentences were available, but did a public education campaign that, in the end, changed people's attitudes. It used to be quite socially acceptable to knock back a load of pints and get behind the wheel of a car. It no longer is. I am not saying that that does not happen, but it is no longer socially acceptable.

We need to do those two things. Mr and Mrs Youens are already doing their part by speaking at speed awareness courses to alert drivers to the damage that they can do.

We need to do our part as politicians and introduce a proper public education campaign, because the aim in the end is surely not to have lots of people serving life sentences; it is to deter them from committing the offence in the first place and to save people's lives. Will the Government please now get on with that?

I know that the Government are looking to include other provisions in a road safety Bill, dealing with such things as cycling. Those measures are worthy in themselves, but they are delaying action on something that many of us believe needs action now. The Government would have the support of the public and widespread support among all parties in the House, and such action would rebuild confidence in the law and recognise the campaigning of bereaved families. Most importantly, it might save lives—and surely saving even one life makes this worth doing.

4.49 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on an excellent speech; she opened the debate brilliantly. She has done great justice to all those who have travelled a long way to hear the debate in Parliament. It is also a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon.

It is unfortunate that I have been called so early in the debate, because I will talk about something that is slightly different, although important to my constituents. My constituents Tom and Jackie Luxon were involved in a car crash with their then two-year-old daughter. The force of the impact was so great that the Isofix that the two-year-old was travelling in broke, and she sustained life-changing injuries that initially caused paralysis; amazingly, in the two years since, she has recovered to some degree. There is evidence that the person who hit the Luxons that day had been driving dangerously for 16 miles before the collision.

The incident was brought to my attention because Jackie was 26 weeks pregnant at the time and her baby, Grace, was stillborn as a consequence. We are debating whether there should be life sentences when dangerous driving is the cause of death of someone who is alive, but Grace was 26 weeks in gestation at the time of the impact. Obviously, she was killed as a direct consequence of the impact, but the man responsible received three years and seven months in prison. If Grace had been delivered when she was taken to hospital with her mother and had taken just one breath, the situation that we are debating would have applied and we would have been talking about whether that man should have been liable for a life sentence—or, as is the current position, something less satisfactory. Grace did not take a breath, however, so three years and seven months is all that could be served on that man for killing her.

PC Owen Davies, the investigating officer for Avon and Somerset police, wrote to me in despair. I hope he does not get in trouble for that with his chief constable, because he did exactly what a police officer should do—showed how much he cares. He said that he and the Crown Prosecution Service

“looked into charging the driver with death by dangerous driving but we hit a brick wall when we discovered that the Road Traffic Act 1988 does not recognise a healthy 26-week-old unborn baby as a person. Instead we had to charge him with causing serious injury by dangerous driving (x2)”—

for the mother and the daughter—

“with nothing able to be charged for the death of the baby.”

A couple of weeks ago, I asked about the issue at Prime Minister's questions, and the Prime Minister gave a considered answer. The key thrust of her answer related to the danger that any such discussion about the rights of unborn children could have unintended consequences. That is as far as her answer went; she was obviously talking about abortion law. I agree with her that the impact could be challenging, but there is precedent.

It is great to see the Minister in his place. As such a distinguished practitioner of the law, he will see that there is an opportunity to get it right. The Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 says that a foetus is viable at the age of 24 weeks. The Act's wording explicitly sets out clear exemptions, precisely so there are no unintended consequences of that definition. It is also worth noting that a child who was stillborn as a consequence of the awful Grenfell Tower tragedy was officially recorded as a victim. There is precedent, therefore, and there are examples in law where it is possible to recognise the rights of an unborn child.

I beg the Minister to consider that when he considers the wider merits of the case that is made in this debate, which is hugely important. It should be possible and the norm to give life sentences for dangerous driving, because cars can be weapons in the wrong people's hands. The Luxons' child was denied to them at 26 weeks' gestation and the punishment for the person responsible was just three years and seven months. I urge the Minister to look beyond what we do to punish people who kill the living, and consider what we should do to punish people who cause babies to be stillborn as a consequence of such collisions.

4.54 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her excellent introduction and the work that she has obviously put into the debate. I pay tribute to other hon. Members who have contributed.

I praise the three people who have made the debate happen: Rebecca and Glenn, who are present in the Chamber, and Violet-Grace, whose tragic and senseless death is the reason for it. I praise everyone who has signed the petition, and I praise the *St Helens Star* and the whole St. Helen's community for supporting Rebecca and Glenn's tireless work to get their e-petition signed, to get the debate and to prevent something similar from happening in future.

Rebecca and Glenn are asking for the law to be changed and for a sentence that fits the crime: “Life sentences for Death by Dangerous Driving”, as the petition states. That will hopefully deter others from reckless driving, so that what happened to Violet-Grace does not happen to another child—or, if it does, so that those responsible receive a sentence that fits the crime they have committed and that gives them the time necessary to reflect, to be rehabilitated, and to have proper regard for, consideration of and understanding of their actions.

The law must be improved for victims and survivors. In the case that we are discussing, the defendant's barrister objected to the parents reading out their full impact statement and argued that the defendants would

[Ms Marie Rimmer]

find it too upsetting. The judge accepted that, so the CPS barrister gave the parents a copy of the victim impact statement with the parts that they could not read out in open court highlighted. The whole purpose of the victim impact statement is the impact on the victims and the survivors, not the defendant. Guidance should be given to the judiciary that the overriding consideration is for the victim and their family, not whether the impact statement may upset the defendant.

We are asking for a sentence that fits the crime. Violet-Grace was a beautiful, angelic-looking four-year-old child. Some hon. Members may find the following upsetting—my family have not been able to say it or hear it. On Friday 24 March, she was simply walking home from pre-school and calling on her aunty and her four-year-old cousin with her nan. Her nan had lifted her up to carry her safely across the road, but had not put a foot on the road when she was struck by a stolen vehicle, which had been recklessly driven at 83 miles per hour in a 30-mile zone before it collided and mounted the pavement.

The stolen car that struck them was fitted with false numberplates and had a cloned key. The driver had no licence or insurance. The Independent Police Complaints Commission later reported that there had been complaints about the car being driven dangerously since noon that day. The driver and his passenger then fled the scene, running over Violet-Grace, who had been thrown 50 yards away. The passenger ran back to the car, stepping over the child again, to retrieve a bag that he needed. The whole incident was witnessed by her four-year-old cousin.

A fireman working in the area heard the noise and saw two young men running at speed. He ran to the main road, found the scene and Violet-Grace, and worked with a local dentist to resuscitate her. The driver fled the country and travelled to Amsterdam to “clear his head” by getting some weed. He then fled to Alicante.

Glenn Youen received a phone call at work to tell him to get to Whiston Hospital urgently. Rebecca, who was working in Warrington Hospital, received a similar call. She set off driving—sobbing—and spotted a parked police car. She got out, banged on the window and pleaded for help, so the police took her under blue light to Whiston Hospital. Violet-Grace’s injuries were horrific, and it was essential to move her to Alder Hey Children’s Hospital. Rebecca and Glenn were told that she could not survive her injuries. They knew her as a loving, caring child, always wanting to help others. They courageously decided to donate her organs to help to save other young children’s lives. They say that that is what Violet-Grace would have wanted.

It was suggested that Rebecca get into bed with Violet-Grace, but she was reluctant to do so with all the tubes and equipment around her. She was persuaded to do so. She prayed and pleaded, “Please breathe, please breathe.”

Violet-Grace passed away with the local priest, Father Tom Neylon, saying prayers around her. He checked the time: it was 11.58 pm on 25 March. He said, “Ah, today is the day that the angel Gabriel came down to tell Mary she is to have a baby called Jesus.” The family wept. Violet-Grace was the angel Gabriel in her school’s nativity play. She was so pleased, and she used to dance

around singing, “I’m the boss of the angels, I’m the boss of the angels.” Her kidney and pancreas were donated to save the lives of two other young children.

Nan, a nurse who trained at Great Ormond Street Hospital, suffered numerous injuries and was in a critical condition. It was a miracle that she survived, but she had life-changing injuries. Grandad, a university lecturer, has had to retire to take care of her—all that while the driver was in Amsterdam clearing his head.

Earlier, I said that all we are asking for is a sentence that fits the crime that has been committed. The two men responsible for Violet-Grace’s death will serve less time in prison than she was alive—less than four and a half years. In fact, by pleading guilty, and with good behaviour, the driver might be out even sooner. I ask everyone here today, is that truly a sentence that fits the crime that was committed? I believe that most, if not all, of us would say no. Clearly, the 164,632 people who signed the petition would agree.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for her work on this issue. I reiterate what she says about the Youen family. As well as our sympathy and solidarity, and the outpouring of love for the family from our community in Warrington, Wigan and across Merseyside and the whole north-west, there is a deep sense of anger about how they have been treated and a determination to make sure no other family is ever treated like that.

Ms Rimmer: I thank my hon. Friend for saying that.

The current laws on sentencing for dangerous driving are simply not good enough. We need to equip our judges with sentencing guidelines that enable them to provide that key tenet of our judicial system: justice. The Youens actually praised the judge and said his hands were tied. I am sure some will say, “What constitutes dangerous driving? What if I sneeze and lose control of my vehicle? Will I now face those increased sentences?” My simple answer is no. We are talking about giving judges the option through Sentencing Council guidelines to issue a higher sentence where they deem it to be just. A judge will consider all the evidence provided to them and pass a sentence appropriate to the crime committed, whether it be the minimum or the maximum sentence in the guidelines, as with any other crime. I and many others are arguing that the maximum sentence that a judge can issue for dangerous driving is far too low.

For gross negligence manslaughter, judges have the option to issue life as the maximum sentence, with a range of sentencing options below it—one to 18 years. I do not see why dangerous driving should have a lower maximum sentence than gross negligence manslaughter. Both involve a disregard for the lives of others, and as we see too often, both can lead to the death of innocent people. An individual’s direct, reckless and callous actions can lead to the death of another. Stealing a car and driving 83 mph in a 30 mph zone can cause life-changing injuries, and the suffering and death of an innocent four-year-old child. How can we not give our judges the option to deliver a sentence at least on a par with gross negligence manslaughter for dangerous driving?

Another issue that I wish to raise on behalf of Rebecca and Glenn, and that I believe falls within the scope of this debate, is concurrent sentencing. Rebecca, Glenn and many others think it is unacceptable that criminals

can serve two sentences at the same time. They describe it as “buy one, get one free”. The crux of this issue is that the current legal system does not adequately explain to victims what is happening, and thus it does not appear to be delivering the justice it is supposed to deliver.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I just cannot imagine the pain that Violet-Grace’s parents feel. As my hon. Friend indicated, two years ago the Government promised to introduce life sentences for death by dangerous driving and create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. Many families across this country—including my constituent Mr Addy from Burscough, whose daughter was mown down in 2016 by a driver who received a fine of £500 and no jail sentence—are waiting for that promise to become law. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need not only appropriate punishment but effective deterrents for dangerous and careless driving, excessive speeding and reckless joyriding? We need it now; everyone has waited long enough.

Ms Rimmer: I accept what my hon. Friend says; people are feeling that.

I call on the Minister to explain to my constituents why concurrent sentences are used, and to investigate how our judicial system explains its practices to victims. I and others are not calling for a knee-jerk change to the law. We are arguing not for punishment for the sake of punishment, but merely for a sentence that fits the crime that has been committed. We are under no illusions about the impact that the change would have on preventing dangerous driving. Changing the sentencing for dangerous driving may only deter a few people from driving dangerously, but those few people changing their behaviour could save lives like Violet-Grace’s. If it saves more lives, surely it is worth it. It will also send a clear message to those who might consider driving dangerously that we as a society see it as morally abhorrent.

Some may not change their behaviour and may cause death by dangerous driving, but by changing the sentencing guidelines we will finally deliver justice for families such as the Youens and others who are affected by such recklessness. It cannot be acceptable that individuals such as those who struck down Violet-Grace and tore open the Youen family can serve sentences shorter than the time she was alive. They have sentenced Rebecca, Glenn and Violet-Grace’s little brother Oliver to a life of grief, and denied them the joys of watching her grow up and experiencing the joyous occasions and events that a maturing daughter gives to a family. That loss can never be repaid in this life.

In October 2017, the Government pledged to increase sentencing for death by dangerous driving to life, but we have not seen any meaningful movement on that issue in nearly two years. I therefore call on the Minister to set his civil servants to the task of getting the laws on dangerous driving changed. That gap in our legislation and our justice system must be filled sooner, rather than later.

I understand that issues such as Brexit put a strain on Departments and Parliament, but we must not allow this vital issue to be lost in the miasma of current politics. Rebecca and Glenn want the change in the law to be made properly and as quickly as possible. The Government have a duty to get it done. The longer we leave it, the longer our judicial system will fail to deliver

the justice that the Youens and the other families we met today deserve. Although we can never heal the wound that has been opened, we must improve justice for victims and survivors and show that we care for them.

5.9 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Mrs Moon.

First, I want to express my heartfelt sympathy to the family of Violet-Grace—and, indeed, to all the families with us today. No parent should have to endure what they have endured. It is to their credit that they created this very successful petition to try to get some justice for families who have lost loved ones to death by dangerous driving and for those who have endured serious and life-changing injuries.

Sadly, Violet-Grace’s story and the bereaved family’s pain and sense of injustice are all too familiar to me. In 2014, my constituent Joseph Brown-Lartey was killed by a dangerous driver. Joseph was just 25 years old, with a promising career opening up ahead of him, yet his plans and his life were destroyed by an uninsured, unlicensed 18-year-old named Addil Haroon, who chose to drive a hired high-powered car at 80 mph in a 30 mph zone, ran a red light and smashed into Joseph’s car. The impact was so great that Joseph’s car was split in two and, tragically, Joseph was killed outright. Police officers who attended the scene said it was the worst crash they had ever seen on an urban street.

Addil Haroon was convicted of causing death by dangerous driving but was given a jail sentence of just six years, of which he will serve just three in custody: he will be released on licence after serving half his sentence. Joseph’s parents, Dawn and Ian Brown-Lartey, contacted me for help after that derisory sentence was given. I wrote to the Attorney General asking for the sentence to be reconsidered in view of the gravity and tragic consequences of the crime. The reply I received was that the judge had acted within sentencing guidelines, and that the sentence had not been “unduly lenient” and would not be reconsidered. As we heard, the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving is 14 years, yet few convictions result in a sentence that long. In 2017, the average sentence was just four years and nine months.

Joseph’s parents, with the help of the road safety charity Brake and campaigning journalist Michelle Livesey, launched a petition and a campaign called “Justice for Joseph”, calling for tougher sentences for those who cause death and serious injury by dangerous driving. The petition gathered 20,000 signatures and was handed into Downing Street with support from me and the then police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester, who is now my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd).

Brake then launched another campaign, “Roads to Justice”. For the launch of that campaign, Joseph’s parents allowed the wreckage of his car to be displayed outside Parliament. Hon. Members may recall seeing the shocking sight of a wrecked Audi split clean in two on their journey into work that day. That wreckage is now used by Greater Manchester police as part of its road safety campaigning and teaching, having been kindly donated by Joseph’s family in the hope that it would serve as a lesson to other drivers.

[Liz McInnes]

In response to that pressure—sadly, many other MPs have had similar tragedies in their constituencies—the Government held a consultation on sentencing for causing death and serious injury by dangerous driving. They received around 9,000 responses. It took many months to process them all, but everyone involved in the campaign was delighted when the Ministry of Justice announced in October 2017 that, as a result of the consultation, the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving would be extended from 14 years to life.

Joseph's parents felt that all their campaigning had paid off and, although nothing could bring Joseph back or bring justice in his case, at least another family bereaved in such terrible circumstances would not suffer the heartache of seeing their loved one's killer receive a derisory sentence. Yet what has happened since then? Although I and other MPs have asked numerous questions in the House, the Government's constant refrain has been that they will bring legislation to the House "when parliamentary time allows". This Government have presided over hours of parliamentary inaction, with sessions closing early and the business of the day being wound up mid-afternoon on numerous occasions. There has been ample parliamentary time to bring legislation forward, yet nothing has happened. The change was promised in October 2017. Twenty-one months on, nothing has changed.

The tragedy is that we are still seeing deaths, such as that of poor Violet-Grace, as some drivers simply do not get the message that, in the wrong hands, a car is a lethal weapon. I strongly believe that longer sentences would reinforce that message. At the moment, some drivers have an extremely careless approach and drive in an extremely reckless manner because they know that if they cause an accident that kills or maims they will serve only a relatively short sentence. That has to change. Families such as the Brown-Larteys in my constituency and the Youens in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) need to see justice being done.

If I have one question for the Minister, it is this: when is the maximum sentence of life for causing death by dangerous driving, which the Government announced 21 months ago, going to be brought to Parliament? The response, "When parliamentary time allows," is simply not good enough. These families need to see justice—for Joseph, for Violet-Grace and for all the other victims killed or maimed on our roads by the scourge of dangerous driving. It is time that the punishment fitted the crime.

5.16 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for opening the debate so eloquently on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

I begin by paying tribute to the family of Violet-Grace, who, tragically, was killed by a dangerous driver in March 2017 aged just four. Her mother and father, Rebecca and Glenn, started this petition when the driver, who mounted the pavement in a stolen car before fleeing the scene and subsequently the country, was sentenced to a derisory nine years and four months in prison.

Violet-Grace's killer was convicted of causing death by dangerous driving. I, along with many other hon. Members and campaigners, have long campaigned for reform of the sentencing guidelines for that offence. As it stands, the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving—driving that falls far below the expected standard—is just 14 years. As we have seen in this and many other cases, killer drivers too often are given considerably less than 14 years.

It is not right that people who drive recklessly, with no regard for human life, and cause death and serious injury get away with lenient sentences because our sentencing guidelines are not tough enough. That is why I warmly welcomed the Government's announcement in October 2017 that they would bring in tougher sentences for drivers who kill someone by dangerous or careless driving, as well as a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving.

My simple question to the Minister is this: it is nearly two years on, so where are those tougher sentences? The Government have said repeatedly that they will bring forward legislative proposals "as soon as parliamentary time allows". I sincerely hope that we do not hear that phrase from the Minister today. As we all know, there has been ample parliamentary time in recent months for these changes to be discussed, debated and implemented. One could fairly conclude that the Government, having announced they intended to introduce those tougher penalties, have now changed their mind. That is an appalling way to treat families affected by this terrible crime.

I have used this quote before, but I will read it again. It is from a family member of an 81-year-old man who was killed by a speeding driver in 2017:

"The Government's delay in implementing tougher penalties has denied my family the justice that we need...The Government has a duty to families like mine to ensure that justice is delivered by bringing in these new laws now, not several months or years down the line. There can be no excuse."

That is exactly right: there can be no more excuses. Many in the Chamber will know the lasting pain and loss of losing a loved one so brutally. I struggle to explain to bereaved relatives in my constituency why the Government are choosing to delay. The Minister should either announce today when he intends to bring forward proposals for tougher sentences for Parliament to consider, or else be honest, say that the Government no longer intend to do so and explain why.

Judges recognise the inadequacy of the current sentencing guidelines and want to be able to hand down tougher sentences so that the law of the land reflects the severity of the crime. As it stands, families are being let down and denied justice, and the Government's inaction is making their suffering worse. The Government may be in their last weeks, but they still have time to right this wrong and get these changes on to the statute book. I ask the Minister today to leave a legacy for this Prime Minister's Government and introduce tougher sentences without delay.

5.21 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I pay tribute to the bereaved relatives with us here today, who have suffered pain and hurt.

In October 2017, the Government announced proposals to increase the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years' imprisonment to life; increase the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving under the influence of drink or drugs from 14 years' imprisonment to life; and create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. It is now 2019 and we are still waiting for those changes to be implemented. The Government constantly tell us, "We will bring forward proposals for reform of the law as soon as parliamentary time allows." When will that be? These proposals are necessary to improve safety on our roads, act as a deterrent to would-be offenders and restore fairness in our justice system. Moreover, they enjoy wide cross-party support and are therefore relatively straightforward to implement. There is simply no excuse for the continued delay.

Let us be clear: while the Government dither, families such as the Platt-May family from Coventry continue to see the killers of their loved ones receive paltry prison sentences, which simply adds to their grief and sense of injustice. Two-year-old Caspar and six-year-old Corey Platt-May were two lovely little boys who lived in my constituency, only yards from where I was brought up as a child. In February last year, they were killed in a horrific hit-and-run incident at the hands of a driver who had no licence or insurance, was doing more than 60 mph in a built-up residential area and was high on cocaine at the time. The driver was given a meagre nine-year jail term, which was increased to 10.5 years on appeal, while the Platt-May family were sentenced to a lifetime of grief at the loss of Corey and Casper. They suffered the double injustice of seeing the perpetrator receive a prison sentence of just a few years.

Casper and Corey's mother, Louise, said:

"what our family has had to go through, and will continue to experience for the rest of our lives, highlights the need for the toughest possible sentences to be handed out to drivers who ruin lives. We call on the Government to honour Corey and Casper's legacy by ensuring its proposals for tougher sentences for drivers who kill are made law as soon as practically possible."

It is time for the Government to heed that call, honour Corey and Casper's legacy and introduce legislation immediately so that drivers who kill are jailed appropriately.

While it is true that no sentence can alleviate the anguish caused by the loss of a loved one in such horrendous circumstances, a lenient sentence can and does add to a family's pain. Families are being ripped apart through tragedy, and although nothing can bring their loved ones back, an appropriate prison sentence, which more closely reflects the severity and impact of the crime, keeps the killer off the roads and prevents them from causing similar misery to another family, will surely bring them a semblance of comfort.

It is in the Government's gift to provide that comfort to these grieving families, to make our roads safer and to put in place a law that is both a proper deterrent and a punishment. I urge the Minister to act without further delay.

5.25 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding, Mrs Moon. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I pay tribute to the petitioners. I thank Brake and the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety

for their briefings, and I thank the Petitions Committee for facilitating the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her excellent introductory speech, and I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher).

Apart from the specifics in the briefings, which I will come to, my concern is that government generally, this Government in particular and society do not attach enough seriousness to road deaths—let alone those caused by dangerous driving, which cause even more pain. If there were 1,500 deaths a year in aviation or on trains, there would be a demand for a public inquiry, and with the number of road deaths stagnating in recent years, we need to address this issue much more seriously. The Government's refusal in 2010 to set a target for casualty reductions, abandoning a 30-year consensus of all Governments since the Thatcher Administration, is indicative of the coalition and now this Conservative Government's relaxed approach. We had seen a gradual reduction in road deaths over the decades, but since 2010 that has stalled.

Our general attitude to road deaths is far too complacent, and it sends all the wrong signals. It creates a climate of "roads deaths happen". When they are committed as part of another crime, they are not condemned as heavily as they ought to be. It is almost as if these deaths—murders—are obscured by all the deaths happening on our roads. Road crashes are the cause of more deaths among young people than anything else. The Government proposed a Green Paper for graduated licences for new—mostly young—drivers to impress upon them how serious a step it is to get behind the wheel of a vehicle. The Green Paper disappeared.

We do not create the appropriate attitude in our new drivers: that, as many colleagues have said, they are in charge of a lethal weapon and, if they use it to cause harm or death to others, there are serious consequences. Just as we do not approach this issue appropriately from an educational or training point of view, nor do we do so from a legal one. We need to approach driving much more seriously.

I am not generally in favour of mandatory sentences because the bench and judges should have discretion, but if my family—my child or my grandchild—were the victim of one of the atrocious crimes we have heard about, I would want the full extent of the law used against the criminals who perpetrated that crime. I would want the penalty under the law to be appropriate, as so many colleagues have said. The law is lacking, to say the least, and the Government know that. They have promised change for years. The question to the Minister, who is held in high regard across the House as a man of integrity, is: when will it happen?

I turn to the briefings, and the one by Brake in particular. Brake says:

"Deaths and serious injuries on our roads cause terrible suffering every day. This suffering is often compounded by a flawed legal framework which lets serious offenders get away with pitiful penalties and allows dangerous drivers back on our roads. We are calling on the Government to finally implement the tougher sentences for killer drivers it announced in...2017".

Two of its demands are: to bring forward legislation that implements maximum sentences; and to simplify and improve legal definitions of unsafe driving behaviour, and specifically the use of "dangerous" and "careless". Brake continues:

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

"It cannot be right that the average prison sentence for a driver who has killed someone through dangerous or illegal driving is four years. When we consider that the minimum sentence for domestic burglary with no additional charges of bodily harm is three years."

It is a very powerful point. Brake also echoes a point made by my hon. Friends:

"In 2014, the then Secretary of State for Justice...promised a full review of all road traffic offences, yet this promise remains unfulfilled."

Why is that?

Brake also mentions the 2016 consultation:

"Brake does not, however, agree with the Government's contentions in their response that 'There is a risk that juries may be less willing to convict...Juries would be able to receive clear direction that a range of penalties would be available in sentencing, with precedent shown, negating this as an issue.'"

Brake discussed the important issue of careless and dangerous driving, and called for the legal definition of unsafe driving to be simplified and improved. It wrote:

"The maximum sentence for causing death by careless driving is only five years, compared to 14 for causing death by dangerous driving."

Brake discussed the contrast between the two sentences and found that

"since it was introduced in 2008...in the first few years after the new charge was introduced, the number of 'death by dangerous driving' convictions dropped off as the number of deaths by careless driving convictions increased. In 2007...there were 233 death by dangerous driving convictions, this then fell to 114 in 2011, when there were 235 death by careless driving convictions."

The question is whether one rate of conviction is coming down while the other is going up, resulting in lower penalties for people found guilty of a less serious offence. Brake thinks there is a relationship between the two rates of conviction, so perhaps the Minister could comment on that.

Brake has also stated:

"Additionally, the use of the term 'careless' in cases where driving has resulted in death and serious injury undermines and trivialises the gravitas of the offence and its impact on victims and their families."

The Minister knows that language is critical, and that "careless" just does not convey the seriousness of the crime. I agree.

The issue of dangerous driving is hugely important to the safety and wellbeing of all our constituents. The Government have been making the right noises and the right promises. So many deaths are caused by human actions: speeding, not wearing a seatbelt, the use of drink and drugs, or using a mobile phone—all deliberate human actions. Such actions are perhaps not criminal or serious enough for people to be charged with the most serious offence, but road deaths are caused by human beings who make decisions and do not care about the rest of us. Those people need to be brought to book.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Not for the first time in Westminster Hall, I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has said. Clearly, we must bring forward changes to the sentencing guidelines. I have listened to some incredible contributions. I wonder whether he is aware of the Don't Motor On Meds campaign, which

has not been mentioned during the debate. It focuses on the role that prescription medication can have in dangerous driving—it can often create unwittingly lethal drivers. Yes, the Government could change the sentencing guidelines, but the pharmaceutical industry could act quickly—now—to label medication much more clearly as "not safe to drive with". Many of the charities are very good at doing that, but many of the pharmaceutical companies bury it in the small print. We are all about prevention, as well as the right punishment when tragic events happen.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes an appropriate point. Individual drivers have personal responsibility: when they get medication, they need to ensure that it does not impair their judgment and that they are not a risk to others on the road. Pharmaceutical companies have a role in that, because they should be printing large warning labels on medication to say: "Do you know this means you are not fit to drive?" GPs have a responsibility to report to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency drivers who are not fit to drive—be it for eyesight, mental health issues or other problems that individuals have—and individuals also have responsibility. Right across the piece, we all need to recognise that there are problems.

I have recently been looking at the issue of more frequent testing for the over-70s, because there have been some publicised cases of older drivers driving up motorways the wrong way and causing death. The evidence from other countries suggests that if mandatory testing is introduced for all over-70s or over-75s and they pass, they think they can go back to driving like they did when they were 45 or 50. It actually has a counter-effect, and it is therefore not always easy to identify simple solutions. There are no simple solutions to this.

We are driving vehicles that can kill people and the responsibility lies with us, as well as with other people and other family members to ensure that we are safe when we get behind the wheel. That is not what we are talking about today; we are talking about criminals who deliberately do things that they ought not to be doing and who cause death and destruction, and grief and bereavement, to decent families across the country. I do not point the finger at the Conservative Government, because dangerous driving has affected all parties and Governments. As a Parliament, we need to ensure that we have the right penalty to fit the crime. If we do not, people outside will feel that they are not being well represented and will be forced to take action themselves.

I believe that we need to approach driving differently—educationally and culturally. Great progress has been made on improving the practical and theoretical driving tests in recent years, but there is more to be done. We must remember that we have among the safest roads in the world—we are usually in the top three countries for safe roads, but we are still killing 1,500 people a year. Dangerous, criminal drivers are hidden among all that, and they should be taken out and identified so that they act as a deterrent to other people who commit the same crimes.

As hon. Members have said, the punishment does not always match the crime at the moment. The petitioners are waiting to hear what the Government intend to do.

Like other hon. Members, I have high regard for the Minister; I look forward to his response, which I hope will give us all some reassurance.

5.37 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and to follow the incredibly powerful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I extend my sympathies to the families here today.

The tragic case of Violet-Grace, like the others we have heard about, starkly illustrates the devastating results that can occur when people recklessly ignore the rules of the road and drive dangerously. That is a reminder of just how important it is to get the law right—but in this context, it is increasingly clear that that is simply no longer the case. The sheer number of members of the public who have thrown their weight behind this campaign shows the strong desire for a law that fits the crime in instances of death by dangerous driving. Sadly, that feeling is known to many of my constituents—in Barnsley East, we have shared in our own tragedy.

According to Library figures, there were 293 traffic accident casualties in my constituency in 2017. Of those, 62 were serious and four fatal. The following year, Brierley's Jacqueline Wileman was hit and killed by an HGV lorry that had been stolen by four men, who joyrode the vehicle around Barnsley for two days. They damaged cars, injured pedestrians and nearly killed a man, stopping only when they crashed into a house while travelling at a speed at least twice the limit. Sadly, that was not before they hit and killed Jackie on her daily walk through the village. All four men had criminal records, with nearly 100 convictions between them—some were for driving offences, including one for death by dangerous driving. One man pleaded guilty and the other three were also convicted, but with plea deductions and time on licence, all will serve between five and just over six years. That is a huge blow to an already grieving family—Jackie's life was taken, and their lives have been torn apart since that day.

It goes without saying that Jackie's family have wondered whether one of those involved would have been free to acquire this second sentence if he had been given a longer and more appropriate sentence for his first conviction for death by dangerous driving. The turmoil that they have gone through is indescribable, and what's more, the judge who sentenced those responsible agrees. His hands were tied by the 14-year maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving, and he admitted that the increase was unfortunately a matter for Parliament, not for him.

So what are we waiting for? Expert judges, the public—demonstrated by the petition's support—and MPs across the House all support an increase in the maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving. More importantly, so do the Government, who have the power to increase the maximum sentence. The Minister is aware of the importance of that, having met Jackie's family and me just a few weeks ago.

I implore the Government not to ignore the cases of Jacqueline Wileman, Violet-Grace, and others tragically killed by dangerous driving. Increase the sentence now,

provide a genuine incentive to avoid driving dangerously, and give judges the ability to take those who do so off our streets. We in this House must do everything that we can to ensure that nobody else has to suffer like the families we have spoken of today.

5.40 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I am sorry to have missed the first two minutes, but I was otherwise engaged. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who spoke movingly about the seriousness of this issue, and thank all hon. Friends and hon. Members who have contributed.

I want to look at two issues, starting with numbers, which we have not really talked about. These numbers are a bit dated—I hope the Minister accepts that they will be greater now—but between 2016 and 2017, approximately 90,000 people were banned from driving in this country. That is from a driving population of 33 million, so I estimate that to be 0.002% of the driving population.

To be banned, a driver has to receive 12 points or be convicted of a serious driving offence. My figures state that around 11,000 people are driving with more than 12 points because they have been let off for one reason or another. That is not necessarily part of the Minister's brief, but it is interesting that people are let off so easily. Anyone who pleads that a conviction will have an injurious effect on their employment can get away with numerous points above 12—that needs to be looked at.

Over the last four years, some 300 people have been caught driving while disqualified in the county of Gloucestershire, while that figure was said to be 38,000 nationally—those figures come from a freedom of information request, so I suppose that they are right. Considerable numbers of people with a ban chance it when they should not be driving. In my view, driving is a privilege, not a right, but those people flagrantly disregard their bans. They go to court again and, presumably, some further action is taken against them.

An awful lot of people drive while disqualified or take huge risks because they are not suitable to be driving for whatever reason. I will not go into the age issue mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), but because of the deficiencies that come with age—that is what happens when we get older—some people should perhaps decide not to drive at all.

We have a huge cultural problem in that very few people are banned, and even when they are, they take risks for whatever reason. We have to change that culture in the same way that we did with drink and drug-driving. We have to nail people for those crimes because they are not just risking their own life and limb, but other people's, too.

My second point is on road safety. I have done a lot of work with my local road safety group, and I am indebted to a gentleman called Charles Pedrick, whom I have mentioned before. He spends hours and hours of his time on local road safety issues, to the extent that he visits parish councils and local road safety groups, a number of which have taken the opportunity to install automatic number plate recognition cameras or use handheld devices.

[Dr David Drew]

Those groups found that most people drive reasonably safely and, although they may speed slightly, they are largely within safety parameters. A minority, however, drive exceedingly dangerously—not just occasionally, but regularly. Those people get caught out by the ANPR staff, but there is little that the volunteers can do, and because the activities are voluntary, not even the police can do much.

In my area, the police now go around, knock on the door and say, “We have got you n times. If you carry on this way, you will cause a serious accident.” Normally, that has the desired effect and people say, “Sorry, I shouldn’t have been doing that. I have learned my lesson.” Sadly, a minority of people flagrantly break the law and do not care at all because they think that they can get away with it. I know that this is not the Minister’s direct responsibility—he will have to talk to the Home Office and elements of law enforcement—but it would be helpful if those voluntary groups were given some traction to stop dangerous drivers.

Unless we stop dangerous drivers at source, they will continue to drive dangerously. It is important that the people who give up their time to monitor those who speed have the satisfaction of something coming of their work. The dangerous drivers will be the ones who kill others, because they do not care. Unless we stop them, the inevitable consequence is that they will kill.

I hear the heartrending stories and I sympathise. We have to stop the dangerous drivers at source. They should lose their licences and go through due process, and until they have learned to drive responsibly, they should not get their licences back. The people who track the dangerous drivers should have the satisfaction that something is being done about the issue. They are frustrated that the police only knock on the door and that is as far as it goes, and that they cannot prosecute because their activities are voluntary.

We know who the dangerous drivers are and we should be doing something about them. I hope that the Minister hears my plea and will get some activity going to make the ANPR information shareable and useable, so that people who drive dangerously cannot get away with it. I hope he has a good response to my plea.

5.48 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the petitioners and the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who introduced the debate. She said that talking about the issue was to step into a world of horror, and she underlined that when she spoke about the heartbreak of families such as that of Violet-Grace. Like the hon. Lady and others, my sympathies go to the families and others who have been similarly affected by such criminality—that is what it is.

The hon. Lady described the selflessness of the organ donation following that incident. That is in stark contrast to the incredible speed, criminality and heartless cowardice of those who perpetrated such a heinous crime.

The hon. Lady went on to talk about the failures of the justice system, which, rightly, has always been different in Scotland, so I will not talk too much about those ins

and outs. Regulations are of course set by the UK Government, but the law is different. Comparisons must be made with wherever people drive, however, and lessons must be drawn from the accidents and criminal acts that occur when someone is behind the wheel. Actions should always be taken as a result to make our roads safer.

The hon. Lady talked about the need to deter further offences. She mentioned education campaigns and drink-drive actions, which I will talk about in a minute or two, after I recap the words of hon. Members, first those of the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer). She talked about Rebecca, Glenn and Violet, and all the people who signed the petition. She talked about the balance of the impact on victims versus that on the defendants, giving more details of the terrible events surrounding the incident involving Violet-Grace. She talked about the understandable rise in anger in the communities, and other hon. Members spoke about how their constituents were similarly affected.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) told us about the terrible case of Joseph, whose car was put on display outside Parliament for everyone to see. That was a particularly heartbreaking sight to witness. If every vehicle involved in something like that was put outside, we would not be able to contemplate the carnage caused by drivers being irresponsible or—as others have said, and will say many times in future—carrying out criminal acts behind the wheel.

The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) discussed some serious and troubling crime involving drug use on the roads, and recounted the story of poor little Corey and Caspar. This has been a difficult debate to listen to, hearing about all the personal tragedy involved and thinking about all the issues that go on to wash into families and communities, as well as the devastating impacts on people’s lives outwith the initial incident, but going on, perhaps even for generations afterwards. She talked about how those boys were mown down when they had barely even started their lives.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) talked about previous convictions hardly being acknowledged in another tragic case, and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) discussed van drivers disregarding the law. He discussed the need to change the culture and the minority of people who regularly drive dangerously. Some can be educated, but a shameful minority just ignore that. He also mentioned the help needed for voluntary groups.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) made a powerful contribution, as has been said. He talked rightly about the need for greater seriousness on road deaths and about the targets required by the UK Government for casualty reduction. He went on to what I will talk about now, which is education, training and of course the law, as well as the cultural change required.

When the hon. Member for Warrington North began the debate, she said that there was no need to delay action. Indeed, there is no need to delay. Things can be done, and they do not have to wait for other bits and pieces to fall into place or for other issues to be dealt with. In Scotland, action has been taken on some of the issues that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse was talking about. Through Scotland’s road safety

framework to 2020, the Scottish Government are committed to achieving safer road travel. The framework sets out Scotland's first ever national casualty reduction targets. Will the Minister let us know whether he intends to follow that lead in this instance?

The SNP Scottish Government have taken a wide range of actions to reduce road traffic accidents in Scotland, including cutting the blood alcohol limit and introducing drug-driving limits in 2019. I will give more detail on that in a moment. Action has resulted in the number of people killed or injured on Scotland's roads reaching the lowest level since records began.

In Scotland, by nature of our geography, road safety is an everyday issue. Most of us use the roads every day as drivers, passengers, cyclists or pedestrians, and for many it is the main way of getting to their jobs—for some, it is doing those jobs. The Scottish Government and the road safety partners are committed to the outcome of safer road travel in Scotland for everyone. To that end, the Scottish Government produced a framework for improving road safety for the next decade. The framework describes for Scotland the road safety vision, aims and commitments, including those targets for road death reductions that I mentioned.

The Scottish Government will also seek to establish a "Drive for Life" culture, which will seek to influence young people's attitudes to road safety and future driving behaviour before they get behind the wheel. They will conduct a public debate on young driver issues, including graduated licences and additional training, and encourage and support the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents Scotland with the formation of the Scottish Occupational Road Safety Alliance in order to raise employers' awareness of the need to have a policy for managing occupational road risk. They will also investigate ways to promote and facilitate initiatives relating to further training for older drivers, including consideration of incentives for that.

The hon. Member for Warrington North, when discussing those shocking and desperate acts, also talked about the need to reduce accidents. Specifically, it is important to reflect on the legal blood alcohol limit in Scotland, which has been reduced from 80 mg to 50 mg per 100 ml, lower than the rest of the UK. Incidentally, England, Wales and Northern Ireland still have the 80 mg limit, which is the joint highest in Europe. In Scotland, making that change saw a reduction of 7.6% in drink-driving in 2015 compared with the previous year.

At that time, Transport Minister Humza Yousaf also announced plans for a cycling taskforce, the main aim of which will be to drive forward ambitious cycling infrastructure such as segregated cycle paths. Although dangerous driving is rightly the focus of this debate, we must not forget that other road users are in danger on the road not only from dangerous drivers, but from other irresponsible driving behaviour.

The SNP MSP Gillian Martin introduced a Member's Bill in the Scottish Parliament to require seat belts to be fitted in all dedicated home-to-school transport in Scotland. The Bill received Royal Assent in December 2017. Furthermore, in 2019, the Scottish Government introduced drug-driving offences and, by the end of this financial year, we will have spent more than £8.2 billion on Scotland's motorways and trunk road network to improve road safety, including the M8 missing link, the Queensferry crossing and—this one is important in my constituency—

average speed cameras on the A9. If the Minister is looking for an example of something that has changed driver behaviour dramatically, those average speed cameras are now welcomed by the community, which saw the difference they made in adjusting the behaviour both of locals using the road regularly and of visitors.

There has been excellent progress, but there is always more to do. We are not content that rates are at the lowest since records began; we have to do more to maintain that improvement. The Scottish Government have been working with the Welsh Assembly on the casualty reduction targets. Official figures revealed that we have had a drop, but we intend to continue the improvement work.

I hope that the Minister will answer the questions about the legal issues that have been raised by hon. colleagues. He will take notice of the passion of the petitioners, the heartache of the families and the pleas of hon. Members in this Chamber and from all parts of Parliament who want action to prevent further road deaths and to tackle those who deliberately flout the law, affecting people's lives in many ways.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mrs Moon. I look forward to hearing about the action that will be taken, and whether the Minister will take into account the lessons that may be learned from Scotland.

5.59 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank all hon. Members across the House who have spoken in this important debate and made some powerful points. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) did justice to this debate by setting a substantial tone for what I hope will be a serious but productive conversation.

I pay tribute to the petitioners—the parents, friends and family of Violet-Grace—for the strength and courage that they have shown in what must be the most difficult period. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) set out those circumstances in her emotional speech, which no one could help but be moved by. Hon. Members from across the House went through some truly horrific and tragic personal cases that they have had to deal with. I look to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), as we in Bradford are no different—some truly tragic cases have come to us.

I pay tribute to road safety campaigners such as Brake, which my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) referred to. I pay tribute to the campaign run by the *Telegraph and Argus* in my district and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South. It has led calls locally not just for much stronger sentences for dangerous drivers and those causing death by dangerous driving, but for increasing resources for the police, to enable them to crack down on dangerous driving—I will substantiate that point a little later.

Those who drive dangerously and sit behind the wheel while under the influence of drink or drugs do so with no thought for the consequences of their actions. They care little for the lifetime of grief and misery that they can end up causing the friends and families of those they kill with their reckless actions. While they

[Imran Hussain]

never set out with the intention to kill, they conduct themselves behind the wheel in a way that makes it a very real possibility. Despite the life-shattering consequences of death as a result of dangerous driving or careless driving under the influence, the sentence that such an offence attracts, in reality, is far from what the public expect or want. As we have heard, in many cases those who have killed through dangerous driving receive a custodial sentence of just a few years.

The offences of causing death by dangerous driving and causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs should be treated with the severity that they deserve, to match the consequences of those actions. However, we must be careful not to tie the hands of the judiciary too tightly, as we must respect its independence and ability to view and judge cases based on the evidence and facts that are brought before it. We must give it the power and flexibility that it needs to pass sentences that fit the crime of which the defendants are convicted.

Because of the backlash, referred to by some hon. Members, over short sentences imposed for such serious crimes, in 2014 the Government rightly stated their intention to launch a consultation on the matter. Many hon. Members have gone through the chronology, but I will look at the pertinent points. It took a further two years for the consultation to be published, and a further year for the Government to publish their response to the findings of the consultation, despite the fact that within days it had become one of the consultations most widely responded to that the Ministry of Justice had ever issued.

Despite being four years on from the Government's statement of their desire to increase the maximum sentence available to judges, we are still no closer to the legislation that would bring such a desire into effect, as many hon. Members have said. Now we hear that they will bring forward legislation when parliamentary time can be found; they have stated as much to many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who is not in this debate.

The Government have used that excuse for the past two years, but the point has been made that time has been abundant for them to bring forward that legislation, and they have refused to do so. Perhaps the Minister will explain why they have left the words and promises they gave to victims' friends and family to ring hollow. To be fair to the Minister, I am not levelling criticism directly at him since he was not in his role at the time. As I said, this issue is serious enough that we should work together on it. I hope that in his response, the Minister will say what everyone here wants him to say.

The massive cuts to police numbers have not taken up a lot of time in this debate, understandably, but they are important. I am attempting not to use the issue politically but to make a factual point: since 2010, £2.7 billion in real terms has been cut from police budgets across the country, and over 21,000 police officers have been lost for good. In my region of West Yorkshire, there are more than 700 fewer officers. Those cuts have fallen the hardest on specialist forces who are much harder to recruit, train and replace, such as our road traffic police who, according to *The Times*, dropped 11% between 2016 and 2018.

The loss is keenly felt on our streets, where the reassuring presence of the police no longer deters dangerous drivers. The Police Federation has said that dash camera evidence from drivers is no replacement for patrols; motorists regularly drive in an antisocial, dangerous and aggressive way because they are less fearful of being caught. Evidence shows that increased levels of road policing can reduce traffic violations and road casualties. We all know that prevention is better than the cure; we do not want to be in a position of sentencing those found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving, because by then it is too late—the irreversible damage has been done and another life has been needlessly lost. Instead, we want those who would otherwise drive dangerously to be deterred from ever setting out on the road, because of a near-certain chance of being caught. We want those drivers never to be able to take another life.

In addition to putting police back on our streets and our roads, we need to look at cases of dangerous driving where, thankfully, there is no death or injury, to look at what is driving people to make such foolish decisions behind the wheel. Such offences may rightly warrant a custodial sentence depending on their severity, but they certainly warrant much greater rehabilitative efforts to make sure that the next time a dangerous driver gets behind the wheel, they do not repeat their mistakes, drive dangerously and end up killing someone.

Those killed by dangerous drivers or careless drivers under the influence of drink or drugs deserve real justice. Their friends and family deserve to see punishment for those whose reckless and dangerous behaviour has left huge holes in their lives.

6.9 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, but a greater pleasure to thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for opening the debate with a sensitive and sensible speech. She used her experience in the law to helpfully give us a pen-portrait of the evolution of driving legislation in England and Wales. She was right to draw the House's attention to the way the law has evolved in this area.

When we take the steering wheel of a car or a vehicle, it means that we assume a responsibility to any passengers in the vehicle, to other vehicle users, to pedestrians and to wider society. Driving law rightly criminalises what we would regard as unacceptable behaviour. It also rightly draws distinctions between types of behaviour. I readily accept that the law gets into difficulty where we have a combination of extreme culpability and blameworthiness in the manner of driving, and the extreme level of harm that can be caused by that degree of bad driving. We now call it dangerous driving; the hon. Member for Warrington North referred to it as reckless driving, as it was known prior to the 1991 reform. I have grappled with that difficulty—not just as a Member of Parliament, serving my constituents, but as a professional and a member of the criminal Bar, having been called upon to prosecute these cases, as well as in my latter incarnation as Her Majesty's Solicitor General.

Before coming on to those examples, I add my own tribute to the families of the victims of these horrendous crimes who have come here today, have supported petitions calling for reform and have, with extraordinary dignity,

exemplified all that is good in our society and positive in our world, despite the horrendous experiences they have gone through.

The offence of causing death by dangerous driving is a particularly unusual, sensitive and difficult scenario because all of us, in this room or outside, could suddenly find ourselves in the same situation as the families here today and the thousands of others who are not here but share the same experiences. Suddenly, without any warning, they are drawn into an entirely different world: a world of police and criminal justice, of procedure, of court proceedings that they never expected they would become involved with in a month of Sundays. That can only add to the sense of loss, grief and suffering that the families endure, and continue to endure—often for many years after the incident itself. It is a set of circumstances that all of us struggle to put into words and to come to terms with fully. I still struggle now, even though it is probably a quarter of a century since my first direct contact with a family who have suffered in this way.

Frankly, there is nothing that a court or this House can do to right the wrong that has been done to such families. Having said that, merely acknowledging that is never going to be enough. That is why we, as parliamentarians and legislators, must do all we can not just to mitigate the circumstances or to try to create a degree of justice, but to send a wider message to society that the system supports those who suffer, works in their interest and at least tries to deliver the highest degree of justice.

I was struck by the conversations I had this afternoon. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Warrington North and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) for allowing me to come and meet the families. It was extremely useful and informative, and I felt the better for having heard what they had to say. I pay warm, meaningful and deep tribute to them.

To directly answer the question put by the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), I should say that the Government have not changed their view about the need to reform the law of causing death by dangerous driving. It is our settled intention to increase the maximum penalty from 14 years to life imprisonment; the issue is when. I want to do this as soon as possible; I would like to see legislation done in a swift and effective way.

My offer to right hon. and hon. Members here and across the House is to work together, to ensure that any Bill that is introduced can be dealt with as speedily and expeditiously as possible, without—with the greatest respect to hon. Members, who have the right to amend any Bill they see before them—a plethora of amendments and other issues that could impede or slow down the process of legislation. That is my request and my offer; I would very much like to work with Members of the Opposition on that, in order to achieve our common goal.

Liz McInnes: The Minister has struck an unnecessarily adversarial tone. It is very clear that there would be cross-party support for this. It was welcomed in October 2017; he does not need to concern himself that anyone in the Labour party—I am sure I speak for the SNP as well, in this case—would try to do anything to impede the progress of such a Bill. We just want it to come in as soon as possible.

Robert Buckland: I certainly was not suggesting in any way that hon. Members of any party would want to impede such a Bill. The point that I seek to make is that we can achieve this with broad and deep consensus. I absolutely take the hon. Lady's point and embrace what she says; having listened carefully to her speech, I know that she comes at the issue with entirely the right and appropriate sense of inter-party and intra-party co-operation, and I am very grateful to her.

Judith Cummins: The point that speaker after speaker has made is “When? Not how, but when?”

Robert Buckland: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's contribution in her speech and intervention. I ask the question “How?” simply because it can very often be an issue for all of us, so ignoring it and trying to pretend that it is not an issue would perhaps be an easy way out for me as the responsible Minister.

I want to get on with this, and I know that all hon. Members present, as well as those with an interest who cannot be with us today, want to get on with it. I accept that we owe that not just to the families of those who have already been bereaved, but to future potential victims. I say that—I hope with sufficient force—because I have seen from my case experience as Solicitor General the problem with the current maximum.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), who quite rightly mentioned the appalling case in her constituency. I became very familiar with that case because I dealt with the unduly lenient sentence reference myself; I felt that there was such a strong public interest to be served that I appeared before the Court of Appeal as Solicitor General and presented the case myself. I am glad that in that case Sir Brian Leveson, the then president of the Queen's bench division—he has just retired, but during his long and distinguished career he took a keen interest in these cases—rightly increased the sentence to 10 and a half years.

I argued on behalf of the Crown in that case that there was justification, in cases of causing death where there were multiple fatalities, to depart from practice and to impose consecutive sentences. I felt that would be an acknowledgement of how, in cases of such seriousness, that was the only sufficient way for the court to reflect the gravity of the offending. The Court of Appeal did not accept my submissions. Therefore we are back in the position where, without an increase in the maximum sentence, the totality of the offending cannot be adequately reflected when, for example, there is more than one fatality, the driving conduct was particularly aggravated or there is aggravation because of previous convictions.

Therein, perhaps, lies some of the answer to the concerns expressed by families: that the total criminality is often not reflected by the level of the sentence. Sentencing precedent and guidelines allow that to be done when the principle of totality of sentencing is applied. Even though a charge is recorded on a particular offence that might not have merited a separate penalty, the offending should and must be taken into account when assessing the totality of the sentence. That might include having no insurance. Driving offences of that nature should be reflected in the overall sentence passed on the lead offence, which would often be the most serious matter.

[Robert Buckland]

I want to deal with each, in turn, of the excellent contributions that we have heard today.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I wanted to intervene before the Minister moves away from his general points. I pay due regard to his expertise as a former Solicitor General, to his explanations about complicated interpretation and definitions, and to what he said about the Court of Appeal not accepting what the Government were trying to do. However, given that he accepts that there would be unanimous support for Government legislation on this issue, can he give an indication of how long it will be before the Government come forward with proposals for legislative scrutiny?

Robert Buckland: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a date. That is a matter of bitter regret to me, but today's debate will be used as an important platform to indicate the degree of concern, impatience and anger that people now feel about the delay. It certainly reinforces me in my determination to get the matter sorted out. As I have already mentioned, my ministerial and professional experience has led me to the firm conclusion that to deal with the full criminality of the gravest crimes under the definition in question, judges need that space—the ability to use their discretion.

Before I deal with individual speeches, it would be right for me to dwell for a moment on the important submissions that hon. Members have made to me, the accounts that family members have given me of their experience of the system, and my concern on hearing about aspects of the use of the victim personal statement. It would be invidious for me to intrude on proceedings where I have not read all the evidence, or seen the transcript, but I would be concerned if the reason for the editing of a victim personal statement was that somehow it would upset an offender. That seems a wholly irrelevant and inadequate explanation to give to anyone, legally qualified or not.

Surely what should drive proceedings is relevance. Having read hundreds of victim personal statements, lawyers and court practitioners are well able to distinguish when an opinion given in the statement might take matters no further; but a real sense of the effect on a victim comes through a well written and well prepared VPS. Since the introduction of the system, police officers have become better and better at drawing out from a victim or their family the sense of loss and bereavement—the whole effect of the crime on their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Those documents are important and must form a key part of the decision making in sentencing.

I was heartened to hear some families' praise for the way individual judges dealt with each case with sensitivity, care and precision. We are fortunate that almost universally we are well served by our judiciary, who find such cases particularly difficult. I have spoken to many of them, and they feel at the end of a case a sense of inadequacy about what cannot be undone, and what cannot be restored to the families and loved ones of those who have died.

I thank the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston, who made a significant contribution to the debate, not just for her speech, but for her persistence in

working with my predecessor, and with me, to ensure that her constituents' point of view and cause are heard. Her contribution today was particularly important in that respect, and I thank her for it. She asked several questions—in particular about manslaughter. She is absolutely right to talk about the existence of that offence, which has long been part of our criminal law and remains an available option for prosecutors in certain circumstances. Those circumstances would involve cases of the highest gravity. Case law is clear that manslaughter would be charged where the facts disclosed a very high risk of death to another person—a type of offending at the very high end of culpability.

That is why the offence of causing death by dangerous driving has been a very important addition to the criminal law. It has made the test somewhat more straightforward, as opposed to that used in manslaughter. I can therefore see huge merit in marrying up the sentence level—a maximum of life imprisonment—with the advantages provided by using the test for causing death by dangerous driving. Those sorts of offences should not become some sort of legal minefield or maze. They are difficult enough for everybody involved without adding those extra complications. That is why, although the offence of manslaughter is, of course, available and is used, we must understand that it is hedged around with particular tests that mean that it is not always the most straightforward case to prosecute.

I was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) about a particularly harrowing case involving his constituents, to whom I pay tribute and who, as we heard from him, have been through unimaginable pain. He asked about the terribly distressing circumstances involving the death of a child yet to be born. He asked me to consider what can be done to reflect the loss of such a child in traumatic circumstances. He rightly anticipated the argument that I would put to him, that there is a danger in changing the law relating to the position of unborn children. Consequences for the autonomy of mothers and the ability to take otherwise lawful action must be considered carefully before attempting to change the law.

However, that is a matter that I would be happy to discuss further with my hon. Friend; it seems to me that the real issue is how to take into account the full harm and the full sense of the impact upon a family in those circumstances. We come back to the matter of harm; paragraph 3 of the current sentencing guidelines, which are now some 11 years old, says of causing death by driving:

“Because the principal harm done by these offences...is an element of the offence, the factor that primarily determines the starting point for sentence is the culpability of the offender.”

That gives us a clear indication of where the law starts from on these matters.

James Heappey: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend the Minister of State for his reply, and I welcome the opportunity to meet him to discuss this further. I simply reflect on the fact that, whatever the sentencing guidelines may say now, three years and seven months for life-changing injuries to mother and daughter, and for the loss altogether of a 26-week-old baby as yet unborn, suggests to me that the current guidance is nowhere near adequate, or does not apply well enough in those sorts of situations.

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend makes an important point; I am perhaps illustrating in my response the struggle, the tension and the difficulty that exist here in fully reflecting the harm and the loss caused as a result of that particular course of driving. That is why I am firm in my conclusion and the Government's conclusion that to deal with those very serious offences, which come to the top in terms of not only culpability, but harm, judges need more headroom.

I have already thanked the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for her important contribution. She quite rightly talked about a case involving her constituent and his family. I thank her for drawing to our attention a powerful example of how the current law is not providing the degree of justice that so many families look to the system to provide. I look forward to working with her on this issue in the months ahead.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) made an important and interesting contribution to the debate, talking about the position on road safety. He rightly reminded us that there is no room for complacency on this issue and that, while this country is among the safest in the world when it comes to road traffic incidents, there are still far too many incidents that are simply avoidable.

It is important to note that, although the hon. Gentleman says they have plateaued, road deaths have continued to fall over the past 12 years—the reduction in fatalities was some 39% in the years since 2007—but I accept that that is almost always as a result of other initiatives that have been taken, rather than better driver awareness. We have safer infrastructure measures; we have new vehicle technologies; we have better hazard perception testing; we have better trauma care, where lives are often saved that would not have been some years ago; and, yes, we have a sense of shifting social attitudes, which I am glad of—we all welcome it.

Hon. Members have referred to the fact that when it comes to drink-driving, what would have been acceptable a generation ago is no longer acceptable at all within society. That is all welcome, but we still experienced more than 26,000 deaths or serious injuries on our roads in 2017, of which 48 were young children. Too many of those incidents involved criminal behaviour, whether dangerous or careless driving, or failing to stop at the scene, and every avoidable death is one too many.

It is hard to see how the criminal justice system can ever adequately compensate for the loss and grief felt by families in these dreadful circumstances. Since 2012, however, we have seen a greater proportion of drivers who have caused fatalities through careless or dangerous driving being sentenced to immediate custody; it increased from 53% in 2012 to 60% last year. We have also seen an increase in the average length of custodial sentence for those offences.

Clearly, the courts are in some measure reflecting societal attitudes and the change in attitude that we have seen toward those serious driving offences. That is reflected by the number of people who signed the petition that prompted today's important debate and the fact that, as we have heard, the consultation that took place was one of the most significant undertaken in recent years, because the number of responses was considerable.

As a result, not only was this proposal put forward, but two other key proposals were accepted. The first was to increase the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs from 14 years to life imprisonment, and the other was to provide a stronger response to offences of careless driving resulting in serious injury. We propose to deal with that by introducing a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. It will sit alongside the existing offence of causing serious injury by dangerous driving, which was introduced in 2012.

I confess to a sense of frustration at the incremental nature of the way we deal with driving offences. If I were able to wave the proverbial magic wand, I would like to see a thoroughgoing codification of the law to make it readily and easily understandable, but I recognise that I cannot do that and that time is not on our side. Therefore, the incremental approach is the best way forward if we are to achieve real change for society, and for the families and victims who have been affected.

I was talking about the contribution of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, and I was particularly interested in his discussion of Brake's helpful and important work in this field. I have probably partially answered his question about a review. Tempting though it is to use that as a cloak for inaction, that would not be good enough. I bear in mind what he says about the sentencing gap caused by the gradation between careless and dangerous driving. I do not have an easy answer about that.

Returning to what the hon. Member for Warrington North said, I do not advocate introducing an offence of reckless driving—a subjective test offence, which might better reflect the gradation in individual driving standards, but which could make the test more difficult in terms of actually proving an offence. This is a vexed question that needs to be debated properly, and I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse for raising it. I do not want it to be used as a reason for further delay.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) made an important and powerful contribution on the case of Jacqueline Wileman, which she has put to me before in the Chamber. I am grateful to her for having brought Jacqueline's family to meet me some weeks ago. What they said to me was powerful, informed, measured and dignified, and I pay tribute to her constituents for playing their part in adding to the swell of pressure rightly being brought to bear today. I thank her again for campaigning in this area.

That was an important case because the prosecutors used the principle of joint enterprise to bring to book those who were not actually driving but who were part of the course of conduct in that heavy goods vehicle. That sensible use of the law will hopefully send a wider message to prosecutors that, just because an individual might not be at the wheel, it does not mean that he or she is not responsible for what happens in the vehicle and the consequences of those unlawful and criminal acts. I am grateful to the hon. Lady.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) made a distinctive contribution in which he rightly talked about the number of people disqualified from driving. He asked about discretionary disqualification. It was certainly always my understanding, from practice, that to achieve an exemption under a discretionary disqualification, one had to show exceptional hardship above and beyond the ordinary inconveniences of not being able to drive. If that test is not being applied stringently, that is a

[Robert Buckland]

matter of concern to me. It was intended not to be some cheap get-out clause, but to reflect those exceptional cases where there might be real hardship—usually not to the driver, but to people who might depend upon that person.

The hon. Gentleman made a general point about impunity and rightly prayed in aid the important work of local voluntary groups in speed watch schemes. I am a qualified speed watch operator, and I have joined many local groups in my constituency to patrol roads of particular concern, with some good effect, I am glad to say, where the behaviour of drivers has changed, with greater forethought given to the quality or otherwise of their driving, particularly in residential areas.

I take the hon. Gentleman's point about consequences and how to better use the information obtained from devices in speed watch schemes to improve conduct and enforcement. That information is usable, and I am happy to talk further on that with him, and perhaps with some of our local police and crime commissioners, to see how we can achieve further crime reduction in our neighbouring police constabulary areas. I readily take up that invitation for us to work together.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) rightly drew the House's attention to the work of the Scottish Government on reducing road casualties and on dealing further with the offence of driving while over the alcohol limit. I am glad to say that, on the south side of the border, work continues within Government to pursue the strategy set out in the 2015 road safety statement, which drew together a number of important safety measures. That statement resulted in a number of successful bids to the safer roads fund from right across the country; increased penalties for drivers who use handheld mobile phones while driving; and—I think rightly—learner drivers being allowed to go on our motorways, thereby obtaining vital experience before qualifying, rather than leaving it until after qualifying, which I always thought was an odd way to train new drivers.

That road safety statement is refreshed and improved upon periodically; this work is ongoing. As always in the sphere of criminal law, before and after devolution, much we have learned from the Scottish criminal justice system has been used here. While I cannot make any commitments relating to drink-driving legislation on behalf of my colleagues from the Department for Transport, we watch with great interest the effect of those changes on behaviour within the population. I note the figures that the hon. Gentleman cited on the reduction of drink-driving incidents, which I found extremely informative.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The Minister mentions the road safety statement, which was welcome and made a difference. It is refreshed occasionally, but that is now overdue by at least six months. The Department for Transport was supposed to produce it, and the reshuffle has delayed it even further. Perhaps he can have a quiet word with his colleague at Transport to find out when it will arrive.

Robert Buckland: My colleague will hear that. I am told that the statement is due later this year, so they had better crack on with it.

Jim Fitzpatrick: It was due at Easter. It is now summer.

Robert Buckland: The point is made and understood, which I can say because I can make promises on behalf of my colleagues. I am sure they would do the same for me.

I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), whose measured and sensible remarks drew together the debate in an informative way. He rightly reminded us that this issue goes beyond party politics and should bring people together in a constructive tone. That is certainly what I want to do, with him and other Members, to make the sort of progress that all our constituents expect.

I bitterly regret that I am not able to give hon. Members that all-important timescale, but the force of the speeches today leaves me and the Government in no doubt about the high priority placed on this much-needed reform—in fact, I would say it is the highest priority. The force of the argument put forward reinforces my sincere wish and drive to bring forward this reform at the earliest possible opportunity. Let us work together to do that.

I once again thank all right hon. and hon. Members for the part they have played in making this a wide-ranging and reflective debate. I hope it struck the appropriate tone not only for the families of those we have lost, but for everyone who rightly wants to see that higher degree of justice for offences of this appalling nature, because they are committed against us all.

6.48 pm

Helen Jones: I thank all those who have spoken in the debate. They have raised a number of issues about road safety, changing the culture and the treatment of victims. However, there is one thing on which we all agree, and that is the need to increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving to life. The Minister says that he cannot give us a timetable for that at the moment, and he wants us—rightly—to work together on getting it through, but I say to him that it is the Government who have to introduce a Bill. This is in the Government's hands. If they introduced a short Bill simply to raise the maximum sentence, it could go through the House in a day, I am convinced. If the Government tried to include in it other things or, heaven forbid, to make it what the Clerks call a Christmas tree Bill—one on which the Government could hang anything—there would clearly be amendments tabled to it.

I urge the Minister to show the relatives of victims not words, but action. Bring forward the Bill and bring it forward soon, and it will have a clear, unimpeded passage through the House, I am certain. That is what people want to hear from him; that is what needs to be done. If he has been given no timescale for this, he needs to go and have a word with the Government's business managers and get a timetable. We can all agree that that needs to be done and it needs to be done swiftly. That is no less than the relatives of victims deserve and no more than most people in today's debate have asked for. For heaven's sake, let us just get on and do it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 236952 relating to dangerous driving.

6.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 8 July 2019

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 9 July 2019. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council will discuss the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 8 July meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers will then discuss potential new sources of revenue for the upcoming multiannual financial framework: the EU's long-term budget.

Own resources

The Finnish presidency will then give an update to the Council on the potential new sources of revenue for the upcoming multiannual financial framework, following a discussion during the early morning session.

Presidency work programme

The Finnish presidency will present its work programme on economic and financial matters for July to December 2019, followed by an exchange of views.

Appointment of the President of the European Central Bank

The Council will be invited to adopt a Council recommendation on the appointment of Christine Lagarde as the next President of the European Central Bank.

European semester

The Council will be invited to adopt the 2019 country-specific recommendations as part of the European semester process.

Any Other Business

The Dutch Finance Minister will brief Ministers on the topic of aviation taxation and carbon pricing.

[HCWS1700]

DEFENCE

Contingent Liability: Case Telescoped Cannon and Ammunition Contract

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I am today laying before the House a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has received approval from Her Majesty's Treasury to recognise a contingent liability associated with the design authority support for case telescoped cannon and ammunition (CTCA) contract extension.

The departmental minute describes the continued contingent liability that the MOD will incur as a result of signing an amendment to the CTCA contract. This amendment extends the exclusion to the contractor's

liability for indirect and consequential losses until March 2021. Due to the value of the contract it is not acceptable for the industry participants to incur such a risk, the value of which cannot be quantified.

For completeness, in addition to the clause outlined above, the contract contains a limitation of liability against contractor's personnel at Government establishments and an overall limitation of liability linked to the value of the contract (£4.8 million). After completing a robust risk assessment these have been found not to create any further contingent liabilities.

[HCWS1697]

EDUCATION

Children's Health and Wellbeing in Schools

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education

(Nadhim Zahawi): Today, the Department for Education has published details for its new healthy schools rating scheme. This is one of our key commitments under the Government's childhood obesity plan, which sets a national ambition to halve childhood obesity rates by 2030 and significantly reduce the health inequalities that persist.

The healthy schools rating scheme celebrates the positive actions that schools are delivering in terms of healthy living, healthy eating and physical activity, and it will support schools in identifying further actions that they can take in this area.

This voluntary rating scheme will be available for both primary and secondary schools. Schools will engage in a self-assessment exercise and will receive their rating based on their responses to questions around food education, compliance with the mandatory school food standards, time spent on PE in school and the promotion of active travel for pupils' journeys to and from school.

The first schools participating in the scheme will receive their reports and certificates in July 2019. We encourage all participating schools to use this scheme to reflect on their future actions, and to share their achievements with parents, pupils and the wider school community.

The scheme is part of a wider series of Government actions to support children's health and wellbeing, which includes delivering free school meals for over a million disadvantaged children each year; doubling the PE and sport premium to £320 million a year; investing up to £26 million to kick-start sustainable school breakfast clubs; investing £9 million in our holiday activities and food programme in summer 2019; and updating the school food standards to reduce the amount of sugar in school meals.

We welcome any feedback on the scheme during its first year and will use this information to inform future scheme developments. Guidance for schools on the healthy schools rating scheme is now available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1695]

Higher Technical Education Reform

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I am pleased to launch the consultation on higher technical education (levels 4-5) in England. Qualifications at this level sit between level 3 qualifications, such as A-levels and the new T-levels, and level 6 qualifications, such as bachelor's degrees.

Our vision is for higher technical education to be a prestigious choice that delivers the skills employers need, encourages more students to continue studying after A-levels or T-levels and attracts workers of all ages looking to upskill and retrain.

The proposals in this consultation are the next step in our programme to reform technical education. They build on the introduction of T-Levels and our investment in apprenticeships as part of our modern industrial strategy to improve productivity and help people progress in their work and lives.

The Government's review of higher technical education has found that there is growing employer demand for the skills provided by higher technical education. But it also found that uptake of higher technical qualifications is low by international standards, has fallen over time, and is low by comparison to other levels of education.

Some higher technical qualifications and courses are well-recognised and valued by employers and students. But overall there is low awareness and varying quality, with the range of terminology, qualifications and provider types creating a complex landscape that is hard for employers and students to navigate.

The starting point for our reforms is to raise the prestige of higher technical education and strengthen its value to employers by putting their needs and quality first. Improving quality now—to demonstrate the value of higher technical qualifications—will lead to increased uptake of higher technical education in the future.

To do this we are proposing a new system to make it clearer which higher technical qualifications provide the skills that employers want. This will be delivered through the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education signalling which qualifications deliver the knowledge, skills, and behaviours set out in employer-led national standards. This will help qualifications at this level command the confidence of students and employers alike.

Alongside this we propose working with the Office for Students to demonstrate the quality of providers, so there is more high-quality provision delivered across higher and further education, including through our flagship employer-led national colleges and institutes of technology.

Finally, we want to make higher technical education a positive and more popular choice by raising awareness and understanding of the new suite of institute-approved qualifications in colleges and universities, and among potential students and employers.

These reforms will take time to deliver. We want to work with everyone who wants to improve higher technical education. I strongly encourage everyone with an interest to contribute to the debate, so we can build the world-class technical education system our students deserve and our country needs.

[HCWS1694]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Flooding and Coastal Erosion: Call for Evidence

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

About one in six people in England live in properties which are at risk of flooding. In addition to the potential for loss of life and damage to property, flooding can affect health and well-being, disrupt essential services, cause loss of business and damage to cultural heritage and the environment. Fewer people are at risk from coastal erosion but the impacts can be dramatic, including complete loss of land and property.

The Government are already taking action on a range of fronts to tackle flooding and erosion, with three particular focuses.

We are investing £2.6 billion between 2015 and 2021 to better protect 300,000 homes.

We published the surface water management action plan, which included a commitment to review effectiveness and compliance with local requirements. It will also consider how responsibility for surface water and drainage assets is determined locally, including dispute resolution. I have appointed David Jenkins, chair of the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, to undertake this independent review. He will provide an interim report by December. David will draw on his past experience as CEO of an lead local flood authority, solicitor and member of an ombudsman office.

After recent reviews, we established a national flood response centre for dealing with major floods and deployed additional resources to improve capacity and capability on flood forecasting and response. After experiencing the devastation of a flood, we want to ensure people can return to their homes as quickly as possible and suffer less damage in their properties. To support this, we want to incentivise people to make their properties more resilient to flooding. That is why I will shortly be announcing three areas where we will carry out pathfinder projects, supported by Government funding, to lead local innovation and increase uptake of resilience measures.

The Government established the Flood Re insurance scheme so that households in high flood risk areas could obtain affordable insurance. Flood Re reported recently that the number of household policies backed by the scheme rose to more than 164,000 by 31 March 2019. Today Flood Re has published its first review of the scheme which makes a number of recommendations to Government about how the scheme could be made more efficient and effective. I welcome its report and I will be considering the recommendations carefully.

Climate change and population growth mean that the risks from flooding and coastal erosion are increasing. That is why Government are looking to update the flood and coastal erosion policy framework to ensure that we can continue to manage these risks effectively into the future.

By the end of 2019, the Government will set out their policies to better prepare the country for flooding and coastal erosion in a Government policy statement on flooding and coastal erosion, a national infrastructure strategy and in the decisions made in a spending review.

Informed by this Government policy, the Environment Agency will update its national strategy for flood and coastal erosion risk management.

The Government policy statement will take into account information from many sources including the UK climate projections 2018¹ and climate change risk assessment²; the first national infrastructure assessment³; and responses to recent consultations such as those on: the Environment Agency's draft national flood and coastal erosion risk management strategy for England⁴; "Improving our management of water in the environment"⁵; local authority funding for flood and coast as part of the review of local authorities' relative needs and resources⁶; and the infrastructure finance review consultation⁷.

The call for evidence which I have published today focuses on some specific issues on which the Government would like additional evidence. They are:

What we understand by the term "resilience"—asking how the term resilience is currently used, and whether the different aspects of resilience could usefully be brought together into one overall concept.

Describing outcomes, driving action and monitoring progress—seeking examples of cases where metrics have been used effectively to achieve an overarching outcome, and information on the advantages and disadvantages of using composite metrics to describe, drive and monitor flood and coast outcomes.

Adapting to coastal change—seeking information about what coast protection authorities have done to join up decisions about managing the coastline with wider plans and decisions for the area, and examples of whether councils have used, or tried to use powers to fund specific coastal erosion works or to create coastal change management areas.

Corporation tax relief for business contributions—asking how businesses have used the provision for businesses to receive corporation tax relief on their contributions to Government-funded flood and coast projects.

Local funding initiatives for flood risk management—seeking examples of local initiatives funded from sources other than the public sector and what could be done to help these types of initiatives succeed.

Developer contributions—asking about the barriers and enablers to the use of developer contributions to ensure developments are safe for their lifetime, and what arrangements are in place for maintaining flood assets in new developments.

Managing financial risks from flooding—asking about how organisations manage the financial risks associated with flooding, in the context of climate change.

I will arrange for copies of the call for evidence to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

¹ <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/collaboration/ukcp>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-climate-change-risk-assessment-2017>

³ <https://www.nic.org.uk/publications/national-infrastructure-assessment-2018/>

⁴ <https://consult.environment-agency.gov.uk/fcrm/national-strategy-public/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-our-management-of-water-in-the-environment>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/review-of-local-authorities-relative-needs-and-resources>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/infrastructure-finance-review>

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Persecuted Christians: Review of Support

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I have today deposited in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament the independent review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) support for persecuted Christians, conducted by the Anglican Bishop of Truro, the Right Reverend Philip Mounstephen.

The review is the conclusion of a project that began in December 2018, when I asked Bishop Mounstephen to carry out this important research with the full support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The UK has always been a leading champion of human rights. In recent years, the FCO has stepped up its work on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In response to new evidence and as a sign of the UK's commitment, the Prime Minister appointed Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon in 2018 as the UK's first special envoy for freedom of religion or belief.

In that role, Lord Ahmad has championed FoRB across Government, through the FCO's diplomatic network, and in his travel overseas. The UK has raised the rights of religious minorities at the highest levels, including in Nigeria, Iraq and Pakistan. Lord Ahmad has also worked with British diplomatic missions—including at the United Nations in Geneva and New York—to defend FoRB. Furthermore, he has overseen the provision of significant funding through various projects and programmes, including over £250 million to support people who were driven from their homes by Daesh's persecution.

Today, about 245 million Christians worldwide are believed to face persecution for their faith. The evidence suggests the problem is getting worse. The number of countries where Christians face religiously motivated harassment rose from 128 in 2015 to 144 a year later, according to the Pew Research Centre.

The review builds on the Bishop's interim report published in May 2019, which examined the scale and character of religious persecution. It includes further findings and recommendations about how the FCO might improve its response.

The review draws on information from: non-governmental organisations; Church leaders; reporting from the FCO's diplomatic missions; interviews with FCO staff and analysts; FCO written sources (including reporting from the network, research papers and policy notes); interviews with retired members of the FCO and with those who have suffered directly from discrimination or persecution. I offer my particular thanks to those who bravely shared their harrowing experiences.

I welcome Bishop Mounstephen's report and its recommendations. We are working across Government to agree a formal collective response.

The review will also be available on the gov.uk website, and further information is available on the review's website at <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/interim-report/>.

TRANSPORT

Inclusive Transport Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): This month marks the one-year anniversary since the publication of the Inclusive Transport Strategy. As Transport Accessibility Minister I am very proud of all that has been achieved in the last 12 months and this Government remain fully committed to delivering against the commitments set out in the strategy.

While a relatively short period of time has passed since the publication of the strategy, we have already reached some significant milestones and continue to make steady progress in delivering the strategy's commitments. Achievements include:

A commitment to extend the Access for All programme with an additional £300 million, delivering improvements at a further 73 stations between 2019 and 2024;

An invitation to motorway service stations to apply for a share of £2 million funding for fully accessible Changing Places facilities, supporting disabled people to travel easily and comfortably on the road network;

The introduction of the first ever impartial and independent Rail Ombudsman, making sure passengers are heard and that they get a fair deal when train companies fall short;

The extension of the Blue Badge eligibility criteria to include people with non-visible disabilities (mental, cognitive, learning, psychological, and neurological); and

The publication of the "Inclusive Transport Strategy: Monitoring and Evaluation framework".

Nonetheless, I acknowledge that there is still more to do to ensure that all disabled people have the same access to transport as everyone else and can travel confidently, easily and without extra cost. The Government will continue to work with transport operators, charities and disabled people's organisations to ensure we achieve our overall goal, which remains to create a transport system which offers equal access for disabled passengers by 2030, with assistance if physical infrastructure remains a barrier.

I have today written to the Chairs of the APPG for Disability, the Transport Select Committee, the Women and Equalities Select Committee and the Health and Social Care Select Committee, including further detail on the progress of the past year. Copies of this letter have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1699]

Petition

Monday 8 July 2019

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Green Deal Scheme

The petition of residents of Glasgow East

Declares that the Government-backed Green Deal Scheme has adversely affected residents of Glasgow East both financially and psychologically; further that many residents have, in good faith, invested their life saving or accrued several thousands of pounds of debt to pay for work that was carried out by companies approved by the Green Deal Scheme; further that in some cases the work including the installation of insulation and of solar panels, was incomplete; further that some were sub-standard and in many cases residents were given incorrect information which led them to believe that they would save or make money when in fact they have simply lost money; and further that in other cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result they are unable to sell their properties, or have the peace of mind that their homes are safe to live in, or that the insurance policies residents continue to pay, are valid without a building warrant.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compensate financially and protect people who have found themselves suffering in this way after signing up to this Government-backed scheme using Government-approved installers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden, *Official Report*, 14 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 199.]

[P002452]

Observations from the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore):

The Department recognises the distress that these issues have caused, and it is right they be resolved as quickly as possible. To that end, the following process is in place.

Consumers can obtain appropriate redress where they have suffered detriment under the Green Deal. A process for handling complaints was established under the Green Deal Framework (Disclosure, Acknowledgment, Redress etc.) Regulations 2012. The consumer makes a complaint to their Green Deal Provider, the company responsible for the work undertaken. Where this is not resolved satisfactorily, the consumer may approach the Green Deal Ombudsman or the Financial Ombudsman Service, depending on the nature of the complaint. Their decision is binding on the Green Deal Provider.

Where the consumer remains unsatisfied with the redress offered through those channels, they may refer their complaint to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy for consideration. Where the Secretary of State is satisfied there has been a breach of the regulations, he may impose the sanction of reduction or cancellation of the Green Deal loan. This is the full extent of the Secretary of State's powers to provide redress to consumers in relation to the Green Deal.

The Department has secured additional expert support from the Green Deal Ombudsman Investigation Service and Financial Ombudsman Service to assist in the review of cases. The cases are complex however and it is important to take the necessary time to reach the right conclusion based on sound evidence. Considerable progress has been made and the decision-points on many cases is becoming closer.

For one particular Green Deal Provider that has dissolved, additional arrangements have been made whereby complainants can approach the Green Deal Finance Company who are able to make offers of loan cancellation or reduction where the evidence supports this.

The Government are undertaking a fundamental review of the Green Deal. We published a Call for Evidence in October 2017 and a summary of responses last summer. We are now considering the next steps to develop policy proposals and will continue considering what changes could be made to the framework.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 8 July 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	1	DEFENCE—continued	
Armed Forces Personnel	11	Topical Questions	17
Armed Services: Optimal Size	8	UK Personnel: Local Support Services	10
Defence Procurement: Jobs	15	VE and VJ Days: Anniversary	15
Fleet Solid Support Ships	14	Veterans: Education	12
Mental Health Provision	13	Veterans: Monitoring Schemes.....	7
Outsourced Contracts	6	Veterans: Recognition	1
Royal Fleet Auxiliary	17	Veterans: Universal Credit	4

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 8 July 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	1WS	FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	6WS
Contingent Liability: Case Telescoped Cannon and Ammunition Contract.....	1WS	Persecuted Christians: Review of Support	6WS
EDUCATION	2WS	TRANSPORT	7WS
Children's Health and Wellbeing in Schools.....	2WS	Inclusive Transport Strategy	7WS
Higher Technical Education Reform.....	3WS		
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	4WS	TREASURY	1WS
Flooding and Coastal Erosion: Call for Evidence..	4WS	ECOFIN	1WS

PETITION

Monday 8 July 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	1P
Green Deal Scheme.....	1P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Monday 15 July 2019**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Monday 8 July 2019

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Defence

UK Ambassador to USA: Leaked Emails [Col. 25]
Answer to urgent question—(Sir Alan Duncan)

NHS Pensions: Taxation [Col. 37]
Answer to urgent question—(Elizabeth Truss)

Higher Technical Education Reform [Col. 46]
Statement—(Nadhim Zahawi)

Business of the House [Col. 54]
Statement—(Mel Stride)

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill: Business of the House [Col. 55]
Motion—(Jeremy Quin)—agreed to

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) [Col. 59]
Motion for Second Reading—(Karen Bradley)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 124]

Precious Metal Markets [Col. 126]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Dangerous Driving [Col. 1WH]
E-petition Debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]
Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
