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30 October 2019**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 30 October 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Order. It will be for the convenience of Members to be aware that, unusually, our House photographer will take several photos from the Bar of the House and from behind the Chair today, tomorrow and, as appropriate, on Monday.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

SESSIONAL RETURNS

Ordered,

That there be laid before the House Returns for Session 2017-19 of information and statistics relating to:

- (1) Business of the House
- (2) Closure of Debate, Proposal of Question and Allocation of Time (including Programme Motions)
- (3) Sittings of the House
- (4) Private Bills and Private Business
- (5) Public Bills
- (6) Delegated Legislation and Legislative Reform Orders
- (7) European Legislation, etc
- (8) Grand Committees
- (9) Panel of Chairs
- (10) Select Committees.—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means*).

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Armed Forces Veterans

1. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support armed forces veterans in Northern Ireland. [900143]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): Before I begin, may I pay tribute to you, Mr Speaker, on what I believe is—I am not sure—your penultimate day in the Chair? As I have said before, despite the odd disagreement in my past life as Government Chief Whip, your energy, drive and commitment to this role has been without parallel. I hope you will indulge me if I also pay tribute to two other departing Members with a strong interest in Northern Ireland: first, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who has served his

constituents with good grace for over 20 years and clearly cares deeply about Northern Ireland and its people; and secondly, my ministerial colleague my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who has been indispensable to me since I took over this role. He has been critical in driving forward preparations for Northern Ireland's exit from the EU, and also in his tireless work for the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire. I would also like to wish all colleagues who are leaving Parliament my best wishes; as Chief Whip, I saw at first hand how tough this period of political history has been for all colleagues.

The UK Government are fully committed to the covenant. A veterans strategy was published last year and a consultation event held in Belfast in conjunction with the veterans support office. I am now working closely with colleagues to develop a comprehensive response to that consultation so that we can ensure that every veteran receives the support they need and the recognition they deserve.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply, but when is the pursuit of brave Northern Ireland veterans and former members of the security services going to come to an end? Is the Secretary of State aware that the Ministry of Defence supports a presumption against prosecution when a case has already been fully investigated, unless there is new evidence? May I urge him to support that proposal and make it an election pledge?

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend will be aware that there is a consultation going on, as he has referred to. The Northern Ireland Office is looking at the Northern Ireland challenges on legacy. These are very sensitive issues—the system is not working, and we will be reporting back to this House over the coming weeks.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I, on behalf of my party, extend our best wishes to the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and the Minister of State, to the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who has been incredibly helpful to me on a particular issue and, indeed, to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who has been a recurring strong voice for Northern Ireland?

The Secretary of State said three weeks ago that no party in Northern Ireland would have a veto, yet Sinn Féin used its veto on the extension of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland; it does not apply in whole or in part, because of Sinn Féin's sectarian intransigence. Will the Secretary of State keenly pursue the full implementation of the covenant in Northern Ireland?

Julian Smith: The Government are committed to the armed forces covenant. As I said, we are engaging with the consultation that has occurred. We are clear on our responsibilities; the covenant is working across Northern Ireland, but we obviously need to ensure that it is working as efficiently and productively as possible for members of the armed forces.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): In the 30 years since I attended the Remembrance service at Enniskillen after the tragedy and atrocity there, there has been recognition of the service by nationalists, Catholics and Irish people in the great war and in the second world war. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to encourage the joint remembrance of a joint sacrifice?

Julian Smith: I will be joining Remembrance Day in Enniskillen in a week or so, and I will be thinking of all the people who have contributed in the way that my hon. Friend refers to.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (IGC): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), may I gently say to the Secretary of State—and I apologise for all the grief I have given him over the past few years—that, on this very important matter, when I was the Veterans Minister I had the great honour of visiting Northern Ireland, and I have to say to him that the covenant, which the coalition Government did so much to advance in that time, has just not happened in Northern Ireland, and it is because of sectarian differences? That is not fair, and those in Northern Ireland must have exactly the same rights under the covenant as those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Julian Smith: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question and pay tribute to her for the work she did in that role. I am aware that there is more to do, which is why we have been consulting on how the covenant is being implemented. There are things to improve, and we will make sure that we improve them.

MLAs' Salaries

2. **Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con):** What plans the Government have to make a further decision on the salaries paid to Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. [900144]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): It is deeply frustrating that there has been no functioning Assembly for so long. MLAs' pay is deeply controversial, but they are doing important constituency work. I have said that I will review MLA pay, and I am currently doing that.

Maria Caulfield: I echo the sentiments about colleagues who are leaving, in particular my fellow Northern Ireland Affairs Committee member, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who has stood up for Northern Ireland.

At the Select Committee last week it was revealed that the cost of MLA salaries has reached over £15 million since the Assembly was dissolved. MLAs do good constituency work, but is it not time to use that mechanism as a tool to get the Assembly back up and running?

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend is right that this is a challenge. It is a controversial amount of money, but in my view we have to do everything we can to encourage the political parties in Northern Ireland to come together. We need to review pay, but we also need to encourage the Assembly to get up and running.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): There is a lot of talk about reducing the salaries of MLAs, but I am sure the Secretary of State will agree with me that many, many MLAs work hard in their constituencies to provide constituency services through their offices. That is an important factor.

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend is right. The quality of political leadership and the quality of MLAs is high. We need all MLAs to come together and get going in the interests of Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I should like the Secretary of State to explain to the people of Northern Ireland why he is still dithering about cutting the salaries of MLAs. He cannot possibly justify continuing to pay MLAs almost £36,000 a year each during the next five years, and the general election campaign will bring no expectation of the Assembly being restored. For goodness' sake, give the people of Northern Ireland some good news. Cut their salaries and do not dither.

Julian Smith: The hon. Lady is being tough on me. At the Select Committee the other day I committed to doing a review as a result of her question, and I am doing that review.

Leaving the EU: Peace in Northern Ireland

3. **Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the effect on peace in Northern Ireland of the UK leaving the EU. [900145]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): Northern Ireland's security situation has been transformed as a result of the peace process. Although the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism continues to be assessed as severe, hard work by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and others means that most people are not affected. Challenges remain and will continue after EU exit, but Northern Ireland is a place where people want to work, study and live free from the threat or use of violence.

Alex Cunningham: The Prime Minister will spend the next several weeks trying to sell his damaging Brexit deal in Northern Ireland, among other places. The Chief Constable of the PSNI believes that that deal could lead to an increase in violence and civil unrest. What additional funding will the Secretary of State commit to community policing in Northern Ireland to help him cope?

Julian Smith: The PSNI has received additional funding in the run-up to Brexit. I remain in constant touch with the Chief Constable, and I will ensure that the funding and resourcing they need to do their job, which they do day in, day out to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland, is there.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): There is widespread disquiet among Unionists about the proposed deal, because of the concept of a border down the Irish sea. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when the UK comes out of the interim period and has a free trade agreement, Northern Ireland can have absolute equal status with the whole of the rest of the UK if mutual enforcement is introduced both north and south of the border? That would get rid of the need for a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and a border down the Irish sea.

Julian Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. The Government, through this deal, are ensuring that the United Kingdom comes out of the EU as a whole. On east-west trade, we are doing everything we can to ensure that there will be unfettered access to the GB market and no barriers to that trade.

10. [900153] **Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): How many of the Government's additional 20,000 police officers have been allocated to Northern Ireland, and what flexibility is there if the security situation deteriorates in the light of the deal?

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): The PSNI operates on a very flexible basis. My view is that it is well resourced—as I said, it got additional funding through the recent funding increase for the police—but I will keep monitoring that over the coming weeks.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): There can be no justification in any circumstances for the use of violence against a democratic decision taken by the people of this country. Nevertheless, the EU withdrawal agreement could create a precedent whereby the principle of consent is altered. The principle of consent is fundamental to Unionist support for the political process and our participation in it. I ask the Secretary of State to look again at what the Government have proposed in this agreement and the damage it is doing to Unionist confidence in the process.

Julian Smith: As my right hon. Friend knows, there is no change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. I accept that there have been significant questions from the Unionist community. I met with a range of Unionist community groups, including the Orange Order, on Saturday. I will continue to have those meetings and to reassure people that there is no constitutional change and that the arrangements for the Assembly and the Executive remain unchanged.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his most generous words. I have to say, the warmth and kindness he displayed are not normally characteristics of the Whips Office, which made them doubly welcome.

This is a bittersweet occasion, but for me the bitterness is assuaged by the sweetness of the 21 years I have worked in Northern Ireland, in that most beautiful part of the world, with some of the finest and sweetest people anyone could ever hope to meet. I implore the Secretary of State and all those who will assemble in the new Parliament to strain every sinew to see that those children born 21 years ago, who are now a new generation of adults in Northern Ireland, may finally know the peace to which they are entitled and let Northern Ireland finally flourish and bloom in peace and prosperity.

Julian Smith: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. My conversations with young people in Northern Ireland are the most moving and humbling I have ever had, and I will do everything I can to ensure that the opportunities those women and men have are maintained and can flourish. All the young people I have met in Northern Ireland so far in this job show every hope for a successful future for Northern Ireland.

Customs Regulations

4. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government have taken to ensure that customs regulations are the same in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK. [900146]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith):

The withdrawal agreement is clear that the UK Government are committed to protecting Northern Ireland's position in the UK internal market, and we have guaranteed that Northern Irish businesses and farmers will continue to have unfettered access to the rest of the UK market. When the withdrawal agreement comes back, those clauses on unfettered access between Northern Ireland and Great Britain will be in it. Businesses in Northern Ireland will benefit from tariff-free access to the UK single market while also benefiting from future trade deals negotiated with the UK.

Mr Carmichael: It is one of the defining characteristics of a nation state that goods moving into a territory are subject to regulations that are not there for goods that move within it. That is why the withdrawal agreement is a threat to the future of the Union that is the United Kingdom. It is why the former Prime Minister was absolutely right to discount completely the possibility of a customs border down the Irish sea. Why has the Conservative and Unionist party changed its mind?

Julian Smith: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the key priority was to maintain no hard border on the island of Ireland—the thing that has ensured peace there for the last few decades. As I said, we will deliver on the commitments in the protocol on unfettered access for NI businesses into the GB market.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): If there are to be east-west arrangements, may I press my right hon. Friend to try to ensure that they are cost-neutral for Northern Irish business?

Julian Smith: I am having proactive discussions with the Treasury, and I agree that we need to have no costs and no barriers for Northern Ireland business.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): In the light of that answer, how does a Unionist Secretary of State justify export declarations on £18.5 billion-worth of trade flowing from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, and what charge will be placed on that £18.5 billion-worth of trade?

Julian Smith: Through this agreement, the United Kingdom maintains total control of how that is applied. As my hon. Friend knows, we are working day in, day out to ensure that Northern Irish businesses can send their goods from Northern Ireland to Great Britain with absolutely unfettered access.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): May I return to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson)? Could we not consider the mutual recognition and mutual implementation proposals in much the same way as we administer the common travel area?

Julian Smith: Over the coming weeks, and then when we enter the implementation period, we must do everything we can to deliver on the commitment that I have just made to unfettered access for goods travelling from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, and ensure that trade can continue as it is now.

Northern Ireland in the UK

5. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the benefits to Northern Ireland of being part of the UK. [900147]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Robin Walker): As part of the world's sixth largest economy, Northern Ireland benefits from sharing resources to fund public spending on defence, education and health, and from access to the UK's unique international networks. It also benefits from the Government's UK-wide policies, including recent increases in the national living wage and the personal allowance. As Conservatives and Unionists, we should always support the Union and Northern Ireland's place within it.

Daniel Kawczynski: In an interview on Radio Ulster this morning, I reiterated our unwavering commitment to Ulster from the Tory Back Benches. I trust that the Minister agrees that, despite the DUP's initial reservations about the withdrawal agreement, they will hopefully realise that it is in all our interests for it to be passed as soon as possible.

Mr Walker: I do agree with my hon. Friend. I think it is clear that this deal safeguards Northern Ireland's place in the customs territory of the UK, safeguards the principle of consent, and safeguards the right of the Northern Ireland Assembly to opt out of future arrangements if it chooses. It absolutely safeguards Northern Ireland's constitutional position as part of the United Kingdom.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): One of the hallmarks of this United Kingdom is fairness and justice for people who have been victims, wherever they have suffered abuse, but today the victims of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland feel very frustrated and angry about the fact that because an election has been called, the Bill that was designed to address that issue and provide compensation will not now proceed. Can the Minister please indicate, even at this late stage, that it will be allowed to proceed?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to this issue. Time is of the essence when it comes to the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill, and we will do all we can to ensure that it is passed before the general election: my Secretary of State has made that clear. No decision has yet been made about the Bill prior to the dissolution of Parliament, but we will do everything possible to take it forward.

Nigel Dodds: I must press the Minister on this issue. We have literally only a few days and hours left. Surely the Minister can give a more definitive explanation. Surely he can give a definitive commitment that, on this issue, he will step forward. There is cross-party support here in the House, and there is cross-community support in Northern Ireland. Please, please get on with it.

Mr Walker: I absolutely recognise the urgency of the matter. Earlier this week, the Secretary of State stated publicly that in order to speed up the delivery of redress mechanisms, he had tasked officials in the Department to work at pace with the Executive Office, and to begin preparations for the scheme once it becomes law. Those

preparations will continue, and we will also provide whatever support is needed to assist the Northern Ireland civil service to ensure that victims are paid as rapidly as possible. However, I recognise that this is a question for the House, and we will work with the usual channels to see what we can do on that front as well.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I begin by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for your courtesy and consideration to the Opposition's Northern Ireland team?

It would be remiss of me not to recognise the ending of the place on the Front Bench of the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), as well as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who will be sadly missed on our side of the Chamber and, I believe, on the other side as well.

As the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) has said, it is absolutely intolerable that victims of institutional abuse, who had been led to believe that legislation would pass through this House imminently, now face the prospect of the Leader of the House and the business managers frustrating their simple call for justice, even though the Secretary of State, the Opposition and the Democratic Unionist party want that legislation. Will the Minister ensure that he talks to the Leader of the House and demands that that Bill be brought forward before Parliament is prorogued?

Mr Walker: It is clear that we have agreement across the House on how important this issue is, and we are doing everything we can to move forward on it. I will certainly have those conversations, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will also have those conversations with the usual channels on his side of the House.

Leaving the EU: Withdrawal Agreement

6. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What economic assessment he has made of the potential effect of the Government's proposed withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland. [900148]

12. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What economic assessment he has made of the potential effect of the Government's proposed withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland. [900155]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd): In my last questions, may I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his over-generous remarks and associate myself with his kind words about my north-west London neighbour, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)? I should also like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your support over many years in the Chair.

Under the proposed agreement, all businesses will continue to trade across the north-south border without tariffs or new regulatory checks. Businesses in Northern Ireland will continue to benefit from tariff-free access to the UK's single market while having the opportunity to benefit from any future trade deals negotiated by the UK after we leave the EU.

Marion Fellows: Has an economic assessment been prepared to illustrate how much of a competitive advantage Northern Ireland will gain from effectively remaining in

the EU's customs union and single market, compared with other businesses across the rest of the UK? If so, will the Minister publish it?

Mr Hurd: I draw the hon. Lady's attention to the impact assessment. I do not recognise her comments about competitive advantage or disadvantage. I hope that she will recognise that the circumstances in relation to Northern Ireland are special because of the land border, and that the proposed agreement responds to those special characteristics.

Patrick Grady: The Foreign Secretary has described the deal as "cracking" for Northern Ireland. It stands to reason, then, that the deal must be less cracking for the rest of the UK. Why is Northern Ireland getting special treatment when it voted to remain, while Scotland, which also voted to remain, is having to take the bad hard Brexit that the Tories are so determined to push through?

Mr Hurd: I understand, I think, the point the hon. Gentleman makes, but I return to what I was saying. He knows that the circumstances in Northern Ireland are special in relation to our exit from the EU because of the existence of the land border and because of the importance that we all attach to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. One of the great achievements of this new proposed withdrawal agreement is the removal of the need for a hard border.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Heysham in my constituency is the nearest mainland UK port to Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that my area could be a boomtown if we had a free port, as 10% of the north-west's GDP comes in through our port, and it will be 20% once this withdrawal agreement has been finalised?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his creativity in introducing that point, which I am sure will have been heard by the relevant Secretary of State. He raises an important point about the opportunity and need to talk up the UK economy and to talk up the opportunities to increase business and trade links across the UK internal market once we leave the EU.

Welfare Mitigation Payments

7. **Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab):** If he will bring forward legislative proposals to maintain welfare mitigation payments in Northern Ireland after March 2020. [900149]

8. **Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind):** If he will bring forward legislative proposals to maintain welfare mitigation payments in Northern Ireland after March 2020. [900151]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd): The mitigations in place were agreed by the previous Northern Ireland Executive and are sunsetted in March 2020. Ministers here in Westminster do not have the power to instruct the Northern Ireland civil service to take action or to direct spending in relation to devolved matters. Any extension of those mitigations will be a matter for the Northern Ireland civil service and restored Executive Ministers.

Steve McCabe: I am—[*Interruption.*] I am sure that the people of Selly Oak would like the welcome that the Prime Minister just received.

In view of the importance of this issue, will the Minister consider amending the Bill, because it is clear that if the people of Northern Ireland face this welfare cliff edge, there will be major problems from March next year?

Mr Hurd: This is an incredibly serious issue. Thousands of people in Northern Ireland benefit from these mitigations, and there is a sunset provision for the end of March 2020. The hon. Gentleman will know that alternative mechanisms are available to the devolved Administration to extend the mitigations, but that is not ideal. The best way would be to change the legal framework, which is best done in Northern Ireland by a Northern Ireland Executive, and the day when it is restored cannot come too soon.

Frank Field: Does the Minister agree that many families in Northern Ireland are particularly affected by the Government's policy to cap benefits for families with more than two children? When he next sees the Prime Minister, will he ask for the lifting of the cap, which affects poor children throughout the whole United Kingdom, to be part of his election manifesto?

Mr Hurd: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point, and the Prime Minister has heard it directly.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson) *indicated assent.*

Mr Hurd: It is not for me to revisit the bowels of welfare policy, but the right hon. Gentleman's Select Committee on Work and Pensions has raised a serious point about extending the mitigations. That is for the devolved Administration and would be an urgent requirement for a restored Executive.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The introduction of universal credit has had a devastating impact in my constituency, but women in Northern Ireland who wish to access an exemption to the two-child limit, known as the rape clause, may still be subject to criminal prosecution for not reporting under the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, as confirmed by the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State commit to lifting the two-child limit that places families into further hardship?

Mr Hurd: That is an extremely important and sensitive issue. The hon. Lady will know that, in practice, there have been no prosecutions under section 5 of the 1967 Act in the past 50 years. She will also know about the guidance from the Attorney General and from the outgoing DPP, particularly on the status of public interest. I come back to the same old riff: any change in the law is for a devolved Executive and a devolved Administration. This is a serious issue, so it is about time elected politicians in Northern Ireland stepped up to their responsibility.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): When giving evidence to the Scottish Parliament, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirmed that Northern Irish businesses will have better access to

the EU single market than Scottish businesses. Shamefully, this Government will not publish an economic assessment of the Prime Minister's deal, but we know from independent research that it will hit Scotland hard. Will the Minister therefore ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who is sitting next to him, whether Scotland's man in the Cabinet demanded that Scotland's businesses be given the same access to the single market and customs union as Northern Irish business, or did he sit there meekly, abandoning them to their fate?

Mr Hurd: The Government have published an impact assessment in relation to the proposed withdrawal agreement, and we have rehearsed the arguments about the arrangements in Northern Ireland. These are Northern Ireland questions, and I am sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's comments.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900228] **Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 30 October.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Immediately after questions today, I will open the debate on the Grenfell Tower inquiry report.

Mr Speaker, I know that the whole House will want to join me in recording that, after 10 tumultuous years, this is your last Prime Minister's questions. As befits a distinguished former Wimbledon competitor, you have sat up there in your high chair not just as an umpire ruthlessly adjudicating on the finer points of parliamentary procedure with your trademark Tony Montana scowl, not just as a commentator offering your own opinions on the rallies you are watching—sometimes acerbic and sometimes kind—but above all as a player in your own right, peppering every part of the Chamber with your own thoughts and opinions like some uncontrollable tennis-ball machine delivering a series of literally unplayable and formally unreturnable volleys and smashes.

Although we may disagree about some of the legislative innovations you have favoured, there is no doubt in my mind that you have been a great servant of this Parliament and this House of Commons. You have modernised, you have widened access, you have cared for the needs of those with disabilities, and you have cared so deeply for the rights of Back Benchers that you have done more than anyone since Stephen Hawking to stretch time in this session. As we come to the end of what must be the longest retirement since Frank Sinatra's, I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking you and hoping that you enjoy in your retirement the soothing medicament that you have so often prescribed to the rest of us.

I know that Members across the House will want to join me in wishing the England rugby team the very best for the final in the world cup on Saturday.

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

Dr Whitehead: I fully associate myself with the Prime Minister's comments about your outstanding service, Mr Speaker, and wish you a long and successful life after your speakership comes to an end.

Labour will produce a strong offer at the forthcoming election on the climate emergency and net zero, including a full ban on the extraction of fossil fuel by fracking. What chance does the Prime Minister think he has of matching that offer, particularly in the light of the news that the Conservative manifesto will be written by a lobbyist for the fracking industry?

The Prime Minister: We will shortly make an announcement about fracking in this country, in view of the considerable anxieties that are legitimately being raised about the earthquakes that have followed various fracking attempts in the UK. We will certainly follow up on those findings, because they are very important and will be of concern to Members across the House.

But I must say that this Government yield to nobody in our enthusiasm for reducing CO₂. We have cut carbon emissions massively in the UK and we were the first European country to commit to net zero by 2050, and that is what we are going to do. We can do it because we believe in a strong, dynamic, robust market economy that is delivering the solutions in clean technology that are deplored by the Labour party.

Q3. [900230] **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): On behalf of those on the Conservative Benches, may I wish my right hon. Friend the best of good fortune in the 12 December general election?

While we live in a period of some uncertainty, there are 426 people who have thalidomide and very much rely on the health grant to give them dignity, care and support. That grant comes to an end in a few years' time. As chairman of the thalidomide APPG, and on behalf of those 426 recipients, I urge my right hon. Friend to end their uncertainty as soon as possible by signalling a renewal of that grant. That would give them the peace of mind that, I hope the whole House agrees, they most certainly deserve.

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on everything he does for his constituents and the thalidomide victims. I reassure him that the current health grant, which as he rightly says is subject to review in 2023, will be reviewed. I am getting confirmation of that from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. I hope that my hon. Friend will pass those assurances to the thalidomide victims as fast as he can.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I hope you will indulge me one moment while I say a word about you—I am sure you will. I want to thank you for the way you have used your speakership over your decade-long tenure. You have done so much to reform this House of Commons, and our democracy is stronger for the way you have done it.

You have served for 10 years. You have given real power to Back Benchers, vastly expanded the use of urgent questions, which has been overwhelmingly popular with all Ministers, and opened up the number of emergency debates, which is even more popular with even more Ministers. In the traditions of the great Speaker Lenthall and others, you have stood up for Parliament when it

has to be stood up for, and we thank you for that. You have also carried that message internationally in terms of the role of parliamentary democracy and Parliaments holding Governments to account. As we hope to form a Government in the future, we hope to be held to account by Parliament as well.

I also think, and I am sure the whole House would agree with me, that you have done excellent work in opening up Parliament to visitors, exhibitions and children. You have reduced some of the strange customs and strange garments that people wear in this building—*[Interruption.]* It's all right. I know you are all jealous of my tie, but it is okay. You have used your office to increase diversity among the staff in the House and make this a much more LGBT-friendly place. You have taken it from being a gentlemen's club that happens to be in a royal palace to being a genuinely democratic institution.

I want you to accept our thanks and pass on our best wishes to Sally, Freddie, Oliver and Jemima, your wonderful family, for the support they have given you. There will be a great celebration today—I am sure the whole House will join us in this—when you and I celebrate Arsenal beating Liverpool tonight. *[Interruption.]* The Labour party loves a debate and loves a bit of banter.

The Prime Minister's planned sell-out deal with Donald Trump means yet more national health service money being siphoned off into private profit. Channel 4's "Dispatches" reported that the cost of drugs and medicines has repeatedly been discussed between United States and United Kingdom trade representatives. Why did the Prime Minister previously say the health service was not on the table in any post-Brexit trade deal?

The Prime Minister: The answer to that is very simple: it is because it is not on the table. I pay tribute to officials of the NHS, who have just done a brilliant job in reducing the cost of Orkambi—made in America, by the way—so that cystic fibrosis sufferers in this country get the treatment they need, at a cost that is reasonable to the taxpayers of this country. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to know how the people of this country are able to afford the stupendous investments we are now making in the NHS—£34 billion, the biggest ever investment in the NHS, with 40 new hospitals that we are building as a result of the decisions we are taking—I can tell him that it is because this is the party that supports wealth creation. The reason we are able to invest in the NHS is that for the last nine years this economy has been growing. It has grown by 19% since the Conservatives first came into office, and he would ruin this economy and ruin our ability to fund the NHS. That is the reality.

Jeremy Corbyn: We all welcome the fact that Orkambi will now be able to be provided in this country under the NHS, and we thank those who campaigned for it. The shame is that we are not told what the deal is with the company concerned. As for the fabled 40 hospitals, that figure dropped to 20 and then finally dropped to six.

We learned this week that Government officials have met US pharmaceutical companies five times as part of the Prime Minister's planned trade deal. The US has called for "full market access" to our NHS, which would mean prices of some of our most important medicines

increasing by up to sevenfold. While the Government are having secret meetings with US corporations, it is patients here who continue to suffer. Can the Prime Minister explain why the number of people waiting longer for urgent cancer treatment has tripled over the past nine years?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows very well, this Government are investing £34 billion in the NHS. We are seeing improvements in cancer survival rates throughout the country, thanks to the investment that the Government are making. I think it absolutely satirical that he should claim credit for getting Orkambi and other drugs delivered at a reasonable price; that is the work of the UK Government and the NHS, supporting the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to ensure that people in this country get affordable treatments. He may not be aware of it, but Vertex, the company that makes Orkambi, comes from America. Is he seriously suggesting that the NHS should not engage in negotiations to ensure that British patients get the drugs they deserve? Is he so phobic of American companies that he would forbid the NHS from having those discussions?

Jeremy Corbyn: Not for the first time, the Prime Minister is talking nonsense. Of course we need to import medicines from various places; I just want it to be done in an open and transparent way. I do not want secret talks between Government officials, on behalf of Ministers, and big pharma corporations in the USA.

Last year, 34,000 cancer patients waited more than two months for treatment. Although early detection is obviously very important, the longer people wait, the less chance there is of their surviving cancer. The Prime Minister knows that, I know that, the whole world knows that—why can he not get it, and put the necessary resources into the NHS to cut the waiting times?

The Prime Minister *rose—*

Jeremy Corbyn: If he could just be patient for 30 seconds.

The Prime Minister claims that the NHS is safe in his hands; why, then, has NHS privatisation doubled under this Government, with nearly £10 billion being spent on private companies in our NHS?

The Prime Minister: The NHS is receiving unrivalled and unprecedented sums of taxpayers' money. If the right hon. Gentleman is seriously saying that he would not like dentists, opticians and Macmillan care nurses to work with the NHS, he must be out of his mind. Cancer survival rates have actually increased year on year since 2010, and more and more people are seen within the right waiting time, thanks to the investments that we are making. I think he should pay tribute to the hard work of NHS staff, stop talking down their incredible achievements, and recognise that if we are allowed to come back as the next Government, we will invest massively in the NHS and take it forward with the funds that we will make available from a strong and growing economy. The reality is that he would wreck that economy.

Jeremy Corbyn: What we do not want is private companies like Virgin Care suing our NHS for contracts that they did not get. Our NHS should be focused on making people better, not making the wealthy few richer.

National health service A&E departments have just had their worst September on record. This morning, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine said that this winter the NHS needs more than 4,000 extra beds. Will the Prime Minister explain why, under his Government, the number of people in England waiting for an operation has now reached a record high of 4.4 million?

The Prime Minister: There is a reason why more people are receiving NHS care: it is that the NHS is working harder and achieving more than ever before. If the House wants to see what Labour would be like in office, it should look at its performance. By the way, I should say that the SNP Government negotiated a much higher price for Orkambi in Scotland. *[Interruption.]* They did. They got the price totally wrong. The Leader of the Opposition should have a word with them.

If the people of this country want a horrific foretaste of what life would be like under a Labour-run NHS, they should look at the NHS in Wales where all health targets are routinely missed, where the A&E waiting target has not been met since 2008; and where the target for in-patients and out-patients has not been met since August 2010. The right hon. Gentleman talks about cancer treatment—that target has not been met since June 2008. That is how Labour runs the NHS.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am surprised that the Prime Minister can keep a straight face saying that, while his Government have cut so much from the Welsh Government's budget. And that from a Government who have cut 15,000 beds from the NHS and who have cut £7 billion from social care. I do not know how he has the brass neck to say what he has just said. The reality is that his words are hollow. That is clear to anyone who has tried to get a GP appointment, who sees how overworked our NHS staff are when they visit a hospital and who sees the stress that NHS staff go through when they cannot deal with all the patients who are coming in. He needs to think about this.

Let me give an example. A lady called Gillian wrote to me this week. *[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"]* Yes, it is a real case of a real person, and I will quote her letter if I may, Mr Speaker. Gillian says:

"My mother died in February as a direct result of the GP shortage in the UK. Her last years were marred by long waits for treatments and for interventions...Whenever she got care, it was given by overstretched but dedicated people, but it always came after painful and debilitating delays."

Why should that happen to Gillian's mum or anybody else's mum? The problem is the shortage of GPs, the shortage of nurses and the excessive waiting time for people with very difficult conditions and deep pain. They should be sympathised with and supported.

The Prime Minister: I can certainly say that we will deal with the concerns of the right hon. Gentleman's constituent Gillian, but I can tell him that there are 17,300 more doctors and over 17,000 more nurses on our wards since 2010. Frankly, it is time to differentiate the politics of protest and the politics of leadership. He should apologise for continually striking attitudes that I do not think are in the interests of the people. It is all very easy to be an Islingtonian protester and say that you side with Russia over what happened in Salisbury, or say that you have a £196 billion programme of

renationalisation, or continually flip-flop one way or the other—now leave, now remain—refusing to respect the verdict of the people in the EU referendum. Leadership means standing up for the people of this country, standing up for our police, standing up for our NHS and making sure that it gets the funding that it needs, and standing up for our economy and for our wealth creators. Above all, it means getting Brexit done and ending the dither and delay. The time for protest is over. It is time for leadership, and that is what this Government provide.

Jeremy Corbyn: Coming from a Prime Minister who withdrew his own Bill, that seems a bit odd. My question was about somebody whose mother had died and who believes that that is because of the shortage of staff within the NHS. I had hoped that the Prime Minister would have shown some empathy and answered that question, because GP numbers are falling, there is a 43,000-nurse shortage in the NHS, and the NHS has suffered the longest spending squeeze ever in its history. The choice at this election could not be clearer. People have a chance to vote for real change after years of Conservative and Lib Dem cuts, privatisation and tax handouts for the richest. This Government have put our NHS into crisis, and this election is a once-in-a-generation chance to end privatisation in our NHS, give it the funding it needs and give it the doctors, nurses, GPs and all the other staff it needs. Despite the Prime Minister's denials, our NHS is up for grabs by US corporations in a Trump-style trade deal. Is it not the truth—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will not be shouted down under any circumstances. He will complete his inquiry to the satisfaction of the Chair, and people who think otherwise will quickly learn that they are, as usual, wrong.

Jeremy Corbyn: Despite the Prime Minister's denials, the NHS is up for grabs by US corporations in a Trump trade deal. Is it not the truth—the Government may not like this—that this Government are preparing to sell out our NHS? Our health service is in more danger than at any other time in its glorious history because of the Prime Minister's Government, his attitudes and the trade deals that he wants to strike.

The Prime Minister: I do indeed agree that there is a stark choice facing this country at this election, and one of the options is economic catastrophe under the Labour party, with a £196 billion programme that will take money away from companies and spend it on a pointless renationalisation programme. Labour will put up taxes on corporations, on people, on pensions and on businesses—to the highest level in the whole of Europe. That is the economic catastrophe that the Leader of the Opposition offers. But it is worse than that because he also offers a political disaster, consigning next year, which should be a wonderful year for our country, to two more referendums: another referendum on the EU because he cannot make up his mind what he thinks, flip-flopping this way and that; and another referendum on Scottish independence. Why on earth should the people of this country spend the next year, which should be a glorious year, going through the toxic, tedious torpor of two more referendums thanks to the Labour party?

We want next year to be a great year for our country. We are going to invest more in frontline NHS services. We are going to reduce violent crime, with 20,000 more police officers on our streets. That is what I pledged on the steps of Downing Street, and we have done it. We are going to invest in every one of our primary and secondary schools across the country. That is what I pledged on the steps of Downing Street, and we are delivering it. We are going to invest in a fantastic infrastructure programme for our country, with gigabit broadband across the whole nation. That is what I pledged on the steps of Downing Street, and that is what we are going to deliver. And we are going to deliver a fantastic deal by which this country will come out of the European Union—a deal that the Leader of the Opposition has tried to block but which we will deliver. That is the future for this country: drift and dither under the Labour party, or taking Britain forward to a brighter future under the Conservatives. That is the choice this country faces.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Bob Blackman; I am sure he is delighted to be so popular.

Q6. [900233] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): For more than 30 years, the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore was promised a rebuild. Under a Conservative Government, we have the first phase of those medical facilities, to match the world-class treatment provided by the medical team there. However, there are two problems. The first is that the next phase is caught up in NHS bureaucracy, and the second is that two eminent non-executive directors have sadly been dismissed from the board. Can my right hon. Friend sweep away this NHS bureaucracy so that we can provide the medical facilities required, and also order an investigation into why the non-executive directors have been removed from the board by NHS London?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on everything he does to campaign for his constituents, and particularly for the hospital in Stanmore. I assure him that that hospital, along with many others, will be in line for the funding that it requires. On his specific point about the administration at that hospital, I will ask my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary to deal with his concerns very speedily.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Can I, Mr Speaker, on behalf of those of us on the SNP Benches, wish you all the best for your impending retirement and salute you, Sir, for the way that you have stood up for the democracy of this House in order that at this time of crisis we hold the Government to account? We trust that you will enjoy your many passions in retirement. You will always be welcome up in Scotland, and if you need to visit a football team as an antidote to Arsenal you will always be welcome at Easter Road to see the mighty Hibernian. Let me, Mr Speaker, wish England all the best for the rugby on Saturday.

This Prime Minister's extreme Brexit will take a wrecking ball to the economy and cost Scotland and the United Kingdom £70 billion a year. [Interruption.] We talk about the impact of Brexit and the Conservatives howl and complain, because they know the reality is that it is going to damage people's lives. Is it not the truth that

this Prime Minister is willing to throw Scotland under his big red bus to deliver his Brexit, no matter what the cost?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows very well, the greatest damage that could be done to the Scottish economy would be the SNP's reckless plan to break up the Union with the UK. Sixty per cent. of Scotland's exports are with the rest of the UK. They would be throwing away not just the biggest block grant in history that Scotland has received this year but, of course, all the benefits of membership of the most successful political partnership in history, from shipbuilding in Govan to the Glasgow climate change summit next year, which will be a glory of our whole United Kingdom and which is coming to Scotland precisely because Scotland is part of the United Kingdom. They would throw all that away with their crackpot plan for borders at Berwick and creating a new Scottish currency or joining the euro; and, worse still, going into the European Union and handing back control of Scotland's fisheries—Scotland's spectacular marine wealth. Just at the moment that they have been won back by this country, they would hand back control of those fisheries to Brussels. That is their policy; I look forward to contesting it at the barricades.

Ian Blackford: You know, Mr Speaker, I thought it was Prime Minister's questions, not a rant from the Prime Minister. I have to say—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Kerr, I am seriously worried about your condition—calm yourself, man. [Interruption.] Mr Grant, I am very concerned for you. Calm down.

Ian Blackford: Well, I certainly wish Mr Grant all the best for his future, because he is not coming back, like so many of the Scottish Conservatives. We hear that the Prime Minister will be coming up to Scotland in the election campaign. He will be welcome, because each time he comes to Scotland he drives up SNP support.

Scotland did not vote for Brexit and we will not have it forced upon us. Is it not clear that the Scottish National party is the only party standing up for Scotland's interests and respecting our democratic decision to remain in the European Union? This coming election will be one of the most important in Scotland's history. Only a vote for the SNP can secure the escape route for Scotland away from this Brexit mess, from the chaos of Westminster and from the austerity of the Tories, and protect Scotland's right to choose our own future as an independent country in Europe.

The Prime Minister: I am sorry if I seemed to rant at the right hon. Gentleman, but if I may say so, he does rant quite a lot about independence for Scotland—he bangs on about it endlessly. Why does he go on about Scottish independence so much? It is because he wants to conceal what the SNP Government are actually doing in Scotland. They are wrecking it. They are diabolical for the Scottish economy. They have the highest taxes in the UK. They are not running either health or education well. That is why they are so monomaniacal about independence and smashing the Union.

There are some wonderful things happening in Scotland, and it is very often thanks to Scottish Conservatives, who are delivering £200 million for Scottish farmers—that is all thanks to the intercessions of Scottish Conservatives

—as part of the biggest ever block grant from London to Scotland. It is Scottish Conservatives who can be relied upon, unlike any other party in Scotland—unlike Labour or the SNP—to keep the Union together: the most successful political partnership in history.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm itself. The truth is that one person's rant is another person's stream of passionate and uninterrupted eloquence.

Q7. [900234] **Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): Mr Speaker, as your former Deputy Speaker, I want to say that nobody who has sat in that Chair has done more to defend and promote the rights of LGBTI people in this country and throughout the world. When so many people live in fear of being born the way they are, I salute you. Thank you.

The Guardian reported last week that the largest number of happy people live in the Ribble valley, and I believe that the Prime Minister has the capacity to make them happier. Will he ensure that Ribble Valley gets its fair share of the 153 extra police who are coming to Lancashire, that we get our fair share of rural funding for health services such as the Slaidburn health centre and that we get equal funding per pupil in our schools? Finally, for the 57% who voted Brexit and for the almost 100% who believe in democracy, will he ensure that after the general election, when he is Prime Minister, he will deliver the Brexit people voted for?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend an assurance on his second point. The only way to deliver a great Brexit is to vote for the Conservative party and this Government. I can make him happier still by pointing out that those 153 police are just the first wave for Ribble Valley, as part of the 20,000 more police who we will be putting on the streets of this country.

Q2. [900229] **Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I have never known this place without you here, and it is going to be different. It is a delight to see your children here watching today, because I know that, while you have a responsibility to Parliament, you also take your responsibilities as a parent incredibly seriously. And now to the Prime Minister.

[Interruption.]

Today is my son Danny's 11th birthday. Thanks to the years of cuts voted for by the Prime Minister, my son Danny and hundreds of children in Birmingham, Yardley are in super-sized classes and are only being educated four and a half days a week. I do not want to hear his fancy stock answers about Brexit or Russia that he has been giving from his little folder or about how he is going to give more—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Both representatives at the Dispatch Box spoke with force and fully. The hon. Lady is not going to be cut off by people ranting at her. She will be heard. If there are people who do not want to hear it, they are welcome to leave; I do not think she will care, and neither will I. Her question will be heard, and that is the end of it.

Jess Phillips: I do not want to hear the Prime Minister's campaign-ad answer, because my son will not be able to go to school on Friday, and his campaign-ad answer

does nothing for me as a parent. *[Interruption.]* I am so glad that they think it is really funny that children cannot go to school five days a week. The Prime Minister is responsible for the children in this country, and while he might struggle with that personally, will he today give a commitment that there will be a maximum number of children in every class post the election and that every single child will be able to go to school for five days a week?

The Prime Minister: May I first of all wish a very happy birthday to Danny? I can reassure the hon. Lady that I believe that under this Government—under this Conservative Government—he will have the best possible chance not only of having the funding for his school that he needs, because we are investing in every primary and every secondary school in the country, but of having, as I say, the £14 billion to level up funding both in primary and in secondary schools. I believe that Danny will have a better chance of a great job under this Government—and look at what we have achieved already: record employment under this Government—and a better chance of being able to find, eventually, his own home. So Danny has a great future under this Government, and I hope she will reassure him on that point.

Q9. [900236] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): In Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP are letting down our wonderful NHS staff and the patients they look after. Waiting time targets have been missed, capital investment has been slashed and there is a £1 billion maintenance backlog. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that, rather than obsessing about independence referendums, Nicola Sturgeon should end her neglect of Scotland's NHS?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on everything that he does for his constituency of Berwickshire, and he is absolutely right. As I said earlier, that is why SNP Members rant, to use their own word, so incessantly about independence—because they wish to distract or to dead-cat, as the saying goes, from the lamentable failures of the SNP Government. He is entirely right that, if this goes on, I think the SNP will forfeit all right to manage the NHS in Scotland.

Q4. [900231] **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): Fireworks in politics can be entertaining. Unfortunately, fireworks of explosive types can cause great distress to sensitive people, pets and livestock. The SNP Scottish Government ran a 14-week consultation and received over 16,000 responses: 94% of respondents said that they would welcome increased controls on the sale of fireworks. The relevant legislation covers consumer protection on explosives, environmental law and animal welfare law. Has the Prime Minister ever considered banning the sale of fireworks to the general public, and in the short time left to him, will he?

The Prime Minister: It is important to strike a balance, and people should be allowed to celebrate Guy Fawkes night and other occasions with fireworks, but the hon. Gentleman is plainly right that they are very disturbing for animals. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is looking at this very matter. I would just point out that, on animal welfare, it may interest him to know that there are measures we will be able to implement as

a result of Brexit—such as banning sow farrowing crates, for instance, which I think is of great concern to our constituents, and banning the live export of animals—that we would not otherwise be able to do. That is one of the reasons why we need to get Brexit done and take this country forward.

Q10. [900237] **Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): Thousands of British people in Wycombe have family and friends on one or both sides of the line of control in Kashmir. With so many serious allegations of human rights abuses being made, do the Government accept that this is not merely some foreign policy issue to be dealt with by others, but that it is an issue of the most immediate and profound concern in Wycombe and in towns across the UK?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and he is absolutely right not just that this matters very much to him and to his constituents, but that the welfare of communities in Kashmir is of profound concern to the UK Government. He also knows, of course, that it is the long-standing position of the UK Government that the crisis in Kashmir is fundamentally a matter for India and Pakistan to resolve and, alas, since we were there at the very beginning of this crisis, he will understand that, for long-standing reasons, it is not for us as the UK to prescribe a solution in that dispute.

Q5. [900232] **Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): In my constituency, the squeeze on Government spending has meant that we have a third fewer police than we had in 2010, we have lost half our children's centres and the state of disrepair at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, is so acute that, last week, the out-patients department was closed because of leaking sewage. How, then, can the Prime Minister justify squandering £2 billion of public money on no-deal Brexit preparations following his feeble pledge to exit the EU tomorrow, do or die?

The Prime Minister: I might ask the hon. Lady how she can justify this country spending another £1 billion per month on delaying our exit from the European Union, which is what she voted for.

I remind the hon. Lady that, under this Government, we are spending £225 million more per year on policing in London than was the case when I was Mayor of London. She might ask her friend the Mayor of London what he is doing with that money and why he cannot do better. Frankly, his record on policing in London is utterly shameful. She should be holding him to account.

Q13. [900240] **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): I welcome the significant additional investment in Stockport schools, thanks to the Prime Minister's work. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister congratulate the excellent schools in my constituency and pledge further resources so that they can continue to deliver an excellent education for our young people?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate Warren Wood and Norbury Hall schools. I believe that Norbury Hall is my hon. Friend's alma mater. I confirm what I think he and the whole House know: those schools and every other school in the country are getting £14 billion more to level up funding for every pupil.

That is possible because of the policies pursued by our one nation Conservative Government. It would be ruined by the Labour Opposition.

Q8. [900235] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): Owing to health inequalities, men in my Stockton North constituency live on average 16 years less than those in the Prime Minister's. Does he agree it is time that my area got the new hospital promised 10 years ago but axed by the Tory-Lib Dem coalition?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look at what we can do to ensure that the hon. Gentleman does get a new hospital in his constituency, because we have a huge programme now under way, but the only way to deliver that £34 billion investment in the NHS—the biggest in modern history—is to ensure we have a dynamic, one nation market economy of the kind that we have. I am afraid all the Labour party would do is whack up taxes on business and companies in such a way as to destroy the viability of the UK economy. That is the programme he supports.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Ind): Mr Speaker, may I take the occasion of your last Prime Minister's questions and mine to join in the tributes to your role in the Chair? During your decade, there have been unprecedented attempts at times to try to increase the power of the Executive at the expense of this Parliament. You have been very formidable in maintaining the duty of government to be accountable to this House. I trust that your successor will try to live up to your considerable achievement.

To show that a veteran MP, even one who is retiring from the House, can still look to the future, will my right hon. Friend give me some clarity on what he will seek to achieve—if, by chance, he wins this unpredictable general election—by way of the permanent relationship he will have to negotiate between the EU and the United Kingdom as an ex-member? In the years of negotiation that he will have to undertake, will he seek to ensure that we maintain trade and flows of investment between the whole United Kingdom and the European Union that are free of tariffs, free of custom controls and largely free of regulatory distinctions; indeed, as near as possible to the single market and customs union that we are in? Just talking about a free trade agreement is an extremely vague aspiration that covers a wide range of possibilities. Can he demonstrate that he really is a liberal free trader at heart?

The Prime Minister: Indeed. As my right hon. and learned Friend knows, the advantage of the partnership we will build is that not only—[*Interruption.*] I am sure the talks will go well. We will have a zero-tariff, zero-quota arrangement with our European friends and partners. Under the current deal, which is a fantastic deal, we will also be able to do free trade deals around the world. There will be many ways in which we will stay very close to our European friends partners, but there will also be important ways in which we may seek to do things differently and better.

I have already mentioned animal welfare; I might mention tax breaks for new technology, I might mention cutting VAT on sanitary products, I might mention free ports. There are all sorts of ways to do this. I might

mention different regulation on biotechnology or in many of the areas in which this country now leads the world. That is the opportunity for our country: to do a great free trade deal with our European friends and partners of a kind of which I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend would thoroughly approve, while also being a champion of free trade around the world. That is what we are going to do.

Mr Speaker: As the Father of the House leaves this place after 49 years without interruption, I for one want to salute him. *[Applause.]* The right hon. and learned Gentleman is one of the most popular and respected politicians in our country. For his service to this place, for his service to his constituents and for his service to our country, he deserves the warmest appreciation. For my part, I thank him for his support and friendship over decades. The right hon. and learned Gentleman, as most sensible people know, whether they agree with him or not, is a great man.

Q11. [900238] **Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, I know that everyone on this side of the House would like to associate ourselves with those comments about the Father of the House.

One of the most consistent things I have seen in all my parliamentary casework is, I am afraid, too many children with special educational needs not getting the support they need. I know that their cause is something you personally support a great deal, Mr Speaker. This year, councils in England alone will overspend on their SEN budgets by more than £400 million. Even then, there is simply not enough resource in the system. How could any Government like the Prime Minister's justify going ahead with cutting corporation tax to 18% when children with the greatest needs in this country are simply not getting what they should?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that shows a fundamental division between us, alas, because I think that what we need is a strong and dynamic economy, and the evidence is that reducing corporation tax delivers more in yields and more in growth. That is how we have been able to commit now to spend another £780 million on special educational needs schools, and to allow communities to set up new SEND schools where they desire them. We will back them with the funding made available by that strong economy. That is the fundamental difference between the hon. Gentleman and me.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that during your time in office, Mr Speaker, and the 326 Prime Minister's questions over which you have presided, thanks to decisions made by the Government and this House the British taxpayer has paid for life-saving vaccinations for more than 140 million children living in the poorest countries of the world? At a time of considerable division in our country, is that not an achievement in which the whole of Britain can take real pride?

The Prime Minister: It certainly is an achievement of which the whole House should be proud. I know that my right hon. Friend has done a huge amount to champion the cause of overseas development, and he can be absolutely certain that this Government will continue not just to provide support for vaccination

around the world but to ensure that we continue to lead the world in our overseas development budget. Our commitment is followed and respected by countries around the world.

Q12. [900239] **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Yesterday, it was reported that Ross England, a former staff member of the Secretary of State for Wales, had, in the words of the trial judge, single-handedly and deliberately sabotaged a rape trial by referring to the victim's sexual history against the judge's instructions. The trial had to be stopped and started again from scratch, and the defendant was convicted. Unbelievably, the Conservative party then selected Mr England as a Welsh Assembly candidate with the Secretary of State's endorsement. Is the Prime Minister going to sack Mr England?

The Prime Minister: It would be inappropriate for me to comment on ongoing legal proceedings.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): This is also my last Prime Minister's questions, and I want to follow the comments that have been made about your strong leadership from that Chair, Mr Speaker, and, indeed, your kind comments about my good friend my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and others. I would also like, if I may, to take this opportunity to thank the staff of this place, particularly those in the Library and the catering department, and the Doorkeepers, who do so much to keep us hale and hearty. I thank my numerous friends and colleagues across this place, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who have been so personally kind to me over the past few months and so supportive of our policies, particularly the introduction of our net zero legislation. I want to thank the people of Devizes who have given me their trust for the past nine years; it has been the privilege of my life to serve you.

I would like to ask the Prime Minister a question. Does he believe, like me, that there is no planet B and that we should take the opportunity of this Brexit blockage breaking election to move the country on and focus on the incredible things we can do as the host next year of the UN's global climate change talks, which may be in Glasgow but are a four-nation COP, so that we can help the world to get on with dealing with the problem of the next 30 years and how we repair our climate?

The Prime Minister: May I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for everything she has done in her parliamentary and ministerial career, and associate myself with your comments, Mr Speaker, about my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke)? I know that my right hon. Friend is leaving this place to do something perhaps even more important, which is to run our COP 26 summit next year in Glasgow, and I know that she will do an absolutely outstanding job. She is completely right that it would be far more wonderful for this country to focus on what we can do to lead the world in tackling the problems of the environment and climate change rather than frittering away yet more political time and capital on two more pointless referendums. I thoroughly agree with her proposal.

Q14. [900241] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May I say to you from the highlands, Mr Speaker, gura math a thèid leat?

My constituent Rachel has been separated from her two young children and her husband Mark and forced to return to Malaysia because her £2,000 spousal visa application was refused. It was refused because her husband Mark's payslips were not included. The problem is that payslips are not a requirement on the UK Visas and Immigration checklist. She called and emailed UKVI and was told that no other information was required. Does the Prime Minister consider that to be fair, and will he personally look into her new £2,000 application to ensure that this highland family are reunited by Christmas?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising his constituent's problem with UKVI and I will make sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary addresses it immediately.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): We all remember that the Opposition parties never wanted to give the people an EU referendum, even opposing our amendment to the 2013 Queen's Speech, selected by you, Mr Speaker, an early Brexiteer, regretting the absence of a referendum Bill. Given that they have done everything they can to delay our departure, as we head into Christmas may I urge the Prime Minister, whatever their antics, to lead a positive, decent one nation campaign for a stronger economy to help those less fortunate that addresses the divisions in our country? We wish him well.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for putting that so succinctly and well. That is exactly what we want. I think it is what the people of this country want; they want to get Brexit done and they want to move forward with a one nation agenda to unite this country, and to level up across the country with better education, better infrastructure and fantastic new technology. That is our agenda; the Opposition's agenda is for years more of political dither, delay and division.

Q15. [900242] **Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Tapadh leibh, Mr Speaker, agus gur math a thèid leibh as well from Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

With Scotland's changing status in Europe since 2014, why will the Prime Minister not agree to a section 30? Why has he so far refused a section 30 as a route to enable an independence referendum for Scotland? Scotland needs to join the dozens of normal independent European nations and become independent.

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman knows my answer to that, which is that there was a referendum in 2014, the result was very clear, people were promised that it would be a once-in-a-generation referendum, and I do not think we should break that promise.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure, Mr Speaker, to see you in your Arsenal tie, and for two reasons: I have worn mine as well, but I am sorry the Leader of the Opposition has not worn his.

Mr Speaker, before I go on to ask the Prime Minister a question, may I thank you not just for giving me a voice in this place but for giving representation to my family and those I grew up with in Buckingham whom you have served so well as their local MP? They have asked me to pass on the fact that you will be missed dearly by them.

Returning to the football/politics metaphor, does the Prime Minister agree that when it comes to both football and politics the owner of the No. 10 berth is key to success, so would he rather see a centre-right, dominant leader sweeping all before him domestically and in Europe, or should we look towards the left wing where we might see a misfiring striker more at home in the 1970s?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who does a superb job of representing his constituents. My own footballing skills are—[*Interruption.*] I can do it, Mr Speaker, and I enjoy it, but the most important thing is to have a team that is united and will deliver a great future for this country. That is what we offer, and I am afraid it is in sharp contradistinction from the Labour party, because last night more than 100 of them could not even be bothered to vote for a general election, which they are shortly about to contest. What kind of confidence is that in their leader?

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Ni fyddwn yn gweld eich tebyg eto yn y Tŷ hwn a byddwn yn gweld eich eisiau, Mr Speaker: I do not think we will see your like again, and we will miss you in this House.

We are coming to the close of nine years of Tory misrule, misinformation and broken promises. Leading us in this merry dance is the Prime Minister, a lord of misrule at this shambolic Christmas election. But my party has long been prepared for this election. In Wales we have a simple choice: we can back our country by voting Plaid Cymru or be let down once again by one of these deeply divided Westminster parties that offer nothing but more Brexit chaos. Will the Prime Minister be honest for once with Wales: there is only one way out of the chaos, isn't there, and that is to remain in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for her beautiful Welsh—although I could not get all of the Welsh—but I remind her that the most important point that she might bear in mind is that her constituents, the people of Wales, voted to leave the European Union. And that is what the people of this country voted for; that is what the majority of the constituents of those on the Benches opposite voted for, and it is high time that they honoured that promise.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My constituents in North Hykeham deal with some of the worst traffic congestion in the country, and they tell me that completing Lincoln's bypass would make a huge difference to their lives. Can my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirm that his Government will support the building of this bypass?

The Prime Minister: Not only can I confirm that, but I can thank both my hon. Friend and our candidate in Lincoln, Karl McCartney, on everything they have done to campaign for that bypass.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I, Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Members of my party thank you for your service to this House? You came to office at a very, very turbulent and challenging time for this House, and you have always been assiduous in protecting the rights of Back Benchers and smaller parties, and we thank you for that and wish you well in your retirement.

In the dying days of this Parliament, will the Prime Minister please do something for the victims of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland? I raised this at Northern Ireland questions. There is still time in this Parliament to get this legislation through. The victims have been waiting for so long now. There is cross-party, cross-community support; will he please act on that?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend; he has campaigned very much on that issue. The Government of course have fulfilled their promise to introduce legislation on the matter, and, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has had productive meetings with representatives from victim and survivor groups. But the most powerful way to address this issue, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, will be if we can all work together to get the Stormont Executive back up and running to deal with the matter themselves.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): There will never be, because there could never be, a more eloquent and articulate Speaker than you, Mr Speaker; we will miss your style and your remarkable, encyclopaedic grasp of detail—and I will miss the literary references by the way, Mr Speaker.

Marcel Proust said the only—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear about Proust.

Sir John Hayes: Marcel Proust said:

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes”.

Hard-working British patriots who voted to leave the European Union with fresh eyes have in their sights the bourgeois liberal elite who are trying to steal Brexit from them. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, as he is broadcast on the wireless and elsewhere and actually meets people in real life too in the coming days and weeks, simply evangelise this plain and straightforward message: back Brexit, back Britain, back Boris?

The Prime Minister: There is only one way to take this country forward, and that is to get Brexit done. My right hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for people in his constituency and across the country, and if our Government are returned, as I hope we will be—and I will work very hard to ensure that we are—the people of this country will be seeing record investment in their NHS, they will be seeing improvements in their wages through the biggest expansion of the living wage in memory, and they will be seeing reductions in the cost of living, because it is one nation Conservative policies that can be relied on to take this country forward—and the Labour party would take us backwards.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Mr Speaker, from the Liberal Democrats Benches may we wish you well and congratulate you on a decade particularly as a modernising Speaker? From topicality of debates to promoting diversity within the staff of the House to reforms to support parents who are MPs, you have helped to drag this institution out of the past so it can face the future.

At this general election, voters deserve better than a choice between the two tired old parties, and in the TV debates people deserve to hear from a leader who wants to stop Brexit and build a better future, so will the

Prime Minister commit today to take part in those three-way debates, or is he going to run scared of debating with “a girly swot”?

The Prime Minister: I think what the people of this country want is the promises made to them kept, and I am not disposed to believe in the promises of the Liberal Democrats when their leaflets in London say they want to revoke the result of the referendum and their leaflets in the south-west of the country do not mention Brexit at all. That is what they stand for—a bunch of hypocrites, the lot of them. They stand for nothing but a policy of dither and delay and indecision. To take this country forward with fantastic environmental policies and fantastic policies on education of a kind that I think will appeal to all the hon. Lady's constituents, she should join this party, vote for this Government and support us at the general election.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I join the tributes from across the House to your service and your speakership? Even though, our 30-year friendship notwithstanding, I have not agreed with everything you have done recently, I have been a big supporter of you in the Chair. You have been a champion of Back Benchers, and you have allowed the Chamber to hold the Executive to account, and you have enabled that in a very good way. The best of luck, and good wishes to you and your family.

When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was standing for the leadership of our great party, he spoke about ending the witch hunt of our Northern Ireland veterans. He said:

“We need to end unfair trials of people who served Queen and country.”

He also said that the persecution of veterans facing historical allegations over troubles in Northern Ireland has “got to stop”. Given that there was nothing on that in the Queen's Speech, will he give a clear manifesto undertaking that if he is re-elected as Prime Minister of a Conservative Government, he will bring forward legislation as quickly as possible to end this awful injustice?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for everything he has done to campaign on this issue. As he knows, the consultation on the new legislation was concluded only a few days ago. I can certainly give him the reassurance that we will bring forward legislation to ensure that, when there is no new evidence being provided, there are no unfair prosecutions of people who served this country faithfully and well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The Prime Minister said at the start that I had demonstrated that I was stretching time and I would not want to disappoint him. Two final contributions from colleagues who I know are leaving the House.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I have been in Parliament for 32 years. I have seen many Speakers in the Chair and I must say you have been the best. As we say in the north-east—it's not quite the language of the Welsh—you're a canny laddie.

The WASPI women were given a bad deal on their pensions. Does the Prime Minister have any plans to put that wrong right?

The Prime Minister: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman as he leaves this House. Indeed, I repeat my congratulations to all hon. Members who are standing down on the service they have given.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the WASPI women. As he knows, it is a very difficult and very emotionally charged issue. We have done our best to try to satisfy that group. Another £1 billion has, I think, been allocated to the support of WASPI pensioners. I would just remind Opposition Members who are chuntering at me that under the Labour Government I seem to remember female pensions went up by 75p. That was their approach to pension rights for women. We are looking at what more we can do to satisfy that issue but, as he knows, it is very difficult.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Mr Speaker, I wish you well and add to the plaudits by thanking you for the way you have represented my father's old constituents of Buckingham. I know you have been assiduous in that.

Many years ago, the Prime Minister was campaigning in Newbury to help get me elected when he was asked by the *Newbury Weekly News* whether there was any chance of him becoming Prime Minister. He said that he thought there was more chance of being decapitated by a frisbee. I will continue to take great delight in the fact that he has defied those odds if he can commit to me here today to continue this country's bold ambition on ocean conservation, in which we are a world leader.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the service he has given to this Government and this country. I remember vividly campaigning with

him on one occasion when we were interrupted by a dog show. He has done particularly important work on conserving oceans. He has helped to ensure that this country has global leadership in establishing marine conservation areas around the planet. As you know, Mr Speaker, this country protects a vast expanse of the oceans, more than any country on earth, and it is thanks to the work of my right hon. Friend that we have put that issue at the forefront of our politics, protecting marine life and protecting not just the fish but the penguins as well. As he will know, a third of the world's Emperor penguins are British. He has done a signal job of protecting those penguins and I thank him for it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we proceed with a number of statements that need to be made, I would like to thank the Prime Minister and colleagues for their kind and generous personal remarks, which are greatly appreciated. I want to thank staff of mine, past and present, who have given of their time to be here today for the last Prime Minister's questions that I will chair. All of them are people who have worked with me for a significant period of time. We have had fantastic relations and a terrific bond. I hugely appreciate the fact that they have bothered to turn up on this occasion. In particular, I want to thank my wife Sally and our three children Oliver, Freddie and Jemima for the support, stoicism and fortitude they have displayed through thick and thin over the past decade. I will never forget it and I will always be grateful for it. [*Applause.*]

Speaker's Statement

1.16 pm

Mr Speaker: It may also be for the convenience of the House for me to make a short statement about Dissolution guidance. The draft guidance for Members standing, Members not standing and Members' staff is available on the intranet. It will be finalised after Dissolution is confirmed. In the course of today, answers to frequently asked questions—FAQs—will also be published. These will include an answer to the point of order raised by the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on Monday concerning arrangements for Remembrance Sunday.

Colleagues, I am very pleased to announce the appointment of Patricia Hillas as the new Speaker's Chaplain. She was selected following a fair, open and competitive recruitment process. Tricia, as she likes to be known, is currently Canon Pastor at St Paul's cathedral, where she leads on diversity and inclusion, and—goodness knows, there is a piquancy about this today—on the Church's response in times of disaster. In particular, she was part of the team at St Paul's that brought together the national memorial service following the Grenfell Tower disaster, working alongside the bereaved families and survivors, and local faith and other groups. As we know, that avoidable disaster has caused intense grief, pain and anger among those affected in the community.

Born in Kuala Lumpur to an Indian mother and a British father, Tricia moved to the UK with her family in 1971. Formerly a social worker, Tricia specialised in supporting individuals and families diagnosed with HIV and AIDS, helping them deal with complex multiple challenges with dignity. Married to Andrew, who is head of the youth offending service for Southwark, Tricia will additionally be priest in charge of St Mary-at-Hill in the City of London. I am also proud to say that she will be the second female Speaker's Chaplain from a BAME background. Tricia replaces our dear friend, the Rev. Prebendary Rose Hudson-Wilkin, who leaves on Thursday to become—I am so proud to say this—the first black Bishop of Dover. Tricia's start date remains to be agreed, but I hope that when she does take up the post, probably early next year, the House will enjoy working with her.

It may also be helpful to inform the House now—these matters have been properly discussed with the usual channels—that at the start of the general debate on the report from the Grenfell Tower inquiry, I will ask the House to observe a minute's silence to reflect on that tragic event and those whose lives were lost.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister in relation to the Report from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry may continue for three hours, though opposed, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Grenfell Tower Inquiry

Mr Speaker: I now ask the House to rise to observe a minute's silence to reflect on the Grenfell tragedy and those whose lives were lost.

1.20 pm

The House observed a minute's silence.

1.21 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the report from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

I will be making quite a lengthy speech this afternoon, reflecting the comprehensive nature of the report, so if hon. Members will bear with me, I am sure that I will address many of the issues on which they may be planning to intervene.

The bereaved, the survivors and the members of the north Kensington community joining us in the Galleries today each have their own story to tell, their own perspective on what happened at Grenfell, but over the past two and a half years, they have been united in their fight to uncover the truth. It is not a fight they would ever have chosen, but it is one they have taken up with determination, dedication and great dignity. Yet their exceptional tenacity in seeking justice has not always been matched by their faith in the system's ability to deliver. This is no surprise. After all, they have been let down many times before, too often overlooked and ignored in the months and years before the tragedy and shamefully failed by the institutions that were supposed to serve them in the days and weeks after it.

Since then, the survivors, the bereaved and the local community have endured one unbearable milestone after another—the funerals, the anniversaries, giving and hearing evidence at the public inquiry, the painful process of building a new life in a new home without loved ones and without treasured possessions, and then the publication of this report today—all the while carrying with them the unimaginable trauma suffered that night. I am very much aware that no report, no words, no apology will ever make good the loss suffered and the trauma experienced, but I hope that the findings being published today and the debate we are holding this afternoon will bring some measure of comfort to those who suffered so much. They asked for the truth. We promised them the truth. We owe them the truth. And today the whole country and the whole world is finally hearing the truth about what happened at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017.

When the sun rose over London that morning, it revealed an ugly scar of black smoke cutting across an otherwise clear blue summer sky, and on the streets of north Kensington a scene of horror and desperation. Shortly before 1 o'clock that morning, a faulty fridge freezer had started a small fire in the kitchen of a flat on the fourth floor of the 24-storey Grenfell Tower. The resident of the flat did everything right. He raised the alarm, called the fire brigade and alerted his neighbours. Within five minutes, firefighters arrived to deal with what appeared to be a routine incident, and in the normal course of events, the fire would have been contained and extinguished, and that would have been that, but what happened that night was anything but normal.

Even before firefighters began to tackle the blaze on the inside of the tower, unbeknown to them flames were already beginning to race up the outside. Just seven minutes after the first firefighters entered the kitchen on the fourth floor, a resident on 22nd floor dialled 999 to report the blaze at her level, almost 200 feet higher up. By 1.27 am, a column of fire had reached the roof, one whole side of the building was ablaze and dense smoke and searing flames, visible across the capital, began wrapping around the tower, penetrating its heart. By 1.30 am, less than three quarters of an hour after it began, it was clear to those watching below that the inferno was completely out of control.

Grenfell Tower, filled that night with almost 300 souls in its 129 flats, was beyond saving. The fire that shocked the nation and the world that June morning took the lives of 72 men, women and children. The oldest, known simply as Sheila, was a poet, artist and great grandmother who had brought joy to many and seen and experienced much in her 84 years. The youngest, Logan Gomes, had never even seen his own parents. He was stillborn hours after his mother made a narrow escape from the choking, noxious smoke. Many who lived together died together: husbands and wives, parents and children were found in each other's arms. Those who survived saw everything they owned reduced to dust and ash: wedding dresses, irreplaceable photographs, beloved children's toys—all gone. The true scale of the trauma, the impact of the fire not only on those who survived but on those who lost loved ones or who witnessed its destruction, is unlikely ever to be known.

Grenfell represented the biggest loss of life in a single incident in the UK since the Hillsborough tragedy 28 years previously, but my predecessor as Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), was determined that there would be no repeat of the travesty that followed that disaster, which saw the friends and families of those who died forced to fight the establishment tooth and nail, year after year, decade after decade, to secure justice for their loved ones. That is why just 15 days after the tragedy she appointed one of our most experienced and respected former judges, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, to lead a rigorous public and completely independent inquiry into what happened.

Sir Martin has today published his report on the first phase of that inquiry, covering the events of 14 June: the cause of the fire and its rapid spread, and the way in which emergency services and others handled the immediate response. As the sponsoring Minister under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005, I laid copies of the report before Parliament this morning. I was in no doubt that the House should have the opportunity to debate it on the day of publication.

Grenfell was a national tragedy, and this is a report of great national importance. However, I recognise that Sir Martin has produced a very substantial piece of work—almost 1,000 pages across four volumes—and that therefore the vast majority of Members will have not yet had an opportunity to digest and analyse it in any great detail. I believe that Members have an important role to play in scrutinising such reports and the Government's response to them, so let me reassure the House that we will seek to schedule a further debate on Sir Martin's findings at the earliest suitable opportunity so that

Members can debate the report in detail. Obviously that may be after the election, but we will certainly ensure that it will happen.

Of course, what happened during the hours in which the fire raged is only half the story. Phase 2 of the inquiry, which will start taking oral evidence earlier in the new year, will look at the wider context, including the nature and application of building regulations, the way in which local and central Government responded to the fire, and the handling of concerns raised by tenants over many years. Phase 1 sets out what happened; phase 2 will explain why. Such a complex process will inevitably take time—longer than any of us would wish—but, as I have said, we owe it to the people of Grenfell Tower to explain, once and for all and beyond doubt, exactly why the tragedy unfolded as it did, and with the standard set by this first report, I am confident that that is exactly what will happen.

Sir Martin's work is exhaustive in its detail. He provides an authoritative, and often harrowing, minute-by-minute account of the fire and its terrifying spread. Led always by the facts, his recommendations are clear and numerous, and where there are failings to be highlighted, he does so without fear or favour. Nowhere is that clearer than in his verdict on the single biggest cause of the tragedy. He leaves no doubt that the cladding on the exterior of Grenfell Tower was the defining factor in the rapid and all-consuming spread of the blaze.

It was the cladding—the aluminium composite material rainscreen—and the combustible insulation behind it that ignited because of the fire in flat 16. It was the cladding that allowed the flames to climb so rapidly up the outside of the tower, causing compartmentation to fail. It was the cladding that turned into molten plastic raining fire on the streets of north Kensington and causing the blaze to travel up and down the building. In short, it was the cladding that turned a routine and containable kitchen fire into a disaster of unprecedented proportions that cost 72 people their lives. Sir Martin is clear that the cladding on Grenfell Tower was fitted in breach of building regulations. Why that was allowed to happen, and who was responsible for it, will be covered in phase 2 of his inquiry.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who I know was bereaved, or suffered the loss of a friend, in the Grenfell fire.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way, and for the manner in which he is making his speech.

It is still the case that men, women and children up and down the country will be sleeping tonight in buildings with that cladding. So many years after the tragedy, does the Prime Minister not think that, in this sixth richest democracy in the world, we could have done more to prevent people from sleeping in infernos across our country?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point; indeed, I was coming to that very matter in my explanation of what happened. All I can say is that he is quite right. We cannot afford to wait for the full conclusions of the report. That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing,

[*The Prime Minister*]

Communities and Local Government has just pointed out to me, we have allocated a further £600 million to the removal of such cladding. It is essential that we remove similar cladding on all buildings as soon as possible, which is why we have established the fund to pay for the removal of such cladding systems from tall residential buildings.

I know that progress is not as fast I should like, but I am pleased to say that all such buildings owned by central and local government have now had their cladding removed, are undergoing work to remove it, or, at the very least, have such work scheduled. In the private sector, progress is slower, and too many building owners have not acted responsibly.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What action will be taken against private building owners who fail to remove or replace the cladding by the June 2020 deadline?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We propose to name the businesses and companies that own those buildings but are failing to comply, to encourage them to get on with this vital work. While the people living in those privately owned buildings are safe—and, as the House will know, round-the-clock fire patrols and other temporary measures ensure that that is the case—I am in no doubt that they need a long-term and lasting solution.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: May I just make some progress?

Nearly all private high residential buildings where such cladding remains are now in line to have remedial work scheduled. Where that is not the case, the Government will work with local authorities to take enforcement action if landlords refuse to deal with the problems themselves. I think the House will agree that they have had enough time. There are no more excuses; they must make those buildings safe, or face the consequences.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has done a lot of work on this issue, and we have highlighted the need for speedy removal of the cladding. It is in the private sector that there are often disputes between the freeholder and the leaseholders, who may be legally responsible but simply do not have the wherewithal to do the work. I am pleased by what the Prime Minister has said, but will he confirm that he will work with local authorities and they will do the work in default, in order to ensure that people in these properties are safe?

The Prime Minister: We will indeed be working—in fact, we are already working—with local authorities to enforce the requirement that they remove the cladding in question. Although I—like, I think, many Members—feel that progress should be faster, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are hard at it to remove that cladding.

If I may, I shall turn now to the second and most important factor that Sir Martin identified. The cladding on Grenfell Tower caused the fire to spread out of control and to behave in ways that nobody had seen before. This unprecedented fire created an unprecedented challenge to the men and women sent to fight it. Since 2017,

much has been written from many perspectives about the way in which the London Fire Brigade handled the unfolding disaster, so let me be very clear from the start.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the thoughtful delivery of his speech. I have seen the report this morning, and I have seen its recommendations. Will he give an undertaking today to enable adequate extra funding so that those recommendations can be taken forward as a matter of haste? It has been two and a half years, and that is too long. We need that money specifically so that they can be taken forward quickly.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I can tell her that I will be coming to that matter—and, I think, probably all the matters that hon. Members wish to address—a bit later in my remarks.

I think that the House will want to hear now about Sir Martin's opinions on the way in which the London Fire Brigade handled the disaster. After examining all the evidence and listening to hundreds of witnesses and experts, Sir Martin does not call into doubt the actions or the bravery of any of the rank-and-file firefighters dispatched to Grenfell Tower. No one in this House or the other place should be in any doubt about that. As Mayor of this great city of London, I saw for myself the courage and commitment demonstrated by the men and women of the London Fire Brigade, and Sir Martin's report bears that out. It tells of firefighters exhibiting "extraordinary courage and selfless devotion to duty"

as they pushed themselves

"to and even beyond the limits of endurance",

facing choking smoke and temperatures as high as 1,000° C. Their work that night was nothing short of phenomenal.

However, Sir Martin concludes that the firefighters on duty that night were

"faced with a situation for which they had not been properly prepared".

He finds the London Fire Brigade's planning and training for such an incident were "gravely inadequate", and that on the night of the fire there were "serious deficiencies" in command and control. The report highlights a lack of co-ordination between emergency services, which Sir Martin calls a "serious failure" of stated policies. He also finds—the point that will be of most concern to those who lost loved ones—that the failure to order an evacuation of the tower once the fire was clearly out of control most probably led to the deaths of individuals who could otherwise have been saved.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) *rose*—

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) *rose*—

The Prime Minister: If I may, I will continue, as it will be important for the House to hear the whole context in which these criticisms and points are being made.

The so-called "stay put" policy is the bedrock on which all plans for fighting fires in tall residential buildings are based. Building regulations are supposed to mean that fires cannot spread beyond individual flats, because they are compartmented. When that is the case, it is indeed safest for most residents to stay in their homes

until the fire is extinguished, but at Grenfell that was not the case. The fire spread widely and rapidly, up, down and across the tower.

Grahame Morris: Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: If I may, I will continue so that the House can get the whole picture that Sir Martin wants to convey.

By 1.30 am, it was clear that the compartmentation had failed. By 1.50 am, it was still not too late to order an evacuation, yet according to Sir Martin senior officers simply could not conceive of a situation in which compartmentation could fail so comprehensively. In the report, “stay put” is described as such an article of faith within the fire service that senior officers were reluctant to let the reality before them override their training. As a result, the decision to order an evacuation was not taken until 2.35 am, by which time the tower’s single staircase was already filling with impenetrable smoke.

Even after that time, poor and confused lines of communication meant that operators in the 999 control room were not aware that the advice had changed. Swamped by the sheer volume of calls, and dealing with a challenge well outside their experience and training, some continued to give conflicting advice to callers trapped inside the tower. Sir Martin notes that many operators did not realise how all-encompassing the fire had become until well after 5 am, when a lull in calls allowed them to check their phones and see images of the burning building for the first time. Information gleaned from callers inside the tower was faithfully recorded, but only rarely made its way to firefighters who could act on it.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Prime Minister for the tone and the reflective manner in which he is delivering his speech, but may I point out that this was not the first time that compartmentalisation had failed? In July 2009, Lakanal House, a multi-storey building, suffered a similar tragedy in which six people lost their lives and more than 20 were seriously injured. Subsequently, the coroner wrote to the then Minister, Eric Pickles, with a recommendation that the “stay put” policy be reviewed, but no action was taken.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point, as the whole House knows. As I said at the outset, that is among the issues that will be addressed in the second part of Sir Martin’s report, but I will say a little bit about it later on. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue.

While brave firefighters led many people to safety from inside the tower, Sir Martin concludes that the chaos and confusion meant that some calls for help were not responded to until it was too late.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I have visited Grenfell Tower twice to sympathise with the relatives, but I have also been able to see at first hand how firefighters in these complex situations risk their lives. I had a meeting only yesterday at the Fire Service College in my constituency, which provides worldwide training for every type of fire officer. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we owe it to our firefighters up and down this country to enable them to have the very best training?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am well aware that he has a centre for the training of firefighters at Moreton-in-Marsh in his constituency. Directly on his point, Sir Martin cautions all of us against making judgments at a distance, and I agree with him wholeheartedly on that.

It is very easy for us on these green Benches to have 20:20 hindsight. We are not about to run into the heart of a fire that is blazing more than 200 feet into the night sky.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. First, when he was Mayor of London he presided over fire service cuts despite warnings from London MPs from across parties, which he did not heed. Does he regret that? Secondly, on his Government’s watch, the regulators were stripped of powers, including the ombudsman’s power to investigate complaints without complainants having to go to their MP first. Will he now take action? He does not have to wait for the reports to come out to take action to strengthen the regulations. Will he provide the much-needed resources? We had to fight tooth and nail for two years with Grenfell United and the survivors to secure the £600 million. It is time that he acted and provided the necessary additional funding so that our constituents can sleep at night without having to worry about whether their homes may be set alight.

The Prime Minister: Sir Martin notes that appliances were at the site within five minutes, and he makes no findings that I am aware of about a lack of resources, nor about the other issues that the hon. Lady raises.

It is vital that individuals are held accountable for their errors, and when we do so we must do so very carefully. It is clear from this report that the firefighters on the ground were in a position that they should never have been in. They were doing their damndest to tackle a fire that should never have been allowed to happen. But that does not absolve us of responsibility.

We must ensure that the failures identified by the inquiry are corrected, because not only does Sir Martin highlight that mistakes made by the London Fire Brigade in responding to Lakanal House, which the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) mentioned earlier, were repeated, he also raises concerns that the London Fire Brigade is, I am afraid,

“at risk of not learning the lessons of the Grenfell Tower fire.”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I must make some progress.

It is vital that the London Fire Brigade learns those lessons, and I am sure that everyone there will want them to do so. As a constituency MP, Mayor, or journalist, I never met any firefighter who was anything less than totally committed to public safety. I will be working with the London Fire Brigade, the Mayor’s office and local authorities across London to ensure that the lessons of Grenfell are learned and that Londoners are made safer for it. Where Sir Martin recommends that responsibility for fire safety should be taken on by central Government, I can confirm that we will legislate accordingly.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: If hon. Members will allow me to complete my points, I think they will hear the answers to their questions.

More widely, we plan to accept in principle all the recommendations that Sir Martin makes for central Government. We will set out how we plan to do so as quickly as possible, but I can assure the House and all those affected by the Grenfell tragedy that where action is called for action will follow.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way and for his tone in delivering his response to the report. On the night of Grenfell, it took 38 minutes for a high-reaching aerial appliance to arrive. By that time, the building's cladding had already caught fire. Will the Prime Minister consider his own actions in removing aerial appliances from London Fire Brigade's engines and in the cuts made to the fire service when he was Mayor of London?

The Prime Minister: Sir Martin makes no recommendation on that point to the best of my knowledge.

For the survivors, the bereaved and the local community, the report will prove particularly harrowing, yet I hope it will strengthen their faith in Sir Martin's desire to determine the facts of the fire and this Government's commitment to airing those facts in public, no matter how difficult they may be, and to acting on them. That commitment is absolute—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I have given way enough.

That commitment is absolute, because if any good is to come of this senseless tragedy—a tragedy that should never have happened—and if it is to become a catalyst for change in our approach to fire safety and, indeed, to social housing more widely, we must get to the truth about what happened and why. We must expose and fix the failings that allowed an otherwise safe building to become so dangerous, that allowed a small kitchen fire to become a devastating inferno, and that led to so many people being told to stay in their homes when they could and should have been fleeing to safety. The inquiry is a vital part of that.

I thank Sir Martin and his team for all their work so far, and I know that all current and former Ministers, civil servants and all public sector workers will fully co-operate with phase 2. While uncovering the truth is very important to the survivors and the bereaved, it is not the only aspect of the post-Grenfell story that requires our attention. We will continue, as the previous Prime Minister promised, to support the affected families long after the television cameras are gone. We will continue the work of the Grenfell ministerial recovery group, which brings together the efforts of all parts of central and local government in meeting the needs of the community. We will continue to ensure that a beautiful and appropriate memorial is created on the site of the tower—a process that is being led by the bereaved and the local community.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No, I am winding up.

We will continue to make sure that those affected by the fire have an active and engaging role to play in implementing the lessons of Grenfell, including working closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to develop the policies in our social housing White Paper. We will continue to implement the findings of the Hackitt review of building regulations, and I have asked the civil servants responsible for implementing Sir Martin's recommendations to provide me with regular and frequent updates on their progress. I will not allow the lessons of this tragedy to fall through the cracks.

The night of 14 June was horrendous, but in the darkness we have also seen the best of humanity: the residents who sacrificed their lives to save their children or neighbours, the local community that rallied round in such an incredible fashion, holding the survivors in a tight embrace as the authorities failed to step up, and the bereaved and survivors here with us today. Those who would have every reason to hide away have instead fought to uncover the truth about what happened that terrible night. They have forced themselves to relive time and again the kind of trauma that most of us, mercifully, cannot begin to imagine. They have dedicated so much of their lives in so many ways to ensure that those who died on the night of 14 June 2017 will always be remembered. To them, I say once again that the truth will out, that justice will be done, and that Grenfell Tower and the people who called it home will never be forgotten.

1.59 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I start by thanking the Prime Minister for the serious way in which he has approached this matter and for his speech today on the findings of Sir Martin Moore-Bick's first report? I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for ensuring that we had a minute's silence at the start of the debate for those who lost their lives on that terrible, terrible night.

I start by paying tribute to the survivors of the fire and their family members, who have campaigned with such dignity and determination for the past two years—two long years. Many of them are here today in the Gallery or watching the debate on television. For them, it is yet another horrible day of remembering a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, a cousin, a nephew, a niece who they will never see again and who will never come back. Those memories will never go away. With sympathy we should have an understanding of our responsibility to ensure that everyone is able to live in safety, wherever they are in this country.

Seventy-two people lost their lives on that night in June 2017. That situation rocked the community and shocked the whole country. It brought together help from lots of people—people from local churches, mosques and synagogues, and from different community organisations. People rushed to Grenfell as the fire was still blazing with gifts of food and toys, and with support. That simple human understanding from so many people is something we have to cherish and begin to understand, because it demonstrates that there is a natural human instinct to help people.

I cannot forget going there straight after the fire and talking to dazed people who did not really understand what had happened and to exhausted firefighters, police officers and many others who were trying to comprehend

the enormity of the situation. It was truly horrific. I pay absolute tribute to all those volunteers and others who turned out that day to help. Local government officers from all across London immediately volunteered to try to help, because the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea seemed to have difficulty in responding to the enormity of the situation—I say no more than that at the moment.

It was a tragedy, Mr Speaker, but it was an avoidable tragedy. A tragedy is when there is an earthquake, a tidal wave or a volcano that we cannot understand or predict. This was an avoidable tragedy. All the survivors—all of them—deserve a new home and safety and security in this country, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary demanded at the time. All those responsible for this avoidable tragedy must understand that justice must prevail. Every necessary measure must be put in place to prevent a fire such as Grenfell from ever happening again.

Karen Lee: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a national fire response issue and that it is not just about London? Will he comment on my request to the Prime Minister that extra funding be made available so that the recommendations can be put in place, because I have not heard a positive response that says, “Yes, we will pay for that”?

Jeremy Corbyn: Yes, it is a tragedy at Grenfell and a tragedy in that part of London, but obviously it is a potential tragedy anywhere where there is dangerous cladding on blocks of flats. My hon. Friend, who is our shadow Fire Minister, specifically asked that question about funding. Perhaps the Prime Minister or whoever responds for the Government would care to answer that point.

I have been on a number of the walks for Grenfell. Over my life, I have been on many marches and demonstrations, but I have never been on anything so poignant and powerful as thousands and thousands and thousands of people silently walking through north Kensington and then walking past the carcass that is Grenfell Tower. The power of that—the power of silence—is palpable. What is also palpable is the way in which the community as a whole supports those people.

When the silent march passes the fire station, there is genuine love and affection for all the firefighters who risked their lives that night. I know that nobody is trying to do this today, but let us not blame firefighters for their work. They did everything they could, and well beyond that.

I thought that it was absolutely right to hold the service in St Paul’s, because it was a way of bringing people together to try to come to terms with the horror of their loss. The events that I have been to in the mosque have also brought people together to try to comprehend the horror of their loss.

Tracey Crouch: I was privileged to be the Minister for Civil Society at the time and, along with the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), I met many of the charities and support organisations. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in thanking them for all the work they have done, both in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and since then, to support the victims, their families and the wider community?

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely do, and I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I have never forgotten meeting so many different groups and charities that day, who were already doing their best to meet in the church. Community organisations, the citizens advice bureau, North Kensington Law Centre and so many more were all doing their very best. There were also collections in the local community to try to ensure that people had what they needed.

We welcome the report on the first phase of Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s inquiry, which, as the Prime Minister pointed out, not everybody has yet had a chance to study in detail. It has, after all, only just come out. We expect the Government and the other agencies cited to respond in full. It is very unlikely that a further debate will be held in this Parliament, so it will be for the next Parliament, I hope, to start with an urgent debate on this matter.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman would like to reflect on the two events that Mr Speaker organised in Speaker’s House to which survivors came. I thought they were very useful occasions for Members to speak informally to people who had had this dreadful experience. It was remarkable how stoical they were and how grateful they were to the fire service and all those who had helped them.

Jeremy Corbyn: Those were memorable occasions. There was courage and determination in support of the families and those who were bereaved, but there was also a strong determination to make sure that Grenfell never happens again anywhere else.

I think that the Grenfell survivors are the heroes of all this. When people go through a tragedy, the natural human instinct is to put it behind them, move away and do something else if they have that choice or opportunity. The survivors have not done that; they have stayed in the community and kept that community together, in order that the rest of us might learn the lesson of the pain they went through.

The limited scope of the inquiry was agreed by the Government. The fact that phase 1 looked only at what happened on the night of 14 June is important, because many questions inevitably remain unanswered and the recommendations do not cover the range of issues that need urgent action from Ministers. The Prime Minister talked about the whole truth, but sadly the whole truth is not yet with us.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): One of the unanswered questions for phase 2 of the inquiry relates to the types of flammable cladding that are out there on buildings right now. The Government’s response to date has focused solely on ACM-type cladding. There has been a failure both to acknowledge fully that there are other types of cladding that might be just as flammable and just as much of a risk, and to commission an adequate range of tests so that building owners and residents can know what is on their buildings and what response is required. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on the Government urgently and ahead of the second phase of Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s report to address comprehensively the range of flammable cladding that is still putting residents at risk?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I am going to come on to more details about that a bit later in my speech, but she is right about it. She and I represent constituencies that include people living in high-rise blocks, and we know the stress and pain they go through. She is absolutely right on everything she said in that intervention.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I, too, welcome the tone of the Prime Minister's presentation and the Government's position. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) has just alluded to this, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a much bigger picture than phase 1? Phase 1 focuses on the fire brigade response mostly, and many in the media have targeted the fire brigade for criticism, some of which is not unfair, but they are targeting only the fire brigade, as opposed to waiting for the big picture. The inquiry was always going to take a long time, it is incomplete and there are others, including ourselves here in this Parliament, who have some responsibility for the conditions that led to the Grenfell tragedy taking place.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He knows, as a former firefighter, not only the stress and strain firefighters go through, but the way in which, because we now live in an age of such instant media, people half-read half a bit of a report of a bit of the report and decide that that is the conclusion of all things. This is the first of two major reports and we should be cautious in throwing blame around too quickly and too soon, because these are serious and tragic matters.

Mr Lammy: Does my right hon. Friend also agree that many of the families are waiting for the criminal prosecutions and inquiries being made by the Met police? A number of people have been interviewed under caution. There are many who believe that what happened at Grenfell amounts to corporate manslaughter and that we should also wait to find out who is going to be prosecuted for what happened.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. He lost a dearly loved friend in that fire and he has done great work in supporting the Grenfell community, and I thank him for that. I ask the Government also to listen carefully to the remarks he has just made. Remembering people who lost their lives in a wholly preventable fire has to be met with a political response, which is what we are trying to do; with a procedural response, which is about the fire service and fire training and which I will come to in a moment; and of course with building regulations. But this also has to be about justice, because of those people who have knowingly—perhaps or perhaps not; that is what a court must find out—clad buildings with materials that they knew to be dangerous. That is where the corporate manslaughter issues arise. I hope that neither the Government nor anybody else will put any obstruction in the way of that process. The Prime Minister talks about the whole truth and that clearly is not with us yet.

In the light of the particular focus on actions of the London Fire Brigade in phase 1 of the inquiry report, we urge that the recommendations made of the London Fire Brigade are given the full response they require.

At the same time, I want to pay tribute to the heroic actions of firefighters in our country every day, including on the night of the Grenfell fire. A lot of the time they stand in fire stations waiting for something to happen, but then they have to go and deal with it. They do not know what they are going to deal with before they get there. Our natural instinct whenever we see a thing of danger is to put ourselves in a place of safety—to run away, to avoid, to do whatever—but firefighters do not do that. They cannot do that. They have to run into a burning building while the residents are trying to escape from it. Firefighters know that is in their job and they know it is their responsibility, and they do it day after day. We should understand the bravery of those who sacrificed so much that night. Despite being told, when they came out of the fire, exhausted and dehydrated, that they must not go back in, as it was against fire service regulations, they said, “No, we might manage to save a life” and so they went back into that fire. That is what they do.

Matt Wrack is the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union and a man who has been a firefighter. His union is composed of firefighters and he is a strong man who fights for his members. He spoke that summer at the Durham miners' gala. I had never before known 200,000 people in absolute silence, as there were while he described what his members—his firefighters—had done at Grenfell. We should pay tribute to all firefighters and of course to the work done by the FBU, which helps to make us all safe.

Janet Daby: I thank my right hon. Friend for the great tribute he is paying to our fire brigade service. Does he agree that between 2010 and 2016, the Government cut central funding by 28% in real terms, leading to 11,000 fewer firefighters? The then Mayor of London, now our Prime Minister, was at the forefront of cuts to the fire service, cutting 27 fire appliances, 55 firefighters and 324 support workers, and closing 10 fire stations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister should apologise for removing aerial appliances from the London Fire Brigade fire engines when he was Mayor of London?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Like other colleagues who have intervened, she represents a constituency in which many residents live in tower blocks. I do not suppose too many Members of Parliament live in high-rise, council-owned tower blocks, but we should all understand the stress and strain that people go through with worry about what would happen in a fire.

The Government's response to Grenfell has been too slow and not strong enough, on every front, from rehousing survivors to dealing with Grenfell-style ACM cladding on hundreds of other blocks across this country.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): On the Government response, one in 10 of the council blocks in England is in Birmingham; we are talking about 213 and 10,000 households. In the aftermath of the fire, the west midlands fire service recommended the retrofitting of sprinklers in all those blocks, costing £31 million. At the dreadful time we lived through at Grenfell, pledges were made that local authorities would be helped and supported in making tenants safe. Birmingham has not received one single penny, and that cannot be right.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and he is absolutely right; this is a huge gap in the Government's response. The retrofitting of sprinklers will help to control and possibly stop the spread of a fire. It will not stop every fire, but it will save lives, which is why it is so important that that issue be addressed properly.

The Prime Minister must now act urgently on the Government's failures following Grenfell: the failure to learn the lessons from previous high-rise fires, with no proper response having been made to the coroners' recommendations made in 2013 following the Lakanal House fire and the Shirley Towers fires in Southampton. Those were terrible tragedies, where lives were lost—those of firefighters in the case of Shirley Towers and those of residents in the case of Lakanal House. We have to learn those lessons. We cannot be here, going on towards 2020, still talking about the coroner's response from 2013 to the Lakanal House fire. Another failure was the failure to rehouse survivors, with some families still living in hotels and temporary accommodation more than two years on—that is shocking.

The Government have also failed to re-clad blocks identified with dangerous, Grenfell-style cladding. Disgracefully, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) pointed out, eight in 10 residential blocks have still yet to have that ACM cladding replaced. Almost 60,000 people are still living in blocks that have this cladding: 18,000 in the residential social sector and 41,000 in the private sector. Thousands of blocks of flats all over the country need to be dealt with urgently now. I say that in respect of those with ACM cladding, but, as my hon. Friend pointed out, that is not the only dangerous cladding that must be dealt with. Local authorities must act quickly to ensure that every block in their community, whether public or private, is inspected and that the dangerous cladding is removed.

My constituency has some tower blocks. I went to a meeting after there had been a small fire in one flat, when fear ran all through the estate because people could see what had happened at Grenfell. Dangerous cladding was found in another block, and I commend my local authority, Islington, for immediately responding when it was discovered by putting fire watchers in within two hours and starting removing the cladding a week later. That is a local authority that is totally on it. The local authority got on to it straight away, and it is with pleasure that I have seen that the scaffolding is about to come down because the replacement has already happened. That shows what happens when local authorities work efficiently and quickly because they are totally on it.

Rushanara Ali: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is an outrage that the Government have allowed so much time to be wasted before supporting local authorities to deal with ACM cladding? Only three buildings in my constituency have had the work done. There are 39 private blocks in which people cannot sleep at night. Does he think that the Government should learn some empathy? Perhaps the Prime Minister should visit some of the residents who have to live like this; he might then learn the importance of urgent action. We do not see urgent action on this Government's watch.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is so right: it is a question of urgent action. That means recognising that local authorities are underfunded and very stressed and

strained by the situation. Local authorities know full well that unless they get the money refunded from the Government—that has not always happened—other services are affected because of their trying to bring about safety for their community.

Grenfell Tower would not have happened to wealthy Londoners. It happened to poor and mainly migrant Londoners. I have met Grenfell survivors on many occasions since that dreadful night, and they have all told me about the wonderful community that existed in and around Grenfell Tower. Those in the multi-ethnic, multi-racial community around Grenfell Tower are supporting each other now and were supporting each other that night. People tried to wake others who were frightened of the fire and those who were asleep and did not realise that the building was on fire. People did all that.

Although the report does criticise London Fire Brigade, we should remember that it was not firefighters who deregulated building safety standards; it was not firefighters who ignored the concerns of tenants; it was not firefighters who ignored the coroner's report and failed to put sprinklers in high-rise blocks; and it was not firefighters who put flammable cladding on Grenfell Tower.

It is disgraceful that, two years on, there has still not been a major review or assessment of the “stay put” policy. I echo the Prime Minister's words when he said that it is an article of faith in dealing with high-rise block fires, but although it may be an article of faith, there clearly has to be a serious review and examination of that policy. The Fire Brigades Union has raised the issue with Ministers on numerous occasions. Concerns about the “stay put” policy were raised with the Government years before Grenfell, by the FBU and others. Will the Government today stop dragging their feet and act?

Karen Lee: I raised the “stay put” policy at Home Office questions on Monday, so I am pleased that my right hon. Friend has raised it today.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention.

The past nine years of austerity have seen cuts degrade our fire and rescue services. The reality and the truth is that we have fewer firefighters, fewer fire appliances and, as a result, slower response times. I am not being critical of individual firefighters or their collective response to try to deal with Grenfell. The reality is that if we cut fire services, we live in a more dangerous place. While firefighters selflessly risk their lives to protect others, the Government have not provided them with the resources that they need. Between 2010 and 2016, the Government cut central funding by 28% in real terms, followed by a further cut of 15% by 2020. These cuts have led to the loss of 11,000 firefighter positions—that is 20% of firefighters.

The Prime Minister will know that, as Mayor of London, he was at the forefront of the cuts to the fire service. In the eight years for which he was Mayor of London, the London Fire Brigade was required to make gross savings of £100 million. That led to the cutting of 27 fire appliances, 552 firefighters, 324 support staff, two fire rescue units and three training appliances, and it closed 10 London fire stations.

We all agree that Grenfell must never happen again. It happened because of the way in which building regulations either have not been adhered to or are

[*Jeremy Corbyn*]

inadequate, because of an inspection regime that was either non-existent or inadequate and because of a response that was insufficient.

Mr Betts *rose—*

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab) *rose—*

Jeremy Corbyn: I give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts).

Mr Betts: My right hon. Friend is right that one of the real problems with the inspection regime is the way that responsibility was taken away from local authority building control officers, who acted independently. Very often developers can now appoint their own friends to sign off the buildings. Is that not something that Dame Judith Hackitt identified as a real problem that needs addressing? We need urgent action now, rather than to wait for legislation in two years' time.

Jeremy Corbyn: As Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend has done excellent work in highlighting all these issues, for which I thank him. That is Parliament at its best, examining what has happened.

I give way now to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin).

Sandy Martin: I was going to make exactly the same point as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts).

Jeremy Corbyn: That is a first, Mr Speaker: someone rises to intervene but does not actually do it. I thank my hon. Friend; he represents a community with mixed housing so also has to deal with these issues.

There are serious questions to be asked about what the Government have done, about what has been happening with the funding of the London fire service and, of course, about the performance of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The night of 14 June will never, ever be forgotten. I have never forgotten talking in my office that evening to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad)—who has been and is a wonderful representative for the people there—about what it was like being an MP. She had been an MP for only for a few days. I said, “It’s great, but it’s hard work and you need to get into it slowly.” She went home and had probably the greatest test of her life two hours later. The way she has spoken up for her community and what she has done is something we should all be very proud of.

The shameful fact is that feet have been dragged. The exact same cladding is on similar high-rise blocks; sprinklers have not been fitted; and thousands of people in this country will go to bed tonight, and tomorrow night, not feeling safe. I pay tribute to the firefighters and, most of all, I pay tribute to the dignity and solemnity of the survivors and the bereaved, who continue to campaign for justice so that no one else has to suffer like them.

I welcome Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s report and look forward to the second part of the inquiry. I want us to have a properly funded fire service in all parts of the country. I thank Grenfell United and all the survivors

for everything they have done to try to bring people together and keep communities together. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has said that an appropriate memorial will be constructed near or on the Grenfell site, but the real memorial will be a properly funded fire service. The real memorial will be safety for people in every tower block throughout the country. Currently, 60,000 people are unsure of their own safety, and there are many more tower blocks with other kinds of composite materials that are just as dangerous. We need very tough regulation to ensure that all our people can sleep safely and soundly in their beds at night, rather than having in their minds the image of that burning monstrosity of a fire, which took the lives of so many wonderful, wholly innocent people.

2.28 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I thank the Government for scheduling this debate, which gives the House the very earliest opportunity to debate the recommendations from Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s report on part 1 of the public inquiry into what happened at Grenfell Tower. I thank the Prime Minister for his commitment to make time for further debate on this issue when Members from all parties will have had an opportunity to look more fully at the report and its recommendations.

Today’s debate gives us an opportunity to recognise, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition did, the appalling nature of the tragedy that took place at Grenfell Tower in June 2017. I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for the tone that he took in his speech and the understanding that he showed. This was a horrific loss of life and, of course, it was a tragedy that should never have happened. I pay tribute to the survivors and to the families and friends of those who died for the dignity and fortitude that they have shown in circumstances that none of us would ever want to face. They have shown not just dignity and fortitude, but commitment and dedication in their struggle for the justice they want for all those who lost their lives and also for those who lost everything they possessed and the home that they had built up.

I also thank and pay tribute to the survivors who gave evidence to the public inquiry. Reliving those horrific times cannot have been easy, but without their evidence it would not have been possible for Sir Martin Moore-Bick to produce his report. I also thank him for his thoroughness and for the considerate and thoughtful way in which he has produced this report. It is detailed, and aspects of it are shocking.

The public inquiry was set up not only to get to the truth of what happened on that night, but, crucially, to understand why it happened. As has already been mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition and by others in interventions, there are many questions as yet unanswered because they lie in phase 2 of the inquiry. Crucially, they are issues around building regulations, the cladding, the enforcement of regulations, and why cladding that was non-compliant with the regulations was put up—and it was agreed it be put up—on this building. It is significant that Sir Martin Moore-Bick found himself able to say clearly that the cladding was non-compliant. That was an important aspect and finding of phase 1 of the inquiry, although greater detail in relation to those matters will be gone into in phase 2 of the inquiry.

Sandy Martin: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. Does she not accept that, while phase 2 will need to deal with these more difficult issues, there are hundreds and hundreds of families still living in conditions that are completely unacceptable because actions have not been taken? These actions could be taken prior to phase 2 coming forward. For instance, in St Francis Tower in my own constituency, people are living in a building, which is, quite frankly, no longer fit for habitation because the cladding has been removed and there are now gaps around all the windows.

Mrs May: I say to the hon. Gentleman that, of course, the Government have put in place support both for local authorities and for the private sector to take action in relation to cladding. Following a question that was asked earlier not just about ACM cladding but about other cladding, I can say that the Department has also been ensuring that tests are undertaken on other cladding on these buildings. We also initiated Dame Judith Hackitt's report and are clear that the recommendations of that report have been accepted by the Government.

I said that the issues around cladding, building regulations and so forth will need to be addressed in phase 2, but so, too, will the question of the role of Government and the role of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Karen Lee: Does the right hon. Lady agree that it just cannot be right that the survivors and bereaved of Grenfell are not properly permanently rehoused?

Mrs May: I recognise that since this terrible tragedy took place, significant efforts have been made to ensure that the survivors—those who have lost so much—have been provided with accommodation that is suitable for their needs. I know that in the early stages many people felt that that work did not go as quickly as it should have done. I recognise, too, that in the struggle that the survivors have been facing to ensure that justice can be done, that the truth can be uncovered, and, crucially, that responsibility for what happened is identified, they have felt that the response of Government at national and local level has not always been as swift or as full as they wished it to be. Every effort will be made, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, to continue the work to support the families of those who suffered this terrible experience in this appalling tragedy. There are other aspects of support that need to be provided in the longer term as well, not least the question of providing mental health support for people who have been affected by this tragedy.

Of course, today we can only look at phase 1 of the inquiry, because that is the report that is before us. One thing that comes through from phase 1 and will be clear to anybody who has met or has had any discussions with members of the Grenfell community is the care that they feel for each other—not just care within families, but care for friends and neighbours, too, and, indeed, for their whole community. The Grenfell community has a lot to teach all of us about the true meaning of community.

It was that care for each other that led to their raising their concerns and fears, over a period of time, about the safety of the building in which they lived. Concerns were brought home to me at a very early stage—when I first met survivors from Grenfell Tower—that they had

been raising these issues about the safety of their building over a period of time, and yet those issues, their voices and those concerns had gone unheeded and had been ignored. I want to go on to reference some of the shocking aspects of this report, but I think that one of the most shocking features that has come out of consideration of what happened at Grenfell Tower is that those people had been genuinely raising matters about safety and yet felt that those matters were just completely ignored—and in some cases they were indeed just completely ignored. That was what led to the work to look at social housing across the country. I am grateful that a number of Housing Ministers undertook that work.

I see my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), the first Housing Minister who started that work, in his place on the Treasury Bench. That work was due to lead to a social housing Green Paper. I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reference a social housing White Paper. We are now about to go into an election. There is *purdah*, but I urge the Government, as soon as possible after Parliament is reconvened, to publish that White Paper, because change is needed to ensure that those who are living in social housing are able to have their voices heard so they can have the confidence that, when they raise issues, those issues will be acted on, and if they are not, they can seek redress in order to ensure that their concerns are being heard.

There are other shocking aspects of this report on which I wish to touch briefly. Some of them relate to the conclusions on the London Fire Brigade. Our emergency services do an amazing job, day in and day out, and there is absolutely no doubt that, on that fateful night, individual firefighters gave totally of themselves. They bravely went into a building with a fire whose like, as they said to me afterwards, they had never seen before, yet they bravely put themselves in danger to try to rescue others. None the less, it is also clear from Sir Martin Moore-Bick's report that there were questions over the command structure, training and communications in London Fire Brigade, which all need to be addressed.

When there is an emergency, we are used to seeing—indeed we expect to see—our emergency services working seamlessly, both in teams within an individual service but also in services working together. Sadly, on that fateful night, that was not the case. Now these were the most challenging of circumstances. None of us should take away from the fact that people were dealing with something that they had not seen the like of before and were having to respond with instant and split-second decisions. But there is absolutely no doubt from the report that the lack of communication and of the passing on of crucial information had an impact on the response. Sir Martin Moore-Bick states in the report:

“The chaotic nature of the communication links meant that neither the control room nor the command units nor the incident commander could know whether rescue attempts had been made in response to calls, or if they had, what had been the outcomes.” That seamless working together is important within teams but also across the services. It is very important that when our emergency services attend an emergency, they are able to work together in the best possible way to deal with it.

When I was Home Secretary, I oversaw the work on the joint emergency services interoperability principles, or JESIP. The whole purpose of that work was to

[Mrs May]

ensure that there was a way of our emergency services working together that enabled them to provide the service we wanted them to provide. And yet on this night, a major incident was declared by each of the services at different times, but they did not communicate that to each other. Sir Martin Moore-Bick makes that point when he says:

“One of the consequences of the declaration of a Major Incident by the emergency services is that there should be a multi-agency conversation between the control room leads. This was a requirement of the joint operating requirements established under the Joint Doctrine... That was also a requirement of the Procedure Manual... The evidence that such a conversation... took place is at best unclear.”

This need to communicate is very important and it is absolutely right that Sir Martin Moore-Bick has raised it as an issue that needs to be addressed in his recommendations.

I want to comment on what in many ways must be the most heartbreaking aspect of the report for the survivors: the use of the doctrine “stay put”. I can quite understand why there was a doctrine of staying put. The experience was that a fire in a flat within a tower block would normally remain in that flat and would be able to be dealt with in that flat—compartmentalisation or containment within a flat. But of course that did not happen in this circumstance; something else happened because of the cladding on the outside of the building.

The doctrine of “stay put” had been developed for good reasons, based on the normal experiences of firefighters. The problem was not the fact that that was the doctrine in such circumstances; the problem was that there was no flexibility to know how to deal with and respond to different circumstances. As we see in the report, at a point in time—the Prime Minister referenced that point—a decision was taken to evacuate rather than to continue to operate the “stay put” doctrine, but even at that time the messages that were getting through were not clear and the messages being given by the control room were not as clear as they should have been. One of the issues here is making sure that there is training to ensure that those who are making decisions on the ground know that they have the flexibility to make a different decision, but also know when and how to exercise that flexibility.

This doctrine did have an impact. On the Friday after the fire I was visiting survivors in hospital, where I met one family, the father of which told me that he, his wife and child had been told to stay put in their flat and that others had been brought into their flat as a place of safety. There came a point when this father took the decision that they could no longer stay in the flat, so he said what he was going to do and took himself, his wife and his child out of their flat. They survived. The others did not. So this doctrine did have an impact that night.

The worst thing that could happen now would be to lurch to having everyone say, “We can’t have ‘stay put’ at all”, because there will be circumstances in which “stay put” is still the right advice to give. But what is important is that flexibility is provided, and that training is given so that individuals know when and how they can exercise that flexibility and change the advice.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): If there is to be this change—a flexibility, under which there may be a full evacuation from time to time—would the right

hon. Lady agree that it would be essential for buildings to have sprinkler systems, at least in communal areas, more than one means of escape and a central alarm system, and that Grenfell Tower would have benefited from those measures? Would she support those provisions being introduced in new buildings and retrofitted?

Mrs May: I have been asked about sprinklers on a number of occasions. Of course, the response to the Lakanal House fire was not that sprinklers should be fitted in all high tower blocks, but that the landlord should look at that issue. Sir Martin Moore-Bick is going to address the issue of sprinklers in part 2 of the inquiry, and he references that and makes the point that I have just made about the Lakanal House fire in this report. On the issue of the means of escape, there was a central stairway in Grenfell Tower, and I think firefighters have raised the question of the means of escape in that regard. This is another issue that part 2 of the inquiry is likely to look at, as it is looking at the requirements and regulations necessary for the future.

There are issues about the cladding itself and about the responsibility for why the fire was able to happen because of the circumstances of the building. I set up the inquiry to get to the truth, and Sir Martin Moore-Bick has shown that he is capable of and determined to get to the truth. His report so far has been clear and uncompromising, and I have every expectation that his report on part 2 of the inquiry will also be clear and uncompromising, whoever or whatever it needs to address.

I welcome the Government’s commitments, set out by the Prime Minister, to accept the recommendations, but change requires a willingness to change. I refer to paragraph 28.55 in volume 4 of the report, where Sir Martin Moore-Bick references the evidence of the Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade and says that he feels that it “only serves to demonstrate that the LFB is an institution at risk of not learning the lessons of the Grenfell Tower fire.”

For the families and friends of those who lost their lives, the pain of that loss will never go away. But for their sake, and in memory of all who lost their lives, the lessons must be learned.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Colleagues will see that many hon. and right hon. Members wish to speak in this debate. Time is limited so I will impose a five-minute time limit after the speech from the Scottish National party Front Bench, and that time limit may have to be reduced.

2.48 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is my pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who made a very careful and considered speech in response to these matters. It is good to know that the days of establishment cover-ups in the immediate aftermath of tragedies—such as we saw over Hillsborough and Bloody Sunday—are over. Although I find much to disagree with the right hon. Lady about, I know that she has been pivotal in ensuring that there was an inquiry in this case, and that her actions were also pivotal in relation to Hillsborough. That is something about which we can agree.

I welcome the publication of phase 1 of the reports, but I agree with the Leader of the Opposition when he says that this was an avoidable tragedy, and I will come back to that in a moment.

Before I say anything else, I want, like others, to pay tribute to the resilience of the survivors of this tragedy and the bereaved. Like many other hon. Members, I had the privilege, thanks to you, Mr Speaker, of meeting some of the survivors and bereaved at a reception in your offices. That was of great use to me in understanding their lived experience of this avoidable tragedy, which must be central to how we deal with preventing this sort of thing and ensuring that it never happens again.

As well as paying tribute to the fortitude and dignity of the families—the bereaved—and the survivors, I want, like others, to pay tribute to the bravery of individual firefighters. For most of us, it is really unfathomable that they had the courage to run back and forth in and out of that inferno. I believe that the bereaved families have had very warm words for the coroner, Fiona Wilcox, and tribute should be paid to her, as well as to Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his staff. Of course, tributes should also be paid, as others have said, to the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who had to deal with this terrible tragedy on her patch very shortly after she had been elected a Member of Parliament, and has been able to do so, again with great fortitude and resilience, because she knew the area so well.

It is important to remember that this is only phase 1 of the inquiry. Many have argued that perhaps the inquiry was the wrong way round and that phase 1 should have looked at the cause of the fire and phase 2 at the response. There is some force in that, but we are where we are. It is very important to look to the statement that the Fire Brigades Union made, pointing out:

“Before any firefighter arrived that night, Grenfell Tower was” already

“a death trap. Firefighters...acted bravely in impossible circumstances, many of them repeatedly risking their own lives to save others.”

Indeed, that is reflected in the report. The Fire Brigades Union goes on to say:

“The true culprits of the fire are those who wrapped the building in flammable cladding.”

It is good that the inquiry has recognised that, and I am sure that phase 2 will spend a lot more time looking at it. Also contributing to this avoidable tragedy were those who gutted the fire safety regime of the United Kingdom, who ignored the warnings from previous fires, and who did not hear the pleas of a community who were worried for their safety.

I cannot help thinking that the story of the avoidable tragedy of Grenfell is a modern tale of two cities. Do we really think that this carnage would have been allowed to happen if the residents of the tower were white, wealthy, middle and upper-class residents such as we find elsewhere in Kensington? Do we really think that the survivors and the bereaved would have waited so long for state support and rehousing if they had been white, wealthy and middle-class? Of course not. This divided city, and our divided society, have developed under the watch of the Conservative party. As others have pointed out, the Prime Minister was Mayor of this great city of London at the time when cuts were made to the fire brigade. There are issues of political responsibility that are properly the province of this House.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Some outside—I am not saying that the hon. and learned Lady is doing this—have said that the fire brigade differentiated its response because of the ethnicity of the people in the building. That is complete and utter nonsense, as I am sure she will agree. On her point about the social class of the people in the building, a number of colleagues have referred to the privately owned freehold buildings across the country that are not getting reclad. They are all private blocks that are owned by leaseholders. The social blocks have all been done—perhaps a little slower, but they have all been done. These people are mostly white middle-class, and they are in desperate need of their cladding being taken down and replaced.

Joanna Cherry: I cannot disagree with the hon. Gentleman's second point, and I also agree with his first point. However, the point that I sought to make was that it has not gone unnoticed by many of us that the social class and ethnicity of the people who died in Grenfell Tower was very different from that of other people who live in the surrounding area, and there is a very strong suspicion that that has led to some of the shortcomings in this case.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: No, I am going to make some progress.

When this House reassembles after general election 2019, we must not allow political blame for this avoidable tragedy to be deflected. The second phase of this inquiry, I believe, will be uncomfortable for Conservative Ministers and Conservative councillors who sat on their hands or took actions that let circumstances occur that contributed to this tragedy. I believe that phase 2 will be far more uncomfortable for them than phase 1 has been for the fire service—and that is as it should be.

I welcome the undertaking from the Prime Minister to implement all the recommendations for central Government, but I reiterate the question that other hon. Members have asked: will he commit to the requisite funding to implement those recommendations? In the past, many post-death inquiries have made very important recommendations, but there is not always national oversight of those recommendations. There is not a national body keeping track of whether they have been implemented, and the reality is that important recommendations often fall by the wayside.

Mr Betts: The hon. and learned Lady is making a very important point. Does she think that as soon as the Government, whichever Government it is, have had a chance to consider the recommendations in detail, they should publish a list of those recommendations, what they are going to do to implement them, how much that will cost, and the timeframe in which they will be delivered?

Joanna Cherry: That is an eminently sensible suggestion.

Others have mentioned Lakanal House. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) pointed out that the tragedy at Grenfell was not the first time that compartmentation had failed. The Lakanal House fire, which resulted in the deaths of six people, with 15 residents and a firefighter injured, was the subject of a coroner's inquest. As the hon. Gentleman said, the coroner sent a

[Joanna Cherry]

rule 43 letter to the then Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, on 28 March 2013, recommending that the Westminster Government should

“publish consolidated national guidance in relation to the ‘stay put’ principle and its interaction with the ‘get out and stay out’ policy, including how such guidance is disseminated to residents.”

Ministers promised to review that guidance with the Local Government Association. However, in the four years after the coroner’s letter, no guidance was produced. So the lessons that should have been learned from the Lakanal House fire, and that might have prevented at least the scale of this avoidable tragedy, were not learned. It is vital that this House is empowered to make sure that the recommendations of phase 2 are implemented promptly, because important recommendations have not been implemented promptly in the past.

Mr Lammy: Does the hon. and learned Lady accept that what took place after the Lakanal House fire should have involved an examination of the Government of the day? That is not to be partisan, but simply to say that it is important that justice applies to everyone. The firemen are not here, but it is important that justice means that anyone, wherever they are and of whichever party—because it may have gone back many years—may be found culpable and must be able to answer for their failure on behalf of these people.

Joanna Cherry: I entirely agree. This is the job of the inquiry, but it is also the job of this House, as I said, to scrutinise the political responsibility for factors contributing to this tragedy.

In Scotland, building regulations are devolved. After a tower block fire in Irvine in 1999, just before devolution kicked in, a Select Committee of this House recommended that all cladding on high-rise dwellings should be non-combustible. Subsequent to devolution, that report was taken seriously by Scottish housing authorities, and building regulations in Scotland were duly amended in 2005. All new high rise domestic buildings in Scotland after that date were, by regulation, fitted with non-combustible cladding or a cladding system that met stringent fire tests, and with sprinklers. The same recommendation was seen as optional south of the border. It appears that that has had tragic consequences, so it is vital that this House finds a way to ensure that the inquiry’s recommendations are properly implemented.

It is also the case that a history of deregulation and its legacy has contributed to this tragedy. That history dates back many years and includes previous Conservative party Administrations’ decisions to cut building regulations drastically and the coalition Government’s cutting of fire budgets by around 28% in real terms. Those are facts. The fact is that the regulatory regime for housing and fire safety created in England has contributed to the scale of this tragedy.

I believe that the coalition Government’s policy of austerity has contributed to conditions surrounding the scale of this tragedy. I am conscious of not taking up too much time, so that others can speak, but Labour Members have mentioned cuts made by the Prime Minister to the London fire service when he was Mayor. I have read carefully comments from Matt Wrack, the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, who notes that a

review of the London Fire Brigade’s resources in 2016 warned against any further cuts to its budget and advised that City Hall

“be ready to mitigate any unacceptable negative impacts arising from cuts in frontline resources”

made by the then Mayor, the Prime Minister. Those allegations come from somebody who knows what he is talking about.

Despite those concerns, the Prime Minister, when he was Mayor of London, went on to insist to Londoners that he had improved fire cover, despite cutting the number of firefighters, fire engines and fire stations. When confronted in the Greater London Assembly chamber about that matter, he told a Labour party Assembly Member to “get stuffed”. I am sorry for that language, Madam Deputy Speaker, but that is a fact, and I have seen the video. It is a great indictment of our politics that that sort of approach to such serious matters is seen as acceptable by some.

As the charity Shelter has said, this tragedy outlines the fact that we need a national conversation about some of the broader policy issues, particularly social housing. In Scotland, even under the constraints of Tory and Lib Dem austerity, we have taken steps to build tens of thousands of new social homes. We have got rid of the right to buy, built council houses and reintroduced security of tenure in the private sector. Those things are all widely accepted in other European democracies, and we need to look at improving them in England and Wales.

Finally, the families must never be forgotten. Working with the organisation Inquest, the families have produced a blueprint for the handling of future disasters. They have called in particular for a co-ordinated response from central and local government and emergency services. They have also recommended that a central point be set up for families to contact about missing relatives and for help and information. The views of the families, whose lived experience is central to our consideration of this avoidable tragedy, must be put at the heart of any work that the next Parliament takes forward, to put right the terrible wrong that occurred on that night.

3.3 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). Grenfell is a tragedy that should never have happened, and the likes of it must never happen again. I welcome any report that allows us to learn lessons for the future, but we must not simply learn; we must follow through and apply those lessons. Unfortunately, given the timing of the phase 1 report’s release, I have been unable to read the 1,000 or so pages of the four volumes. That said, as a former firefighter and senior officer in Strathclyde fire brigade, I feel compelled to make a short contribution to this important debate.

I want to take a moment to set the record straight. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West referred to the wealth of the individuals concerned. Firefighters the length and breadth of the United Kingdom will do their very best, irrespective of people’s colour, wealth, religion or gender. It is uniform throughout the UK. We will do our best, irrespective of where people live. If they ask for our assistance, they will get it.

On that dreadful night, firefighters did not set out to fail; and nor did they fail. I am relieved that the inquiry, in its report published today, is not overtly critical of the frontline firefighters, but rather highlights systemic failures. Firefighters respond where others would fear to tread, often putting their own lives on the line. A question I would ask, assuming that the media coverage is accurate, is: why are we regrettably seeing a pattern emerging of the same or similar systemic failures or shortcomings, from which lessons are apparently not being learned and with no timeous action being taken to rectify such failures?

We live in a world where scientific developments and technological advances aim to enhance our safety. That may lead us all on occasions to feel a false sense of security. Indeed, perhaps too often we take such matters at face value and for granted. In the fire and rescue service, there are often specialist divisions, such as fire safety, fire investigation and fire engineering. However, regrettably, fire certification by fire services has given way to fire risk assessments being conducted simply by responsible persons. There needs to be sufficient exchange of relevant information, particularly to the frontline fire crews and operational commanders, including appropriate familiarisation training and support for those who may, in their firefighting role, have less cause to visit, inspect and become familiar with premises.

Many of those improvements have led to a reduction in the number of recorded fires. As a result, practical experience at incidents, as opposed to on fireground training, is in decline, and that gap needs to be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) mentioned the Fire Service College at Moreton-in-Marsh, which is a wonderful facility. Under the stewardship of the then chief officer, Brian Sweeney, my old service—the Strathclyde fire and rescue service—built a wonderful, modern training facility at Cambuslang in Scotland.

For many years, compartmentalisation has been seen as offering, in effect, a safe refuge. It has worked well on many occasions, but we have learned the hard way that it may not necessarily offer a safe refuge, due in no small way to construction materials and subsequent modifications that may involve original fire-stopping or fire spread-limiting measures being compromised.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; I call him my hon. Friend because there is an affinity and comradeship between ex-firefighters. In London alone, there have been 5,000 high-rise fires since 2014, and compartmentalisation worked in the vast majority of those. That is not an excuse for the London Fire Brigade not taking evacuation action earlier, but it explains why people arrived at the scene conditioned to expect a certain action, and Grenfell did not act like a normal building.

Bill Grant: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is correct. In Glasgow, where there are many high-rise flats, that policy has worked well, but as I will come on to say, we need a bit of flexibility. I firmly believe—I think he would share this view—that the events that night at Grenfell were exceptional. They were not normal; they were an extreme. It was a very difficult fire for any responding firefighters or senior officer to manage well.

While rules, procedures and practices are needed for health and safety, they require to be applied in such a manner that we do not stifle freedom of thought. One of the greatest assets in my early days as a firefighter was the use of initiative and improvisation. To some extent, that has been curtailed over time by the fear of disciplinary action, of being sued in an increasingly litigious society, or of departing from the perceived norm or any policy of long standing. Policies are often quite rigid and lack the flexibility that takes account of the inexact science of firefighting and the unpredictability of both fire and human behaviour.

The greatest question of all is: who was informed, and what revised fire risk assessment took place when the whole dynamic and risks presented at Grenfell changed? A high-rise building was draped in flammable cladding and became an inferno, costing the lives of 72 individuals. Their deaths must not be in vain. I would just comment that, as we speak today in this Chamber, there are still flaws in the building regulations in Scotland. We can still apply flammable cladding. I hope that the Scottish Government will put that right; I am sure that they will.

My sympathies go to the families of those who lost their lives in the Grenfell tragedy, but my sympathies also go to the families of the frontline firefighters, who have to deal with their loved one's experiences on that dreadful night of 14 June 2017, together with external pressures from very intense public scrutiny. Grenfell must be a catalyst for change and secure improvements for fire safety and firefighting not only for the London fire brigade, but for the whole of the UK. Finally, I thank Sir Martin and those who gave evidence and shared their experience of that dreadful night, which will haunt many for years to come.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As the next speaker is the constituency MP, I will remove the time limit, but I know the hon. Lady is aware of the time pressures. I call Emma Dent Coad.

3.10 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to overrun the time limit.

There is one finding in this 1,000 page document that I welcome without hesitation: my former neighbour whose Hotpoint fridge freezer burst into flames, the match lighting a bonfire created by others, is entirely blameless and, indeed, did everything he could and should have done to alert the emergency services and his neighbours. He has been vilified by the gutter press, not by our community, and I would welcome an opportunity to reunite him with the neighbours he was advised—wrongly, I believe—never to speak to again, at huge personal cost to himself. Another point I welcome with some hesitation is that the building was non-compliant at the time of the fire. This finding, although very welcome, is left hanging with no commentary and no resolution.

Much of the rest of this story is, in my opinion, a litany of vested interest protecting itself. How very disappointing it is that the inquiry has to a certain extent gone along with this narrative, as we feared. I do hope people will bear with me, but I did not have the

[Emma Dent Coad]

benefit of having the full report on Monday morning, as *The Daily Telegraph* seems to have done. I will be giving a visceral response, and I will give a more measured response in time to come, when I have absorbed all the details of the report.

For me—and I have spent a mere four hours reading the documents—one of the worst of many disappointments is the naming of some of the firefighters who, as has already been said, risked their lives in a bonfire made by corporate greed and by the disdain and complacency of politicians over many years. To create some balance and to point the finger of blame as I personally see it, I am naming some of those at the top of the pyramid of responsibility.

I am going to start with the chief executive of Arconic, which makes the cladding, Chip Blankenship, who, when he left in 2017, had a going-away present of \$17.5 million, which is 500 times the earnings of a firefighter who ran into a bonfire that he was potentially responsible for. The chief executive of Whirlpool now, Marc Bitzer, who manufactured the now banned plastic fridge freezer that burst into flames and lit the bonfire, was on record as earning \$11.8 million, which is 300 times as much as firefighters. The chief executive of Celotex, Pierre-André de Chalendar, made a mere £4 million from salary and dividends, and the chief executive of Rydon, Robert Bond, who constructed the bonfire of now banned combustible products—and did a pretty shoddy job of it from what we gather, with gaps creating chimneys, badly fitting windows and dodgy fixings, some fitted upside down which encouraged the fire to spread—earned a mere £2 million, which is a mere 80 times that of firefighters. All these men are responsible to some extent for the events of 14 June 2017, but if they are named at all, it will not be for two years, when their army of lawyers will have created a firewall between them and any degree of accountability.

I also name the Prime Minister who, as Mayor of London, was responsible for the brutal cuts that weakened the fire service and forced it to economise, and who, in his current role, will potentially happily allow further cuts to an already depleted service. I do hope that Ministers will deny that. When, as the Mayor, he was challenged about the cuts—at the time I was fighting, and I fought very hard, for North Ken fire station, which I hope we have managed to save—he, as we have heard, emitted a foul expletive, just to show his disdain for the concerns of his fellow human beings.

I also name the current chair of the Conservative party, James Cleverly, who, as the then chair of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, presided over those very same cuts and takes no responsibility for the outcome of those cuts. He did nothing in the aftermath of the Lakanal House fire of 2009 in which six people died.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): May I just check whether, in line with the standard protocol, the hon. Lady advised my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), whom she has referred to by name rather than by constituency, that she would mention him in her speech?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I believe that the hon. Lady referred to the Mayor. Did she use those words?

Eddie Hughes: And James Cleverly.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady used an actual name, but if so, that would be incorrect. The right hon. Gentleman was here earlier, but I am sure she will bear in mind that it is important not to refer to right hon. and hon. Members by name.

Emma Dent Coad: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I would also like to name the previous Fire Ministers and Housing Ministers Brandon Lewis and Gavin Barwell, and Eric Pickles, the then Secretary of State, who turned a deaf ear to pleas about the fire cuts, as well as our current Fire Minister, whom I have had many conversations with. I feel that I have spent two years—I apologise for this—shouting into a void.

I also name the former Kensington and Chelsea cabinet member in charge of the refurbishment, Rock Feilding-Mellen, a man whom we have no love for in North Kensington. He abandoned his fourth home, a modest London crash-pad, which he had bought for cash, that now overlooks the shrouds of the Grenfell Tower he was so keen to improve the appearance of. He is a man who called my beautiful Golborne ward a “ghetto”, but he can sleep at night safe in one of his three stately homes, one of which appears to be a castle. He is a man who demanded good prices on the Grenfell Tower refurbishment, and I am sure this will come out in the second phase of the inquiry in two years’ time.

I also name the past leader of the council, Nick Paget-Brown, a man who was happy to spend £250,000 on pre-Raphaelite paintings, but as the tower blazed behind him on that horrible morning—as my neighbours burned to death behind him—he said on camera that the residents had been offered sprinklers and refused them, which was an entirely provable black lie.

It is these people—cushioned by their millions, devoid of any conscience, protected by taxpayer-funded legal teams, reputation advisers and empathy coaches—who are the guilty ones here. They sleep easy in their beds, while half of North Kensington, including myself, have sleepless nights broken by nightmares, and tens of thousands of our fellow human beings across the country live in dangerous buildings, some of whom have put their life savings into them—all lost. Those I have named and the system they represent built a bonfire, lit the match and stood by wagging their fingers as firefighters, ill-trained and ill-equipped for a situation that should never have happened, ran into an inferno to save lives.

This interim report has failed us, as far as I am concerned. It does nothing to protect people tonight or into the future. In addition to protecting corporate interests and declining to look into potential dodgy dealings or even possible corruption, which is for police to investigate, it fails even to support the recommendations that would stop this man-made atrocity happening again. There are some things that could have been done at this stage, and they have not been done. Why should we wait another two years for that? These failures of corporate interests, the complacency of politicians over many years and the failures of this report mean, to my mind, that Grenfell 2 could happen tomorrow. I wonder whether they, if their children were living in a flat in the sky wrapped in solid petrol, would wake up to the potential disaster and legislate now.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some fair points, but there have been failures over decades in terms of free regulation in relation to fire, and is it helpful at this point in time simply to use this issue in a party political perspective, as she is doing? This is about failures of previous Governments and, one could argue, failures of the current Government. Nevertheless, this should not be about party politics.

Emma Dent Coad: I acknowledge that, and I have not pointed to any parties at all. Indeed, there has been complacency and failure over many, many years.

If we wait another two years, we will see another Grenfell, and a finger of blame will point at the Government and their failures to act, and at this interim report. “Stay put” was the correct advice in Grenfell Tower for 45 years, until the building’s safety was compromised by a refurbishment designed by five years of bad decision making. This is a national Government policy that the fire services have been asking be reviewed for particular buildings for many years, ever since the first cladding fires. Firefighters are being blamed for Government policy failures and the Government still refuse to review the policy—it is “in due course”—because to do so would be, I believe, an admission of guilt.

I hope that the Government will reconsider and take immediate action. This is urgent. We must deal with safety and building regulations without delay. If another Grenfell happens, the Government will have knowingly sent residents and firefighters to their deaths. Let that be on their conscience and in their nightmares forever.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Just a reminder that if right hon. and hon. Members are to refer to other right hon. or hon. Members who have not been in the debate, they should give them notice of that. I now impose a four-minute time limit.

3.22 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on the content and tone of his speech. I was appalled that this report was leaked two days in advance, and I was extremely worried that the fire brigade would be used as an excuse and blamed. That is quite wrong. I spoke to the fire brigade and found that it has dealt with internal learning and improvement, predetermined attendance, new equipment, training, control improvements, information gathering and other matters.

The reality is that Parliament is to blame, because over many years we have not prioritised this issue at all. Of course, we come together when there is such a tragedy, but over many years Parliament has not prioritised the situation. I gently say to colleagues that we have all been sent emails about fire training measures in this place, but I am afraid that the take-up among colleagues is relatively small, and I hope that we will do better.

We are all aware that when the fire brigade has to attend a fire the magnitude of Grenfell, that is because of a failure in the building system, which according to Dame Judith Hackitt is seriously broken and not fit for purpose. As we have heard, phase 2 of the public

inquiry will commence next year and look at the original design, construction and composition of the tower and the subsequent modifications both prior to and during 2012 to 2016, including compliance with regulations and guidance and industry practice.

I only wish that we in the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group had been listened to many years ago. I am delighted that the group has three Members who were Ministers and two firefighters, all of whom make excellent contributions. Our group will be represented at stage 2 of the public inquiry by the group’s adviser, former chief fire officer Ronnie King.

As I said, the fire tragedy that unfolded at Grenfell Tower cannot be laid at the door of the firefighters. I have had only a brief opportunity to look at the 1,000-page report, but I want to pick out one or two words. Sir Martin Moore-Bick says that the London Fire Brigade’s readiness for the Grenfell fire was “gravely inadequate”. He stated that

“incident commanders had received no training in how to recognise the need for an evacuation or how to organise one”.

Her Majesty’s inspectorate of fire services really should be picking up that sort of thing. Whether it failed to notice it or just failed to act is a matter of grave concern.

There was no contingency plan for the evacuation of Grenfell Tower. Assurances had been provided following the 2013 inquest into Lakanal House that this kind of issue had been resolved. It clearly had not. The London Fire Brigade has an operational database of buildings in London and has a risk assessment policy accessible to all operational firefighters. The information available about Grenfell Tower contained almost nothing of any use to an incident commander called to a fire. I also understand that what was there did not reflect the significant refurbishment work that had gone on. Once again, Her Majesty’s inspectorate really should have picked up that shortcoming. The first incident commanders, although experienced, were of relatively junior rank. They were faced with a situation for which they had not been adequately prepared, and I know the fire service will look at that.

We should not argue any more about this. We should ensure that the cladding is dealt with everywhere in private and public buildings, we should ensure that sprinklers are retrospectively fitted, and we should ensure that a tragedy such as Grenfell never ever happens again.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry; after the next speaker, I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

3.25 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for the tone in which he opened the debate, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), for setting up the inquiry in the first place, and Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his inquiry team for the detailed work they have done. I also thank the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). It is entirely understandable that the community is angry and wants justice. She expressed that, and she is right to do so. When she says this is urgent, she is absolutely right.

[Jo Swinson]

Nobody could not be moved by the horror of reading or listening to the testimonies of those who experienced that fateful night: the horror of people being trapped in a burning building, or of knowing that their loved ones were. In the report they then read the heartbreaking finding that advice to stay put was given to people who could otherwise have escaped, and that led to loss of life.

There are so many lessons to be learnt, but the truth is that the people who survived, and their friends and family, bear this burden every single day, as do those from our emergency services. There are the firefighters who bravely ran into danger in that hellish building—that inferno. There are those who gave medical support to the people who were affected, and those who picked up the pieces in the community, including people in the education service. I am struck by the story of the young woman who escaped from the tower and the next day went to set her GCSE chemistry exam. The reach of Grenfell, with the number of people whose lives were affected, or who have helped those affected, is huge. It continues to this day.

The report makes it absolutely clear that the Grenfell tragedy was the result of several institutional failings. Simply put, it should not have happened. We need solutions now to ensure that it can never happen again—from local authorities having emergency planning procedures and risk assessments to the fire service having the support needed on lessons that must be learned about communication. It is also about the regulations made in this place about cladding and materials, the rules that we have for buildings, and learning the lessons from previous tragedies such as Lakanal House.

Everyone deserves a safe and secure home to live in, and, bluntly, the residents of Grenfell did not have that. It is unacceptable that that cladding was ever approved for use on buildings such as Grenfell. In part of the report, Sir Martin Moore-Bick finds that it is hard to understand whether it could ever have been compliant with building regulations—it is important that that is fully investigated in phase 2—yet 200 buildings still have that cladding today. People are going to sleep in buildings where that is the case. That is not good enough two and a half years on.

It is incredibly important that the next phase of the inquiry can proceed. It needs to be comprehensive and detailed, and it needs to do its work as quickly as possible, but the very fact that that cladding is still there on buildings more than two years on should shock us all. It is long past time that we matched our words with actions.

3.29 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution to this debate, and I am honoured to follow the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson).

I need to start by acknowledging the grief, pain and anger of the bereaved and the survivors from Grenfell. No one can be anything other than deeply saddened at the huge loss of life. Anything other than complete condemnation of this event is unacceptable. No one escapes their share of the blame from Grenfell. This includes the London Fire Brigade, and I speak as a

former operational firefighter with the brigade. London Fire Brigade is not hiding from the criticism levelled at it, but the catastrophic failure that is Grenfell was not caused by the London Fire Brigade, which did its best to deal with it. Compartmentalisation normally works. I have fought high-rise fires, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) has, too. It has saved countless lives over many years, but Grenfell was not compartmentalised. The building failure led to London Fire Brigade making many mistakes of which, I am sure, it is absolutely ashamed and that it regrets deeply.

Responsibility for what happened lies with us here in Parliament, with the Government and with many others—local government, building suppliers, construction companies and the rest. The focus of the inquiry is, in phase 1, on the initial evidence supplied by witnesses called by the inquiry. Subsequent phases will apportion more responsibility to a wider number of organisations and individuals. I believe therefore that the criticism of London Fire Brigade has to be viewed with that perspective—that there is a bigger picture and that it will subsequently be uncovered. I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for his kind words about London Fire Brigade, to the Leader of the Opposition and to Sir Martin Moore-Bick for commending the brigade's bravery in his report.

The conspiracy theorists have had a field day, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for putting on record that the resident who suffered from the fire and was vilified for it has been proved to be completely innocent. There were accusations that London Fire Brigade had used different operational firefighting techniques because of ethnicity, as well as accusations of cover-up and that the body count was not accurate; all these things are not only offensive but insulting to everyone involved in firefighting all the way through.

Nobody can deal with the pain of the survivors or bring back the victims. What we all have to do is to learn the lessons; I believe that London Fire Brigade has, and it is obvious that that is already being demonstrated. I say to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government that cladding is still a huge issue, both in terms of safety and policy.

Finally, I thank the inquiry. People said that it would not get to the truth and that it would be a whitewash. I had faith that it would never be that, and the inquiry has demonstrated that it is digging, and digging deep. There is a lot more to do, but the first phase demonstrates that the inquiry knows what happened and is telling the world.

3.32 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), perhaps making his last speech in this House. I thank him for his friendship over the years and his unswerving commitment to fire safety. He will certainly be remembered for that. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for her outstanding work on behalf of her constituents. This disaster happened shortly after she had been elected, and I do not think that anyone in this country could have had better representation through the difficulties that the community faced and the work that she has done on their behalf.

I thank Sir Martin Moore-Bick for his recommendations in the inquiry. Of course, they need to be implemented and the funding needs to be made available. To pick out certain salient points, it is very clear that the cladding on that building did not meet fire or building regulations. It was there illegally. Eventually, the inquiry will look at how it came to be in that situation, but at some point someone will have to be held accountable because if that material had not been on that building, the disaster would not have happened. That is absolutely key.

The second issue, a concern to which Sir Martin draws attention in paragraph 33.6, is the delay in getting action in removing this cladding from other buildings. Indeed, the Secretary of State has said that he has concerns about that. The Government were too late in providing funding for social housing and in providing money for the private sector. They now have to act to make sure that disputes between freeholders and leaseholders in the private sector do not lead to further delays and to support local authorities in taking enforcement action.

What can the Government do? We referred to this in the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee the other day: they should act quickly to deal with the conflicts of interest in testing, where producers go round from one testing organisation to another to find one that will approve their product with no public transparency about the products that have failed various tests. That must be rectified quickly.

As I said to the Secretary of State the other day, the process whereby developers in high-risk buildings can appoint their friends to be the building inspectors who sign off the work is not acceptable. It cannot be allowed to continue. I have referenced a block of student accommodation in Sheffield evacuated the other day because the building inspector had not even been on site to give approval to the building and sign it off. That, again, needs to be stopped here and now.

Finally, reference has been made to non-ACM cladding. There are materials on half a million properties—half a million flats and apartments—in this country now that would not be allowed and approved on a new building but that are thought acceptable, and people have to stay in those homes and live in them at night. That cannot be right either; that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency as well.

3.35 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Khadija Saye, my friend who died, was Facebooking her friends at 1.47 that night. I now know, as a result of this inquiry and the review by the fire brigade, that firemen were on the 20th floor of Grenfell Tower at 2 am. I so wish that those fire officers—and I am sure they do as well—had knocked on the doors of people on the 20th floor so that they could make their way out. The “stay put” advice stayed in place until 2.47. Khadija made her way out of her flat with her mother at 3.14, an hour and 14 minutes after she should have done. She died on the 10th floor and her mother died on the 13th.

This report goes into tremendous detail about the leadership, the co-ordination and the communication of the advice that was offered to tenants, but of course it is important to recognise that much of this had been explored previously in the Lakanal House fire, the

coroner’s report that followed it and, frankly, the lack of progress that should have been made following that tragedy.

But we are not really talking about a tragedy; we are talking about what many see as a crime. For that reason, I look forward to the next phase of this inquiry. I look forward to establishing whether companies like Arconic, Rydon, Celotex and Whirlpool, leaders of the local authority, mayors and Ministers will be held to account for the decisions that were made.

I also look forward to the Metropolitan police’s inquiry and review of the evidence and the prosecutions that many of us hope will follow. I said on the day afterwards that this was corporate manslaughter, and it cannot be right that people with lots of money escape justice if they are culpable. So, yes to the inquiry, but also to the Metropolitan police examination of this issue.

Everything I do in relation to this is in memory of that wonderful young woman who had so much to offer this country and lost her life in what was a preventable fire and all those victims and survivors who deserved better from the country in which they lived.

3.38 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Let me start by joining other Members in commemorating the 72 people who lost their lives in the Grenfell tragedy, which was completely needless: it was a man-made disaster. I also want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of community organisations but, most importantly, of public servants such as firefighters, who worked incredibly hard to save people.

As others have pointed out, the issue with ACM cladding affects many thousands of residents across the country, in social housing as well as in private housing blocks. My constituency has among the largest number of ACM-clad blocks, and Tower Hamlets as a whole probably has the most blocks. Families are living in fear of their lives because of the failure of the Government to take urgent action. After continuous campaigning with *Inside Housing*, Grenfell United, the survivors and colleagues across the House, some funding has been provided, but it is not enough and it does not address the wider systemic failures that the Grenfell fire disaster exposed. That is why we have continually called on the Government to ensure that the resources are available and to take action to go after private freehold owners of private blocks, because our constituents are being left to take that fight to them. It has been over two and a half years, and very few of those blocks have had work undertaken on them to remove cladding. The lack of urgency from the Government is extremely worrying, because we all have to deal with the spectre of other fires that have taken place since Grenfell and the risk of further fires and disasters happening if action is not taken quickly.

In addition, the Government’s actions to deregulate have meant that residents do not have recourse to the support necessary to deal with problems when they arise. I ask Ministers to urgently address that matter rather than waiting for the inquiry’s further findings and reports to come out. The Government know what the problems are. They know that these actions can be taken immediately to provide remedy and reassurance to our constituents and the resources that are required to ensure that they can live in safety.

[*Rushanara Ali*]

My final point is that, instead of constantly making excuses, the Government should ensure that they take action. That is what we all expect. That is what the survivors of Grenfell expect, and it is what the victims deserve.

3.41 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): The tragic, avoidable loss of life in the Grenfell Tower disaster is seared into our national consciousness as a shocking example of corporate greed and governmental complacency. The firefighters who responded on the night acted with commendable courage and professionalism, and yet, by choosing to focus on the fire and emergency services in its first phase, the inquiry has made a scapegoat of those who risked their lives to save others. The Labour party welcomes a thorough investigation into the disaster, and it is important that the LFB recognises where there were issues and where it can improve, but firefighters who go into burning buildings to save others must not be blamed for this disaster. I am particularly concerned by the inquiry's unprecedented decision to name individual firefighters—I think that is shocking.

To deliver justice for the community, we must hold to account those who repeatedly ignored expert advice, deregulated building safety laws and allowed such dangerous materials to be fitted. This inquiry ought to have considered what led to the catastrophic fire at Grenfell before it looked at events on the night. Any recommendations should be implemented and fully funded, but nationally, not just in London. The inquiry's report confirmed that the 2016 refurbishment of Grenfell Tower was catastrophically non-compliant with fire safety regulations. It also confirmed that the flammable cladding was a primary cause of the rapid spread of the fire, contrary to evidence given by the manufacturer. It took just 12 minutes for the fire to spread 19 floors to the roof.

The Government had been consistently warned about the danger of high-rise residential fires, and the coroner's report on the Lakanal House fire in 2013 recommended a review of the "stay put" policy, retrofitting sprinklers and clear guidance on compartmentalisation, but the Government ignored that expert advice and failed to act.

In the two years since the disaster, the Government have let down Grenfell survivors with inadequate housing—that is disgraceful. They have dragged their heels on safety regulations and left people to live in unsafe buildings. The only meaningful reform of building regulations has been a ban of combustible materials on select buildings. There has been no review of "stay put", nothing to ensure that sprinklers are installed and no widespread reform of building regulations. The deep and damaging cuts to our fire service continue. It is time that the Government—or perhaps the next Government—put people before profit and that we prioritised delivering justice for the local community and confronted the ongoing fire safety threat to communities across the UK.

I have only a few seconds left, so I just say this: we are all analysing what happened on the night, but my feelings are for the families and bereaved who are affected. Let us all spare them a thought today—they are certainly at the forefront of my thoughts.

3.44 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The inquiry and the Government's wider response had two obligations. One was to get justice for the families and survivors of the Grenfell disaster, and the other was to make sure that nothing like this could ever happen again. I welcome Martin Moore-Bick finding as a matter of fact that the content of the ACM cladding was the principal reason the flames spread so rapidly on the outside of the building. That clarity provides us with a helpful basis for stage 2 of the inquiry, however frustrated the community and survivors feel, quite understandably, about the length of the process.

The fact is, however, that far too many people are still living in properties with either ACM or other flammable cladding. For example, it was confirmed this summer that in London alone 315 joint inspections had taken place between the London Fire Brigade and local authority housing officers of tall residential buildings with flammable cladding. Some 26 of those were in my borough of Westminster—the third highest in London after Tower Hamlets and Greenwich. Those people are living in fear in blighted accommodation. This week, *The Times* has confirmed its findings that there are half a million owners of properties in the private sector who cannot sell or remortgage their properties because of the uncertainty over Government advice. This is having incredibly damaging consequences for their lives and mental health. We need greater speed. We do not have to wait for stage 2 of the inquiry to make progress in removing flammable cladding.

The Government have also failed to tackle some of the consequences of the complexities around properties with multiple tenure, such as council blocks with some privately owned properties in them, which is one reason there has been so little progress on the retrofitting of sprinklers. Westminster Council was going to make progress on that, but could not do so, and still cannot do so, because there remains a lack of clarity about its rights to enter those properties.

Finally, the Government promised us a wholesale rethinking of the attitude towards social tenants. Social tenancy was part of the approach to be reviewed. We have seen nothing of that change in attitude. Only this week, we saw it from the ex-councillor from Barnet, Brian Coleman, on the "Victoria Derbyshire" show, showing complete contempt for council tenants in temporary accommodation. It is really important that in addition to making the essential progress on fire safety, we carry through this rethink of our whole attitude towards social tenants.

3.47 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): With hindsight, I think we could have had part 2 of the inquiry first, because those are the difficult and complex issues of culpability that need to be addressed. Although there are policy issues such as "stay put" that come out of part 1, there is also a concentration on individual action. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), whom I, too, compliment on the role she has played: I would rather the politicians and the corporate chisellers had been identified.

Very little progress has been made on cladding. I have read the briefings for this debate from the Royal Institute of British Architects, the London Fire Brigade and Rockwool. Yes, there is a ban on combustible cladding

on high-rise residential buildings over 18 metres, but what about non-residential high-rise buildings, including hotels and offices? What about high-risk buildings under 18 metres, such as schools, hospitals, care homes and sheltered housing, and what about the range of materials? It is not just ACM cladding; there is now the high-pressure laminate cladding and many other types. The Government have only scratched the surface of these matters.

On the “stay put” policy, I intervened on the former Prime Minister because I hoped she might agree and say not just that these things might be in the inquiry, but that, if there is a problem fitting sprinklers in leasehold properties, at least they could be put in communal areas. One cannot vary the “stay put” policy unless there is a reliable means of evacuation, which requires more than one means of escape. Planning consent is being given now for tower blocks in my constituency built on the Grenfell model with one central staircase. That has to change. We have to have alarm systems.

We also have to crack down on product safety. A block of flats in my constituency, Shepherds Court, which was not compartmentalised, caught fire a year before Grenfell. That fire was also caused by a defective white good manufactured by the Whirlpool corporation. We need to be much tighter on these issues.

My final point goes beyond the Moore-Bick inquiry, but it concerns a matter that the Government have themselves highlighted. I have as yet seen no sign of a changed attitude towards social housing generally. Less than a mile from Grenfell are the West Kensington Gibbs Green estates, which, through the collusion of developers and Conservative politicians, have been blighted for 10 years. Two thousand people have lived in those homes without any security because of the greed of developers, who are now suffering because of the current climate. I should like the Secretary of State to go down to those estates with me, and see whether that changed attitude can apply not just to fire safety in Grenfell but across the board in social housing.

3.50 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have never fully accepted their responsibility for failings in the building fire safety regulations. The lack of clarity in those regulations was identified by the coroner at the inquest following the fatal Lakanal House fire as long ago as 2013, but Ministers failed to act. That lack of clarity meant that fire safety tests on cladding and insulation combinations were unreliable. Builders, developers, architects, planners—none of them knew with any certainty whether materials, or combinations of materials, were safe or complied with the regulations when they went up on buildings. A series of Ministers who were directly responsible for the failure to correct the problem were later rewarded with promotions, including to the Cabinet. That tells the victims’ families that this Government do not care, when Ministers are rewarded for such serious errors of judgment.

The Government have now announced, belatedly, a partial ban on flammable cladding on some new buildings, but they are still allowing it to go up on schools, hospitals and residential blocks less than six storeys high, and on hotels. I cannot imagine a single parent who would be happy to know that their child’s school was covered in flammable cladding, but the Government do not seem to think that it is a problem.

The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), rightly expressed and echoed concerns that fire safety issues raised by Grenfell Tower residents had been ignored. How much more shocking, then, that we continue to ignore issues raised by thousands of families who are still living in blocks covered in flammable cladding today. That is, quite simply, negligence on a grand scale.

The Government’s main objective throughout all this seems to have been to absolve themselves of blame, not to right the wrongs for which they are responsible. Far too many people are still stranded in potentially dangerous homes, facing bills that they cannot afford to pay for failures that have absolutely nothing to do with them, and that is simply not acceptable. I am left wondering, the victims are left wondering, and thousands of people living in accommodation of this type are left wondering what more needs to happen before this negligent Government finally take the necessary action to keep every home safe from the kind of tragedy that so horrifically destroyed 72 lives at Grenfell Tower.

3.53 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I commend what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) and what has been said by many other Members, particularly the Leader of the Opposition. Let me also pause for a moment to convey my sincere tribute and deepest sympathies to the families who have been through the most appalling, absolutely dreadful experience over the past two years.

I want to reinforce some of the points made by colleagues from London, but also to make the point that this is a national problem, and a very serious one. It affects towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom. In my own area, Reading, several thousand people live in blocks of flats, some of which are very tall, and there is a significant expansion in the number of towers in the town. Those who travel there by train will see that a huge new tower block is being built right next to the station. There are plans for another enormous tower block on top of the Butts Centre, and the process is continuing as we rapidly urbanise and become more like an outer-London borough. Yet at the same time we face significant problems with cladding, and other fire safety issues which have not been fully discussed here today.

Immediately after Grenfell, four blocks with the unsafe cladding Members have been describing were identified in our town. Some of that is being rectified only now, two years after the disaster. Is it not awful that, in the fifth wealthiest country in the world, we cannot get our act together to solve such problems in a medium-sized, wealthy town?

To make matters worse, new problems are being discovered all the time. In the past few weeks, in a development that was finished in the late 2000s or perhaps 2013, a block containing 200 to 300 people was identified as having dangerous cladding of a different type from the kind we have been discussing today. There is also a series of other problems. I was briefed about this by Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, to whom I pay tribute along with other colleagues in the fire service around the country. It was deeply worried about a whole series of related and interconnected problems in building safety that are not being addressed by central Government. The fire brigade felt that it did

[Matt Rodda]

not have the resources or the powers to intervene, and it was unable to get the necessary support from building control because the regulations had been stripped away. This is very serious.

I can give examples of poor conversions in which builders have unwittingly knocked through partition walls, allowing the potential for fire to spread through large blocks without any interruption. There was a case of that in Slough that the fire service was deeply concerned about. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North said, fire services are also concerned about the cladding on a whole range of other buildings, including commercial buildings, schools and health buildings. They are also worried about the serious problems of houses in multiple occupation, including conversions over chip shops or takeaway premises. Some of these are deeply unsatisfactory, because a fire could easily be caused by the business premises. There are also examples of Victorian buildings in densely populated areas being wrongly converted. [Interruption.] I appreciate the pressure on time, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you so much for letting me make these points. I call on the Government to act urgently.

3.56 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak in this important debate. I wish to declare an interest as a member and co-chair of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group. I would like to thank members of the FBU who gave up their time this week to brief me and other MPs on the implications of the report, and to speak to us about their concerns. I would also like to pay tribute to my good and hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for her work, her remarkable personal courage and her bravery in naming the names that need to be named, and more generally for the work that she has done following the tragedy. I want to acknowledge and pay my respects to the victims and their families and, indeed, to the whole community of Grenfell and to all those who have been terribly touched by the tragedy. I also want to acknowledge the contribution of, and express solidarity with, the fire and rescue services and the firefighters who put their own safety and lives at risk on that most dreadful day.

In the little time I have, I want to make a couple of quick points about the inquiry that I hope are salient. Like others, I believe the inquiry has been conducted back to front. It might have been more valuable if we could have looked at some of the corporate aspects at the same time and the two aspects could have been run in parallel. Individual politicians and Ministers, including senior Ministers, should be held to account for their actions and the consequences of their policy decisions. I was just thinking about other common strands in this Parliament, where Ministers failed to accept responsibility for the consequences of the decisions. We call it culpability, don't we? We saw it with the Windrush scandal and the then Home Secretary. We also saw it to a large degree with the May train timetable fiasco under the then Transport Secretary, and now we are seeing the tragic consequence of the dreadful loss of life at Grenfell Tower.

We have to hold the Prime Minister to account. People were huffing and puffing about that, but when he was Mayor of London, he was responsible—despite

protestations from the fire authority and from London MPs—for the closure of 10 fire stations, the loss of 27 fire engines and 600 firefighters, and the cutting of 10 of the 52 fire safety inspectors. Someone mentioned the role of fire control, which is absolutely critical. He cut fire control by a quarter over that period. So in my opinion, the inquiry's decision that phase 1 should focus on the night of the fire has given a reprieve to some of the companies, individuals and politicians who should be held to account for their decisions.

3.59 pm

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (LD): I pay tribute to the families and people from the Grenfell community who are here to listen to this important debate. Upon reading the report, all of us should have the human reactions of anger, grief and shock at what happened on the fateful day of 14 June 2017. Those who lost their lives could have been our friends, our brothers, our cousins, our parents or our grandparents. They had their futures ahead of them. Birthdays, engagements, exams, graduations—they had a lot to live for. However, we know now that that tragic loss of life could to some extent have been prevented. Regardless of the politics, the families and the community deserve truth and justice, and this first report, in its clarity and bleakness, goes a step in that direction. It does not answer all the families' questions, but I hope that the next report and the police inquiry will ultimately offer the necessary closure.

I commend the fire officers on the night for dealing with an unimaginable tragedy. Much has been said about the report today, but not much has been said in this House about compassion. One thing that came out of this event was the compassion of the people of London. Indeed, I think the *Evening Standard* managed to raise £7.4 million to support the families and the community. However, we know that all that is no substitute for the local authority doing its work to ensure that people are permanently housed properly as dignity requires. There is a lot that needs to be done, and there are many actions that the Government need to take, but this should not be about cost. Public safety—not just in Grenfell, but around the country—should be the most important issue in our considerations.

4.1 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The interest in this debate and the abbreviated speeches that people have been forced to make underline the fact that this must be only the start of this House's debates on the results and findings of the phase 1 report that was published today. I thank Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his staff for the huge amount of work that they have done on the first phase of the inquiry, and I thank all those who contributed to the inquiry with oral, written and expert evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) quite rightly said that there is a bigger picture to come with the second phase of the inquiry, but this report is, as he said, digging deep and telling the world what it needs to know.

Most of all, I pay tribute to the Grenfell survivors, the families of the victims, and the community in north Kensington, who have conducted themselves with such dignity during the course of this painful inquiry. I say to them, "You have suffered unimaginable trauma and

loss, but thank you for having the courage to share this and the resolve to turn your grief into the fight for justice and change.” It is with them in mind that I say now what I said in the days immediately after the terrible Grenfell fire: the Labour party is totally dedicated to seeing all survivors get the help they need, to getting new homes for those who need them, to bringing all those culpable to justice, and to putting in place every measure needed to prevent a fire like Grenfell from happening again.

We heard those sentiments in the days after that fire, and we must learn the lessons and never let this happen again. We heard that again today in the speech of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who said that we must turn words into action. However, nearly two and a half years on, it is shocking and shameful that we still cannot say with confidence that a fire like Grenfell could not happen again in this country, a point that the Secretary of State himself conceded on a podcast last week.

The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), was quite right to say that Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his team could not have produced a thoughtful and thorough report like this without the testimony of survivors, and her contribution today was also thorough and thoughtful. She was right to say that the central important finding, which I will come back to if I have time, is that the cladding was non-compliant. She noted that the recommendations of Dame Judith Hackitt’s report were accepted by the Government, but I say to her and the House that that report was 18 months ago and still no legislation has been introduced, let alone implemented. She spoke movingly about what she said was one of the most shocking things: residents of Grenfell telling her how they had raised concerns about the safety of the block but had been ignored. She rightly said that the Government then introduced a social housing Green Paper, but that report was 15 months ago and still we are only promised a White Paper as a follow-up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) again demonstrated her relentless quest for justice and to speak, on behalf of her constituents, the hardest truths to those in power. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) was right to pay tribute to her and to the work of the FBU. The Secretary of State has a number of points to take from this debate—an agenda for action that is still not done.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) knows, as a result of the report, more about the death of Khadija and her mother. He reminded us that many friends and survivors look to phase 2 of the inquiry not just for answers and truth, as in phase 1, but for justice and convictions.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke, with great authority from his experience in the fire service, about systematic shortcomings, with lessons not being learned or changes made.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) rightly said that he was appalled by the leaking of the report, as were we. It was embargoed so that the survivors had time to read it in full, rather than see bits in the media. He was right that it is a job for Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to ensure that the required action follows.

The Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), said that the report rightly says that there are serious concerns about the serious delays in getting dangerous cladding off the side of buildings. There is a big question for the Government, because cladding that is now banned on new blocks is in place on thousands of existing blocks. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) rightly spoke about constituents of hers feeling alone in fighting private block owners to get them to remove and replace Grenfell-style cladding. When eight in 10 blocks with Grenfell-style cladding still have it in place nearly two and a half years on, it demands more from the Government. The Prime Minister said that nearly all buildings have work in hand. He is quite simply wrong. Sixty-nine block owners do not even have a plan in place to remove this cladding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) was right about the singular importance of retrofitting sprinklers. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) spoke about the shortfalls in the powers of councils as planning and inspection authorities, which the Government must fix. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) rightly said that the Government have only scratched the surface because of the other materials and other buildings that are still at risk.

Grenfell Tower was unprecedented but not unavoidable. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) both talked about the Lakanal House fire and the coroner’s report in 2013. Points picked up in the recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry report were there a full four years earlier in that coroner’s report to Ministers after the Lakanal House fire: to publish national guidance on the “stay put” principle and its interaction with the “get out and stay out” policy; to require high-rise residential building owners to provide design and safety details for the fire services in information boxes or plates on premises; and to encourage retrofitting of sprinkler systems in high-rise residential blocks.

So it was after Lakanal; so it has been after Grenfell. Action from the Government has simply been too slow and too weak on all fronts. Since the fire, Grenfell survivors have seen three Secretaries of State and four Housing Ministers, all serious and sincere as individuals about the lessons of Grenfell but all fettered by the fundamental basic failure of policy, based on an ideology that is simply too reluctant to take on the vested interests that profit from a lax system of building regulation, too unwilling to have the state act when private interests will not do what is in the public interest and too reluctant to legislate or regulate to require higher and safer standards.

When they were at that Speaker’s House reception marking the two-year anniversary, to which many Members have referred, the victims and the survivors told us, “We should not be here. We should be at home rebuilding our lives. In two years, little has changed and justice still seems so far off.” A national disaster on the scale of Grenfell Tower requires a national response on the same scale from the Government and this has not happened. They have failed to right the wrongs of Grenfell, and it will fall to the next Labour Government to do so.

4.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for the contributions they have made today to what I think all would agree has been a deeply moving and important debate. Like the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), many were not able to speak at the length they would have wished today. I hope that, whatever the outcome of the forthcoming election, the next Parliament will hold a fuller debate at the earliest opportunity.

The Grenfell Tower fire was, as we have heard, an unimaginable tragedy. Today's publication of the phase 1 report from the inquiry is an important moment, for the bereaved, for survivors, for the community in North Kensington and for the whole country. I know—and we have heard this expressed many times this afternoon—that no report can truly capture the heartache, sorrow, anger and grief that many people rightly feel. Having met survivors and the bereaved, some of whom are here today, I, like others who have spoken, have been truly humbled by their dignity and resolve. The greatest respect we can show them is to guide the path to the answers they seek and to the accountability and justice they are fighting for; to take responsibility where it is due; and to take action of a scale and at a pace that is commensurate with the tragedy that prompted it.

Across the House, there was thanks to Sir Martin Moore-Bick and the inquiry team for a report of great depth and seriousness, and of candour and clarity, including on issues of crucial concern, exemplified by his statement that the tower did not meet building regulations. He could have reserved that statement for the next phase of his report, but he and the inquiry chose to make it now. I hope that statement gives reassurance that the second phase of his report, which, as a number of hon. Members have said, sets these events into a much broader context, is likely to be equally candid and clear. As the Prime Minister said in his opening remarks, the Government will accept all of the findings of the report, and accept them in full. We want to ensure that the recommendations are implemented without delay. We will work with our partners, including fire and rescue services across the country, to deliver them. In answer to the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and the Leader of the Opposition, let me say that of course we will fund any actions that are required in order to do so. We will bring forward legislation as soon as possible, including ahead of the building safety Bill, if that would mean that any of Sir Martin's recommendations can be implemented sooner than they would otherwise be.

Like the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and many other Members including, to single out just two, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who are both ex-firefighters, I pay tribute to the incredible bravery of those who responded to the scene. They ran into danger with one ambition alone, which was to save lives, and they deserve our gratitude and respect.

Sir Martin has raised a number of concerns, including about preparation and planning, training, the basic information that was missing, serious deficiencies in command and control, and problems dealing with 999 calls. Lessons must be learned. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will take up the matter immediately.

Most grievous of all was the failure to evacuate the tower once the fire was out of control—the failure to override the “stay put” advice. I want to be clear, as this has been raised a number of times this afternoon: Sir Martin makes it clear in his report that effective compartmentation is likely to remain at the heart of fire safety strategy and will probably continue to provide a safe basis for responding to the vast majority of fires in high-rise buildings. It will be necessary, though, as a number of Members have said, for building owners and fire and rescue services to provide a greater range of responses, including full or partial evacuation; for firefighters and those leading them to be prepared and trained for an alternative, should it be required; and for that training and guidance to be provided, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, so that they can exercise their discretion in that most difficult and challenging of moments. With the National Fire Chiefs Council and others, we will review the “stay put” advice, to ensure that lessons are finally learned.

Mr Betts: One thing that probably has not been mentioned so far is that yes, there need to be adequate responses from firefighters, but fire brigades and authorities also need to hold information about precisely what materials are on the buildings in which they are going to fight the fire.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and, as it is one of Sir Martin's recommendations, that will be one of the items we will take forward and legislate for at the earliest possibility.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): We have talked about the responsibility of, and changes needed in, the fire service, but does the Secretary of State agree that the people who caused the problem were the people who put on the cladding and did not deal with that properly? They are the people at fault here.

Robert Jenrick: As the Prime Minister and I have made clear, and as Sir Martin has made clear in his report, we have the greatest admiration for firefighters. The next phase of the report will answer the question of how the cladding, which was not compliant with building regulations, ended up on the building and was such a primary cause of the tragedy.

In the few minutes remaining, let me answer as many of the questions raised as I can. The important questions in respect of sprinklers, signage and fire doors must now be taken forward. We have already announced—in fact, it was one of my first decisions as Secretary of State—that we will consult on reducing the building height at which sprinklers are required. It is not the case that retrofitting sprinklers is necessarily the right course of action for all buildings. Dame Judith Hackitt said in her review that it was not always the answer. What was required was a serious, independent, individual fire safety assessment of every at-risk building, and for the evidence to lead to actions.

I urge developers and building owners to consider Sir Martin's report and Dame Judith's report and to act on their recommendations now. We do not need to wait until legislation is in place, although people should be under no doubt that we will take it forward regardless. Building owners must take action.

John Healey: Or else?

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Robert Jenrick: I am afraid I cannot give way; I have only a couple of moments left.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne says, “Or else?” We have said—the Prime Minister reiterated this today—that those building owners who do not take action should face the full force of the law. Local authorities should use the enforcement powers they have, and my Department stands ready to support any local authority that wishes to do that. We will name those building owners that are not remediating ACM cladding at the pace that is required and take enforcement action against them. It is, as I have said previously, frankly shameful that £600 million of taxpayers’ money is now at their disposal to remove this dangerous cladding and yet some are prevaricating. We must and we will take action.

In the broader context, which we will learn about in the next phase, I want to see Dame Judith Hackitt’s independent review implemented in full. It will be through our building safety legislation that was announced in the Queen’s Speech. Building owners must now assess the safety of their buildings and take action if that is required.

A number of hon. Members raised the rehousing of the victims and survivors of the Grenfell tragedy. I can report that 95% of the 201 households who lost their homes have been permanently rehoused. Today, nine households remain to be permanently rehoused. It would be wrong of me to set out their cases before the House, but I know each of their individual circumstances and my Department and I will continue to scrutinise and to challenge the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to ensure that action is taken and that these individuals, when it is right for them, move into permanent housing of their choosing.

In the remaining seconds available to me, let me say in answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead that we will be taking forward the social housing White Paper. That is an important step in providing security and dignity to individuals who feel that they have not been listened to and that their views are not respected. We are working with Grenfell United, which represents some of the victims of the Grenfell tragedy, to ensure that that is done right and that we make the changes that are required for future generations.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the report from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

NORTHERN IRELAND BUDGET BILL: BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland Budget 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 at today’s sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Notices of Amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(c) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

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 moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) 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)(c) 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)(d) 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: reasons committee) 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 to proceedings on the Bill.

(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.—(*Julian Smith.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Under the terms of the Business of the House motion that the House has just passed, amendments for the Committee stage of the Bill may now be accepted by the Clerks at the Table only. Members may continue to table amendments up until the start of proceedings in Committee of the Whole House. For the benefit of everyone, however, I would encourage Members to table their amendments as soon as possible. The Chairman of Ways and Means will take a provisional decision on selection and grouping on the basis of amendments tabled a quarter of an hour after the beginning of the Second Reading debate, and that provisional selection list will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website before the start of proceedings in Committee. If necessary, an updated amendment paper will be made available as soon as possible during proceedings in Committee.

Northern Ireland Budget Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before I invite the Secretary of State to move the Second Reading, I must announce the Speaker's decision on certification for the purposes of Standing Order No. 83J (Certification of bills etc. as relating exclusively to England or England and Wales and being within devolved legislative competence). On the basis of material put before the Speaker, the Speaker certified that in his opinion the Bill does not meet the criteria required for certification under that Standing Order.

4.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith):

I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As the House well knows, Northern Ireland has now been without a functioning Executive for almost three years. Since May, the Northern Ireland parties have engaged in a series of cross-party talks focused on getting Stormont back up and running. It remains my assessment that the issues preventing the restoration of Stormont are few in number and soluble in substance, and I stand ready to facilitate further talks if and when political parties are willing to move forward. However, until such time as they are able to reach an agreement, the UK Government and this Parliament have a duty to ensure good and functional governance in Northern Ireland. We have a duty to ensure that public services can continue to be provided for all citizens of Northern Ireland. This Bill upholds that duty by placing the budget published in February 2019 by my predecessor on to a legal footing and enabling the Northern Ireland civil service to access the full funding for this financial year.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene so early in his speech, on the issues of public finance and the ability of our services to respond appropriately. I do so because I am mindful of the comments you have made, Madam Deputy Speaker, about the ability to table amendments. The Secretary of State knows that I have a keen interest in pursuing a legislative fix that would allow our Co-Ownership housing association in Northern Ireland to be able to avail financial transactions capital. The organisation would then be redefined so that it would not burden the public finances. Billions of pounds in housing association loans would not be on the public balance sheet. What commitments and assurances can the Secretary of State give that would assuage me from my desire to amend this Bill?

Julian Smith: The hon. Gentleman has been precipitous in his intervention, as he often is. I will address that point shortly.

Since January 2017, Parliament has legislated four times to secure the public finances of Northern Ireland. These were not interventions that the UK Government wanted to make, but they were necessary to ensure the continued provision of public services in the absence of an Executive.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way again. I had a stab at making this point earlier today during Northern Ireland questions, and I wonder whether he will indulge me just one more time.

I assume that the part of the budget that is covered by schedule 1, relating to the Department for Communities, covers welfare mitigation payments in Northern Ireland up until March 2020. In the September 2019 joint report of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs and the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, entitled "Welfare policy in Northern Ireland", the Committees point out that ending the mitigation payments after March 2020 could make some 35,000 households in Northern Ireland worse off by hundreds of pounds a month. Is the Secretary of State aware of that?

The Department for Communities cannot extend these payments because, in the absence of the Assembly, that requires ministerial action. This is urgent because the Department is saying that it will need to start advising claimants by this autumn of significant cuts to their welfare payments next year, unless the Government act.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Steve McCabe: May I have just one second more? I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure the Secretary of State does not want an unintended consequence in Northern Ireland, so will he look at this issue and act now?

Julian Smith: The hon. Gentleman tackled me on this issue in the Tea Room earlier. I will refer to it, and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, will also refer to it in Committee. We are aware of this welfare challenge. It is indeed a responsibility of the Northern Ireland civil service; civil servants do have a power that they can use with regard to the discretionary housing payments. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will spend time on this issue over the coming days and weeks, because it is an important one.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): This is an immensely important issue for some of the very poorest people in Northern Ireland. Might the Secretary of State go back to the Department and ask his permanent secretary what powers he can draw the Secretary of State's attention to that will allow him, before the week is out, to take action to prevent people from falling off the cliff into greater poverty?

Julian Smith: I am in the process of working through how we can move forward with this. It is a devolved matter, but I will be speaking to the Northern Ireland civil service over the coming days and weeks. As has been alluded to, these are funds and mitigations that help the most vulnerable citizens in Northern Ireland. I take these matters seriously, and I will come back to the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Gentleman in due course.

Frank Field: Given that we do not have devolved government in Northern Ireland, surely there are powers somewhere that will allow the Secretary of State to act while we are waiting for ever and a day for devolved government.

Julian Smith: Indeed, the Northern Ireland civil service has a power, but if I can leave it there, I will come back to this House and come back to the hon. Gentlemen about this matter.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State accept, however, that even with the powers that civil servants have, the cost of these mitigation measures is such that budgets will have to be rejigged—quite substantially rejigged—and that that can be done only if a Minister makes a decision? Is this not yet another example of the Secretary of State burying his head in the sand and pretending that the Executive will come back when he knows that they are not going to come back? This can be dealt with only if civil servants bring forward a report saying, “This is the money that is required and this is how we see it being reallocated.” Someone has to make a decision, and it will probably be a Minister here.

Julian Smith: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. However, I go back to the fact that it is, I think we all agree, in Northern Ireland’s best interests that the Executive are reformed and the Assembly gets back up and running. Any idea that it is a better solution to take powers here at Westminster is false, and we have to focus on that.

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

Julian Smith: I am going to make some progress.

I would like to pay tribute to the Northern Ireland civil service. It has the most dedicated civil servants who are continuing to deliver public services in the absence of political leadership and political decision making. Hon. Members from across the House have approached me today raising legitimate concerns about the future of public services. While today’s debate is not the place to tackle these issues—this Bill simply makes the necessary authorisations for expenditure for this year—those Members are right that they need to continue to be monitored carefully, and that is what we will be doing. However, we are up against a lack of a local decision making.

Lady Hermon *rose*—

Julian Smith: Could I continue to make a little progress?

There are some significant challenges to reflect on, such as housing associations and welfare reform, but there are opportunities, too. The £163 million growth deal announcement to Northern Ireland shows what can be achieved when politicians of all backgrounds, local businesses and community leaders come together to shape the economic future for their local area and for Northern Ireland as a whole. That is why we want to see these issues taken forward by a restored Executive.

To my frustration, however, it is necessary once again for Westminster to intervene to provide the necessary authorisations for expenditure in Northern Ireland in the continuing absence of an Executive and of a functioning Assembly. The finances of Northern Ireland Departments are in a critical state. The legal authority for the Northern Ireland civil service to spend is currently capped at approximately 70% of the opening position of the previous financial year’s budget—a spending cap that was approved by this House in March 2019. The Northern Ireland Audit Office and the public services ombudsman have already reached their cash limits, and the Department of Finance has been forced to issue two Departments with contingency funding. This temporary financial measure can be used on a very short-term basis to manage the smaller Departments running out of cash, but it is just not tenable for a significant number of Departments.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene. He reminded the House in his opening remarks that we have not had a functioning Assembly for almost three years. I am astonished and disappointed—and I am sure that the vast majority of the public in Northern Ireland will be extremely annoyed—that the Bill mentions the remuneration of MLAs yet again. I had a horrible feeling when the Secretary of State mentioned a review, when I challenged him about the continuation of MLAs’ salaries in Northern Ireland questions today. We have had a review. We had a review two years ago by Mr Reaney, who reported in December 2017. Two years on, we do not need more long grass dressed up and disguised as a review. Why does the Secretary of State hesitate in getting on and doing the right thing by the people of Northern Ireland, by cutting MLAs’ salaries? It is so obvious that he should be doing that.

Julian Smith: The hon. Lady raised that issue with me earlier today. I spoke to her three days ago about this review. I am on it, but as I said, I want to ensure that I balance the need to ensure that public expenditure is reduced with the fact that I want the Assembly up and running. I am not going to stand here and accept the premise that this Assembly and Executive cannot get up and running.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): As I mentioned in Northern Ireland questions today, many of our MLAs are doing a fantastic job through their offices. It is important that we keep that representation for the general public.

Julian Smith: It is indeed. There is so much more that they could do if they were in the Assembly, and we need to hang on to that over the coming weeks.

If Royal Assent is not granted by the end of October or as soon as possible thereafter, there is a risk that the Northern Ireland civil service will assess that the only way to continue to deliver public services in Northern Ireland is by exercising emergency powers under section 59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Using those emergency powers would constrain the Northern Ireland civil service to spending 95% of the previous year’s budget, effectively delivering a significant real-terms cut to the funding of public services. Northern Ireland Departments would have to consider their current budget allocation against their identified priorities and their available cash, which could put at risk essential services such as those within the health service.

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will be taking these steps very reluctantly, as I remember doing when I was in his post. He has highlighted the deals and the investment in various parts of Northern Ireland. I am conscious of investment in the north-west and promoting economic activity and opportunity in that part of Northern Ireland. Can he comment on the plans for a graduate medical school at the Ulster University Magee campus in Derry/Londonderry, which could promote a sense of skill and opportunity and secure the positive outcome that we would like to see for the north-west?

Julian Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He has worked hard to promote the merits of the Magee campus, as have others. I visited it only

two weeks ago. I am extremely committed to making that work, as I know he is. I think that we are close to a position where we can move that forward. It is a devolved matter, but there are things we can do, and we will continue to do them.

The Bill upholds our commitment to good governance in Northern Ireland by preventing the Northern Ireland civil service from having to rely on emergency section 59 powers. It is a budget set by the UK Government, but one that the Northern Ireland civil service must plan and implement. If Stormont gets back up and running within the financial year, the new Executive will be able to adjust the budget as they see fit and amend the legislation at the end of the financial year. The Bill does not authorise any new money. In the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly, it simply authorises spending money that has already been allocated by this Parliament in the UK estimates process, together with locally generated revenue.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I want to ask the Secretary of State about Barnett consequential from money that has been ring-fenced for special projects. One example is the high streets fund, to help our town centres in the United Kingdom. We got our Barnett consequential in Northern Ireland, but that money has been swallowed up by the Departments and used to plug holes in their budgets. We have not been able to ring-fence that money and ensure that money coming from the Exchequer is used for the intended purpose.

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Barnett consequential, whether of the spending review or of other allocations from this place and from Whitehall, are very difficult to attribute due to the lack of an Executive. We are seeing a sort of constipation in the system, as we have cash arriving but no decision making to spend that cash.

I shall now briefly turn to the Bill's contents, which largely rehearse what the former Secretary of State set out to this House in a written ministerial statement earlier this year. In short, the Bill authorises Northern Ireland Departments and certain other bodies to incur expenditure and use resources for the financial year ending on 31 March 2020.

Clause 1 will authorise the Northern Ireland Department of Finance to issue £5.3 billion out of the consolidated fund of Northern Ireland. The sums of money granted to Northern Ireland Departments and other bodies are set out in schedule 1, which also sets out the purposes for which the funds are to be used. The allocations in this budget reflect where the key pressures lie in Northern Ireland, building on discussions that the UK Government have had with the Northern Ireland civil service, the main parties in Northern Ireland and broader stakeholders, and, where possible, reflecting the previous Executive's priorities.

Clause 2 will authorise the temporary borrowing by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance of about £2.6 billion to safeguard against the possibility of a temporary deficiency in the consolidated fund of Northern Ireland. If used, this money would be repaid by 31 March 2020.

Clause 3 will authorise Northern Ireland Departments and other specified public bodies to use resources amounting to about £6 billion in the year ending 31 March 2020 for the purposes specified in schedule 2.

Clause 4 will set limits on the accruing resources, including both operating and non-operating accruing resources, that may be used in the current financial year. The Bill would normally have been taken through the Assembly. Clause 5 therefore includes a series of adaptations that ensure that, once approved by both Houses in Westminster, the Bill will be treated as though it was an Assembly budget Act.

Alongside the Bill, I have laid before the House, as a Command Paper, a set of main estimates for the Departments and bodies covered by this budget Bill. These estimates, which have been prepared by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance, set out the breakdown of resource allocation in greater detail than the schedules to the Bill.

This is a fair and balanced budget that provides a secure basis for protecting and preserving public services, with a real-terms increase in health and education spending and protections for frontline Departments delivering key public services, but the budget is not an easy one. It requires savings and efficiencies to enable Departments to live within their means, and it will fall to the Northern Ireland Departments to plan and prepare to take decisions to do just that. As I hope right hon. and hon. Members will agree, this is very much a minimal step to ensure that public services can continue to be provided in Northern Ireland for the full financial year.

As I conclude, I will set out once again a point that I have made several times before to this House. The UK Government are steadfastly committed to the Belfast agreement. Legislating on Northern Ireland budgetary matters at Westminster is not a step that I or my ministerial colleagues want to take—nor is it one that I would wish to take again. I am determined to restore the political institutions set out in the 1998 agreement and its successors at the earliest possible opportunity. On 14 October, the people of Northern Ireland had gone without a power-sharing devolved Government for 1,000 days. The continued failure to restore the Executive will bring extremely difficult choices about how to ensure effective governance in Northern Ireland.

4.44 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I say to the Secretary of State that we well understand why the fast-track process has to be used for this legislation as we approach the general election? Obviously, the needs of the people of Northern Ireland require that there is a budget to provide the vital services on which they depend. It does however make it all the more paradoxical—and, I think, shameful—that the same fast-track process was not available for the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill to make its way through Parliament. I hope that even at this late stage those words are echoed from the Secretary of State, who I know is sympathetic to the case, to the business managers, who have so callously let those people down. It is an embarrassment for him, but it is extremely difficult to justify the decisions of the business managers when everyone in the House would be prepared to make time available for that legislation.

The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) is in the Chamber. I remark on that simply because he was the Secretary of State when Stormont collapsed. Since then, we have recycled Secretaries of State and the paralysis in decision making in Northern Ireland continues.

[Tony Lloyd]

There are some technical issues that we ought to address. One of the questions in any budgetary process ought to be an account of value for money. However, there is almost no capacity for any form of scrutiny of the efficiency of the spend from this budget. That is as unacceptable to hon. Members from Northern Ireland and taxpayers in Northern Ireland as it is to taxpayers anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Value for money is fundamental to any form of Government spending or public spending, and the scrutiny required for that is not available for this budget.

Sammy Wilson: The shadow Secretary of State is making an important point about the inability to scrutinise the efficiency of the spend. Does he also accept that we do not even have a chance to look at the relevancy of the spend? Much of the spending that goes on in Departments is determined by decisions made by an Executive four years ago, and new priorities that are emerging in Northern Ireland do not get a chance to be considered because civil servants cannot initiate new measures.

Tony Lloyd: I have enormous sympathy with the point made by the right hon. Gentleman. One thing we do know is that there has been significant demographic change in Northern Ireland in the last three years. The population is growing increasingly elderly and the number of young people, in relative terms, is decreasing. Therefore, the decisions made by politicians those years back may still be relevant in some areas, but in others they are beginning to be stretched.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is currently not only a lack of scrutiny and reactivity, as outlined, but a lack of transparency? I have written to the head of the civil service on numerous occasions to ask about the additional money that goes into the Northern Ireland budget—I accept that it is by way of unhypothecated Barnett consequentials, which is not ring-fenced, and decisions must be made on where it goes—and I get a fairly stock response simply to say, “This is not ring-fenced. We will have discussions and civil servants will decide.” Civil servants have done nothing to open up their processes to scrutiny and transparency. It appears that they are still unaccountable to anybody. We now see this Bill, which outlines their decisions, rushed through this House with very limited scrutiny. It is letting down the people of Northern Ireland.

Tony Lloyd: Again, I have real sympathy with the point made by the hon. Lady. It is similar to the point made earlier by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) about ring-fencing of moneys for the high streets and the inability to trace those moneys. In fact, some time back I raised with the previous Secretary of State whether it would be possible to have an accountability mechanism whereby the Northern Ireland civil service would respond to questions from Members of this House so we could scrutinise its decisions for exactly those reasons and provide at least transparency, even if that would not necessarily lead to proper accountability of the spend made.

These are really important issues, and they would be important even in an annual budget. If this was the budget for a large local authority—the Greater Manchester Combined Authority budget or that of the London Mayor are, I suppose, equivalent to the budget of Northern Ireland—we would be astonished if we did not have the capacity to scrutinise it. I say to the Secretary of State that I think the time is coming when we will need to look again at how the scrutiny process takes place; that will not be resolved today, but clearly we have to look at it.

I have some questions for the Secretary of State. I should say that we do not intend to block the Bill in any way, shape or form. It is vital that it goes through, and the amount of time available does not allow for any rarefied debate about more than the general outlines. However, there are some issues that we must begin to address. I nearly quoted the permanent secretary at the Department of Health, but I shall paraphrase: he said that Northern Ireland has the money for a world-class health service, but it just does not have the money for the health service that Northern Ireland has. In that, he was referring to the fact that the Bengoa reforms, which would and could have transformed the health service in Northern Ireland, had not been implemented.

There are issues about areas where we know the spend is no longer adequate. We know, for example, that Northern Ireland now has longer waiting lists than any other part of this United Kingdom. We know that mental health provision is unacceptably poor in Northern Ireland; I have to say that it is poor in my own constituency, but it is nevertheless particularly bad in Northern Ireland. The chilling fact that more people have committed suicide since the end of the troubles than people died during the troubles gives some indication of the need for improvement in those services.

We know about social care and the demands on it—again, this addresses the point made by the right hon. Member for East Antrim. We know that the number of elderly people and the dependent elderly is growing all the time in Northern Ireland, just as it is in my own constituency, but the capacity of the budget to deal with those issues has remained largely unchanged. We know that education spending is no longer appropriate: Northern Ireland still has a high standard of results in its educational system, but too many people are now being left behind because of the inappropriate nature of the education service.

I would particularly like to continue the questions raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), which my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) raised in Question Time earlier. The Minister of State has used words like “the same refrain” when saying that the answer lies in getting devolved governance back. I understand that that is the long-term answer, but we are going to face a crisis for some individual families because of the exhaustion of the welfare mitigations. It is not simply about housing: it cuts across other areas of spend where those mitigations are protecting families now. The Secretary of State’s response was that he would look to see what could be done by him and the Northern Ireland Office. We have to look very closely at the Secretary of State and Northern Ireland Office working with the Northern Ireland civil service, and that is important.

Let me ask a specific question. Does this budget contain money for the Stormont House bodies? Those bodies ought to be set up imminently, of course, so money has to be made available for them. We need to know that the proper provisions are there. Equivalently, and this is also important, if the historical institutional abuse Bill is not going to come before Parliament immediately, I hope it will be introduced rapidly by whatever Government take their place after the election so that that legislation can come into operation. That means we need to see within this budgetary framework, resource available for HIA victims, who deserve not simply our compassion but our recognition and our financial support.

I need in that context to ask the following question. The Secretary of State has been very specific: he has undertaken to see whether it is possible in terms of welfare spend to use imagination around the powers that do exist. I wonder whether he will now begin to apply the same kind of imagination to see whether it is possible to create within the framework of the existing spending operations something that begins the process of reconciliation, even if it is just the simple acknowledgment of payment to victims of institutional abuse. Money clearly is not everything in that context, but if it is possible, even without the legislative framework, to find an imaginative way of making some form of payment, that would at least go some way to showing the willingness of the Government and the Secretary of State, which I know is there, to try to rectify the failure of the system and get this Bill through Parliament.

This Bill is important—I think everybody accepts that. Nobody is going to want to block the capacity for the structures to operate within Northern Ireland over the coming three months, so it is important that this is passed today before Parliament is dissolved. We will support the Secretary of State in moving it through Parliament, but there are some issues that he and his Department need to begin to look at and see whether there are at least some patches that can be applied that can make a material difference to those who would most suffer if we do not get the answers right.

4.56 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): That was a quicker speech than we thought it would be.

May I begin by briefly putting on the record that I think the House should have enormous appreciation for the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)? During my time in this place since 2015 he has been the steadfast rock with regard to Northern Ireland. I occasionally see him as the political equivalent of the Giant's Causeway—nobody quite knows why he is there or why he is that shape, but we know that things would not quite be the same if he was not there. The House will miss him, and his interest in and knowledge of the affairs of Northern Ireland and the politics of the island of Ireland will be missed. *[Interruption.]* Yes, he is going to be a tourist attraction in his own right—and is already listed, I believe, as an ancient monument.

Our thanks should also go to the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd). The idea of the Northern Ireland Office not having a Hurd somewhere near it is depressing and dispiriting, and I wish my right hon. Friend well. Although she is not in her place, as Chairman of the

Select Committee I ought to repeat what I said in Committee this morning and express my eternal thanks to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who has done so much on behalf of the communities of Northern Ireland over so many years.

I obviously support this budget. I echo entirely what the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) said, and I also echo the concerns of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) with regard to the welfare cliff that we canter towards in a slightly unguided, uncontrollable way.

I will not read it out, but page 5 of the explanatory notes to the Bill sets out clearly why fast-tracking is necessary. We appreciate the reasons why, and we can rehearse and rehearse and rehearse in a rather odd political version of the film “Groundhog Day” the comments, “I wish Stormont was back up and running...Ministers are doing all they can to achieve that...Parties stand ready to come back”, yet we never quite get that over the line.

While we fiddle with that issue, everybody is aware of the problems in Northern Ireland with regard to welfare, the downturn in education and the acute issues with healthcare. If we are serious, and if talking about Northern Ireland as a part of the Union is something beyond words and some sort of abstract, we should worry that we have allowed the eccentric to become the norm and allowed a mindset to develop whereby emergency legislation, sticking plasters and ad hoc solutions have to be found. If this was taking place in Scotland, Wales, North Dorset or any of the counties of England, we would be up in arms. Front-page articles would be written about it and questions would be asked all over the place. The fact that they are not is a cause for concern. How can we ever hope to make the politics of Northern Ireland and public service to its taxpayers as normal and as mainstream in Ballymena as one might find in Blandford Forum in my constituency? We are never going to make the progress on peace, reconciliation and confidence building that is so desperately required.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says. He mentioned welfare a few moments ago. That is of particular concern to many people in Northern Ireland, particularly with regard to welfare mitigation payments, which were negotiated by a member of my party when he was Minister. They give rise to great concern, because in four short months, those mitigation measures will fall away. We need to take steps immediately and urgently to deal with that problem.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. People in communities in Northern Ireland today will be worrying about the impacts of the end of the mitigations. They will be among the most vulnerable in the community, who have the least opportunity to ride even a temporary blip or gap in service provision, and they will be the hardest hit. We understand that we are adding to their justifiable reasons for concern and anxiety, because as well as Stormont not sitting, Westminster will not be sitting either. The ability of right hon. and hon. Members to hold the Secretary of State and his ministerial team to account on the Floor of the House, in a Select Committee or in Westminster Hall will be removed from us. A democratic deficit—an accountability vacuum—will be created for five or six weeks, and that presumes

[*Simon Hoare*]

that on 12 December, there is a clear-cut result that effectively allows something to resume on Monday 16 December.

We do not know what the result will be; we could be in for weeks of horse trading, with the usually happy time of Christmas and the new year elongating the window when no decisions are taken into early in the new year. Those who can least afford any hardship are likely to be facing it, and having their burden of woe added to, without having any democratic forum in which their concerns can be expressed and the decisions—or lack of decisions—taken by Ministers can be questioned and challenged. That is the icing on the cake of the democratic deficit that is now becoming the norm, and of the tendency to deal with Northern Ireland as a perpetual emergency, which is subliminally, if you will, undermining the path of peace and civil stability that we all wish to see. We have to be careful: we are allowing this psychologically to become the norm.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: Of course, I give way to my hon. and gallant Friend.

Bob Stewart: I do not feel very gallant.

I seem to recall that two Secretaries of State ago I sat in this House and heard that direct rule would have to be imposed very soon, and here we are, 18 months later, still not there. The people of Northern Ireland must be really fed up with the fact that we cannot give them proper governance. Please, let us have direct rule if we cannot get the Executive working again.

Simon Hoare: I have enormous sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. Again, if these were normal times, that would probably have happened, but as we all know, when it comes to the delivery of politics and services in Northern Ireland, we push one and we pull the other, and it is a bit like water in a balloon: it moves around and alters but the shape remains vaguely identifiable. In theory, direct rule would be a good thing, bringing decision making and delivering policy change in real time for real communities, but of course that would provide grist to the mill of those, including some in the nationalist community, who like to castigate the British Government and say, “This is just the big imperial mother Parliament flexing her muscles and exerting herself”. So it is not, I am afraid, as easy as just deploying direct rule, as desirable as that would be for service output.

My hon. Friend is right, however, that at some point somebody will have to take a decision, and how we mitigate things would then depend on that decision, because this perpetual coma, limbo, purgatory—call it what you will—is not sustainable. These are citizens we should consider equal to ourselves on the mainland. This disruption in the delivery of governance, which we would not support or sustain for more than three weeks were it an English county division, cannot be allowed to become the norm any more. At some point, somebody will have to be brave and take a decision, knowing full well that we can please some of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time.

5.8 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): While we welcome the Bill, in so far as it is necessary, we most certainly do not welcome the circumstances in which Parliament has to legislate. I listened to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), and he made some very important points. It is ironic that Members of Parliament elected to this House from constituencies in Northern Ireland who refuse to take their seats, and therefore do not involve themselves in the process, are the very people responsible for the fact that we are dealing with this legislation today and that we have limited ability to scrutinise it. There is only one party in Northern Ireland refusing to form a Government, and that party is Sinn Féin.

Mr Gregory Campbell: My right hon. Friend is drawing attention to a matter that has been raised numerous times. Does he agree that, to add insult to injury, what does not get mentioned very often, in the House or outside, is the fact that the House pays those Members not to attend and represent their constituents and gives them expenses for office costs, flights and hotel bills?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I appreciate that intervention. I know that from time to time Members express concerns about the pay of Members of the Legislative Assembly. I rarely hear a concern expressed about the paid lobbyists of Sinn Féin who are omnipresent in the coffee shops or outside on the Green but are absent from these green Benches, failing to fulfil their responsibilities to their constituents. Yet they alone are responsible for Northern Ireland's not having a functioning Executive.

On 21 October—this month—the Assembly met, and representatives of a number of parties turned up. Shamefully, representatives of Sinn Féin were not among them. They absented themselves, and I have to say with some regret that the Alliance party also absented itself. This is the party that describes itself as the bridge builder, the party to bring people together, but on an occasion when we were bringing our elected representatives together at Stormont to try to break the logjam, the bridge builders were nowhere to be seen. They were absent without leave.

I hear lectures from some Alliance party representatives about how we should be doing this and that and restoring Stormont, but when they had an opportunity to show their presence and highlight the fact that Sinn Féin alone is holding the people of Northern Ireland to ransom, yet again the Alliance party gave Sinn Féin political cover by absenting itself from Stormont.

Emma Little Pengelly: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is an issue about which many people in all communities in Northern Ireland care very deeply? People are very concerned, because they do not know about the details that have led the Secretary of State to present regulations relating to the termination of pregnancies. Those who did not turn up, or who refused to go into that Chamber, did not just deny any democratic accountability in respect of that decision; they even closed down basic debate because they disagreed with another party's stance, and some other people's stance, on the issue. That is shameful. They should have at least facilitated debate, because the people of Northern Ireland wanted that.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have said this before, but I will keep putting it on the record because it needs to be said, lest the perception be created that somehow this is a problem that goes beyond Sinn Féin. Yes, there are difficulties in Northern Ireland that need to be resolved. Yes, there are issues that need to be addressed. But the people of Northern Ireland elected their Members of the Legislative Assembly to go to Stormont and sort those issues out. The place in which to do that is the forum that was created under the Belfast agreement for the very purpose of resolving our difficulties.

For our part, the Democratic Unionist party wants to see Stormont functioning properly. If the Secretary of State, or the Speaker, or whoever, wants to convene the Assembly on any day, we will be there. We will appoint our Ministers, we will elect an Executive, we will play our full part. But our Assembly Members are being penalised, and I have to say, with the greatest respect to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), that there is not a single Democratic Unionist MLA in Northern Ireland who does not want to be doing their full work at Stormont. In fact, we are losing good people because they cannot do their job.

I have a concern—others may not, but I do—about what this means for the political class in Northern Ireland. If we are dissuading people from becoming involved in politics, that is not good for the future of Northern Ireland, and it is not good for the development of the political process. I understand the sentiment that leads people to say, “Cut their pay”, but I think it a little unfair for all the Assembly Members to be punished because one political party refuses to do its duty and play its part in that political process, and is holding the rest of us to ransom.

Bob Stewart: I seem to recall that the Belfast agreement was fully signed up to by Sinn Féin, which should have guaranteed that it would be present in the Assembly.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for his continued interest in Northern Ireland matters, which is deeply appreciated. We wish him well in the election.

Bob Stewart: Et vous!

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Thank you. We will be back.

It is frustrating that we find ourselves in this situation, and I have a lot of sympathy for the Secretary of State for having to perform these functions, but I want to echo the comments of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who made the point earlier when he intervened on the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) that this cannot continue indefinitely. This is not how democracy should function.

Emma Little Pngelly: Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the issue about the pay of MLAs is ironic? We have raised an issue about political donations many times with the Secretary of State, and it is that Sinn Féin fundraises huge amounts of money outside the United Kingdom—in the United States and in other places—which it can use to sustain its operation, but it is the party that is preventing every other MLA from getting back to work. This needs to be addressed urgently.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is an impact on the political process in Northern Ireland when we have one party that receives funding from international sources, which skews the political system. That is something that we have consistently pressed the Government to address, and they have not yet done that.

Sammy Wilson: Does my right hon. Friend not find it ironic that when Sinn Féin raises those funds in America and other parts of the world, they can be used for the purposes of promoting the party in the United Kingdom but not in the Republic of Ireland? That is because the Government of the Republic of Ireland have had more guts in dealing with Sinn Féin than this Government here at Westminster have had.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It goes further than that. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Beckenham, I believe that we have not had direct rule reintroduced because Sinn Féin objects to it. On the one hand, it will not allow us to function as an Assembly and an Executive; on the other hand, it says that we cannot have direct rule. There is surely an irony there. The party that calls itself republican and objects to so-called British rule in Ireland is the party responsible for this Parliament having to exercise its authority to agree budgets and take legislative decisions. That is entirely down to Sinn Féin. It speaks out of both sides of its mouth. On the one hand, it is the ultimate republican party demanding an end to the British presence. Incidentally, that includes myself and all my right hon. and hon. Friends. It does not want us to be British. It does not want our British identity to be exercised, despite the fact that it has signed up to agreements that supposedly respect that. It does not respect this Parliament. Just this morning I heard Sinn Féin say that one of the slogans for this election will be to ditch Westminster. So, we have ditched the Assembly, and we have ditched the Executive—let’s ditch Westminster! What are we going to be left with to provide government within Northern Ireland? This is a ridiculous situation and it cannot go on.

I say to the Minister and to the Secretary of State that in the next Parliament we cannot continue with this situation with the absolute minimum of decisions being taken to pass budgets, when we do not have proper scrutiny of government in Northern Ireland. It is not right, and my colleagues have made that clear. I shall give one little example, and it relates to the education budget in Northern Ireland. I think there would be cross-party support for more funding going into special educational needs in Northern Ireland, yet we are frustrated in being able to influence those kinds of decisions, because we do not have an Assembly. There are parents in my constituency—and, I am sure, in those of all other right hon. and hon. Members from Northern Ireland—who are desperate to have adequate educational support for their children, but we cannot change the way in which the budget is spent because we do not have proper opportunity for scrutiny. That is just wrong, and it cannot continue.

I am proud of what the Democratic Unionist party has delivered in this Parliament for Northern Ireland: additional funding for public services, reform of our health service, and more money for our schools and for

[*Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson*]

infrastructure projects. All those things are important, but it is extremely frustrating that we are not always able to influence how that additional funding is spent. That is difficult to explain to my constituents, because they expect their Member of Parliament to be able to influence those things. We are neither one thing nor the other. We do not have direct rule from Westminster, and we do not have devolution in Northern Ireland. We are in this kind of—

Bob Stewart: Limbo.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Limbo; the hon. Member for North Dorset described it as another thing earlier. I cannot accept that for my constituents. This is not British democracy functioning for the people of Northern Ireland. I have every sympathy with the Secretary of State, and I commend his and his team's efforts to bring the parties together to try to get an accommodation and to try to restore devolved government. We do not believe that the fault for that lies at the foot of the Secretary of State; it lies at the door of Connolly House in west Belfast, the headquarters of Sinn Féin, which is responsible for us having no Government.

I will briefly touch on two particular aspects of the budget, both of which speak to public safety in Northern Ireland. The first is the Police Service of Northern Ireland. One of the successes in recent years has been the progress in the level of public support for policing in Northern Ireland and the transformation of the police service. However, having met the Chief Constable recently, I am worried about police numbers. I know that the Government have said that they are recruiting more police officers—it is a big part of their platform for the general election—and I know that the PSNI is engaged in some recruitment, but the demographics and the turnover of experienced police officers are not being matched by recruitment. We will want to sit down with the Government after the general election to look at that, because there is a need to increase the number of officers available for community policing, which is crucial for the continuation of public confidence in policing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The Police Federation for Northern Ireland gave evidence at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee this morning, and I asked a series of questions about the required number of police personnel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, looking at policing both in the past and at present, we appear to need in excess of 1,000 additional personnel?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is what the Police Federation for Northern Ireland and the Chief Constable have been saying, so we need to consider police officers and the recruitment process.

My final point on public safety relates to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which is headquartered at Lisburn in my constituency and comes under the remit of the Department of Health. Of course, the Department has enormous pressures on its budget and on how it manages staff, so I have every sympathy, and the priority in the Department must be the health service and health service reform. However, I am nevertheless concerned about the downwards trend in funding for the Northern

Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. In 2019-20, the budget for the fire and rescue service is £74.1 million, but it was £81.6 million in 2011-12, so there has been a significant cut.

Earlier today, we had a debate on the report on the tragic circumstances of the fire at Grenfell Tower. None of us wants to see that kind of situation, but the cuts in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service leave me concerned, as a public representative, about its capacity to respond to that kind of emergency situation. I will not go into all the detail of how those cuts are having an impact, but they are.

We have seen whole-time crews cut in Northern Ireland, which means that in many locations crews cannot deploy without part-time firefighters being available to provide them with the full complement they need to attend an incident. That is a matter of concern. That is in no way to question the professionalism of part-time firefighters—far from it—but it is an unsatisfactory situation for the fire and rescue service to be in, because it can result in delays while full-time fire crews wait for their part-time colleagues to arrive before they can respond to an incident.

That is having an impact on response times for fire crews in Carrickfergus, Portadown in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson), Omagh, Enniskillen, Newtownards in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and Armagh. The cuts are also having an impact in Londonderry. It concerns us that the capacity of the fire and rescue service to respond to major incidents is being diminished in Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My right hon. Friend has outlined a number of towns where fire services will be cut. Does he share my annoyance and concern over the reductions in the fire service in towns that are growing, with a population growth of some 10%, 15% or even 20%?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Indeed I do. I have made the point that the population of Northern Ireland has increased in the period I quoted.

We welcome the progress that has been made. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service does a great job at fire prevention. Its fire safety talks in schools and to community groups have been very successful. Nevertheless, I am concerned that if we have major incidents in Northern Ireland, like we had at the Primark building in the centre of Belfast, the capacity of our fire crews to respond and the specialist equipment that needs to be deployed will have been diminished as a result of the cuts.

Gavin Robinson: My right hon. Friend is right to mention critical incidents. Although he did not refer specifically to cuts in my constituency, the Knock fire station is one of those that houses an aerial appliance, which is crucial for high-rises in the city of Belfast and for Belfast City airport in my constituency. It is important that we not only plan for critical incidents, but have the crews available to resource the appliances that are required.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the capacity and ability of the fire and rescue service to respond to major incidents such as one—though we would never want it to happen—at Belfast City airport.

I give that illustration simply to make the point that I would like my Assembly Members and those who represent the towns and cities that I have mentioned to be able to scrutinise properly how our budgets are being allocated and spent, and to consider the impact on public safety as they do so, as any legislator or political representative would. They are denied the opportunity to do that, and we cannot do it on their behalf properly or effectively. This is not a criticism of any Department or of the civil servants who are making the decisions, but the civil servants themselves would say that the absence of that political input is harmful. It is to the detriment of the people of Northern Ireland.

We cannot go on like this. The current situation is not fair on the people of Northern Ireland. If the Government are returned after the general election, I hope that we will be able to sit down, and if there is not the basis for restoring devolution—if the political parties cannot reach an accommodation—we will take some tough but right decisions to give a degree of accountability and scrutiny back to the political process in Northern Ireland through this Parliament.

5.30 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I shall be extremely brief, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I am very conscious that some of our colleagues from Northern Ireland also wish to speak and we have a time limit.

I want thoroughly to endorse the contributions of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) as to the difficulties the House is placed in now by this process, whereby we are not able to scrutinise properly the expenditure of the Northern Ireland Departments. When we had the equivalent legislation 18 months ago, I tabled amendments seeking to curtail the expenditure on the prosecution of our military veterans. In the 18 months since I withdrew those amendments, we have seen those prosecutions continue and, indeed, accelerate, in quite an arbitrary way and, as usual, in a very unfair way, in that members of the armed forces are being put first in the firing line.

I am therefore extremely pleased by the progress that has been made by the new Government since July. The consultation has finished and we have had the commitment in the Queen's Speech to legislation, a commitment repeated again by the Prime Minister today. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to continue to make progress on that, to see whether it is possible to construct some presumption against prosecution in cases that were too long ago, in cases that have already been investigated and in cases where there is no new evidence. I would add a fourth criterion: where a member of the armed forces genuinely believed he was doing his duty. None the less, I welcome the progress that has been made and I very much hope the Minister will reassure me that we will soon proceed to early legislation, because, as I said when I spoke in the House 18 months ago, this issue is not going to go away, however difficult and complex it is. From my time in the Ministry of Defence, I understand the difficulties that the Northern Ireland Office is faced with in trying to resolve it, but this issue will not go away and I hope the Minister will reassure me that progress really will be made at the beginning of the next Parliament.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I say that I must bring in the Front Benchers at 5.40 pm?

5.32 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, let me say that the Secretary of State is being very optimistic if he thinks this is the last time he will be bringing such a Bill to this House. I have listened to every Secretary of State over the past three years who has brought the budget Bill to the Floor of the House say that they hoped it would be the last time. They have even had the same Northern Ireland Office line in their speech that, "We are close to getting an agreement on the restoration of the Assembly." I really do think it is time that instead of listening to the Sinn Féin spin that comes from the NIO, he looks at the reality on the ground, which is this: despite the fact that the absence of an Assembly hurts Sinn Féin's constituents greatly, Sinn Féin still refuses to go back into the Assembly.

We have heard here today about the mitigations on welfare reform. A recent survey found that most of the people who will be hurt will be in Sinn Féin constituencies, yet Sinn Féin is still happy to plough on and face the end of this financial year, when people will be hit with huge bills because housing benefit will be reduced and some of the other mitigation measures that were put in place will no longer be there. Yet still Sinn Féin says that we are not going to have the Assembly.

We have heard here today about something that would benefit a Sinn Féin constituency. I happen to think it is a wrong decision, although I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) will disagree with me on this—I am referring to putting a medical school into Londonderry. There are good arguments—including the economies of scale and other benefits—for saying that we should just enlarge the one at Queen's University. I guarantee that had Ministers been in place in the Assembly, we would already have the medical school in Londonderry, yet Sinn Féin are quite happy to sit it out and see a Sinn Féin constituency without that important facility that would bring a lot of benefits to that constituency, although it might not be the best thing for Northern Ireland as a whole.

We have heard time and again in this place about the victims of historical abuse. Martin McGuinness drove that work forward, yet the closure of the Assembly has denied those people the justice and support that they thought they would get. Sinn Féin are still unmoving and will not go back into the Assembly.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. It will not come as a galloping shock for him to hear that I have been campaigning for the medical school in Londonderry. Does he agree that what Sinn Féin are really worried about is having a whole new electorate that would not vote for them in a tight marginal seat?

Sammy Wilson: That may well be the case. On the face of it, Sinn Féin say they support the idea, but they are quite happy to sit out the Assembly so that no decision is made on it.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) pointed out, the Assembly met recently because of the whole issue of changes in

[Sammy Wilson]

respect of abortion law, which exercises tens of thousands of Sinn Féin supporters who come from a Catholic tradition, yet Sinn Féin sat out the Assembly rather than go in to address the issue. If the Secretary of State thinks Sinn Féin are just on the brink of going into the Assembly then, to use a Northern Ireland colloquialism, his head is full of sweetie mice. It is not going to happen. They have shown time and again that they are not prepared to make that decision, even when it is unpopular with their own electorate.

That brings me to the inadequacy of what we are doing today. The Secretary of State has made it quite clear that there is no additional money for Northern Ireland; the Bill will simply ensure that, of the money allocated in the budget, the remaining part that was not allocated when we last debated these issues will now be made available to see us through to the end of the financial year.

The Bill does, though, have a substantial impact on Northern Ireland. People have mentioned the lack of scrutiny. Of course, this is not the only way in which the budget is scrutinised. Had the Assembly been up and running, the permanent secretaries, Ministers and officials of each Department to which money is allocated in the Bill would have been brought before committees and asked about how the money was being spent. Is it being spent efficiently? Is there the transparency mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly)? Is the money being spent on things that are relevant, or should it be allocated in different ways? But none of those committees is meeting.

We then find that, for example, in the Department for Communities, there are at a rough count 51 different heads of expenditure. Are they all necessary? Have changes occurred in Northern Ireland over the past four years that mean we perhaps should have focused spending in different ways? In the Department for the Economy, there are more than 60 different heads of spending. Some of those may have been relevant four years ago, but are they as relevant today? Should some of them not be raised in priority and some dropped in priority? That scrutiny does not happen. The global sums are given, and the civil servants will spend them as they see fit.

Of course, the civil servants do not have the decision to make and cannot make decisions on huge changes. All they can do, even with the legislation available to them, is spend money on the basis of decisions that were made four years ago. Any new initiatives cannot be taken by civil servants. For example, the £140 million that went on mitigations in welfare reform would have to be found by cutting back on other programmes. Civil servants are not going to make those decisions; Ministers must make those decisions. The Minister cannot run away from that. He must accept that those changes and that stepping in will be necessary, which is why we must get a grip on this.

The one point that the Minister had promised to make during his speech and did not make—this has been raised time and again by my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and myself with Treasury Ministers and with the Secretary of State—is to do with the whole issue of housing associations and the fact that they cannot currently access financial

transactions capital of which the Northern Ireland Executive does have surplus, but cannot spend, because there is no outlet for it.

Have we not yet had the legislation because various Northern Ireland Departments—the Department for Communities, the Department of Finance or the Northern Ireland Office—have been dragging their feet? Or does the problem remain here at Westminster, with the Treasury not taking this matter forward? It is important that we find out, because this issue will affect capital spending in Northern Ireland.

I know that you want me to finish, Mr Deputy Speaker, but let me just say to the Secretary of State that the Government cannot dodge the issue. If we do not have an Assembly, or any prospect of an Assembly—Sinn Féin have no intention of allowing us to have an Assembly—decisions will have to start being made here.

5.41 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is a source of great sadness to me and, I think, to everyone both inside and outside the Chamber tonight that such an important piece of legislation is being discussed so briefly. It is also a source of sadness that we have to legislate in this House for matters, which, entirely, should be the province of Northern Ireland. I am also concerned that we are probably failing in the scrutiny process. I am not sure that we reach the highest standards. I understand the need for fast-track legislation, but I was intrigued to see in the explanatory notes that, because of the urgency, there was no opportunity for the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to consider the matter in full; instead it has received an informal technical briefing from the Northern Ireland Office. I think that we should place on record our concern that this form of consultation, by way of a technical briefing, is something that we should resist except in extremis.

I pay credit to the officials in the Northern Ireland Office for producing an extraordinary, well-made piece of work here. The amount of effort that has gone into this is quite remarkable and it does bear examination. It is extremely interesting that, over and again in the Bill, we see that expenditure is required as a result of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union and related services. Some of them are quite extraordinary. The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission requires a modest £11 million, which has to go towards

"enhancing public awareness and involvement in the working of the Assembly".

That is money well spent. Then we have £3 million for the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and £868,000 for the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation—I wonder whether there might be a quango in there for me somewhere in the months ahead. Who knows?

The fact remains that this is crucial stuff, and in the extraordinary, passionate and well-informed speech of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), he absolutely put his finger on it. We should be talking about the issues that matter to the people of Northern Ireland. We should not be allocating funds to the Assembly Commission; we should be talking about the health service, about social services and about education.

Mike Kane: Talking about being passionate and well-informed, I think the whole House will join me in paying tribute to my hon. Friend, as he is at the Dispatch

Box today for possibly the last time. He has been one of the finest Members to grace this House and a friend to many. He will be sorely missed once he finally leaves this Chamber.

Stephen Pound: I am not entirely sure that I accept that. I am obviously grateful to my good friend and colleague. However, I was slightly knocked back by the extraordinary comment of the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who compared me with a prehistoric ruin on the North Antrim coast. I am quite proud to be compared with the Giant's Causeway, but if I were to be any feature of the Northern Irish landscape, I prefer to think of myself as Carrickfergus castle, a doughty defender of Northern Ireland. That would also enable me to keep an eye on the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) on a regular basis.

Time is very short. We have heard excellent contributions, not just from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset, but also from the right hon. Members for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), for Lagan Valley and for East Antrim.

As has been intimated, this will be the last occasion at which I stand at the Dispatch Box. I am delighted that it is on an issue that means so much—an issue that has come to dominate my life in many ways, but one that I willingly allow to so do. If there is one thing that typifies what could be best about this House, it is the way in which we are so often united on this subject. Equally, this issue typifies the House at our worst, because we seem to be incapable of resolving it. I would have hoped that my last appearance at the Dispatch Box would have been to say that a restored Assembly and Executive are now taking the lead in Northern Ireland. It may be said that I have my head full of wee sweetie mice; I do not know. I like to think that I am an optimist, and I like to think that the great people of Northern Ireland can respond to that optimism, step up to the mark and show what they can achieve.

My colleagues and I will not oppose this Bill tonight. Reluctantly, we support it. We pay tribute to the Ministers who have brought this legislation forward, all the Northern Ireland Members and particularly the officials and officers of the NIO, who have done such an extraordinary amount of work. May they soon be able to return to the work that they should be doing, where they should be doing it. In the meantime, all I can do is to say thank you and goodnight.

5.46 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd): May I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)? I previously served for a long time with a shadow brief, and I would say the key thing is to care about it, and the hon. Gentleman does deeply and that comes through. He has earned a great deal of respect across the House in that position. Tonight he has been compared to on historical monument—listed or listing, I was not sure—but of course he also represents a constituency that has the magnificent Ealing pyramids. Surely this may be time for the good people of Ealing to consider commissioning a statue to sit alongside them. I thank him for his service and for his very kind remarks about officials, who often do not get the appreciation they deserve.

I thank the Labour Front Bench and the DUP for their constructive approach to the Bill. Whatever we feel about the circumstances of why and when we are here, it is recognised that this Bill is necessary—otherwise, emergency powers will have to be used that will see the people of Northern Ireland short-changed in terms of their public services, and we cannot allow that. This Bill is absolutely necessary, and I thank Labour and the DUP for their recognition of that. However, the debate did reflect a great deal of frustration across the House about the state of democracy in Northern Ireland at this moment in time. The Secretary of State expressed his frustration, although of course I will never be able to look at him in the same light now that I know his head is full of sweetie mice.

Stephen Pound: I think it would be appropriate at this time to mention the debt of gratitude that the House owes to the right hon. Member for South Ruislip and Northwood, who is also leaving the House. I just want to place on record the Opposition's appreciation for his work. In the short time that he has held this brief, he has immersed himself in it and has won the respect of Members on both sides of the Chamber. We wish him well and thank him for his service to date.

Mr Hurd: I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I do not want to appear churlish, but in fact I am the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, although I am sure that the current Member for South Ruislip—the Prime Minister—will be grateful for the appreciation shown.

The central theme of this excellent debate was one of profound frustration at the state of democracy in Northern Ireland. This was reflected by the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, who raised important issues about the quality of scrutiny available—a point reflected passionately on the DUP Benches, not least by the right hon. Members for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who I have heard speak passionately about his tour of Northern Ireland, again expressed frustration about direct rule. The Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), spoke really well in warning against tolerance of a new norm around the listless process of decision making that we are in. That is not to denigrate in any way the hard work of civil servants in Northern Ireland. I could not have higher regard for David Sterling and his team there. They are in a very difficult situation and they do a difficult job.

In the time remaining, I should respond quickly to some specific and very important points, particularly around mitigation of welfare reforms, which was also touched on in oral questions. There is a significant issue approaching in terms of the so-called cliff edge in March 2020. That is a very serious matter, given that we are talking about mitigations that help to support many thousands of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. There are powers available to the relevant Department, but they present administrative challenges and are sub-optimal as a response. The best response is through the law, and the best way of doing that is through the Northern Ireland Executive. I hope that the shadow Secretary of State heard the response of the Secretary of State and is willing to lean in on that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): That is very good. I would say that the shadow Minister will be missed in all parts of the House.

5.50 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the allocation of time motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Question (Order, this day).

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Northern Ireland Budget Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE *in the Chair*]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):

I can inform the Committee that one amendment to the Bill has been tabled. Copies are available in the Vote Office. I have not selected the amendment for debate.

Clause 1

ISSUE OF SUM OUT OF THE CONSOLIDATED FUND FOR
THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2020 AND
APPROPRIATION OF THAT SUM

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider clauses 2 to 7 and schedules 1 and 2 stand part.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd): In speaking to clause 1 stand part, I will also try to address very briefly the issue of housing associations, which I did not have time to do in my closing speech on Second Reading.

Clause 1 authorises the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland the sum of just over £5.3 billion. The allocation levels for each Northern Ireland Department and the other bodies in receipt of these funds are set out in schedule 1, which also states the purpose for which the funds are to be used. The authorisations and appropriations in this clause are a balance to complete in addition to the vote on account previously authorised in section 4 and in column 2 of schedule 3 of the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2019.

I will now address the issue of housing associations out of respect to previous comments made. The Government, to be very clear, recognise the absolute importance of housing associations as the main mechanism for delivery of social and affordable homes. We agree 100% that classification as public sector has serious implications for their funding stream, for the reasons cited in the debate. We completely agree, therefore, that action must be taken, and the Government are committed to taking forward legislation to facilitate reclassification as soon as parliamentary time allows. I hope that the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) will realise that standing here today on the brink of an election I do not feel I can give a guarantee of a specific time, but I can say that this will be a priority for this Government, if re-elected, and that officials are continuing to work closely with officials in Northern Ireland to facilitate it.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Perhaps the Minister could give us some clarity. In the past, we have been told that the reason why the legislation could not come forward is that it had not been properly prepared by either the Department for Communities or the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland. Then we were told that it had to come through the Northern Ireland Office. Has the legislation been prepared by the appropriate Department in Northern Ireland? Has it been approved to come forward to the Treasury here in Westminster? If it has reached that stage, when did it reach that stage? If it has not, what are the impediments?

Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I am informed that officials have been making preparations to facilitate its introduction. I can confirm that a draft Bill exists and has been translated into the Westminster format, and NIO officials continue to work closely with officials in the Department for Communities and the Cabinet Office to make further progress towards introduction. I have spoken to the permanent secretary in the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland, and I know that she is extremely enthusiastic to see this through, as we are. I regret that I cannot give an absolute guarantee of an exact time when this will happen. The hon. Member for Belfast East will know why that is the case, but I am clear that the good will and the commitment are there, because we recognise the fundamental importance of the issue raised and the ramifications of the existing classifications.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I want to repeat something I raised earlier. I do not necessarily expect the Minister to give a response in this debate, but perhaps we could get some kind of response today. Once again, this relates to the situation of the victims of institutional abuse. If we are not going to see the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill brought through the House of Commons, is there any capacity in the Consolidated Fund to make some form of payment, to at least acknowledge the fact that those victims of institutional abuse exist and that they suffered? It would be, we could say, a down payment. Is there legal capacity for the Secretary of State, the NIO or the Northern Ireland civil service to authorise that kind of payment?

Mr Hurd: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. He asked about that on Second Reading, and I apologise for not having the time to respond directly. On his broader question, I can confirm that this budget is putting on a sound legal basis the draft budget debated earlier for this financial year. The short answer to his question is that it does not include provisions for the implementation of the Stormont House agreement institutions, and it does not include consideration of the consequences of implementing the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill. I wholly agree, as I know the Secretary of State would, that that Bill must be a priority for Governments of any colour. The hon. Gentleman asked for some creativity or flexibility in terms of a down payment. I am not authorised to put something definitive on the record, but I know that the Secretary of State and the team have heard that and will look to discuss it with the Northern Ireland civil service. I do not have a black and white answer to that question, but it is certainly noted.

I want to acknowledge the point made about the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley is right: the PSNI is a success story, and we cannot afford for it to go backwards. As a former Minister for police in England and Wales and a former Minister for the fire service, I found myself largely in agreement with the sentiments he expressed about the need to ensure that the police service has the resources it needs and about the challenges of the recruitment process in the modern age.

Sammy Wilson: I want to come back to the point about housing association classification, because the Minister was not clear in his answer. The legislation has

been prepared—I got that bit—but is it still being held by the Northern Ireland Office and therefore not transferred to the relevant Department that has to take it through here at Westminster, or has it been transferred to the relevant Department at Westminster and there simply has not been parliamentary time? That is important.

Mr Hurd: With respect to the right hon. Gentleman, if I was not clear enough before, I am not going to get any clearer now. The language in the document in front of me tells me that this is an extremely co-operative process. I do not think that the legislation is stuck in the NIO or the NICS, which is his concern. Everything here tells me that officials are working closely with the Department for Communities, the NIO and the Cabinet Office to make further progress towards introduction. I will go away and take further advice on that, but there is nothing here that tells me there is a hard impediment; it is just that I cannot, with any good faith, stand here and give a firm timetable under the circumstances we are in.

6 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Minister will be aware, because we had Northern Ireland questions before Prime Minister's questions earlier today, that the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) asked the Prime Minister directly for a commitment about the legislation to compensate the victims of appalling historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland. We have a moral responsibility to compensate those victims, and we cannot allow the five weeks of a general election to prevent them receiving the compensation that is long overdue to them. I am alarmed at the response the Minister gave to the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland because he seemed to be ambivalent about that legislation coming through before the general election. I want the Minister to give a clear, unequivocal commitment to the victims of historical institutional abuse that that legislation will—will—come through this House before this House is dissolved next week.

Mr Hurd: I do not think I can give that hard guarantee to the hon. Lady. I know exactly why she is pressing me for it, and I have huge sympathy with what she is saying—and I know sympathy does not cut it—but she will know that parliamentary time is now extremely limited. It may well be, as I think Lord Ashton has indicated in the Lords today, that there is not time for the Bill to pass through both Houses. However, the hon. Lady certainly has my assurance—and I believe I speak on behalf of the Secretary of State; the hon. Lady knows how passionately he feels about this—that this will be tested very hard by us.

The hon. Lady will also know, given the importance and the sensitivity of the Bill, that we must obviously make sure it is properly considered so that victims of institutional abuse in Northern Ireland get the redress they deserve as quickly as possible. That is not a light consideration; it does require some proper scrutiny. I do not think anyone in the House is happy either that we are in the situation we are in with this Bill or about the absence of the HIA Bill, but we are where we are with the parliamentary time being extremely limited.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister just clarify this for us if he can? If the HIA legislation is not brought forward and this Parliament finishes on

[Jim Shannon]

Tuesday, as it probably will, does that mean all that legislation falls, and are we just to start again next time around? If so, that is appalling.

Mr Hurd: I agree that it would be extremely regrettable, but if that is the situation, it is for the new Government, of whatever colour, to establish their priorities. What I can say, having spoken to the Secretary of State about it, is that we have a deep commitment to doing this. It is a priority for all the reasons that we have stated. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) talked about a moral responsibility, and of course she is absolutely right.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Given what the Minister has said, may I urge him to do two things? First, will he try to get clarification about this issue as quickly as possible? Right now, the many survivors of terrible abuse will be deeply upset and worried, and they need to have clarity. If we can get that tonight, that would be good. Secondly, we have heard reference to an interim payment, and if it is not possible to put forward the detailed legislation, would it be possible to take through a much simpler piece of legislation with an accelerated passage, as is being done with this Bill today? That would at least give the Secretary of State or somebody the ability to make payments—simple payments—and then, after the election, the detailed process could kick in, because many of these victims are in desperate need.

Mr Hurd: I understand completely the points being made from various people in the Committee and the underlying reasons and motivation. I have a huge amount of sympathy, and I give an undertaking to try to establish some clarity this evening or first thing tomorrow morning, so that everyone knows where they stand, and we will do that through the normal channels.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) *rose*—

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am always very lenient because I want to allow Members to broaden the debate a little, but I do not want to diverge from where we should be at the Committee stage; hence I want to save time for Third Reading to allow Members to broaden it further. I believe the Minister is giving way to Gavin Robinson.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you, Sir Lindsay. When the Bill to make restitution payments in some part to victims of HIA passed its Second Reading in the House of Lords, was there an associated carry-over motion? Is there any certainty that the Bill will be resurrected in the new Parliament? Can the Minister give us some clarity on that?

Mr Hurd: I will try to give the House some clarity, ideally before the end of Third Reading.

Gavin Robinson: I will be brief, given the need to move on to Third Reading. You mentioned, Sir Lindsay, that an amendment to the Bill had been tabled, and I want to place on record my thanks for the positive and dextrous way in which you and the Public Bill Office considered it. I also thank the Minister for his response on Co-Ownership.

I recognise that the Minister is constrained in giving a definitive timescale for passing legislation, but I want to make it clear that the commitment he gave this evening was given to me in exactly the same debate a year ago. A promise and commitment was given then to rectify this small, discrete issue. Of course, the Ministers who gave that commitment are no longer Ministers. The Minister realises that I hold him in high regard, but with the greatest respect, he will not be here to follow through his pledge.

We need certainty. I asked whether there would be a carry-over motion for the HIA Bill because HIA victims need certainty. It would be an appalling dereliction if the House of Lords did not, in passing Second Reading of that Bill, associate a carry-over motion with it, because otherwise we must start again. In the run-up to Christmas, we will simply sign in, then in the immediate aftermath of Christmas and the new year, we will get another Queen's Speech. Then for another week or two we will discuss the Gracious Speech and the Humble Address, so there will be no progress on that legislation, which cannot be brought back or reintroduced until the end of January at the earliest, subject to the business managers. That is completely substandard.

The issue of co-ownership, which I have been pushing, must be resolved by the end of the financial year—legislation must be passed by 31 March. I know it is small, but we as Members just piddled about this place whenever the Supreme Court asked us to come back, and we did nothing. No substantive business was put before us, yet we had a commitment on co-ownership legislation a year ago and that was never brought before us.

I must say that the Secretary of State has been good on HIA. His predecessors did not move at all; they said, "I'm sorry, this is a matter for the Executive. The report must go back to the Executive, and it is for the Executive to decide how to go forward." I am grateful for the injection of progress he has brought, but sadly, given how this Parliament has evolved, it is too little, too late.

I make those points in gratitude to you, Sir Lindsay, for the consideration given to the amendment that was tabled, to the Public Bill Office and to the Minister for the commitment he has given. I recognise the constraints, but this issue cannot wait indefinitely.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

6.9 pm

Mr Hurd: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank the House for the debate that we have had on this important Bill and recognise the frustrations attached to it because of the timetable, the pace and the lack of resolution on some extremely important issues, not least to do with the passage of the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill 2019, which, I can confirm to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), did not have a carry-over motion in the House of Lords. I will direct the frustrations of the House about that to the Secretary of State and, through him, to the business

managers. I also recognise the frustration, now I am better informed about the background, about the questions on the housing association issue that have clearly dragged on for a long time. That perhaps explains the line of questioning, but I am where I am, at the Dispatch Box today, and I think there is a genuine commitment. I am not aware of any serious impediments. I hope that that gives Members some reassurance.

We see this as a defensible, limited and sensible intervention at this time, and one that is in line with the approach taken since the collapse of the Executive in January 2017. We take very seriously our commitment to good governance in Northern Ireland and this Bill, vitally, does not preclude a new Executive, should they be formed within the financial year, from making budget adjustments if they see fit and amending legislation in the usual way at the end of the financial year. Crucially, we have heard that the impact of not passing this legislation would be Northern Ireland Departments being unable to access the full Northern Ireland block grant for 2019-20. Of course, that would have a very serious impact on the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. The absence of legislation to underpin departmental spending would quickly become a systemic risk that would be unacceptable to all sides of the House. I thank the House for its consideration of the Bill, despite all the frustrations attached to it.

This is my last appearance at the Dispatch Box after almost nine years as a Minister and almost five years before that as a shadow Minister. I am delighted that this Bill is making its passage so that we can ensure that Northern Ireland has the budget it deserves, and so that the public services that the people we serve and represent rely on can continue to be delivered in the best possible way under the most difficult, frustrating and trying circumstances. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is very sad that this is the Minister's last time at the Dispatch Box and in the House, and it is very sad that so many distinguished parliamentarians will not speak again from these Benches. This House will be the poorer for their not being here. I thank the Minister for the way he has conducted his business today and throughout his career in this place.

6.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Let me put on record my thanks to the Minister for the help he gave my constituents, Sophia, Darren and Danielle Gibson in Newtownards, in relation to medicinal cannabis and the related methodology—working, in all fairness, with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland to make that happen. He will have received the card that we all got to say thank you, and he has the one with wee Sophia's photograph. I am sure he still has it; I have one in my office, too. I thank him so much, and wish him well as he moves on.

This is not the first time that I have spoken on Third Reading of a Northern Ireland Budget Bill debate and bemoaned the state of finances in Departments in Northern Ireland. We find ourselves in the difficult situation of having no functioning devolved Assembly. We have a seriously limited local council system; its powers are not on a par with those held by councils throughout the rest of the United Kingdom—that is a fact of life. We have a Westminster Parliament that has intervened only when

legally necessary—other than to impose abortion against the will of the people of Northern Ireland. I find that disturbing, and my constituents in Strangford and people across Northern Ireland find it unacceptable. As I have said numerous times in this Chamber, either direct rule in its entirety should be implemented or legislation to call for an Assembly election should be introduced with the prerequisite that anyone who stands must take their seats and nominate accordingly.

Emma Little Pengelly: As my hon. Friend is outlining, there is currently very limited decision making in Northern Ireland. However, he will have been very pleased, as I was, to hear the announcement just this week that, through Northern Ireland's active participation in the English and Welsh negotiations for Orkambi and other drugs, that will be made available at a better price, as I understand it, for Northern Ireland and England than the Scottish deal. Does he agree that that is a very good announcement? I also highlight the hard work that he and many people in Northern Ireland have done on this campaign.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for what she said. There has been a joint campaign to have the Vertex drug available for those with cystic fibrosis. I am thankful for the decision, but we need to move this a stage further. As she said, it would be better if we had the legislation in place to make sure that we get it in Northern Ireland—we should do. We met Jen Banks and her wee boy here in the House. I also have a constituent in Newtownards who suffers from the same thing and who needs the drug immediately, so it would be great if that happened.

I am glad that the election has been called. I am happy to put myself before my constituents knowing that I have consistently done what I believe to be right in this House, yet I am disheartened by the conduct in this place. We seem to have lost our sense of honour and of being people of our word and doing the right thing—we in the DUP corner of the House certainly feel that way. I still continue to do that and should I be re-elected, I will continue to do so. Only a few weeks ago, it was remarkable that across the House, everybody could turn up, when they were putting the backstop in place, to do us over, yet where are they tonight? When it comes to being honourable people and doing the right thing, I find that I have seen less of it in this House over the last period. There are many in this House who I am good friends with, and I intend to be good friends with them forever, but I do feel let down and I want to put that on record.

The Northern Ireland Budget Bill will enable day-to-day life to continue in the Province. We have come through a number of years of austerity. Although I can comprehend the rationale behind that, it is difficult to watch the daily effects of it. Our streets are untidy, because Transport NI can no longer afford to address the weeds, never mind resurface the roads, but I am pleased to note from my most recent correspondence with Transport NI that the spend allocated for Strangford in 2018-19 is just over £11 million, which is almost a combination of that for 2016-17 and 2017-18.

I am reminded of a song from when I was a wee boy—that was not yesterday, by the way. We probably all know it from our childhood: "Four wheels on my

[Jim Shannon]

wagon and I'm still rolling along"; "Three wheels on my wagon and I'm still rolling along"—then two wheels, then one wheel, but do you know something? When there are no wheels on the wagon, you do not roll along at all. What we find with the Northern Ireland Assembly is that we are not rolling along. What a disappointment that we are not doing anything the way we should be. There are no wheels on my wagon—or no wheels on the Assembly's wagon, I should say, and we are not rolling anywhere. *[Laughter.]*

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): "You can watch those Cherokees go galloping by"—it is a great old song. I get the point that the hon. Gentleman is making by using that song as an example. No wheels on his wagon, he is not rolling along: the Cherokees have captured him, but he is still singing a happy song.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is the Assembly that is not rolling along. I am rolling along very well actually, just to let you know—no problem with me. Even though I am a diabetic—type 2—I can still keep going, and the Duracell battery is what I have to keep me going. The rest of the batteries fail—Shannon still keeps going. Just remember that. *[Laughter.]*

More money has been allocated to my area, which can only be a good thing, as we are in desperate need of basic infrastructure. There is huge potential in my area and local towns for international investment and so much more. We have state-of-the-art office space, UK-wide connectivity and low business rates. The long-term goal is to show the world that Northern Ireland is the place to invest in business. It is the place to produce television shows—scenes from "Game of Thrones" were filmed locally and supplied by local people. We can provide a high-class graduate labour force and an abundance of admin staff as well.

One of the key components to unlocking local investment is the ability to connect easily, and that includes good roads and transport. I will seek additional funding to improve connectivity to Belfast airport for those looking for the perfect place to invest. With due respect to my colleagues, the perfect place to invest is Newtownards and the surrounding areas. Infrastructure has a massive role to play. I have said it before, but I will say it again—this is the end of term: we need the Ballynahinch bypass. That town is being held back from growing the way it should because it does not have a bypass. The land is acquired and the scheme is in place, but the go-ahead needed from the Northern Ireland Assembly is not there.

Spending on the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs rose from £13.6 million in 2016-17 to £50 million in 2018-19, but our upcoming exit from Europe means that more funding must be allocated. I was pleased to read that additional funding has been allocated specifically to address Brexit issues, not simply for DAERA, but across the Northern Ireland Departments. I am pleased with what DAERA has done in my constituency. It has allocated and committed significant moneys to the Northern Ireland countryside management scheme. The money allocated to tackling rural poverty and social isolation—something else I am particularly interested in—has increased for the last

three years. The substantial money for the rural development programme in the last year has also been great. This money has addressed many of the issues that are prevalent in the countryside. DAERA is doing that. It could do better if we had a Minister in place, but it is doing very well.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On DAERA, does my hon. Friend agree that the issue of the veterinary school in Coleraine has been going on too long and needs to be processed, alongside the medical school in Londonderry? There are so many projects sitting there waiting for approval, but we need ministerial intervention to ensure they proceed.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend makes a most helpful intervention. It would benefit the whole Province, not just his constituency.

Education needs a massive injection of sustained funding, not one-off projects. Schools have not received the correct inflation-based moneys they need. I have been liaising with the Education Authority and the Secretary of State to ensure that schools have enough funding to sustain the high-level quality education expected in Northern Ireland. We must also find a solution to the union issue. I look to the Minister, as we always do, to outline how he intends to ensure that teachers and staff are happy and being appropriately paid and correctly treated. I gently ask him to intervene so that after-school clubs, which often round out social education, can continue without teachers having to break through the picket line.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) referred to the importance of special educational needs provision in schools. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and I have constituents who attend Clifton Special School in Bangor—60% of its pupils come from my constituency—but it needs investment, as does Killard House School. Our teachers and staff do a phenomenal job with finite resources that are not rising in line with inflation or the increased expectations from parents. It is past time we resolved the union issues. Although the Education Authority has been working on this, perhaps ministerial intervention is needed to push it over the line. Information I have shows that, although more money has been allocated this year, the fact that the 2016-17 allocation was so low means that all we are doing is playing catch-up.

We need to address those things. The money available to individual schools may have increased since 2016, but it does not make up for the two years of underfunding. We are nowhere near where we need to be. I feel frustrated, but I look forward to a new Parliament and a new opportunity to push for appropriate funding for Northern Ireland. In the meantime, however, I have no option other than to support the Bill so that we can keep ticking over until direct rule or a fit-for-purpose Assembly does the right thing and takes its seat.

When I met the Chief Constable, Simon Byrne, just over a month ago, I raised two issues with him. I asked him to ensure that a police training system was in place, and to give me a commitment, if the funds were there and he had the wherewithal, to train 1,000 officers in order to increase the number to the necessary 7,500. He gave an important commitment on community policing, in which I am a great believer: I think that every one of us who represents a constituency anywhere in Northern Ireland understands how important it is.

Our hospitals need more funds. The money allocated to each trust area is not adequate. I want especially to thank the permanent secretary of the Department of Health in Northern Ireland, Richard Pengelly, who has said this:

“it costs £26 billion a year to run Northern Ireland but only £17 billion is being raised. The amount needed to maintain the health service goes up each year. At the moment to run the same service this year as we did last year and next year, it’s about 6% increase per annum. If we continue on that trajectory, within about 20 years the health service will need virtually all the money that’s available”

—in the block grant—

“to the executive.”

Richard Pengelly thinks that we need a new health strategy in Northern Ireland that will focus on diabetes, heart, stroke and cancer services and occupational therapy, and on the fact that the waiting lists for operations are getting longer and longer.

Let me make three final points. There will be a greater need for health services for an ageing population that is growing dramatically. In mid-2018, 308,200 people were 65 or older, and 37,700 of those were 85 or older. Given that we are producing fewer children, the pressure will be on healthcare for that ageing population.

I want to say something about cancer care, because cancer affects so many people. So many of my friends have contracted it recently, or, unfortunately, have passed away as a result of it. It is a major issue, especially in an ageing population. The most common cancers in men are cancers of the prostate and lung, and the most common in women are cancers of the breast and lung. Successive one-year budgets are impeding planning and investment in Northern Ireland’s health and social care services; we need the money to ensure that those things happen.

Early diagnosis and care at the outset are extremely important. A significant proportion of cases in Northern Ireland are diagnosed at a late stage: 20% are diagnosed at stage 3, and 26% at stage 4. Late diagnosis can be due to a number of factors, but what we need is earlier diagnosis, which will save lives, help our health service, and, in particular, help those with cancer. We also need a system that will shorten the timescale between the visit to the GP and referral to a consultant.

My last point is about mental health. My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) has fought the case for mental health treatment extremely well in the House. We all have constituents with mental health issues, and I am very conscious of the need for funds to address them. There is a particularly high level of mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, among those who have served our Province in uniform—in the police, the Army and other emergency services. Another issue that I face every day is the mental health of children, especially those at primary and secondary school level.

I thank you for your patience and your time, Mr Speaker. I just wanted to put on record how many things need to be done in Northern Ireland, and how many things could be done if we had a working Assembly that could respond to all the people there—and who is holding that back? Sinn Féin.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business of the House

6.29 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I should like to make a statement regarding the business for tomorrow and until Tuesday 5 November.

Tomorrow, the House will be asked to consider a motion relating to the first report from the Committee on Standards, followed by tributes to the Speaker’s Chaplain, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Northern Ireland (Extension of Period for Executive Formation) (No. 2) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft (Civil Partnership) (Opposite-sex Couples) Regulations 2019, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments. The House will not adjourn until Royal Assent has been received to all Acts.

The business for the week commencing 4 November will include:

MONDAY 4 NOVEMBER—The House will meet at 2.30 o’clock to elect a Speaker.

TUESDAY 5 NOVEMBER—An opportunity for Members to make short valedictory speeches and to debate matters to be raised before the forthcoming Dissolution.

Mr Speaker, I might add that I shall make my normal statement tomorrow, which will also be an opportunity for people, in the course of that statement, to raise questions in the form of tributes to you.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I think that I should say thank you to the Leader of the House, but I am somewhat confused. Can he confirm whether there will be absolutely no business questions tomorrow and that what he will do at 10.30 is start the tributes to Mr Speaker? That is my first question. I can see why he perhaps would not want to be here on 31 October—a significant day—answering questions from hon. Members. It seems like the Government are melting away, along with the commemorative 50p pieces. We all know that it is a significant day.

I am slightly perturbed because I have not seen any reference to the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill, which is currently in the House of Lords. It is an extremely important Bill that provides a redress scheme for survivors of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland. The House of Lords is expediting all its stages tomorrow, and it is keen to get it on the statute book. The survivors who will benefit from the Bill are content with the legislation, and I know that the shadow Northern Ireland team are keen to agree with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that it should be on the statute book. The survivors cannot wait any longer. Some have passed away while waiting for the compensation that they are rightly owed. Will the Leader of the House make time for this important Bill?

I have had lots of mixed messages, and I do not think this is a good way to end this Session. I was not sure whether business questions were on. First they were on, then they were off, and then they were on again. This is not an appropriate way to carry out the business of the House, particularly as many Members are standing

[*Valerie Vaz*]

down and business questions are a good opportunity, just before an election, for them to raise issues that they might be able to deal with when they go back to their constituencies. So I hope that the Leader of the House will take on board those three questions relating to what time he is going to start, whether business questions will be in the form of questions or a statement and, particularly, what will happen to the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady said that we were trying to avoid saying things tomorrow, and she referred to those 50p coins. I am afraid that I have never liked fiddling around with our coinage. I prefer the 50p coins with Britannia on the back, rather than the ones that have all sorts of peculiar—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What about a 10 shilling note?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What an excellent idea, shouted out from the back! Bring back the 10 shilling note! I think that is a little old-fashioned, even for me, but it is reassuring that some Members are even more antediluvian than I am.

On the important question of the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill, I note what the right hon. Lady says about what is happening in the other place. We need to wait and see what happens there, and we will then be able to come to a decision on what can be done in this House. It will, of course, mean that there will be another business statement from me. That is becoming a daily occurrence at the moment.

The hon. Lady mentioned the business statement tomorrow, which will be a statement on tributes to Mr Speaker. The questions that arise will of course be whatever Mr Speaker rules orderly, so I think that Members will be careful to work out what is orderly in that respect. I am really pleased to have been able to announce that right hon. and hon. Members who are standing down will have the opportunity to make their valedictory addresses on Tuesday in the form of the Adjournment debate. That is a debate that I am very much looking forward to responding to, as it is an important opportunity not only for people to say their farewells but for their service to this House—in some cases, over many decades—to be acknowledged. I hope that that answers the hon. Lady's questions.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): May I briefly underscore what the shadow Leader of the House said to the Leader of the House about the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill? It has cross-party support in this place, as my right hon. Friend knows, and the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs has looked at it in great depth. I will not labour the point, but I know my right hon. Friend is aware of the pressing need for the delivery of justice and the start of closure. I am pretty certain that the legislation could be dealt with in 35 minutes to 40 minutes on Monday following discussions through the usual channels. If he will be so kind, I urge him to find the time to make that important step forward, because the wait has been far too long.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is absolutely right to highlight the importance of that Bill, and the

Government are committed to bringing it forth as soon as possible. I congratulate him on his service to the people of Northern Ireland and to the people of Dorset—something that he carries out with great distinction. I am biased, of course, because he is one of my oldest friends in this Chamber, so I do listen to him particularly carefully. I have absolutely heard his message, as I have heard the message from the shadow Leader of the House. Let us see what their lordships do. The normal processes will then grind through, and we will see what can be done.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): There is nothing too old-fashioned for the right hon. Gentleman. I think we are all getting used to these daily business statements, and we look forward to another thrilling episode tomorrow. However, I had real concerns when I saw this business statement about whether there would be standard business questions tomorrow, because I remember the right hon. Gentleman's clear commitment that there would be the opportunity for tributes to Mr Speaker. I am pleased and relieved to see that that is included in the statement and that there may be the opportunity to discuss other matters as we conclude this Parliament.

I am very concerned about the business for next week, and the arrangements for the election of the next Speaker are particularly unsatisfactory. Members like myself will have to come down all the way from Scotland during an election campaign for the sole purpose of electing a Speaker. I do not know how many hours that will take, but we will have to decide what will be the better use of our time: fighting an election or coming down here to decide the next Speaker. There is a real chance that Members of Parliament from Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom could be disenfranchised in the important business of electing the Speaker.

How have we got to this situation? Conversations were ongoing through the usual channels between the political parties and among the candidates for Speaker about trying to resolve the matter this week, so that the House could dissolve on Thursday or Friday. We could then we make the decision about the Speaker when we returned with a new Parliament. What has happened to those conversations? Has there been any blockage? If so, who is responsible? What type of discussions have been had? From speaking to colleagues—not just those within the Scottish National party—there are real concerns about the election of a Speaker happening exclusively on Monday, and we need to better understand what has happened and how we have reached this situation.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for saying that nothing is too old fashioned for me, and I shall try not to disappoint him in future. I am sorry that his travel arrangements will be inconvenienced, and I mean that genuinely because I appreciate that the situation is difficult for Members who have to come a long way. People must order their priorities accordingly. My personal priority always revolves around the Chamber of the House.

I will point out that a right hon. Friend of mine, whose name I will not give away, will be a long way out of the country on long-planned business and is going to pay a £1,000 of his own money to make sure that he is back for an important parliamentary occasion. Some

people take that view of attending for business, and others may indeed wish to start their election campaigns early. That is a choice that they must make. However, Monday and Tuesday are sitting days, and once Mr Speaker has resigned, we must elect a Speaker if the House is sitting. That is completely routine and standard and orderly, and it is important.

I will, if I may, correct the hon. Gentleman on the question of Dissolution, as I was corrected by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). The date of Dissolution is set backwards from the date of the election. With the election being on Thursday 12 December, Dissolution has to be on Wednesday at one minute past midnight. It cannot be on any other day. There is no flexibility in the terms of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

I confess, Mr Speaker, that there were conversations about whether we could have finished tomorrow, but for everybody who said to me that we should stop on Thursday, somebody else said that we should stop on Tuesday. There was no clear consensus. It is my view as Leader of the House that my responsibility if there is no consensus is to ensure that things carry on as they were planned to be. It would be wrong for me to force the House in a way that there was not a consensus to go down.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Exactly two years ago, I had an Adjournment debate about airgun safety, which was responded to graciously by the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who is in his place. That instigated a review of airgun safety. I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), who is in his place, have pressed the Government persistently for the publication of their review and consultation. Today, I rang my constituent to say again to him and his young son, who was severely injured, that that has not come forward and that we have no idea when it will. Will the Leader of the House please indicate for the families we represent when that important review and consultation will come forward?

I add my support on the need to bring the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill to this House. Front Benchers from all parties have indicated clearly that it will be dealt with very quickly. There is cross-party support and it could be done very quickly next week.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On airgun safety, I will write to the Minister who is responsible to get an answer. There will obviously be no time for a debate on it before this Parliament comes to a conclusion, but it is important that when Members raise questions, they get answers. I cannot always promise people the answer they want, but by and large, it is important that answers are given.

I note the hon. Lady's point about the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill. It seems that there may be an evolving consensus around that issue in this House.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Just to emphasise the consensus on that point, I want to back up what has been said by the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and other right hon. and hon. Members. This matter has been raised at every opportunity today in this House, including questions to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

We do need to get the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill through the House before the election. I really hope that the Leader of the House has heard the consensus he has talked about and will work on the basis of that consensus. I add to the point that we can do this very quickly and that it does need to be done. I look forward to his taking it forward.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, our confidence and supply partner, for his important point. The message is loud and clear. There is—dare I say it?—some element of tension when the Government propose to bring Bills through quickly. There is sometimes criticism that it is being done too quickly. However, it is more normal in a wash-up period that things are done at a certain rate of knots than in other periods. I have heard what has been said, and I will ensure that it is passed on to all the relevant people.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I echo the comments that have been made about the victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse. In the earlier debate, it was mentioned that the Bill might not be brought forward. I know that many victims will be deeply distressed and dismayed by that. There is an opportunity tomorrow with the further business question, so I wonder whether the Leader of the House can confirm that if there are no issues in the House of Lords—I am not sure what issues he was referring to—time will be made to get the Bill through before Dissolution.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On a purely technical note, we will not be able to make time for that tomorrow, because it is not in the statement that I have now. So the question would be for Monday and then issues may arise relating to Royal Assent, because there is a Royal Assent moment tomorrow, but I am not sure that there will be one on Monday. These issues will be looked into. I have heard from some extraordinarily distinguished Members and note their views, but I cannot give a definitive answer from the Dispatch Box now.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I met the Leader of the House recently to talk about the 100th anniversary of the election of Nancy Astor. The Dissolution of Parliament means that the celebrations of that momentous moment when Plymouth Sutton elected her as the first woman to take her seat will now not take place on the day. I would be grateful if he reflected on whether there is time to record that impressive moment on either Monday or Tuesday next week, so that we do not miss this moment to talk about the important role that Nancy Astor played in this place and in wider British politics.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful for that question. I hope that I am not being indiscreet in saying that the Commission discussed this when it met earlier in the week on Monday, just before I had to leave early to come to make an emergency business statement, which seems to be quite a frequent occurrence. The Commission agreed to a series of suggestions, including particularly the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that there could be a picture in the Members' Dining Room underneath the picture of Nancy Astor's presentation and that there would be no hire charge for the room—that has been specifically agreed by the Commission—and the suggestion

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

that we have a commemoration on the Order Paper on the relevant anniversary. Fortunately, there are several relevant anniversaries—for example, the anniversary of her maiden speech. Most of the ideas that he has come up with were warmly endorsed by the Commission. As I say, I hope that I have not broken the Official Secrets Act or anything of that kind by revealing this.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I would be grateful if the Leader of the House confirmed whether Tuesday's Westminster Hall business will go ahead. From what he said, I assume that it might, but I just want clarification on that point.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As far as I am aware, business in Westminster Hall will continue as normal. I am being nodded at from the Box, which is always extremely helpful when I am on a slightly sticky wicket. I am glad to say that my forward defensive stroke has kept the ball clear of my stumps.

Mr Speaker: The word “inimitable” springs to mind. I am extremely grateful to the Leader of the House and to colleagues.

PETITION

Dispute between HMRC and Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust

6.47 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents regarding the dispute between Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that concerns about the Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust have escalated to an unreasonable level; notes that despite a meeting taking place on the 27th of March 2019 between HMRC and REBTL, eligible employees that include local residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk have still to receive any payments as HMRC is continuing to hold the funds over the level of tax liability of the beneficiaries; and further notes it is unacceptable that the distribution of funds is being prevented by HMRC notwithstanding a High Court ruling in January 2014 in favour of the Roadchef Employees Benefits Trustees Ltd.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HMRC to end their foot-dragging and resolve this long-standing issue of the withholding of payments by HMRC to the Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002538]

Cross-border Trade and Accounting

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Colin Clark.)

6.48 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to have secured this Adjournment debate on the exciting topic of accounting systems in cross-border trade. I know the House is racked with anticipation for this debate, as shown by the packed Benches, so I am looking forward to it.

I have to admit that, because of the potential for there being debates on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill this week, I thought that cross-border trade would be a hot topic, and that this Adjournment debate would provide an opportunity for colleagues, especially those from Scotland and Northern Ireland, to talk through some of the issues in greater detail. Obviously, events have overtaken us and we are not quite in that situation, so I will continue with the debate but take a slightly different angle. I shall talk about the development of accounting systems, and refer to some of the work by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs on Making Tax Digital, and about HMRC's support for small and medium-sized businesses. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

While on secondment from Marks & Spencer, I had the great fortune to work for the Prince's Trust's Accounting for Sustainability project, which is dedicated to using accountants to try to help to solve social and environmental issues. Indeed, His Royal Highness Prince Charles believes that accountants are the key to saving the world: by changing the data that is used in day-to-day business and in organisations, they can help to steer better decision making—

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman)
rose—

Luke Graham: Is the Minister on his feet?

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): He is going for a drink.

Luke Graham: I hope it is whisky; we will be here for a while.

Accountants can help us with some of our biggest social and environmental challenges. In the current context, with Brexit on the horizon, I thought this debate would be useful, and later in my speech I shall come to the issues relating to trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Let me give a little background on accounting systems—the non-accountants in the room can tune in now, because this is the exciting bit. Accounting has come a long way since it was established centuries ago: we had the evolution of double-entry bookkeeping from the original ledgers; we then had some base computing in the 19th century, and then more into the 20th century; and we now have the far more advanced accounting systems that we use today. During my previous life, before I entered the House, I was lucky enough to use a range of different systems, on which I shall touch in just a minute.

One of the Government's greatest advances in the use of accounting systems to help on the domestic front was the Making Tax Digital scheme. Unfortunately, like many others, I was greatly upset by the fact that the Government had to defer some of their plans to make tax digital because of the advent of Brexit and the consumption of Government time by Brexit preparations. Making tax digital and using accounting systems, whether for small or large businesses, is important because it makes us more efficient and more productive, and it can lead to better decision making for companies right across the United Kingdom. That is vital.

Whether someone is a single trader in Portsmouth, working for the global manager in Edinburgh, or working for a large multinational in London, accounting systems can really give them the transparency of data that they need. They are also environmentally friendly, because as accounting systems develop, we are able to move away from paper receipts and invoices and towards electronic records, which makes interactions between individual companies, customers and suppliers far easier, more efficient and more effective. As a result, the real benefit will be for the entire country, because not only will companies grow, but it will contribute to our productivity and thus our GDP.

Another important point is that as companies are developing, intangibles and intangible assets are becoming more and more important in their valuation. In fact, just a few years ago it was recognised that around 80% of the value of the S&P 500 is in intangible assets rather than tangible assets. That is why the development of accounting systems is so important: we need to be able not only to capture the value of our physical assets, and use the traditional accounting fair-value methods to make sure that those assets are held at the right value, but to look at new methods of valuing intangibles, because the intangibles of brands and, to a certain extent, intellectual property, along with other new technological advancements, mean that it is increasingly the case that less and less of companies' value is being captured on our stock exchanges, and that obviously has an impact on the prices that are traded and the returns that can be made by companies and customers throughout the country.

As I said earlier, a number of systems have come into the accounting sphere that can help smaller businesses to improve and be more effective. One of them is Xero and another is QuickBooks, and there is also Oracle for large companies. I should say, for the sake of fairness, that plenty of other accounting systems are available. The point of these systems is to make sure that, from the base transaction and from the base-level accounts receivable and accounts payable systems, right the way up to the highest-level strategic decision making, managers and users of the information have the correct information—the one source of truth—and that there is consistency in the data right the way through the organisation. That is for the benefit not just of the actual company, but of HMRC and our Government. The better the records we receive, the more accurate the accounts are and the more accurately we can calculate the tax take for those companies as well. Obviously, it is always a good thing that not only should taxes be low, but companies and individuals pay the taxes that they do indeed owe.

In the current context, as we move between accounting systems, I would like to apply some of this to the discussions that we have been having on Northern Ireland.

The reason why I take this leap—some might see it that way—is that many of the accounting systems that are imported now are connected to HMRC to help companies and individuals file their tax returns. They are also connected to HMRC for the purpose of VAT filing. As we know with Northern Ireland, VAT and customs have been a key issue in the new withdrawal agreement, and I will explore that a little bit more—hopefully with help from my colleague from Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward. It is a very important initiative. It is just a pity that it is coming at this time, given where we are. Does he understand that these systems, which create a digital border in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland, have been in place since the peace walls came down? That is a fair while ago. Such an approach is, and can be, both sensible and prudent for the region and could be something that happens elsewhere.

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is quite right. There is a number of those accounting systems, but there is also a number of other systems and structures in place in Northern Ireland. I have to be honest about this. Although I have engaged with some of his colleagues on this over the past two years, many Members in this House and the broader public are still ignorant of the matter. It would, I think, be to the benefit of the House if some of these issues were explored in greater detail and in greater depth, so that Members can make more educated decisions, especially when we are working on such controversial issues as withdrawal from the EU, and as we start mapping out our future trading relationship with Europe. As he will recognise, this will also be important when we have new free trade agreements with other countries around the world—whether they are the rollover agreements that are coming across from the EU or, indeed, new trade agreements such as those with the United States of America. I will touch on that matter in just a moment.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my good friend for allowing me to intervene on him. Let me follow up on the point from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Presumably, this digital accounting system will not just be routed into HMRC for tax purposes, but could quite easily be pushed sideways to the Border Force. What we are actually talking about is minimising the paperwork for crossing a border, and that is terribly important.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend is almost making me skip over certain parts of my speech, so I appreciate his intervention. He is quite right. One of the key systems that is currently used is the VAT information exchange system. Under the current withdrawal agreement proposals, it will still be open to Northern Ireland. At the moment, I am not sure whether it will be open to other parts of the United Kingdom, but I recommend that it should be. Through that system, companies and member states are able to co-ordinate VAT returns. It also enables the simplification of those VAT returns between different member states. There have been concerns about the system, certainly in the area of fraud, especially when parts are moving between different areas of member states, but the system is still a good one and will be open

[*Luke Graham*]

to Northern Ireland. That is one of the very good things that is contained within the withdrawal agreement as it stands at the moment.

I did have one question on the issue of VAT. Although VIES will be available to Northern Ireland, as I have said, will it be available to the rest of the UK? Furthermore, one point that I would like someone to explain—it may not be the Financial Secretary to the Treasury today, but certainly I hope that it comes out in further debates—is related to the terms found in the withdrawal agreement when it talks about Northern Ireland being outside EU law in relation to VAT, but also about EU VAT law being applicable in Northern Ireland. Greater transparency in the details around this issue and also in the details around the application of the customs code would help a great deal for debates in this House, which inevitably will take place when, hopefully, we return here in December.

Therefore, as I have said, there are a number of systems available. What is even better is that private business and enterprise are catching up with some of these systems and complementing them. As I mentioned earlier, the evolution of accounting systems that are used by some of these smaller companies and larger companies can then obviously work with systems such as VIES, which means that Government, customers and suppliers can all work together to make sure that there is more efficient and effective record keeping, better tax collection and—hopefully—better revenues and profits for all those involved. As I said, I would love to get some more clarification either from the Treasury Minister himself or from a Brexit Minister in the near future.

This is not just an issue for the United Kingdom and the EU. I had the great fortune to work in China and the United States before I came to this place, and was able to see some of their tax collection and accounting systems in progress. China is an enormous country of over 1 billion people, but a significant amount of accounting records are still kept in paper format—this was back in 2008, so some of the new software was not available then—and everything is signed off by an original chop. For those who do not know, that is a traditional stamp. A record, fapiao or receipt needs a traditional ink chop to be recognised for accounting purposes; multiply that by over 1 billion people, and it becomes more of an issue.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Colin Clark.)

Luke Graham: As a result, I found that we were not able to get the level of transparency and speed of information when we were working right across China—certainly in a multinational company with lots of subsidiaries—as quickly as one would hope in the 21st century, although I know that China is leading the way in many technological advances.

Some of these walls and barriers can also be seen in the United States of America. As many people will know, the United States of America is a federal system. Therefore, companies operating in America often have to file individual city, state and federal tax returns. The US does not have VAT. It has sales tax, which varies as between different parts of the country. This puts an

additional burden on individual businesses and increases their costs. It benefits accountants and lawyers, but does not necessarily benefit the revenues and profits of companies. If a company is based in New York, it will have a New York tax return as well as a federal one, and if it has operations in different parts of the United States, it may indeed have to submit sales tax and other taxes in those other states, and then aggregate it all together. That means extra costs and extra burdens.

I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure me that no matter how far we go with devolution in our country, we do not turn to the more federal system whereby we erect more transactional barriers between different parts of the United Kingdom. I do not think businesses, consumers or suppliers want that. We need to ensure that we use accounting systems to make the flow of trade easier, rather than erecting more walls and bureaucracy.

Accounting systems are also incredibly important for cross-border trade because the more open and secure they can be, and the more internationally verifiable they are, the higher levels of trust there will be between customers, suppliers and Governments all around the world. If a Government are entering a new trade agreement with a different country—or indeed the customers and suppliers of that country are engaging in new trade after a new free trade agreement has been signed—having the accounting systems installed and developed means that they have a common way of working. That means that deals can be struck more quickly and sales can be far more profitable.

Let me turn to my ask of the Government. The Conservative and Unionist party has always been the party of business. Brexit has obviously taken an enormous amount of Government time. When Parliament is returned—and I hope that I and my hon. Friends on these Benches will also be returned, as well as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I hope that we will start putting more Government time and effort into progressing systems such as Making Tax Digital, and providing training and incentive programmes to small and large companies so that they invest in their systems. That will mean that they will have more efficient and effective trade, and can make the most of the great trade deals that the Minister is looking to implement when we return to this place and leave the EU.

Better accounting systems would also be great for UK consumer rights, because they provide a greater level of transparency, detail and trust. As I am sure the House will appreciate, in the 21st century trust is an enormous issue for consumers in the United Kingdom and around the world. The greater levels of transparency that companies can provide about their products and ways of operating—whether with regard to tangible assets, intangible assets, sales receipts or the taxes they are paying—the greater the faith that consumers will have in them. I can see my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) smiling at me. He will have received, as I have, many emails from people complaining about multinationals such as Amazon not paying the right amount of tax. I know that they use efficient accounting systems and I am sure that the Government are working with them to try to make sure that when tax is owed it is paid. Accounting systems can provide that level of transparency to give customers faith that where sales are made, the right level of taxes are paid as well. That is the case both for large and small businesses.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I have to say that this is the most passionate speech on accountancy I have ever heard. I am slightly amused by, or in awe of, the idea that accountancy can save the world. To underline my hon. Friend's point, technology removes operational burdens from business and boosts productivity. Is he going to come on to, or will he comment on, the barriers that are stopping more companies taking up the benefits that he is articulating so very clearly?

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The Minister will be well versed in some of the reports and debates on Making Tax Digital. A lot of these barriers were articulated at that time. One key area will be costs. Sometimes the cost of pieces of accounting software is very low, perhaps a couple of hundred pounds or so, but for a small company it is still an additional cost. The other obstacle that customers and companies will face is knowledge of the accounting software. Even in a large multinational business, many of the executives on the board, and many of the managers, have no knowledge of their accounting system. They are only focused on simple outputs and do not necessarily know what is underneath the bonnet. With modern cars, as we all know, that often leads to more costly and more complicated servicing when the time comes. That is great news for finance directors but not such great news for operational directors.

Bob Stewart: In the nicest way, I think that my hon. Friend is such a know-all on this subject that he has just talked himself into becoming a junior or even a middle-ranking Brexit Minister after the election.

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention—I think. As my record will show, I am very much in favour of more international co-operation, and I hope that we will be doing that when we come back.

Accounting systems can really help with cross-border trade, from small companies to large multinationals. As I hope I have laid out in this short speech, they have been used in places such as Northern Ireland, and they can be discussed in some of our debates when, hopefully, we return to this place. It will be useful for the Government to use some of these systems as they negotiate new trade with other countries all around the world. The Government are very fond of saying that they want a global Britain and that our exit from the EU will allow us to expand over new horizons. I therefore hope that after this speech and the debate that follows, the Minister realises that it may well be accountants who have the key to that global Britain.

7.7 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) on securing the debate. We came to a bit of a joint decision that it should happen around the time of the withdrawal agreement, because much of the debate on that has been about how borders will operate post Brexit. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) obviously has concerns, as do I, about the differences between trade happening between GB and NI, between NI and GB, and across the Republic border. I think we all want those things to be as seamless as possible.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire said, we are not in the old world of wet stamps and guys with kepi caps on borders checking paperwork; we are very much in a new world where digital information is in place to make things work. I have had concerns—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—about the push towards making tax digital, particularly for smaller traders, for which I can see very little use for it. However, bigger companies have naturally migrated away from the old systems of Kalamazoo and paper-based things of years of old—you have to be a very old accountant to remember those—to entirely digital systems. VAT returns now have to be sent completely digitally, with details of all the transactions underlying them.

Therein lies the solution to many of the problems raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire mentioned the VIES system, which is already live in Northern Ireland. There is also the CHIEF—customs handling of import and export freight—system and economic operators registration. We are in a new world, but for people to say that intra-EU trade is somehow seamless and completely frictionless is simply not true.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): What does my hon. Friend say to people like me who are gravely concerned about the degree of complexity in these accounting systems, which makes any kind of audit trail really difficult? The big four audit companies have such a poor record in auditing these accounting systems. What does he say to people like me who are sceptical about how to drive transparency, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire?

Craig Mackinlay: I would go against that. I think my hon. Friend will find that the digital trail is more likely to be there than the old paper trail. It is rather like my hon. Friend's tweet from 10 years ago: it is still there, and it will be with him for a lifetime. This gives us an opportunity to have greater audit accountability. I take his point about the big four auditors, but we are talking about volumes of transactions that are mind-blowing, and to ask an auditor—I declare an interest: I am an auditor, and I still hold registration—to be responsible for every jot of every transaction lacks an understanding of what the audit process is all about.

I will return to the point I was making, because I know that the Minister will want to speak for some time. I was talking about the fact that things are not completely frictionless today. If I sell, as a VAT-registered entity in the UK, to another VAT-registered entity, it is not frictionless. That transaction has to be recorded on both sides, and it will find its way through Making Tax Digital on to a VAT return, so the trail is there. If I sell to an EU company, a level of complication comes into play, because I have to obtain an EU registration number, and I can then zero-rate that transaction. On the other side, they have to do a reverse charge to recreate that VAT for themselves and claim it back. It is a burdensome system, whichever way we look at it. Whether or not a business is partially exempt, at the end of the day, the transaction looks the same, but it is not frictionless; it is far from it.

A big trader with transactions of more than £250,000 going out to the EU and more than £1.5 million coming in enters the ambit of the Intrastat system, which is

[Craig Mackinlay]

quite burdensome. A business has to classify each and every commodity that it is selling abroad, according to an Intrastat classification nomenclature. If one were to look on the UK Trade Info website, they would find that there are literally thousands of lines of code. One really must ask whether this is bureaucracy gone mad. I was looking at the website as I was listening to the very worthwhile speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire. There is a different code for frozen lamb carcasses and half carcasses from frozen meat of lamb. One wonders why we have such a complex system.

This is all done electronically, and it comes down to trust. When we buy something in a shop, there is not a man from HMRC at the counter making sure that the transaction finds its way on to a VAT return, just as not every single transaction across EU borders is checked. But those records and proof of a good being transferred have to be maintained for six years. Again, this is not a frictionless system.

The issue of trust is very relevant to the Republic-Northern Ireland border. There are massive excise duties across that border. There are different currencies and a different VAT rate. Corporation tax is different, and income tax is different. There are a vast number of different things going on. I always give the example of the Jameson lorry that trundles from the Republic across the border into the north and perhaps then over to GB, and the Bushmills lorry going from Northern Ireland across the border to the south. There is no physical border infrastructure, yet there are hundreds of thousands of pounds of potential differences in the excisable duties. These lorries are never stopped, however, because there is trust, and that is the route to solving this problem.

Many people will say they have concerns about VAT losses across the border. There are such concerns, but again, this is based on trust. I consider that the amount of excise losses even today, during our membership of the European Union, must be of very great interest to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. Let us just consider the cigarette trade, in which cigarettes come across the border from Poland at £2.50 a packet versus a UK cigarette price of about £10 or more, yet we accept those losses because individuals are allowed to bring in as many of these products as they please. That obviously feeds into a black market, and I can assure the Financial Secretary that those are just the cigarette trade excise losses. We have chosen as a country—for good or evil, but that is a debate for another day—that such evil products should have a very high rate of excise in the UK for health reasons, and we find that a good percentage of cigarettes for sale in the UK come in from other EU countries.

I am very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire mentioned that the US has a federal system. The US is often held up as the land of the free, as it is called, but I do not think that holds very true of Uncle Sam. The level of bureaucracy in running a business in the US is infinitely higher than in running one in the UK. I was quite intrigued to learn that if an individual in California decides to buy goods on eBay or whatever site they please from a low-tax state such as Dakota, they have to do a personal return

for a transaction above a certain size monthly or quarterly, and actually return the equivalent of the sales tax—VAT, in other words—that the Californian authorities have lost because they have taken their trade outside California. These things are solvable.

I really wish the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was still in his place, because I understand the Northern Ireland concerns. As with anything in the profession of accounting or of running a business, when there is change, everybody puts their hands up in the air and says, “We’ll never get to grips with this. I’m retiring. I’m giving up. It’s all too complicated.” That applies to the real-time information for PAYE that we imposed some years ago—there were the same concerns—or auto-enrolment for pensions, but we get on with it.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend is making a very strong point about taxation returns and the problems in Northern Ireland. Does he agree with me that some of the simplest solutions can be the best? Some of the best tax regimes are in places such as Hong Kong where there are flat taxes, which are simple and elegant. He talked about some of the complications in the US, which has a tax code that runs to some 75,000 pages, so it is said, whereas the UK’s had about 17,000 pages in 2015.

Craig Mackinlay: That is a topic for a wider debate, which I have often considered. The UK tax code does not have 17,000 pages; it has been rather well expanded to 22,000 pages. When we compare that with the tax code of Hong Kong, which runs to 350 pages, we can see the difference. When I was a councillor on Medway Council, we had a document on the localisation of council tax that ran to 370 pages. I wondered how on earth the entire tax code of a very successful and vibrant economy such as Hong Kong could run to 350 pages, yet Medway Council, which I served on, managed to get a 370 page document just to consider the localisation of council tax.

I know the Minister will want me to conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I do not want to take up any more of his time, but the fact is that these things can be solved through the trust that exists today and the digital returns that exist today, including internationally. The concerns that our friends in the Democratic Unionist party have about a future trading bureaucracy are real, but once this is in operation, they will fade away, and people will get used to the new system within a very short time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire for bringing forward this debate, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

7.19 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I feel almost embarrassed to be intervening on the promising discussion between my hon. Friends the Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay); it is almost as though one would be intruding by saying anything from the Treasury Bench, given the degree of conversation that was going on. I thank them both for a most engrossing and expert discussion.

When I was thinking about this debate, I did a little research into the background of my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire and discovered

that part of his life had been spent not merely as an accountant at Tesco and Marks and Spencer, where he started to develop the considerable personal knowledge he has demonstrated, but involved an outfit called Tough Mudder. I do not know whether you have come across Tough Mudder, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an organisation that specialises in ultra-long obstacle courses of 8 to 10 miles, or possibly longer. It holds some rather interesting events. I bring your attention to the “arctic enema” in which participants plunge into a dumpster filled with ice water, dunk themselves underneath the plank that crosses the dumpster and then pull themselves out on the other side. There is also “electroshock therapy” in which live wires hang over a field of mud that participants must traverse. Above all—this is especially important in the context of the House of Commons—there is “Everest” in which participants run up a quarter pipe slicked with mud and grease; just the thing to ascend the ladder of career opportunity in Government and Parliament. It does not surprise me at all that my hon. Friend should have acquired those important skills; he is demonstrating them so brilliantly in his parliamentary career.

It is also quite interesting how my hon. Friend has deployed precisely those Tough Mudder tactics so successfully today in calling for an Adjournment debate on cross-border trade and accounting systems and then taking us into the highways and byways of the tax code. I call that classic bait-and-switch of the kind that the founders of Tough Mudder would be delighted with.

Let me mention a few of the things we have touched on before coming to the main thrust of the topic. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight Making Tax Digital for VAT, not merely as a success for HMRC—although it has had some delay, it is clearly proving to be that in relation to VAT—but because of its wider effects. More than 1.25 million businesses are signed up to Making Tax Digital for business, and very nearly 1.75 million VAT returns have been successfully submitted through the service. Some 81% of all businesses mandated from April are now signed up to it. That is a tremendous achievement, and it fully bears out the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet. When the British people are presented with a challenge, particularly on taxation, they rise to it and overcome it. That is an important and valuable characteristic, and it is one we rely on.

There are also wider benefits, and they are becoming quite evident. There are potentially quite significant productivity benefits—we are still measuring them in HMRC. The benefits are starting to become sufficiently well known within the smaller business community to result in many signing up for Making Tax Digital VAT voluntarily; they are not captured by its mandate because they are not above the threshold. That is an important aspect of the wider picture of improving productivity and audit and accountability that goes with these developed processes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire also rightly mentioned the concerns and opportunities created by new methods of managing and valuing intangibles. That is always of great interest to Revenue and Customs, as he might imagine. He talks about the importance of transactional barriers and the need to avoid them; of course, I agree. He rightly focused on extracting an appropriate level of tax from

the very largest companies and platforms—he and I have written about this in other contexts. It is important to level the playing field, with platforms using their power for good rather than yielding to the temptation to exploit insider information and one-to-many power to create an unlevel playing field. In part, that is exactly what our digital services tax is designed to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet quite rightly mentions cigarette excise losses. If it is of any reassurance to him, I personally have sat with the HMRC fraud team tracking of some of these gangs in real time. I can tell him that it is an enormously impressive operation and one that yields great benefits to the Revenue and to this country's Exchequer.

Turning to the issue at hand, let me say a few things about the very important question that my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire asked about cross-border change and the role that accounting systems can play in that. He will be aware that the Government are committed to an efficient and effective customs system that minimises administrative burdens on people who trade. He will also know that HMRC has invested some £34 million to fund training for individual businesses and—this is the key point—to develop and grow the customs intermediary sector so that it embeds greater expertise and institutional capacity to sustain our customs over the longer term. Indeed, I spoke at the launch of the UK Customs Academy, funded by HMRC, only last month.

It is also important, as my hon. Friend has stressed, to make customs processes as simple as possible. The current declaration system, known as CHIEF, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet mentioned, is being replaced with a new customs declaration service that is much more modern, much more flexible and able to anticipate vastly larger volumes of trade, and much easier and quicker for traders to use. The digital and streamlined processes committed to in the 2018 Budget are already coming into play and the specific commitment to halve the time it takes to receive authorised economic operator status is a further exemplification of that.

Let me come, slightly more widely, to the question of VAT. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire is right to ask whether VAT systems can be used to facilitate cross-border trade. This is an issue that officials within HMRC have explored in relation to HMRC's own VAT regime and whether that can be deployed to facilitate customs processes. The House should be clear that there are specific challenges arising from that. The first has to do with the monitoring of goods, and the UK is under an obligation to demonstrate its control over goods imported and exported from this country. The Government need to be able to monitor the movement of goods in real time, but the trouble is the current VAT system, which is of course typically run on a quarterly returns basis and does not meet the real-time requirement, as VAT is accountable after the movement of goods.

The second challenge is a related one and bears on assurance. It is an underlying principle of the World Trade Organisation and the World Customs Organisation that tariffs should exist as a trade policy tool and must be applied in a fair and reasonable way. Real-time controls are a way of satisfying authorities that the correct tariff has been applied and collected on goods and, of course, it is important not to lose the credibility

[Jesse Norman]

that border controls confer when they are deployed on the UK as a trading partner. That would potentially be put at risk by this suggestion.

Real-time controls of course also help to ensure that goods that do not comply with regulatory standards or that pose a security risk—of course there are such goods—do not enter this country. Without some customs processes, it would be difficult to identify and check goods that pose a risk to this country. It could be a phytosanitary risk, one from hazardous materials or, of course, one from weapons and other things of that nature.

The final challenge I would identify is that we are under an obligation to show that we have applied trade policy in a fair and uniform manner, and customs controls allow us to differentiate countries that have free trade agreements from those that are subject to most favoured nation status. Of course, any future customs

facilitation for UK-EU trade will be a matter for negotiation once we have left the EU. Both we and the EU envisage putting in place ambitious customs arrangements to make use of all the available facilitative arrangements and technologies that we can.

Let me reassure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and colleagues across the Chamber that we are preparing for that negotiation and will work with Parliament, the devolved Administrations and others to ensure a successful outcome in the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. What an interesting debate. It's all right—I am a lawyer, so I understand accountants.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 30 October 2019

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

Building Out Extant Planning Permissions

9.30 am

Anne Milton (Guildford) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered building out extant planning permissions.

It is a pleasure, albeit a surprise, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes.

I am here to talk about planning, which is often a contentious issue for our local councillors, and particularly for local authorities that are developing local plans, especially in constituencies with significant areas of green-belt and other protected land. Some 89% of Guildford borough and 60% of Waverley borough is in the green belt; and 36% of Guildford and 53% of Waverley is in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

In Guildford, we are very short of homes. We have around 3,000 people on Guildford Borough Council's waiting list, with thousands more unable to buy a home due to excessively high prices, and we have correspondingly high rents. However, in Guildford and Cranleigh we need to build more homes in the right areas, with good transport links and all the necessary infrastructure, without increasing the risk of flooding, while protecting our green belt. To do that, we need investment from Government and developers.

I am sure that many Members of this House and I could spend several hours discussing the need for more homes, including more social housing and more homes that people can afford, and where those homes should be built, but I asked for this debate on a narrower area. Once local authorities have had the arguments about local plans and planning permissions—and they do have torrid arguments about them—and permission has been given, what powers do local authorities have to get the homes built? How can they get the much-needed infrastructure?

In Guildford in 2018-19, the number of homes built was 284. There is a requirement for 518 this year and 928 in 2021-22. In simple terms, that will only cover the backlog of unmet need. There is also a need, year on year, for 570 so-called affordable homes—although what is called “affordable” in Guildford is not affordable in many other parts of the country, or even in Guildford itself, so the word is open to some debate. However, taking into account that development will provide 40% of the overall housing figure, year on year, Guildford will be short of affordable homes until we reach more than 1,000 new dwellings a year.

Schemes such as Weyside urban village are subject to a housing infrastructure fund or HIF bid, which we are still waiting to hear about. We were told by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that this was an oven-ready scheme, but still we have not heard back on that, and the Government have recently put up interest rates on local authority loans from the Public Works Loan Board from 0.8% to 1.8%.

Despite my having had numerous meetings with Ministers from the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Guildford's infrastructure, both road and rail, is under extreme pressure, as is the two-lane stretch of the A3. That affects many more constituencies than just mine; it affects everybody south of Guildford. Developers will build only where there is a commitment to the delivery of infrastructure. Builders simply will not build without it; they go elsewhere, where it is easier to build.

In Cranleigh, in Waverley borough, a total of 7,640 permissions have been given since 2013, but only 1,906 homes have been built. Cranleigh is required to build 1,700 new homes over the local plan period, which is from 2013 to 2032. Of those, 1,600 have been granted permission. The largest sites in Cranleigh account for 1,348 of those dwellings, of which only 168, or 12%, had been built as of 4 September.

The figures are pretty shocking. A permission for 425 dwellings was granted in 2016, but only eight of those plots are complete; 136 dwellings were given permission in 2014, and only 69 of those plots are complete; 75 dwellings were granted permission in 2017, and 38 of those plots have been developed; 265 dwellings were given permission in 2015—four years ago—and none of those is complete; an application for 54 dwellings got permission in 2017, and of those, we have only one show home; of 125 dwellings given permission in 2015, none is complete; and on one site, where 149 dwellings were given permission in 2016, and 119 in 2018, only 52 plots are complete. As I say, developers will build only where there is infrastructure, but these permissions are crippling Cranleigh.

Cranleigh is in the countryside, beyond the green belt, and although I do not want to see building on the green belt—none of us does—we end up with development pushed on to the countryside beyond the green belt, with no account taken of sustainability, environmental protections or feasibility. Cranleigh is a wonderful village, but it has precious little transport infrastructure and no realistic means of achieving it. That has an impact on housing delivery, and developers want to keep prices high, well beyond the reach of many. Build-out is slow. I could talk about the inappropriateness of the development in Cranleigh, but that would take me into another Westminster Hall debate.

Local authorities simply do not possess enough tools to force the hand of developers. The housing delivery test is based on the completion of new dwellings, rather than planning permissions granted. In granting planning permission, local authorities can set shorter time periods in which the development must be begun, but as starting a development can mean as little as commencing an access road, or creating a hard-standing for the parking of vehicles, those time periods mean precious little. Local authorities have no carrots and no sticks at their disposal.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing this debate. I am trying to give her a break to maybe take a mouthful of water, but I am interested in what she thinks those carrots and sticks could be.

Anne Milton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will come on to exactly that; I have a few ideas.

[Anne Milton]

There are numerous options available to Government to make a real difference in getting the homes that we need built. We need houses that people can afford in areas such as Guildford and Cranleigh, where prices are eye-wateringly high—the average house price in Guildford is more than £550,000—and socially rented homes. However, it sometimes feels as if successive Governments are simply unwilling to do anything that will upset the developers' apple cart.

The options that could be available to Government include requiring developers of strategic sites in local plans to come forward with a full permission application. They already have the benefit of being in the local plan—a factor that carries significant weight when it comes to granting permission. They should have to come forward with a full application. The pretty development pictures that we see at the outline stage, which are generally in watercolours and made to look a bit like something out of a storybook, are rarely carried through into reserved matters.

Phased development on larger sites should be agreed in advance between the developer and the local planning authority and written into the section 106 agreements, so that the LPA has a more realistic idea of what will be delivered. Currently, provision of affordable housing is written into any agreement, but if all housing is viewed as a social benefit—I think all housing is a social benefit—we could include phased development targets, particularly on strategic sites, in local plans.

Starting a development should involve completing a dwelling, not just putting a bit of concrete on the land. Once the developer has committed money to laying on services and so on, they are more likely to continue. Council tax could become due on every dwelling, whether completed or not, based on agreed delivery rates. There could be compulsory purchase by Government of sites that had not delivered over, say, 10 years. There could be a higher rate of tax on land banking by non-building companies that push up the value of land. We could apply heavier taxes on developers' land banks that contain more than five years-worth of house building, based on their current build rate. Developers can make money selling on plots rather than building houses; we need to capture more of the uplift value of the land, so that house building becomes the better option. We could decide not to sell public land to developers. Land capture value should be captured for the benefit of the public, not for plugging funding gaps.

Local authorities face significant sanctions for not building homes in housing development targets; developers that do not build have none whatever on them. The only cost that they bear is the cost of interest on loans that they acquire to buy the land. In fact, it is not uncommon for developers to build out just short of their targets but not up to the trigger points. For instance, I recently heard a story of a developer from whom significant amounts of money were due when it reached the 300th house—money that was critical for the infrastructure for a large site. But the developer stopped at 299. None of the other developers building on that strategic site was prepared to go ahead without that infrastructure.

I cannot see, despite protestations from many people, any real action from Government. You, Ms Nokes, raised with me an interesting point about Romsey brewery. This is a long-running case in Test Valley. The last brew

was on your 11th birthday on 26 June 1983. Every time it looks like development is about to make progress, it stalls. There are residents on a site that has been partially developed for years and years. There is a similar site in Guildford; it was demolished in, I think, the 1980s. It stands right in the town centre—minutes' walk from the station—but nothing is being built on the site. In an area such as Guildford, where, as I said, 89% of the borough is green belt, it is criminal that people who need homes—socially rented homes, homes to rent, and homes to buy at prices that they can afford—see that site sitting empty.

If we want more homes, at the very least Government need to help local authorities to deliver the infrastructure and penalise the developers, or give them significant incentives to get on and build the houses that are needed. We need the Government to take action so that we get truly sustainable development—not just development anywhere, but development that allows rewilding of our countryside, for example, and enables building on brownfield land. I am thinking of sites such as the Romsey brewery and the Plaza site in Guildford.

Guildford will remain unbuilt on for years and years unless Government do something. I know that this Government have, and previous Governments had, the best intentions. What I would like to hear from the Minister and perhaps the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) is some ideas about how we get things to happen in the foreseeable future, not five years down the line.

9.43 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is also an unexpected pleasure for me to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I thank the right hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) for securing the debate. There is no doubt in my mind that the failure of developers to get on with the job and build the homes for which they have permission is a major factor contributing to our failure to meet the needs of people in this country.

The right hon. Lady talked about high demand for property in Guildford and real shortages. That is reflected across the country and even in the north of England, where land prices are of course less expensive. She made a comprehensive speech, and my speech will reflect much of what she said. There were interesting comments particularly on affordability. Of course, we have very different markets across the UK. I do not know what it costs to buy a three or four-bedroom house in Guildford, but if someone comes to Stockton-on-Tees, they can buy a brand-new four-bedroom house for under £200,000.

Anne Milton: In Guildford it varies slightly, but I think the average house price is about £580,000.

Alex Cunningham: There we have it—the absolute difference between different marketplaces. If someone wanted to buy a small, two-bedroom apartment in my constituency, they could buy one brand-new for under £90,000.

[GERAINT DAVIES IN THE CHAIR]

My point is that if we had investment in the north of England similar to what there has been in the south—investment in infrastructure and in business development—perhaps people would find tremendous advantages in heading north and living there, where the standard of

living can be much higher and people have so much more disposable income even after they have paid their mortgage.

The problem is that this country is facing a housing crisis. There are 126,000 children without a home to call their own. Rough sleeping has more than doubled since 2010. Home ownership among the under-45s has fallen by 900,000 since 2010. More than 1 million people are on council waiting lists.

Labour has made many commitments on how we will address the housing crisis. We will launch the biggest council building programme for a generation. We will build for those who need it, including the very poorest and the most vulnerable, with a big boost to new social rented homes. We will stop the sell-off of social rented homes by suspending the right to buy. We will look closely at how local authorities deal with land—how they sell land if they need to sell land. The right hon. Lady talked about that, and we will look closely at how we contain the value and the price of land. We will transform the planning system with a new duty to deliver affordable homes.

We also want to encourage greater use of brownfield sites. I mentioned the site in Stockton where someone can buy a four-bedroom house for £200,000. I visited that just last week. It was a brownfield site—a big joinery company used to be on the site. People are starting to build there, so I hope that the centre of Guildford might see a similar development in the near future.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Ind): I think that you might be a little indulgent, Mr Davies, if this is quite a long intervention. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) has spoken about brownfield sites, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) mentioned, on my behalf, Romsey brewery. Our big challenge there is that that is the only remaining brownfield site in the centre of Romsey, yet because the developers have started the build, there are no additional powers to force them to build it out. Would the hon. Gentleman like to expand a little on how he sees a future in which levers can be applied to developers where they have the permission and have started the build and where compulsory purchase is not possible, for a wide variety of reasons, including the fact that every time the council comes close to compulsory purchase, the developer simply starts building one more unit? Does the Labour party have any great suggestions on how we might resolve such situations?

Alex Cunningham: I will develop that point later in my speech, but we believe that we could impose penalties in that situation. If developers were failing to develop the land, we could tax the land in a particular way so that they could decide either to pay the tax or to get on with the development.

A Government can take many actions to alleviate the housing crisis, but of course the real answer is to build more genuinely affordable homes. To truly address homelessness of all kinds, we need those affordable homes for people to live in. To enable more young people to buy a house, there needs to be the stock available at a price that they can afford. My researcher, Kerri Prince, lives in Greater London and is saving

desperately to buy a house, but she needs £40,000 or £50,000 to put a deposit on a house, so it is almost an impossible task for her.

Anne Milton: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the problem when Government put money into the housing market—to take his example—is that they simply push the price up?

Alex Cunningham: The answer to high prices is to provide more homes and drive the prices down, and our ambition is to do that, and not just for younger people. We need to ensure that older people have adequate housing; it should be designed specifically for them so that it is suitable. We need to build more for the elderly as well.

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as giving developers planning permission, as the right hon. Member for Guildford outlined. We have situations where planning permission has been given and building has begun, but residents in the locality are left with an eyesore of a building site for many months, or even years, due to the project being suspended or halted. There is no requirement for developers to finish the building and bring the project to completion, and there are no deadlines for the building to be completed. She gave lots of examples of developers failing the people they are meant to be providing for.

Caroline Nokes: Does the hon. Gentleman concur that the imperative, therefore, is to have deadlines by which development must not only begin, but be completed? It affects not only residents in the locality but, in many instances, residents who are already living on the site.

Alex Cunningham: I concur with that. We see this tremendous race by developers to acquire potentially lucrative land, yet they might not be equipped or ready to develop it. They might not have the resources or labour to get on with the job. They have complied with the planning permission by starting to build. As the right hon. Member for Guildford said, that could just be an access road. They know that they can simply pause the project indefinitely. This is not how our processes should work. We desperately need that housing for people to live in.

Some developers get their hands on the land and then fail to build even one house within a reasonable timescale. The developers always get what they want but, for many reasons—probably related to their projected sales, income and profit generation—they chose to go at a pace that suits them, not the need for new homes. We believe that councils should be given “use it or lose it” planning powers. They should be able to levy the tax that I mentioned on sites where planning permission has been granted but it has not been built out in a reasonable timeframe, or where the building has begun but been halted for the long term, so the homes do not get built because it is not convenient for the developer to do so.

At the planning permission stage, we could place more stringent timetables on when parts of the development should be delivered. That would result in a minimum number of homes being developed within fixed timescales and would not leave the early inhabitants living on a building site for years on end. I know that major developments can face uncertainty and setbacks, but I

[Alex Cunningham]

am under no illusion: some developers enter the process in the full knowledge that they will abandon the land for a time, depending on their own needs and processes. For me, that is not on.

Local authorities grant planning permission in good faith, to provide homes for their residents. Some developers may hold up the delivery of the houses for the sake of profit, as prices may have dropped, or they have been unable to increase them as much as they claim they need to. For too long we have tolerated profits for developers being put ahead of housing for the many. We should be much stronger on regulations and the planning system for delivering new affordable homes.

Last week, during a visit to Sheffield, the Minister spoke about a corridor of prefab house building factories across the north of England—a bold and welcome vision—yet it was a shame to hear that most of the £38 million to boost construction went to councils in the south. That seems to be the story with this Government: investment for the south while the north continues to be disregarded and discounted. I hope that the Minister will have tough new measures to announce.

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman lives in a very different part of the country from the constituency I live in and serve. He may be interested to hear that we in the south-east, particularly in Guildford, feel that all the money goes to the north of England, particularly the infrastructure money.

Alex Cunningham: That is a fascinating comment. Just look at Crossrail, investment in the Underground or investment in HS2, which is supposed to go to the north—we do not know when it will reach Leeds, never mind the real north, which is Teesside, Durham, Newcastle, Berwick-upon-Tweed and then my homeland of Scotland. When we see Crossrail-type investment in infrastructure in the north, perhaps I will be able to come around to the right hon. Lady's way of thinking.

I hope that the Minister will announce tough new measures that outline how she thinks we can bring these housing developments to completion within a reasonable timescale. That must include measures to support councils in getting the required level of affordable housing to ease their waiting lists; measures to be firm with developers who are sitting on developments with no completion date in sight; and measures to be tougher during the planning permission process, to give councils the assurances they need to grant the green light.

Our housing and planning systems are long overdue an overhaul. Over the past decade, this Government have failed on housing on all fronts, so it will fall to the next Labour Government, in a few weeks' time, to deliver the change that is needed.

9.55 am

The Minister for Housing (Ms Esther McVey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship now, Mr Davies. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) on securing this debate on building out extant planning permissions. I thank the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for adding her contribution to this important debate.

The right hon. Member for Guildford raised many important points: the shortage of homes, unmet need, future need, green belt protections, and the fact that we

need to be building homes of all types—social, council or private, to rent or to purchase—and we, as a Government, agree with that. We are tenure-blind, because everybody will need a home at some time in their life—of course they do—whatever type of home that is at that time. We know from surveys that 87% of people would rather own than rent, so we know that people ultimately want to own a home, because they feel it gives them security and a stake in society. It is about providing all those homes, with a view to helping people on to the housing ladder.

Anne Milton: Before I entered politics, I worked with social housing providers in inner London for 15 years. I disagree with the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). I think the right to buy gives people an opportunity. I know more than one person who has been able to build a life and meet many of their dreams and aspirations, because they could buy a home. The problem is not the buying but the fact that another home must be built in its place for people who want to rent. The right to buy inherently gives people an opportunity and allows them to get on in a way that other things do not.

Ms McVey: The right hon. Lady is spot on; people do want to be given the opportunity to buy their home. She is also correct that we need to build more homes, to continue that cycle—to enable people to get on the housing ladder at whatever stage in life it is plausible for them to do so. I say that as someone who has been in every type of tenure.

I remember only too well the opportunity afforded to people who bought their own home in the 1980s and earlier. It worked as well for local councils and the Government as it did for the individual because at that time, when council homes were not necessarily being kept in the condition that they should have been, a person living in a council home could take over the property to maintain it, and bought it at a price that worked for them and for Government; and they then had a home.

As the right hon. Lady said, we need to keep that cycle going so that there are more homes coming forward, and that is what we must continue to do. So many people have said, and continue to say, that the opportunity afford through the right to buy fundamentally changed not only their lives, but those of their children.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister will be as aware as I am of the vast number of homes sold under the right to buy that have ended up in the private rented sector because people have sold them and moved on. Many of those people have ended up back in the rental sector, so vast numbers have not really benefited from the right to buy. The important thing is to have more homes, but the Government have failed over many years to provide new homes for each one that they have sold.

Ms McVey: There are many life stories, and the hon. Gentleman may well be right that sometimes, for whatever reason, people might not have stayed in the home that they bought. People do not know what will happen in their life's journey. However, for the vast bulk of people who took the opportunity, buying their home was transformational: it meant the security of having the

home that they wanted and of being on the housing ladder. Opportunities are what the Government can give people, and we will continue to offer them to others because our party believes in social mobility as well as self-empowerment. That is key.

Anne Milton: I thank the Minister for indulging me, since we have quite a bit of time. I would just like to mention to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) that when I was on Reigate and Banstead Borough Council I knew a Conservative councillor whose family had been homeless. He had had an abusive father who used to beat up his mother. His mother bought her flat under the right to buy; they sold it and bought a pub, and that was the making of the family. I could tell many more stories along similar lines. It gave the family an opportunity to come from being homeless to owning their own business, running a pub and giving their children all the benefits that they wanted to. That was why he became a Conservative councillor.

Ms McVey: The right hon. Lady is quite right. So many people have said what a support the right to buy was. That is key for the Conservative party: how do we help people to achieve what they aim for in life, whether that is a home or a business?

When we talk about the number of homes coming forward, we all agree that there have been many decades of not building enough; demand has outstripped supply for many years. In the past year, however, more than 220,000 homes have been built—more than in all but one of the past 31 years. We need to do more, and more is being done—but a significant amount has been done already. We are going in the right direction. The Government are putting another £44 billion into home building.

Alex Cunningham: It is good that more homes are being built, but does the Minister acknowledge that the Government have failed to meet their own targets almost every year?

Ms McVey: What I will say is that we are still on the way to our target of building up to 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. We have been building more; as I said clearly, we built more homes this year than in all but one of the last 31 years. That is key.

We have helped people in various ways. Some 560,000 people have benefited from our Help to Buy scheme, and we are helping 310,000 first-time buyers. We have the highest number of first-time buyers in a decade, and there was an increase of 84% between 2010 and 2018, so we are helping people to get on the housing ladder. Local authority waiting lists went down by about 40% in that time. We are helping people across the board, whether they are on housing waiting lists or whether they want to buy homes, but I agree that there is more to do.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister's statistics may sound impressive, but does she share my concerns? I live at Chelsea Bridge Wharf when I am in London, and each night I pass all the huge new developments and properties that have been built. Although they have been there for several years, most of the lights are off all night. The properties that the Government boast have been built

are not occupied, but owned by overseas developers and others who just want them for their value. That does nothing to put people into properties.

Ms McVey: I cannot agree. I am giving the hon. Gentleman figures that show that waiting lists have come down by 40%, that we have the highest number of first-time buyers in a decade, and that we are supporting people into homes, so I cannot agree with what he says.

We all want sustainable development. We want homes that are fit for the future and future-proof. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that in Sheffield I talked about the fact that the Government are setting up a centre of excellence across the north. Our vision is that the north will be the centre for engineering and modern methods of construction. We will be building homes for people to live in, so the UK can be a global leader in modern methods of construction and in safe homes, technological homes, green homes, modern homes and beautiful homes. That is our goal and ambition; if we achieve it, a mature market will be worth £40 billion a year to this country. That industry will be led from the north, as it needs to be. We selected the north because of the vision that it already has. We need to capitalise on the arc that stretches from Liverpool right across to Sheffield. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman shares my vision and view of the opportunities.

On sustainable developments and homes for the future, the Government are paving the way for a green revolution with eco-friendly and affordable homes. We are looking in the round at how to have homes with considerably reduced heating costs, so that they are affordable in every way, but also good for the environment. We need homes that give the people in them value for money, that are good for the environment and that reduce carbon emissions.

Anne Milton: Has the Minister looked—I personally have not—at whether we can do more on building regulations to ensure that we make a positive difference to the impact of housing on the environment?

Ms McVey: That is exactly what we are doing: looking at homes for the future and what we need to do for the future. This is coming into play now.

Caroline Nokes: Does the Minister agree that building eco-homes and homes fit for the future will sometimes take real imagination? It is not just about building regs; it is about looking at ways of developing really imaginative and forward-looking homes that fit into the landscape. We need to provide beautiful homes in a way that does not necessarily plaster our countryside with bricks and mortar, but that uses imaginative building materials, so that they are not only environmentally friendly and cheap to run, but sit well in our landscape.

Ms McVey: That is exactly what we have to do: open up the whole building sector and industry. We continue to have traditionally made homes—the latest figures from 2015 show that 90% are built in that way—but a new market is emerging. The modern methods of construction and different materials that the right hon. Lady refers to are being used in 10% of homes, or about 15,000. How do we develop and expand that industry to give people a choice of where to live?

[*Ms McVey*]

Some of these homes can be built off-site, using modern methods, in a couple of weeks, and can then be put on-site in a couple of days. That stops the disruption for everyone living close by, which stops some of the opposition to planning permissions and building out, because it is very considerate to everybody living close by. That is key, and it is exactly what we are doing.

The companies coming forward in this area include Urban Splash, up in Manchester, which is engaging in a joint venture with a Japanese company, Sekisui, that is coming over to England. In Speke in Liverpool, there is a new, emerging company called Ideal Modular Homes, and in Yorkshire there is Ilke Homes. This new development is happening, and these new products are coming forward. The Government are getting behind that, and supporting these new and emerging industries, because that is the future of housing in this country. However, housing is all about choice, and that is what we will always push; we will not only back industry, business and creativity but ensure that houses are built and delivered to local neighbourhoods in a considerate way.

Alex Cunningham: It is great that we agree on so much across Parliament as far as housing development is concerned, particularly on the greenhousing issue. I have met developers recently, and I keep pressing them on ground source heat pumps, air source heat pumps, solar and everything else, asking them why on earth are they not starting to adopt these new technologies. They tell me that it is because the market is immature, and they cannot get the quality of product that they require, and even if the quality of product was there, they could not get it in the quantity that they require. The Minister talks about encouraging the development of these industries, but what will the Government do to encourage that development, so that these industries have the supply chains that they require?

Ms McVey: There is an element of the developments having to be done at a scale that then brings down cost and adds to affordability. That is what we are addressing through schemes such as the home building fund, through which we are putting £2.5 billion into the sector and providing innovative ways for small and medium-sized enterprises to come forward. We are backing up what we are talking about with significant support from Government.

The right hon. Member for Guildford and the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North talked about brownfield sites. They are key, especially when we consider that possibly 1 million homes could be built on them across the country. Once again, through the home building fund, the Government are putting more than £2 billion into supporting work on brownfield land that is coming forward, which is key.

I go on visits around the country, looking at what is happening with housing. I went to Northstowe, the biggest complete new town since the 1950s. It was built on public brownfield land. We have to make sure that there is a steady supply of brownfield land coming forward, and we must provide support to make sure that people do the remediation work on that land and build on it. They must not only start building on that land, but continue that building until completion.

Anne Milton: There is a site like that in Guildford; the brewery site in Romsey would be another. What will the Government do to make these developers build on them now?

Ms McVey: What we are doing is bringing forward an accelerated planning Green Paper. There will be not just a single solution that ensures that developers build out; there will be an array of solutions, using both carrot and stick approaches. Those methods will be set out in our new Green Paper, which is coming forward.

The right hon. Lady is correct to say that after developers receive planning permission and start building, we need to see the end point. We are working with our strategic partner, Homes England. If we are selling off public land, we will make sure that we divide the plots up, so that we can have small, medium-sized and big builders involved, and can ensure a path to completion, with companies of different sizes building properties with different types of tenure. That matters, because a lot of research we have done shows that a lot of the difficulty is not about people land banking; it is about the need for variation in the types of tenure coming forward. Obviously, we need people to want to buy properties, so we must understand the marketplace, and bring through the array of types of home wanted; that is key.

We have talked about the number of homes that will be needed in the future. The Chartered Institute of Housing has reported that we need around 340,000 new homes a year to meet unmet need, although KPMG and Shelter project that there will be future demand for a minimum of 250,000 homes per year. That is why we are looking to increase the figure to 300,000 new homes a year by the mid-2020s.

We must ensure that new homes fit in with the demands and wants of local communities. Obviously, we live in a democracy; we have to take everybody's views into account. We have to make sure that people are happy with what is being built; that is why we brought in the national planning policy framework, and it is vital that we keep such things updated, which will help us as we work towards establishing communities that people want.

We have helped to cut red tape while making it quicker to plan and build new developments of homes that people want. That is how we have managed to increase building rates this year. Furthermore, I am delighted that in the year to June 2019, new build dwelling completions—not permissions, but completions—increased by 8% from the year to June 2018. Indeed, in the year ending June 2019, the planning system granted permission for 375,200 new homes, which is a positive step, so we have planning permissions in the pipeline for the future. That means things are going in the right direction, but we recognise that more needs to be done, and more homes need to be built out.

Anne Milton: I do not want the Minister to give away any surprises from the Conservative manifesto, which I am sure will be brought forward soon, but perhaps she could reassure me that it will have some highlights from the planning Green Paper. I also hope that she will address the point that in Cranleigh, which has to build 1,700 homes by 2032, some 1,600 planning permissions have been given. Perhaps she can give me some insight

into what powers local authorities will be given to ensure that these properties are built, so that local authorities are not penalised when unmet need is looked at.

Ms McVey: I am glad that the right hon. Lady did not want me to reveal what is in the manifesto, particularly as I am not writing it, which would make revealing what was in it difficult. She is quite correct that housing is key going forward. How do we ensure that we get the homes we need?

Key measures will obviously include the housing delivery test: what is needed in an area, how do we work towards meeting that need, and how do we get the local plan working in the way that is needed? Also, we will look at the independent review of build-out rates. What is inhibiting development? What is stopping people building out? I have mentioned the answer: it is ensuring that the right tenures and types of homes are built, so that there is variation.

Anne Milton: In the meantime, permissions have been given, but the homes have not been built and the local authority is penalised. That does not seem to be quite fair, so local authorities urgently need a tool that they can use to ensure that properties for which permissions have been granted are built, or local authorities should not be penalised.

Ms McVey: That is where the accelerated planning Green Paper will come in, because it will provide the blueprint to overhaul the planning system to create a simpler, fairer system that works for everyone, from homeowners to small and medium-sized businesses, local communities and housing developers. It will also ensure that people who want to build for themselves have the right to do so.

Alex Cunningham: Does the Minister see an opportunity for retrospective powers to be granted to local authorities to tackle the specific problems outlined by the right hon. Member for Guildford?

Ms McVey: I am not sure about retrospective powers. We would have to look at their impact, but we could certainly go forward with what we see we need to do.

Caroline Nokes: This point is absolutely crucial. I have listened with enthusiasm to the Minister's comments about the accelerated planning Green Paper, because there is much to welcome there. However, on the retrospective point, the power going forward is pointless when it comes to the Plaza site in Guildford or the brewery site in Romsey. We want something that has been outstanding for the best part of 40 years to be tackled now.

Ms McVey: As we look at what is in the local plan, we will ask how we need to build it out. I mentioned that there will be carrots and sticks, but we have to make sure that it is feasible and workable going forward. I agree with the right hon. Lady. How do we build these out and prioritise the brownfield sites before we move on and do other things? What are we doing that will give the council significant strength to ensure that these are built out? Tackling unnecessary delays in planning permission and building out has to be key. She asks about the additional strengths that a council could have

to ensure that land is developed and built out. All of those things will be considered in the Green Paper, because we intend to achieve those goals and get homes built. We have started off well.

The housing infrastructure fund of £5.5 billion will ensure that the correct infrastructure is in place and will unlock about 650,000 homes. Marginal viability funding will help people to unlock the land. We will probably need to understand a little more about why some of the brownfield land has not been built out and perhaps help people apply for viability funding. If it is about remediation or infrastructure, we could provide support to make sure it is built.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I want to reassure her that in sites such as the Romsey brewery and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford, it is not about remediation, infrastructure or any outstanding obstacles; it is about a developer who simply finds it more economically convenient not to build than to build. I am very frustrated that what we are hearing from the Green Paper is that there will be lots of carrots and sticks for future development, but nothing that helps now.

Ms McVey: But if those sites have not been developed, they will be. We will speed those up. If they are not built, there can only be a future development. We will look at those sites, understand why they have not been built out, and look at what we need to do to ensure that it happens.

Anne Milton: I feel that we are giving the Minister a rather hard time, with only a few people speaking. However, I mentioned in my speech the housing infrastructure bids that Guildford has for the Weyside urban village. Interestingly, it has around 1,000 homes and nobody objects—it is one of the few large sites that nobody objects to. When the bid went in, officials in the Minister's Department said that it was oven-ready—ready to go—yet Woking has got £90 million of HIF money on a scheme that is not ready, so can she perhaps write to me in the days before Parliament is dissolved to let me know whether Guildford is getting the bid and, if not, why not, because the scheme is oven-ready for around 1,000 houses?

Ms McVey: I will take that away and look into the scheme to see where it is and I will write to the right hon. Lady with an answer. The HIF is all about unlocking developments and finding the extra funds needed for the infrastructure for a site. As she says, it will unlock 1,000 homes in her area. That is why the money was put aside. It is 1,000 homes in her area, but 650,000 across the country. So far we have not delivered on that, but we have to make sure that we get value for money and that homes are built out in a speedy and safe way. I will write to her on that matter and see where her HIF bid is.

Alex Cunningham: It looks as though the Minister is moving towards the idea that we should have retrospective powers for local authorities to ensure that the sites are actually built out. Perhaps we could find a way to compel them to work in partnership with other organisations, such as housing associations, in order to allow them to develop a site if the developers are not prepared to get on with it.

Ms McVey: We are supporting housing in all different ways in order to get the homes we need. As I said, we have done a considerable job so far. How do we work with people? We are not statist like the Labour party, which might tell people what to do. We understand that we have to work with the local community, local councils and developers to get the best outcomes for the local area. We do it through consensus, understanding what is needed and providing support. The Government set up the housing infrastructure fund to do just that. We ask where the pinch points are, where the difficulties in developing something out are, and then we ensure that it works successfully. But how do we build on that and analyse what works to take it further?

Alex Cunningham: We have heard examples this morning of sites sitting totally empty for donkeys' years with nothing happening. People have tried to work with developers in the examples that we have given, but nothing has happened. Surely, eventually, you have to remove the carrot and apply the stick.

Ms McVey: This Government have helped support the building of more homes in the past year than all but one of the past 30 years, so I do not want the hon. Gentleman to paint an untrue picture of what is happening across the country. If we drive across the country, we see significant home building. When I talk about the biggest ever complete new town in Northstowe, with 10,000 homes being built on brownfield public land, we can see it happening. Sites are being built out, working with the local community, and that is what we need to do. Do we need to do more? Yes, and I think we can all agree on that.

How do we make sure that brownfield sites or sites that have planning permission come to fruition and get built? We have been doing that all across the country. I have travelled to Gosport to look at a new significant size building there, partnering with Homes England. I have looked at what is happening in Cambridgeshire and Northstowe. I am looking at a new development in Manchester and bringing back into play what I call unloved land, or we are renovating old buildings. That is exactly what we are doing, but each part of the country wants, and requires, a different type and style of home. We must have solutions for all of them, to ensure that we keep to the character of different areas.

The Government also want to bring back many small and medium-sized businesses. A third were lost in the financial crash of 2007-08. How do we stimulate the marketplace and ensure that we bring those builders back into it, so that the big builders do not dominate? That is key, because we are the party of small businesses, and of innovation and aspiration. We can bring those elements back in by working with our strategic partner, Homes England, which has increased in size considerably and is stretching out across the country. We are looking at how we can subdivide land to bring in new developers, so that they too can get building. Equally, if those developers are from the local area, the local area benefits too, in terms of jobs, the survival of businesses, and understanding the character of an area.

Another key point is how to get the skills and the labour force. That involves working through the industrial strategy, and working with the Department for Education

to ensure that we will have a workforce that can build the homes that are needed. We are doing significant work and putting significant funding behind that too.

Anne Milton: It is not quite relevant to the debate, but I am sure that the Minister will agree that the Government's changes to the apprenticeship system have had a significant impact. I could not agree more that we need a lot more smaller builders. They can now get the apprentices they need and train up the workforce they need by using the apprenticeship levy, 25% of which can be passed on to them by those who pay it.

Ms McVey: The right hon. Lady knows much about that, and I pay tribute to the work that she has done in that sphere, getting the apprenticeship levy and working on high-calibre apprenticeships. Construction provides a wonderful career path and wonderful opportunities in an array of areas. We have put money into construction hubs to support young people, and we have worked with the Construction Industry Training Board on traditional build—although I return to the idea of modern methods of construction and getting young people excited about going into that career. At present, we have an ageing workforce, and we must ensure that young people are coming through.

Caroline Nokes: The Minister is of course right that we must encourage young people into the construction industry, but that takes time. What meetings has she had with the construction industry to discuss how they will manage to fill the gap that there will be in construction when free movement ends, to ensure that the current impressive rate of build will continue?

Ms McVey: The right hon. Lady is correct. I have meetings all the time to discuss that, as I did when I was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, when I was constantly working on how to support various sectors. She will be pleased to know that the Government have got 3.5 million more people into work—a thousand more people every day since 2010. There are also millions more in apprenticeships, so we have looked at the full flow-through of how we support people.

European citizens who are here, working with us, will remain here. We support them and thank them for the work they have done. Looking forward, how can we ensure that our workforce is homegrown as well as including those we need for the time being? The right hon. Lady is correct to mention those issues, but I have not just thought about them today; I have been working on them for nine years. That is why our country has such robust employment figures. However, she is right to mention those concerns.

Alex Cunningham: Unemployment in the north-east is up by 15,000 in the last year, which just shows the imbalance in Government investment. The Minister managed to answer a previous intervention that I had planned before I could make it, but I am interested in what she said about how much we can agree on regarding bringing small builders back into the industry. We have heard about other sites this morning. There are sites across the country that are not being built out, so surely there is an opportunity for small builders to work in partnership with larger companies. Alternatively, larger companies could release the parts of those sites that

they are not prepared to develop, in order to let small builders enter the market, build homes and satisfy the housing crisis.

Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman knows that I will not let an unfair representation of what is happening in employment go unchecked. We are at record low unemployment in this country, and at record high employment. The Government have brought down youth unemployment by 50%—under the previous Labour Government it sky-rocketed. We are the ones who ensure that people are in employment and have the careers they want, as well as opportunities for their future, and we will continue to do so.

It has been hard work for the Government to turn around the economy and get people into employment. That is the truth, and it has to be on record. I am particularly pleased that the Government have reduced youth unemployment by 50%. When we started in 2010, meeting young people who thought that they might never get a job was shameful, yet we have turned that around, ensuring that there are opportunities for everyone in this country.

With regard to ensuring that people work together, including big companies giving work to smaller companies, people do that on site anyway, ensuring that small, local companies work on site. That needs to be pushed even further. We are working with our strategic partner, Homes England, to ensure not just that there is a single big developer, but that the land is subdivided so that small and medium-sized enterprises can come forward. I am also working closely with Homes England on ensuring that smaller sites are given to SMEs to build on first.

We agree that it is key that local people benefit from the house building that is needed, not only through places to live, but through jobs. Some 300,000 homes will have to be built every year from the mid-2020s. Look at the size of the opportunities, and at the workforce that needs to be created. They will be very good jobs with very good career prospects. That needs to be planned for, which goes back to the question the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North asked about the workforce. Significant planning needs to go into that, which has been done and continues to be done. Again, that is why we are looking at modern methods, so that we can cater for a highly skilled workforce.

I think that we are coming to the end of the debate. We have covered an array of issues. I will take various matters back and will write to the right hon. Member for Guildford, particularly on the HIF fund that she is working for. However, I want people to be reassured that we are building more homes, and we will continue to do so. We have incentives and support to ensure that people are building on brownfield sites, and where they are not, we will look at what levers we can pull to make sure that people build out those sites, whether using carrots or sticks. I will take that question back and consider it. We are also talking about how we make the planning process easier, making sure that we are working with local communities.

I will give the final word to the right hon. Member for Guildford.

10.40 am

Anne Milton: I thank the Minister, who has been very patient. Having been a Minister, I know that debates are generally more difficult when there are lots of Members present, but it is also quite tricky when there are only two Back Benchers contributing.

The key point is that we want to protect our green belt, but that does not mean simply pushing housing on to the countryside beyond the green belt, which is the case in Cranleigh. It is not sustainable; it is not the right place to build homes. All these planning permissions are being given but the homes are not being built, and unless something happens soon, Waverley Borough Council will be penalised for that.

I appreciate that the Minister is going to be bringing forward a Green Paper, but I, like many members of the public, get so frustrated: “A Green Paper? Goodness gracious me, when is something actually going to happen?” It feels like a long way ahead, so I urge the Minister to look at some small things that could be done. I know that the housing market is complex, and that Governments have to be careful about where they interfere in it because that can have unintended consequences, but council tax on undeveloped planning permissions is one small thing that might alter the balance of the economics for developers, and get them building.

There is another thing I urge the Minister to do. Governments always talk about joined-up working, but they never join anything up. That is not a criticism of the Minister, but she and her colleagues in the Department for Transport need to work closely together, because in an area such as Guildford—I am sure this is the case in Romsey, too—we have to get transport and housing lined up.

Ms McVey: I can reassure the right hon. Lady that we have set up an inter-ministerial group. She is quite right that we should not, and do not, work in silos. All of these things need to be aligned so that we are getting the transport and the infrastructure, and homes are built in the right place. We are doing that, and making sure there is a timetable and a clear path for the transport and homes needed in communities such as hers.

Anne Milton: Turning an inter-ministerial group into actual action can be quite a frustrating business, but it is a start. I would also include the Treasury in that. The Treasury looks only at income, but it is quite important that it also takes account of the social benefits of certain things it does. If that were put into the mix, the Treasury would look at its figures in a different way, because there is a clear social benefit.

I thank you, Mr Davies, for your patience, and I thank the Minister and the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). I look forward to receiving the Minister's letter about the HIF bid within the next couple of days.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered building out extant planning permissions.

10.44 am

Sitting suspended.

Leaving the EU: Integrated Foreign Policy

11 am

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered integrated foreign policy after the UK leaves the EU.

As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am grateful to the Minister for attending; I am aware that he is newish to his brief, so I hope he is not too put out. I also hope that we can use the debate not only to set out ideas, but to explore some themes and thoughts that I hope will be of benefit to global Britain post Brexit.

Integration should be a key theme in foreign and overseas policy, because it is a natural way to increase our power. It is good to have more power, which we hope to use for our own good and for the defence of the international liberal order. Having power also prevents others from shaping the world to our detriment. All powers need to integrate, and arguably the problem at the moment is that our potential adversaries are doing rather better than we are. Indeed, the commonly used term “hybrid war” is in part a reference to permanent and hostile competition using not only conventional tools of military force, but non-conventional forms of state power. One of the things that worries me about the new world is that, arguably, modern autocracies have adjusted to it rather better than we have.

More broadly, Brexit—if it happens—requires a renewed commitment to global engagement. It should not imply a shrinking from the world, but an embrace of it. I want the Government’s vision of global Britain to have meaning. James Rogers from the Henry Jackson Society and I produced a study entitled, “Global Britain: A Twenty-First Century Vision”. The foreword was written by the current Prime Minister, who I hope appreciated some of the ideas—I am not saying that he would recommend them all, because we were trying to suggest some quite radical thinking. Perhaps there are hon. Members present who would question that, and they are welcome to do so.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some very wise points. When I was a Minister, I was certainly impressed with the integration that we see in post. I appreciate that he applied for the debate before the general election was announced, but is he as shocked as I am to see that there is not a single Labour Member present to discuss this crucial issue?

Mr Seely: It is disappointing that they are not here, but we have a former Labour Member, the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), as well as an esteemed Democratic Unionist Member, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). There is at least some cross-party interest.

What is the UK’s status in the world? The 21st century is likely to be defined by two superpowers: China and the United States.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): On the point made in the intervention, it is not normal for a shadow Minister to respond in a half-hour debate.

Mr Seely: Thank you for that point, Chair.

A series of major powers will sit alongside the two superpowers: Brazil, Indonesia, economic powerhouses such as Germany and Japan, and former superpowers such as Britain and France. Britain is not a superpower and has not been since the 1950s, but it remains a great power—perhaps the foremost great power. Talk of the UK as medium-sized and middle-ranking is pointlessly deprecating and contributes little to the debate.

What is the state of the world? Conventional wars are generally in decline, and much of humanity enjoys more enriched lives than ever before.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has brought a very important issue to Westminster Hall for the half-hour debate. Does he agree that it is important for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to be a member of NATO and to play its part in that excellent organisation when it comes to foreign policy that collectively joins us together to have a global influence?

Mr Seely: It is critical. One of the points that I would like to touch on in the debate is the importance of the UK’s engaging multilaterally through not only, hopefully, a leading role in NATO, but a re-energised role in the United Nations. If I have time, I would like to ask the Minister about that.

What is the state of the world? Conventional war is in decline, but the world is becoming a more challenging place. There are new forms of integrated conflict and competition being developed by rivals. The international rules-based system set up since world war two has not broken down, but it is under threat and is being bent in several different directions.

A global Britain implies the use of something that perhaps we have not had enough of in this country—strategy, which is the reconciling of ends, ways and means. For the UK to be better able to achieve its ends, it has to marshal its means and ways—its resources, and how it uses them in the most effective way possible. Hence the need for integration across Government Departments, in a strategy that includes all overseas Government Departments and perhaps sometimes domestic Departments, too.

Russia and China do not have foreign policies that we should copy, but they show the worth of integrating power. Does Britain have what the great 20th-century strategist Basil Liddell Hart would call a “grand strategy”—the combination of the great tools of state power? I would argue that we do not yet have that—the Minister might disagree—but we are working towards it. We do not have it yet because, apart from anything else, although Sir Simon McDonald, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, pledged to the Foreign Affairs Committee to produce “something” in early 2019, I am not aware that the work has yet been produced. What has happened to the report that was promised to the Foreign Affairs Committee?

The tools of national power and influence exist on a spectrum, ranging from hard power through to soft power. As I have argued, they should not be seen in isolation from each other. British state power sometimes becomes less than the sum of its parts because our overseas engagement has come to be divided between so many competing Departments.

I will now make a point with which some colleagues may disagree. For me, there is no reason why we should not look closely at the Australian and Canadian models, whereby overseas aid and trade Departments are integrated as agencies within the Foreign Office.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (LD): Evidence suggests quite strongly that the Australian decision has had a significant impact on the Government's ability to deliver effective aid overseas; in other words, aid has lost out.

Mr Seely: That is not the evidence that I have read, but I look forward to reading it. If the hon. Lady would care to send it to me, I would love to have a look at it. From my conversations with Australian and Canadian diplomats and people who know about these things, I understand that their system—the integration of trade and the international development into their Foreign Offices—has actually worked quite well. This is not a criticism of DFID, which does many things very well. It spends public money considerably better than the Foreign Office does. It is not about trashing or diluting DFID, but about its full integration into an integrated overseas policy. I am also not arguing against 0.7% of national income being spent on aid, but I would change its definition.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My hon. Friend and I have a difference of opinion on this matter. Let me be very clear: no one who has studied these things closely thinks that the Canadian and Australian model that he describes is superior to the British model. I can reassure him on this point. When David Cameron set up the National Security Council in 2010, he did so directly to address the point that my hon. Friend makes. The National Security Council provides for the co-ordination between defence, diplomacy and development. With the greatest of respect, that makes my hon. Friend's proposal to put those Departments back into the Foreign Office entirely redundant, because the new mechanism delivers precisely the goal that he and I want to see—better co-ordination of policy in Government.

Mr Seely: I am not sure whether that is the case, but I will explore that idea in a few minutes if I have time.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a compelling point. He has done a huge amount of work on this issue, and I have a lot of respect for the work he has done with the Henry Jackson Society. One of the problems that he might crash into if we were to merge the Department for International Development with the Department for International Trade, albeit within the Foreign Office, is that there would potentially be the criticism that we are tying trade to aid, and that therefore our objectives might be impure. Would not our interests be best served by being more influential with the OECD Development Assistance Committee, and making the rules work better for those we serve?

Mr Seely: There are various ways to do this. I do not expect to succeed in merging the Department for International Development and the Department for International Trade back into the FCO. It is an option

that we should explore, and we should look honestly at whether it is the best, but if it is not—I suspect the Minister will argue that—I would very much like to explore ways to increase joint working, because it works at a strategy level.

I take issue with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said about the National Security Council, because I am not sure it works as well as it could when it comes to setting strategy. We need a national strategy council because the National Security Council's role is still too reactive. It is moving towards integration and looking at strategy, which I will come to if I do not run out of time—I want to make sure the Minister has time to respond.

There are many different ways of doing this, but at a departmental level, the integration to achieve greater effect and greater power sometimes breaks down. Arguably, it can also break down at an ambassadorial level; I will develop that argument in a second. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for their interventions and their important contributions to the debate, which I take in good faith.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems that we face in integration and influence is that our senior leaders travel far too little in places of importance, such as the whole of the African continent? In the time in which President Macron has visited the African continent more than 10 times, our Prime Minister has been able to visit only once. It was the first time a Prime Minister has visited Kenya—one of our strongest allies—since the days of Margaret Thatcher.

Mr Seely: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I would love to see Ministers do that more—I hope the Minister will not then blame me for jetlag if he ever has it. That is an absolutely sensible point. I will crack on, because I do not want to run out of time.

We have a tendency towards reactivity. We have a National Security Council, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield articulates. We have an Africa strategy, and we are developing a China strategy, so we are integrating more, but I would argue that we need to turbocharge it, push it and institutionalise it to greater effect. One way to do that is to change the nature of the National Security Council and turn it into a national strategy council. It would have two roles: it would have the reactive role that it has at the moment, and it would institutionalise and formalise a strategy role to set up whole-Government policy towards different parts of the world. That is beginning to happen; the National Security Council has within it committees that look at different parts of the world and themes. However, for me it is not institutionalised enough. There has been a lack of political leadership, as there often is nowadays—this relates to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) made about travel—to integrate Departments so that we maximise the value of our power.

Mr Mitchell: What my hon. Friend is saying about strategy is very good, but the National Security Council tends, to a very large extent, to be the creature of the Prime Minister. All I can tell him is that, when David

[Mr Mitchell]

Cameron was Prime Minister, the point that he makes about strategy was understood, and perhaps pursued more than it is today.

Mr Seely: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention and for being present; it is a great privilege for me that he is. He makes the point well about the need to normalise and institutionalise the strategy element so that, regardless of the Prime Minister's determination to push through a strategy, the setting of strategy five, 10 or 20 years ahead becomes the norm. The Army does it when it looks at strategic threats out to 2045—I was listening to the Commandant General of the Royal Marines yesterday—but we are not doing it at a political level. I am worried that our excellent FCO diplomats and soldiers lack political leadership because we have become too parochial in this House. It is a pleasure that so many Members with a broader vision are in the Chamber. I will crack on, because I am about to run out of time.

Here are some ideas for the One HMG agenda. I want it to remove barriers to joint working so that, whatever system we have—whether or not we keep DFID and DIT, and whatever their relationship with the FCO is—we maximise the integration factor. I was painfully aware of some of these ideas when I was overseas and deployed in my former life as a very accidental soldier. We need clear, integrated governance structures. We need integration of more levels of Departments, potentially through the use of what I call joint effects teams. I have seen their worth, and their absence in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

We need integrated line management through ambassadors. Ambassadors cannot manage DFID staff in the same way as they can with the FCO. An ambassador in a country should have control over the whole staff. There should be a common set of pay and conditions, which, frankly, means giving the FCO staff pay rises to bring them in line with other Departments and ensure that they are treated in exactly the same way.

Critically—especially for military operations in which the military are in the lead but DFID is very well represented and other international agencies fall under the British chain of command—there should be a single legal chain to speed decision making. Among the many things that slowed down decision making in provincial reconstruction teams in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq were the multiple legal chains that stretched back to individual Departments. If DFID is leading an operation in Africa and other Departments are supporting, DFID should supply the legal chain and there should not be parallel legal chains elsewhere. If the military are leading and DFID is supporting, the military lawyers should likewise have the legal remit. That speeds decision making and gives clearer and firmer political direction without too much infighting. That is an example of integration at a practical level that does not require great structural changes—I still want to see them, but I accept that they may not happen.

I would like to see the UK push for significant reform to DAC, the OECD committee. To colleagues who think that I am hostile to DFID, let me say that I am genuinely not, and I am genuinely not hostile to 0.7%.

Some people in this House, like Nigel Farage outside it, say, “We should pretty much scrap it. It is a disgrace that we spend more on overseas aid than on policing.” Actually, that is an embarrassing figure for us. I am not against the 0.7% figure at all, but we need to change the definition in some way that helps us. I suggest 0.5%, with 0.2% that we spend how we like, without reference to DAC. We could do two things in particular. All UK peacekeeping should come out of development money, because it is a fundamental building block to development. That would save the Ministry of Defence £300 or £400 million a year.

Harriett Baldwin: Does my hon. Friend welcome the fact that we were successful in lobbying the OECD DAC to ensure that peacekeeping should go from 7% to 15%?

Mr Seely: Yes, and I congratulate the former Minister on her excellent work and that of the Department. We can spend 15% now, but there is a big difference between 15% and 100%. I would like to see all UK peacekeeping counted, either by changing the rules of DAC or rearranging how we spend our aid money.

The second thing I would like to see is a reinvigorated BBC World Service TV and radio, with significantly increased funding, and I would like that to come under aid and development. Increasingly, aid and development will be seen not just as keeping people alive, as important as that is—I would not touch, but increase the life-saving element of DFID's budget. However, I would reallocate some of the economic support, where there is no discernible evidence of its effectiveness, either to the BBC World Service so that it can take on global fake news, or peacekeeping.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the BBC World Service. In fact, when I was Secretary of State, I increased by nine times the amount of money spent on the BBC World Service Trust. On the OECD DAC, if we make a promise to the poorest people in the world—Archbishop Tutu described that as a sacred thing—we should stick to it. The promise was 0.7%, and I am very proud that a Conservative Government introduced it. My hon. Friend is perfectly right to say that we should always review the nature of the definition. What he says about Britain's peacekeeping effort is absolutely relevant, but the OECD DAC works very well for Britain, because it brings countries that do not spend their aid as effectively as we do up to the standard that Britain expects, so we gain from that.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Bob Seely, you have 10 minutes left.

Mr Seely: I will wrap up in the next minute because I want to give the Minister time to respond. I do not accept that final point, because so few countries spend anything like the same amount on aid, and I think it just washes over most states. There is clearly a conversation to be had there.

To sum up, we have a National Security Council, we have had changes to increase integration and we should have three global themes—free trade, free thought and freedom from oppression. We could wrap up so much of what we do by championing free trade under the

WTO, freedom of thought with the BBC, and freedom from oppression, by championing UK anti-slavery measures at the UN and in this place. All that implies a commitment to a renewed multilateralism, not only through NATO, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, but through the UN. I would very much support a much more powerful role for the UK in the UN, both in committing more resources, funding and support for its reform, and in being a critical UN power. That will also mean giving the UK's UN team a better building to work in, so that they become more of a hub for the diplomatic community at the UN, increasing our power and influence.

Although I had other points to make, I will leave it there because I want to give the Minister time to respond. I thank him for listening and look forward to his response.

11.20 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Christopher Pincher): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) on securing this timely debate. I mean “timely” in the broader sense, as we are nearly out of time in this Parliament, but I am sure that the ideas that he adumbrated will form part of the election campaign, in which parties and candidates of all stripes will be able to put forward their views on our foreign policy—views that may well be taken up by the next Government. I pay tribute to him for all that he has done to inform and challenge the Government's foreign policy making, both as a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and through his thoughtful contributions in print, of which I have two submissions to hand. I also congratulate all colleagues who are present. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) said, not every political party is represented, but those who are here are respected across the House.

There is no doubt that we face a world of increasing uncertainty. The rules-based international system is under challenge. Trading tensions, climate change and growing populations mean greater competition. New technologies need to be properly harnessed to ensure that cyberspace cannot be hijacked for malign purposes—my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight made that point cogently and eloquently. Those challenges involve threats to our interests that we need to identify and overcome, but they also offer opportunity, from the economic potential of innovating to tackle climate change to the commercial possibilities offered by the dynamic economies of Asia, or the growing populations of Africa.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) mentioned Africa, and I agree with him: Ministers should travel more. I draw his attention to the current rather challenging parliamentary arithmetic, which means that the most powerful person in the House of Commons is not the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Foreign Secretary, but the Government pairing Whip, who allows us to travel. Perhaps in a new Parliament with a different arithmetic, Ministers will be able to travel much more.

Jeremy Lefroy: Does the fact that British foreign policy suffers because Ministers are understandably tied to Parliament not point to a fundamental problem in our country? We do not have the ability to get out there, unlike our counterparts with presidential systems.

Christopher Pincher: Our system is beautiful but imperfect. I acknowledge my hon. Friend's point, but we have a fantastic diplomatic service, Members of the House of Lords, who are often able to travel more, and trade envoys from across political parties, who contribute to our diplomatic effort.

Once we have left the European Union, we will continue to be guided by our core foreign policy priorities: protecting our people, projecting our influence and promoting our prosperity. Those priorities align with the three freedoms mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight: freedom from oppression, freedom of thought and expression, and freedom for trade. I am sure he will agree that those are important elements in delivering our core priorities.

We will remain a pragmatic champion of our values, a steadfast defender of our interests, and a global force for good. We will work with, and through, the global network of multilateral institutions—as a permanent member of the United Nations, to which my hon. Friend referred; as a leading member of the G7, the G20 and the Commonwealth; and as an independent reformist voice in the World Trade Organisation. That commitment extends to our neighbours in Europe. We are leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe. We remain steadfastly committed to the security and welfare of the continent, remaining a vital partner in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and of course, NATO, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others mentioned. We will lead by example. The Foreign Secretary has announced our intention to establish a global human rights sanctions regime, which will reinforce Britain's role in the world as a good global citizen.

I had a good sense of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight would raise today from the report he produced in February. He referred to the Prime Minister's foreword to it, and it will form an important part of my respite reading during the general election campaign. If I am here on the other side of the election and appear before the Foreign Affairs Committee, of which I trust he will be a member, I am sure that we will refer to the report when we joust.

I am pleased to advise my hon. Friend that many of the suggestions made in the report, and by hon. Members today, mirror lines of work that this Government are already delivering. The United Kingdom has considerable strengths and world-leading capabilities, including a renowned military, of which he was once a part, an attractive economy and one of the largest and most respected diplomatic, development and security networks. Our extraordinary soft power generates a huge amount of opportunity and puts us in the top two of Portland's soft power index. To leverage those assets to maximum effect, we must work across organisational boundaries. If global Britain is to be successful, our systems must be fit for purpose.

I agree with my hon. Friend that a well-integrated foreign policy is critical. He mentioned the National Security Council, which has proven an excellent vehicle for bringing together the work of different Departments to focus on the more immediate issues and threats that we and our allies face. The NSC's role has been enhanced over the last year by the adoption of the fusion doctrine, which strengthens Her Majesty's Government's collective approach to national security, drawing together all the

[Christopher Pincher]

United Kingdom's security, economic and diplomatic capabilities in pursuit of our national interests. Members of the NSC, be they Cabinet Ministers, junior Ministers, officials or experts, speak with authority and as equals. That is one of the key components of the NSC's success.

Of course, there is always room for improvement. That is why at home, the Government's collective approach to international work is strengthened through the creation of national strategy implementation groups, which meet monthly and bring together officials from all relevant Government Departments to formulate collective responses to opportunities and challenges. We encourage effective co-ordination between Departments, but there is also a great deal to be gained from the development of dedicated expertise in specialist departments. I will ask my officials, who my hon. Friend is meeting later, to give him further detail on that.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I appreciate that a 30-minute debate on the integration of foreign policy is hardly enough to integrate it, but I am sure that there will be future opportunities for him, me and other hon. Members to debate it more fully.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Child Poverty in Scotland

[SIR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered child poverty in Scotland.

I thank all Members who have taken the time to come to this important debate. We all came into the House seeking to improve the lives of children and young people. That is why some of our most passionate debates are about childcare, education and apprenticeships. We often share the same goal, but perhaps disagree on the policies needed to achieve it. That is why I am holding this debate.

None of us wants any child to live in inadequate housing, or to be stuck in temporary accommodation. None of us wants to see any child going hungry to school or during the school holidays, or having to rely on food banks. None of us wants to see any child fall behind in their education and be denied opportunities as a result. We all agree that no child should live in poverty or be denied the best start in life—but too many children live in poverty across Scotland. I hope that the debate gives us the chance to reaffirm a sure commitment to eradicating child poverty, and that we are able to have a serious discussion about which policies work, which policies need changes, and which new policies need to be implemented to achieve our shared goal of ending child poverty.

One million people live in poverty across Scotland, and 240,000 of them are children. That means one in four children in Scotland now lives in poverty. It is truly staggering to think that so many children in our constituencies live in poverty.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I compliment my hon. Friend on achieving this debate, and on the importance of the subject. As he said, one in four children in Scotland lives in poverty. That is a shameful figure, both for the Tory Government here in Westminster and for the SNP Government in Holyrood, and one that we must all strive to reduce. Since the 2016 Holyrood election and the 2017 Westminster election, the number of children living in poverty in East Lothian has gone up by 2%, which means that 16% of the young people in my constituency live in poverty, facing all the challenges that brings.

Hugh Gaffney: That is true. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has estimated that two thirds of children living in poverty are in households where at least one adult is in paid work. Almost 30% of children live in households where three or more children are classed as living in poverty.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the key fact from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation: much of the debate tends to focus on people being out of work, when in fact most children living in poverty in Scotland are from families and households who are in work. The previous Labour Government took 120,000 children in Scotland out of poverty through measures such as tax credits and the

national minimum wage. Now, we must do a lot more. Also, child poverty is not restricted to deprived areas. My constituency is seen as quite affluent, but in some parts of it, more than a third of children are being brought up in poverty. This is an issue for us all, in every single community, and the way to tackle it is to improve working conditions and pay in the workplace.

Hugh Gaffney: I could not agree more. People used to think they were working to get out of poverty—not so nowadays. The figures highlight the fact that we have a real crisis with child poverty in Scotland. The Resolution Foundation has projected that child poverty across Scotland will likely rise to 30% by the mid-2020s, despite the target to reduce child poverty to 18%.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): One in four children in Scotland lives in poverty, but is not the real shocker that the figure is the lowest of those for the four UK nations? Child poverty was down at 21%, but has now risen, not because of the financial crash but, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) said, because of changes in welfare. The rise started in 2012, and that was owing to policies made here in Westminster.

Hugh Gaffney: We are all here to help the children, whether in Scotland, England, Wales or Northern Ireland. That is what it is all about.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Is not one of the biggest reasons for children going into poverty the two-child limit on tax credits? Does he agree with the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, which is to publish a report before Dissolution that says that the policy should be scrapped?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes. I will come on to two-child cap poverty.

History shows that we can tackle child poverty in Scotland. The largest falls in the poverty rate recorded in the past 20 years were among pensioners and children. From the late 1990s, child poverty across Scotland fell significantly because of the policy choices made by the Labour Government. The Labour Government redesigned the welfare state with the purpose of tackling child poverty, which is why policies like child tax credits and the national minimum wage were introduced. Those policies were designed to target the underlying causes of child poverty, such as low pay. The success of the Labour Government in reducing child poverty highlights the fact that it can be done when there is the political will and the right policies.

We need to show that political will, because the impact of poverty on children is simply unacceptable. Children living in poverty suffer greater health and social outcomes than their better-off peers. Children living in poverty are much more likely to suffer health problems, such as poor mental health and wellbeing, and obesity. They are more likely to lag behind in reading, writing and numeracy. Child poverty affects not just childhood, but individuals throughout their whole life.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. One of the most shocking figures that I have heard in my time in Parliament was through the all-party group on health in all policies. We heard from the UK

Faculty of Public Health that 1,400 children a year die before they reach the age of 15 as a direct result of poverty. As he has said, those who do not may still face blighted lives thereafter.

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Lady for that staggering fact. How sad is it that, in this day and age, children are dying from poverty before they are 15?

If we are to tackle child poverty in Scotland, we must look at whether current policies help us to do so. Since 2010, the Government have implemented a series of welfare reforms, such as universal credit. As we all know from our surgeries and constituents, universal credit is having a negative impact on families. In particular, it is hurting low-income families, pushing more children into poverty. Universal credit could be considered a success only if its aims were to push up rent arrears, increase food bank use and drive people deeper into poverty. That is the success that some think universal credit is creating.

Earlier this year, I led an Adjournment debate on food poverty in Scotland, after it was revealed that more than 210,000 food parcels had been distributed by the Trussell Trust last year. Nearly 70,000 of those food parcels were issued to children. That means that about one in three food parcels distributed in Scotland last year was for a child. What a shameful situation we are in. The UK is meant to be the world's fifth largest economy, but we have children going hungry in our constituencies.

Rising food bank use is linked directly to the Government's welfare reforms. Trussell Trust figures reveal that almost 50% of all food bank referrals are the result of a delay to benefit payments to claimants. Almost 35% of all emergency food supplies are distributed to those individuals who find that their benefits regularly fail to cover their cost of living. In areas where universal credit has already been rolled out, the Trussell Trust observed a 30% increase in food bank use after a year of the roll-out.

Chris Stephens: I recall the hon. Gentleman's Adjournment debate on food poverty. Does he agree that one of the main issues is that people wait five weeks to get their benefit entitlement? The advanced payment really should be the first payment, and people should not have to wait five weeks to get state support.

Hugh Gaffney: I totally agree. That is a change we can make today.

The Government decided to implement a two-child limit policy, despite warnings from this House and charities that it would worsen child poverty in Scotland. What was warned about has come to pass, and almost 4,000 low-income families in Scotland are affected, with a loss of £3,000 per year for each family. We cannot ignore the impact of other welfare reforms introduced by the Government. The benefit cap affects over 3,000 households in Scotland, 92% of which contain children. The benefits freeze has impacted low-income families, further fuelling child poverty across Scotland.

It would be fair to say that the Government's welfare reforms have worsened the child poverty rate in Scotland, but we cannot ignore the fact that the Scottish Government have gained greater powers, which would enable them to better address child poverty. The Joseph Rowntree

[Hugh Gaffney]

Foundation highlights that in areas of Scotland such as Edinburgh, where the private rent sector is bigger than the social sector, private rent growth has outstripped inflation over the last decade. Higher rents impact on the incomes of families, meaning that they are less able to cover essential costs such as food and heating. Undoubtedly, that fuels child poverty across Scotland.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman will know that 16% of benefits have been devolved to Scotland. He says that the Scottish Government should do more; what does he think the Scottish Government should do that they are not currently doing?

Hugh Gaffney: The Scottish Government should use more of their powers to help children. They have the powers; we are asking them to use them. The Scottish Government's own figures reveal that there was a 4% increase in the number of children living in temporary accommodation last year. Nearly 7,000 children now live in temporary accommodation in Scotland, and last year, 38 children were made homeless every day. It is clear that the failure to provide permanent, high-quality accommodation for children is increasing child poverty across Scotland.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman realise that the Scottish Government have built more houses since they came to power in 2007 than the Labour-Liberal Democrat Administration did in the preceding years of the Scottish Parliament?

Hugh Gaffney: Are those houses social housing? Are those houses council housing?

Although the Scottish Government have introduced a £10-per-week child support payment, it will not be fully in place until 2022. My good friend Mark Griffin MSP highlighted that nearly 60,000 children will lose out on the child support payment because initial applications will be restricted to children who are five and under. How will such a restriction truly help to tackle child poverty across Scotland? We need real policy changes that will eradicate child poverty in Scotland. We must scrap universal credit, because it has absolutely failed to address child poverty.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for being generous with his time. We are all on the same side; we all believe that child poverty is bad, and we all want to do whatever needs to be done to eradicate it. Again, 16% of benefit powers are devolved to Scotland. He talks about policy changes; what specific policy changes does he want in Scotland that we have the power to deliver but have not yet delivered?

Hugh Gaffney: I said at the beginning that we are here to get the right policies. I want the right policies in the Scottish Government.

The Government should end the five-week wait that claimants must go through, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, before they receive their initial universal credit payment. I was also

concerned to hear that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions refused to rule out a further extension of the benefits freeze. I urge the Government to bring the benefits freeze to an immediate end, rather than looking at extending it. An extension of the benefits freeze means an extension of child poverty across Scotland. I urge the Government to end the benefit cap and the two-child limit policy.

Ahead of this debate, the House's digital engagement team undertook a public engagement exercise and received over 700 responses. Respondents called on the Government to look again at their damaging welfare reforms such as universal credit. I hope that the Government will reflect on that.

The Scottish Government must also look at the policy changes that they could make. They could introduce a Mary Barbour law to cap rents in the private rented sector, in order to help low-income families. They could build more social and affordable housing to end the disgrace of children being trapped in temporary accommodation, or finding themselves homeless. They could look again at the child support payment, which the Resolution Foundation found would still leave more than 25% of children in Scotland living in poverty—the Scottish Government's own target of 18% would not be close to being met. I also urge them to listen to the calls of Scottish Labour for a child benefit top-up of £5 per week to support those affected by the two-child limit policy.

I started this debate by saying that all of us in this House share the goal of eradicating child poverty in Scotland. That goal will be achieved only through serious policy change of the kind that I have suggested today. I put on record my support for North Lanarkshire Council's Club365 programme, which helps to tackle holiday hunger among children in my constituency. That shows that local councils can take action to address child poverty, despite the budget cuts imposed on them by central Government.

Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown was right to say that Scotland now has a full-blown child poverty emergency. In emergencies, we expect rapid and decisive action. I hope we will see that action from both the UK and Scottish Governments.

2.47 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), on this debate.

Let me begin by quoting a community activist in my constituency, Derek Kelter:

"Poverty destroys everything in your life. A low for me was last Christmas, when I had no money to buy my son a Christmas present. The situation we have today is unacceptable. We should all be able to live a dignified life but too many people are trapped in poverty. I'm blind and I've been locked out of employment since I had a brain injury five years ago. It doesn't have to be this way though. Social security benefits should be enough so that people can live a dignified life and disabled people should be given support to access employment."

We can all agree that that is a damning indictment on the state of a 21st-century first-world country. It is appalling.

I am not here to blame people, but to represent the people of Motherwell and Wishaw and to fight for the best possible life for them. That evidence was given to the Poverty Alliance. The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland also has damning indictments of child poverty in Scotland. However, it noted the introduction of the Scottish child payment by the Scottish Parliament in 2020, which will start at £10 a week for each child, no matter how many children are in the family. In Scotland, we do not believe that families should be penalised by a two-child cap; that is an abomination. It is almost incredible that the Tory Government in Westminster have tried time and again to justify that cruel, callous policy.

I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said. We are all against child poverty. I, too, would like the Scottish Government to eradicate it tomorrow. That will not happen while they do not have the levers of all the tax and benefit systems that the UK Government currently have reserved to them. However, in the circumstances, the Scottish Government continue to do what they can with the limited resources they have.

The hon. Gentleman says that Labour has pledged to scrap universal credit, but the Joseph Rowntree Foundation does not necessarily agree that that is the best way forward. Introducing two separate types of benefit payments would further confuse people, and more people would probably fall between the cracks with two benefit systems. We all know what is wrong with universal credit. We have said time and again, in this Chamber and the main Chamber, that we should look at making it work for those who have to use it.

Many people in my constituency are reliant on universal credit, and it is the single biggest casework issue I deal with. This Government should end the five-week wait. The five-week wait should be a thing of the past. The fact that people have to repay advances at an enormous rate leaves them even poorer and means they have to use food banks even more. I should pay credit to the Lanarkshire food bank, which operates in my constituency; it is a source of real help to many in Motherwell and Wishaw.

Labour actually has a good list of things it wants to do, most of which are based on things the Scottish Government have already asked for and introduced. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should have fortnightly payments and split payments for couples. That should be the default position. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has made that point in numerous debates.

I also think this UK Tory Government are wrong to charge single parents to apply to the Child Maintenance Service; again, I have debated that many times with the Minister. Notwithstanding years of austerity in the United Kingdom, it seems that this Tory regime want to make people who are poor even poorer, by charging them more and more for services that their children need.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights—someone from whom the Minister normally would not like to hear—praised the Scottish Government for their

“ambitious schemes for addressing poverty, including the Fairer Scotland Action Plan and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan”,

and for using their

“newly devolved powers to establish a promising social security system, guided by the principles of dignity”

and respect. I believe that is another thing the Labour party wants to introduce.

We have good ideas in Scotland for ending child poverty. We actually have a plan to do it. We measure child poverty. It gives us no comfort that child poverty increases under the watch of a UK Tory Government who say they are absolutely committed to ending austerity but show no sign of doing so.

I do not want to stand here and quote stats—we can all do that—but when a constituent of mine gets to his lowest ebb because he cannot find the money to buy his child a Christmas present, there is something seriously wrong with the state of this United Kingdom. As far as I am concerned, the sooner Scotland exercises its right and gives the people the choice to leave it, the better.

2.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on bringing forward this debate. He always speaks passionately on behalf of his people, and on this occasion he did so on behalf of all children in poverty.

I am here to support my colleagues and friends. Although the debate is about child poverty in Scotland, the fact is that child poverty is not specific to Scotland. It is also rampant in other areas of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—particularly Northern Ireland—so I want to say a couple of words in support of colleagues who have already spoken and those who will speak after me. Much of what we say will be very similar.

I am a proud Ulster Scot. I love my heritage. I come from the Stewarts of the lowlands of Scotland, so my heritage goes way back to Scotland. I share a cultural identity with the hon. Gentleman and other friends and colleagues in the Chamber, and my values are very similar to theirs.

Unfortunately, the children in my constituency face the same difficulties as those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. Official estimates published by the Northern Ireland Department for Communities—the figures are a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly—show that in 2017-18, 19% of children in Northern Ireland from birth up to the age of 16, including dependent children aged between 16 and 19, lived below the poverty line, in households with an income of less than 60% of the UK average. I suspect the figures are the same in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and in those of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and the hon. Members who speak after me.

In 2017-18, the poverty threshold in Northern Ireland stood at £19,016 of annual income for a single person with two children, and £24,245 for a couple with two children. The Minister knows that I am very fond of him and what he does, and I believe he will answer our questions to the best of his ability, but I say to him that we need a UK strategy and additional funding to tackle child poverty. The situation in my constituency is the same as the situation that the hon. Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill and for Motherwell and Wishaw described. Society, the Government and

[*Jim Shannon*]

elected representatives are marked by the way they respond to those who are less well off. I do not believe for one second that we can ignore them; the Government must reach out and help.

During Northern Ireland questions today, an hon. Member—in fact, it was the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw; I should have recognised her name earlier—asked the Secretary of State:

“What economic assessment he has made of the potential effect of the Government’s proposed withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland.”

In a subsequent question, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) asked about

“legislative proposals to maintain welfare mitigation payments in Northern Ireland after March 2020.”

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) tabled the same question.

My party—the Democratic Unionist party—and our Minister at that time were instrumental in achieving those welfare mitigation payments. At the end of March 2020, those provisions will end, and members of the public from all communities and of all political and religious persuasions across Northern Ireland will be disadvantaged because of Sinn Féin’s intransigence. We have an opportunity because my party put on the statute book legislation that enabled welfare mitigation payments to be made. Those payments came out of the block budget, by the way, but we agreed to that and acted accordingly. I did not get the chance to ask Northern Ireland Office Ministers directly earlier, but I ask this Minister: what can be done to mitigate the impact, which will be severe?

I will make a final comment about food banks, Sir David. Food banks are often talked about, and have probably been mentioned by everyone who is present here. The first Trussell Trust food bank in Northern Ireland was in my constituency. It came to Strangford because a number of church groups got together and recognised the need to reach out as faith groups, in order to help others who found themselves in difficulties making payments or paying bills, or when everything seemed to turn against them.

On the television this morning there was a discussion about debt organisations; I have not had a chance to watch it yet. It is not always a person who has benefit delays or benefit short payments who needs debt management; more often it is people who do not fit into the normal category. Minister, when it comes to addressing child poverty, what has been done to help those who need debt management? It is always better to try to address debt management early on, rather than let people get to the final moment, when letters are coming through their door, they are under pressure, their credit cards are over-egged and they find themselves in difficulties. People who are in employment, have a mortgage and who own a house may also need help.

There are people who come to my office who use the Thriving Life food bank in my area. I highlight the DWP and the changes that have been made to benefits, as referred to by the hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. There is a follow-on that is down to benefits being reduced

or, when the issue of housing benefit is looked at, delayed. It is also down to employment issues, such as shorter hours and changes to minimum pay.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of food banks. There is hardly an area that does not now have a food bank. My local area is supported by churches that have a rota to collect goods. Recently, our food bank has often had to put out crisis calls because its shelves are simply empty; it cannot keep up with demand. As the health spokesperson for his party, does the hon. Gentleman recognise the impact on life expectancy and on long-term physical and mental health that comes from growing up in poverty?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady; she is always good in this House when it comes to bringing forward issues that are pertinent to the debate. She again excels today in bringing forward this issue of food banks and the needs they address. The people who use them are under pressure emotionally and mentally, which transfers to physical issues. When that happens, the problems that the hon. Lady refers to become real for them.

I recognise, as I know the hon. Lady does, that those who have set up the food banks are genuine, interested people who bring the best of people together. They reach out to those who need help, as their faith tells them to do, which is a great motivation. I almost feel encouraged by the food banks and those who are motivated to make them happen, but calls go out to ensure that people bring in more stock, because demand is sometimes high.

We appreciate what the food banks, the volunteers and the churches do when they work together. When it comes to child poverty, whether it be in Scotland or Northern Ireland, we all want the same. We want children to have a good quality of life and we want their families to be able to look after them in the way it was designed in life that they should. For that to happen I believe, with great respect, that the Government must look genuinely at what they do.

The issue of debt management is important to child poverty; it is crucial. Nothing disturbs me as much as seeing children in difficulty; there are two or three such children who come to my office. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw mentioned Christmas. As Christmas comes, the child who lives three doors down will probably get almost anything he or she wants, but the child living in poverty will not get anything. There is a terrible injustice in society when we come to Christmas, a time of giving and good will, that those who are in poverty will not be able to have the same as everyone else.

3.4 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing the debate. In my constituency, one third of children live in poverty, and it has the third-worst statistics in the whole of Scotland for child poverty. That is shameful in this day and age, and it matters, because I grew up in abject poverty and I know what it is like. Poverty is not just about a lack of money, although clearly that is the foundation on which all poverty is built. It bleeds into every single area of life, and it is hugely damaging for

the children affected. It does not just mean a cold house, or going to bed with an empty, hungry tummy, which is bad enough and completely unacceptable in this day and age. It also brings with it a poverty of hope, aspiration, self-confidence and self-belief.

Material poverty reduces and lays waste to the things we want all children to have. It is life-limiting, and too often leads children into a pit from which it is hard for them to escape. Even if, on growing up, they manage to drag themselves out of poverty, it leaves scars behind that do not vanish on reaching adulthood.

I have spoken in the past about how poverty brings isolation. When people live in poverty, there is no money to access local services. Parents cannot take their children out for a treat for the day; they cannot go to the pictures or visit the local café. They cannot have the everyday pleasures that ought to be part of every child's life. It means that their life is limited and their horizons are not broadened. Many things are out of reach for them. That life limiting brings another kind of poverty, which arises from material poverty. That is a shocking indictment of a country as rich as ours.

Dr Whitford: My hon. Friend was a teacher in a former life, before she came here. I am sure that she recognises the impact of the cold house and the hungry tummy on trying to concentrate and study. These children will struggle at school, which will impact on all their opportunities for the rest of their life.

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The fact is that unless child poverty is addressed, raising aspiration and attainment is like working with one hand tied behind your back. Children who are hungry or go home to a cold house tend to find it much more difficult than other children to attain their goals at school, whether those are academic or vocational. Their life is limited in ways that are difficult for people who have not experienced poverty to imagine.

The Scottish Government are doing what they can to tackle child poverty. Their Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill sets tough targets to reduce child poverty levels. A £50 million fund will support innovative approaches to tackle child poverty. Free early years childcare has been expanded to 30 hours per week, and there is a new best start grant to provide financial support to low-income families. The popular baby box gives practical support to new parents. An initiative that has been unveiled recently is the Scottish child payment, which provides £10 per week for each child.

These measures are welcome and can ease the scourge of child poverty, but they cannot remove it. We need to use all the levers of tax and benefits to make the inroads required to remove it. The Scottish Government have power over 16% of social security spending, and that is better than 0%, but it is far from what is required to tackle this scourge on our society.

It is no accident—the Minister has heard this—that the roll-out of universal credit brings with it a spike in food bank use. In my constituency in the past year, 8,173 people relied on food bank assistance, of whom 2,192 were children. That is an absolute disgrace in this day and age, although I pay huge tribute to the food bank organisations in Ardrossan and Largs in my constituency, which do tremendously good work against challenging odds.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: Just a minute. The hon. Gentleman was not here at the start of the debate, so I do not know if am allowed to.

People are punished for being poor. Their children are punished as well, and left without the support that they need. That damages the life chances of children and their parents. Benefits must reflect people's need—it is as simple as that.

We have heard today about the five-week wait for universal credit, which is unacceptable, but I have something very specific that I want the Minister to take away and think about. I have raised it before—to no avail, as far as I can see. When people have a five-week wait for universal credit, they are offered loans—it does not matter what they are called—by the Department for Work and Pensions to help them through that five weeks. We might think that that helps ease the pain of waiting five weeks for a proper assessment and proper universal credit payments to be made, but I say this to the Minister: if anybody seeks to take out a loan in the normal course of events, they go to a bank and ask for a loan. Their creditworthiness and ability to repay is assessed, and that determines whether they will be given the loan. People on universal credit waiting for the five-week payment are not assessed. They are given loans when it is clear that they are not able to repay them. Attempts to repay the loan shove them further into poverty and despair, and that pushes them further away from the world of work. It is simply not on. It is not working. The Government really need to look at the transitional payments, which are actually loans. Those payments should not be loans. People need support during those five weeks.

The Child Poverty Action Group has said that it is time—I am sure the Minister is aware of this—for the UK Government to use their powers, as the Scottish Government have done, in an equally positive way to develop a wider UK child poverty strategy, so that both Governments can work together to make child poverty history across the UK. I cannot understand why anybody would object to that. I am sure the Minister will want to think carefully and reflect on that.

We have the phenomenon of in-work poverty. The Scottish Government support the real living wage, and many employers, with the Scottish Government's encouragement, have signed up to paying it in Scotland. The Minister will be interested to hear that employers who have decided to pay the real living wage have reported increased productivity and reduced sick leave, so valuing people is important. It gives me no pleasure to say this to the Minister, but the UK Government have sought to deceive with their pretend living wage. Nothing should be called a living wage unless it is based on the cost of living. The Government's pretend living wage is not, so it should not be called that. This pretend living wage has led directly to the scandal of in-work poverty, which is absolutely appalling.

The cruel and austere policies of the UK Government are deeply damaging and dangerous for children in my constituency, and they must not go unchallenged. I recently participated in a debate in the Chamber on—I cannot believe I am saying this out loud—childhood hunger. The fact that that is even a thing, that it even

[*Patricia Gibson*]

exists, is embarrassing and shameful. I do not know how the Minister feels, but if I was part of a Government who presided over childhood hunger and had the ability, as a member of the Government, to do something about it, I would not hesitate. I cannot understand the reluctance. The Government really need to get their act together and take real measures to support children, instead of punishing those who need support. Eradicating child poverty needs to be a priority; it is as simple as that. It cannot be an afterthought or an add-on. It needs to be a priority, and it cannot be considered inconvenient. If we cannot invest in our children, and cannot go to bed at night safe in the knowledge that children are not going to bed hungry, we are doing this all wrong.

I want the Minister to tell us today what serious attempts he is prepared to make, as a member of the Government, to address what can only be described as a scandal. I will make a commitment to him today. Any measures that he takes to tackle child poverty in the UK will find support on the Scottish National party benches. Scotland's children need and deserve better.

3.15 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing this important debate on child poverty in Scotland. The scourge of poverty and the effect that it has on our children, as well as the knock-on effects that it will have into future generations, is an issue that unites us all, and I am sure that many in this place, if not everyone, share much of the anger and frustration that he articulated in his opening remarks. Of course, he knows that child poverty is not confined to the central belt of Scotland; rural poverty is a blight as well. I know from personal experience in my Argyll and Bute constituency how awful it can be.

I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate this afternoon. Notable by their absence have been the Scottish Conservatives. Some 21 minutes after the debate started, the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) rolled in, but no one from the Scottish Conservatives was here to contribute to this vital debate on an issue of importance to their constituencies, as it is to every other constituency in Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: I will take your guidance, Sir David. Given that the hon. Gentleman turned up 21 minutes late and missed the opening speeches, am I allowed to take an intervention?

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Whether or not to give way is entirely in the gift of the Member who has the Floor. Given that you have mentioned the hon. Gentleman, I think that you should give way.

Brendan O'Hara: Following your guidance, Sir David, I give way.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to you, Sir David, for your judgment, and to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I tried to make a contribution during the previous

speech. The hon. Gentleman's attack on my colleagues and I, the Scottish Conservatives at Westminster, is all too typical of the antics that the SNP gets up to in this place. In relation to grievance, no one can match the SNP. It was said in the previous speech—I am sure that this will be the hon. Gentleman's position as well—that if they had the ability to do something, the Government should do something on child poverty. Who is for child poverty? We are not. We are trying our best to eradicate it. The Scottish Government have the power to top up reserved benefits, so they could do something about this if they wanted to, but they do not want to because it is a convenient grievance.

Brendan O'Hara: Had the hon. Gentleman wished to make a speech of that length, he would have turned up in time and perhaps brought one or two of his Scottish Conservative colleagues with him.

As we have heard, there are 1 million people living in poverty in Scotland, and almost one in four of them are children. In 2019, 250,000 children living in one of the world's richest nations are growing up in poverty. That is nothing short of scandalous. Poverty is not inevitable. People not having enough money to feed and clothe their children is not something that happens by accident. The existence of poverty in a country as rich as ours is a direct consequence of political choices.

The decade of austerity was a political choice. Massive long-term cuts to the social security budget were a political choice. The widening of the holes in the social security safety net so that more families and children would fall through was a political choice. The ill-conceived and hopelessly financed introduction of universal credit was a political choice. Making the poorest, weakest and most vulnerable in our society carry the can, and bear the brunt of a financial crisis that had nothing to do with them, was a political choice.

No matter how we look at it, it is an inescapable fact that the Tory Government, and indeed the Liberal Democrats, who were in the previous coalition Government—they, too, are conspicuous by their absence today—are directly responsible for plunging children and families into poverty across Scotland and the UK.

Dr Whitford: Is it not a disgrace that it has not been confirmed at this point that the benefit freeze brought in when inflation was at 0.3%—it is now 2.5%—will be done away with, as originally planned in April?

Brendan O'Hara: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and will touch on that in a moment.

There can be no doubt that, as we have heard this afternoon, one of the main drivers of child poverty in Scotland has been the Government's package of welfare reforms, which by any measure has been an abject failure. How else could one describe a package of reforms whose result is that 65% of all the children who live in poverty come from households where at least one adult is working? There is no need to take my word for it. The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty said:

"Changes to benefits, and sanctions against parents...are driving the increase in child poverty".

Some would still have us believe that it will take decades to turn things around and lift children out of poverty, but that is simply not true. There are measures

that the UK Government could take right now that would immediately stop children and their families falling into poverty. One of those, which my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) just mentioned, would be to end the benefits freeze immediately. The Government should then immediately stop the roll-out of universal credit, take their time, and find the money to fix the major problems in the system, which they are only too well aware of but choose to ignore.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, the scrapping of the five-week minimum wait for a first universal credit payment must come to an end. The idea that poor people who are given advances need to pay them back serves only to plunge people further into debt. I congratulate the Select Committee on Work and Pensions on today's report recommending putting an end to the two-child limit and its despicable rape clause. The idea that sanctions work for people has been proven untrue.

There is therefore a package of things that the Government could do immediately to stop the situation and turn it around. Of course, none of what I say will come as a surprise to the Minister, as we and others have been making the argument in this place for some time. We will continue to make it until the UK Government do something about it, or until the Scottish Government are given full powers over welfare or, better still, until they have them as an independent nation within the European Union.

My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) spoke passionately and eloquently about the situation in her constituency, but her most powerful words came at the start of her speech when she quoted her constituent, Derek Kelter, who said:

“Poverty destroys everything in your life.”

Consider that. It is all that politicians need to hear, because it cannot be unheard.

As always, I am delighted that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has taken the time to be here. He made the powerful point that, although the debate is about Scotland, child poverty is not confined to Scotland but is rampant across every part of the United Kingdom. If it is a disgrace in Dundee, it is a blight in Belfast. If the UK Government cannot or will not do something about it, they should give the devolved Administrations the power to do so themselves.

My colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), gave a powerful and moving personal testimony about poverty in childhood and how it leads to poverty of hope, aspiration and opportunity. Most movingly, she said that even though one might escape material poverty as an adult, the deep scars do not easily go away even in adulthood.

We have heard much this afternoon about what the Scottish Government are doing, and I am extremely proud that they are using the limited powers at their disposal to tackle child poverty. What sets them apart from the United Kingdom Government is the fact that they are determined to use every possible way to eradicate child poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently reported that the building of 87,000 affordable homes since 2007 was a huge help, and that enshrining essential child poverty measures in statute is having an impact on how Scotland tackles child poverty.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran was right to praise the new Scottish child payment, which will mean that £10 is given to every child in a low-income family that is in receipt of qualifying benefits. Initially, 170,000 children will be eligible for the payment, which will lift 30,000 children out of poverty by putting £1,000 a year into the pockets of their parents. John Dickie, director of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, described the new payment as a “game-changer”, and he is right. The Scottish Government care about people and, despite the meagre resources available to them, will do what they can. Just think what they could do if they had full powers to create a more progressive, economically healthy and socially just welfare system.

It is worth recognising that the achievement of the Scottish Government in tackling child poverty has been singled out by the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty, who praised their

“ambitious schemes for addressing poverty, including the Fairer Scotland Action Plan and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan”.

The rapporteur also praised the Scottish Government for using their

“newly devolved powers to establish a promising social security system, guided by the principles of dignity”.

Perhaps the Minister should take note of what the United Nations has said about Scotland and encourage the UK Government to follow our example.

3.27 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow so many passionate and thoughtful speeches. My reflection on the debate and Members' contributions—particularly that of my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), whom I congratulate on securing the debate—is that poverty is, fundamentally, probably the worst evil in our society. It is particularly pernicious, because it is a cruel and indiscriminate denial of opportunity to many people who have great potential.

My constituency has some of the highest child poverty levels in Scotland—and in the UK as a whole. When I go round it, I am constantly reminded of the denial of opportunity to many young people, particularly children. There was a turn of phrase used by Jimmy Reid when looking at high-rise tower blocks in my constituency—the infamous Red Road flats, which are now demolished and being redeveloped. He said that behind every one of the windows could be a Nobel prize-winning chemist, or a great Formula 1 racing driver, a fantastic doctor, engineer or perhaps Prime Minister, but—you know what?—they will never get the opportunity because of where they were born and the circumstances in which they were brought up. From birth they have been denied their potential. As a nation and as a community, that sabotage of young people's lives is the greatest loss to us all, and in many cases it is literally a life sentence.

In the early 1990s Jimmy Reid made a documentary in Scotland, and he was filmed standing in a field between Milngavie and Drumchapel. The camera panned across the field, and he said that a child who is born on one side of the fields will live 10 years longer than a child born on the other side of the field, in Drumchapel. The average sentence for murder in Scotland is not far

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

off 10 to 15 years, so for many children born in those circumstances, that is literally a life sentence. That destroyed potential is a great tragedy for us all.

Child poverty can be solved through political means—it is not inevitable, as many speakers have suggested; it can be solved. Child poverty has been both demonstrably reduced and demonstrably accelerated at the behest of policies of various Governments, and if there is one thing I can be proud of about the previous Labour Government, it is their efforts to reduce child poverty. When Labour came to power in 1997, child poverty stood at 3.6 million in the UK. When Labour left office in 2010, that figure had been reduced to 1 million. That was still too many, but it was a significant and demonstrable reduction. Today child poverty stands at 4 million—more than a reversal of those achievements—and we must address that generational tragedy.

We should not get too bogged down in the minutiae of Brexit; instead, we should focus on what we could be doing. What motivates me—and probably most Members—to get out of bed in the morning, is thinking about how we can leave a legacy that will improve lives for future generations. That certainly motivates me, my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill and other Members of the House, yet this Government have demonstrably, deliberately and consciously implemented policies that have permanently damaged lives.

Stephen Kerr *indicated dissent.*

Mr Sweeney: It is true. Those policies will have a material effect on children born in this decade of austerity. We are visiting huge destruction not just on their lives, but on a whole community that has been denied those opportunities, and when we reflect on what Members have said today, that is the greatest tragedy.

One of the most moving aspects of this is the fact that child poverty is driven primarily by insufficient income, yet 65% of all children living in poverty in Scotland live in working households. Parents are trying to do what they can. They are not feckless or idle; they are trying to achieve what they can, but the capacity of the economy to meet their basic income requirements is not there. That is a legacy of this Government, their failure to address the 2008 financial crash, and their entire counter-productive austerity agenda, which has retarded economic growth in this country and caused one of the most regionally unbalanced and slow-paced recoveries of any major economy in the western world.

Stephen Kerr: Does the hon. Gentleman welcome the fact that this Government have lifted the threshold after which people start paying tax to £12,500? That really helps people. Combined with that, we have increases in the national living wage. Does he not welcome those as well? Does he welcome the fact that the Government have introduced policies to allow people at the lower end of the income scale to keep more of their own money, so that they can spend it on their families? Does he welcome any of the policies that the Government have introduced to tackle child poverty?

Mr Sweeney: I would congratulate the Government if they had demonstrably increased incomes for people on low wages, but wage growth in this country has been the lowest in the western world, and that is the primary measure of success.

Stephen Kerr: Tax!

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about tax, but the tax threshold was never met by people on the lowest incomes in the first place, so that measure does not deal with people at that end of the scale. People who already rely on social security benefits have been crushed by the two-child welfare cap that has been mentioned. Those are the things that affect people.

One searing example of that can be found in a recent report by Oxfam, Child Poverty Action Group Scotland and the Poverty Alliance, which addresses the issue of hunger in Scotland. It is an inspiring and chilling report, and the thing that strikes me most is the testimony that it contains. One example is from a lady called Alison. She is typical of many people—usually women—who turn up to my constituency surgeries in horrendous circumstances. A person might be born and brought up in a constituency and live there their whole life, as I have, but they never know the half of it until they become a Member of Parliament and realise what is going on behind closed doors.

Many people are too proud to come and demonstrate that they are suffering and have problems. They do not want to make a spectacle of themselves, and they are upset about having to speak to a Member of Parliament about their circumstances. The example from Alison is particularly egregious. Speaking about the whole issue of food insecurity and the wellbeing of our children, she said:

“My son, throughout the whole of this, was scared to put the heating on. He was scared to put the light on. He was sitting in the dark. He’s not playing his computer. What else is he meant to do when he’s socially isolated? When there’s no money to go on a bus, never mind take him out for the day...When things were on a level, it’s very, very sad to even say, he was just happy that we went for a hot chocolate and a muffin. Now that’s a simple thing. That is not doable anymore.”

Another parent said:

“Me and my daughter used to go everywhere. But now, I don’t have nothing like, so we can’t do anything.”

One mother said:

“I’ve felt suicidal more times than I’ve had hot dinners and that’s no joke.”

That is a true testimony from someone suffering in Scotland now.

To me, it is offensive at a very fundamental level if the great achievements of the welfare state have been rolled back to the extent that people are suffering in this way. Not only is there the shaming need for people to go to food banks and prostrate themselves in front of authority figures to demonstrate that they need help, but we have also removed the social floor that was there for many people. We created the idea that there was a floor beneath which no one would fall and above which everyone could rise. That is how my family progressed, and how I was able to have opportunities that my parents did not have. To think that that has been reversed under this Government is offensive.

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that part of that has been the change from what used to be “social security”, to what is now called “welfare”? In the past, no matter whatever happened to someone, we knew that they would somehow be safe, but that has been removed. I served on a committee with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) to consider the children’s future food inquiry. We took evidence from children about the hunger that they suffered from at school—I kept having to put my glasses on to hide that I was crying. That is ridiculous in a country such as this.

Mr Sweeney: It is ridiculous. The scourge of things such as people having no recourse to public funds is a particularly horrific example of that. A couple of weeks ago a lady came to my surgery. She looked emaciated. I asked if she was all right, because she looked as if she was going to faint. I brought her in, sat her down, and we gave her a plate of shortbread. She scoffed it in front of us in a couple of minutes in a way that otherwise would have been impolite, but under the circumstances we were horrified that she could be so hungry that she was grabbing food in front of us. I could not believe that someone was in that situation because of having no recourse to public funds. She was destitute; she had left an abusive relationship with her child, and she was trying to find somewhere to shelter. There was no availability of homeless accommodation in Glasgow at that point. She was being helped by a women’s refuge charity, but it did not have long-term accommodation. That she was driven to that sort of desperation is just one example of the circumstances in which people find themselves.

The case of Alison in the report that I mentioned is typical. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned the concept of social security as a system that would save everyone, and the change from that to a welfare system—it is almost like a return to the poor laws of the Victorian era, with the idea that this involves some sort of virtue and vice.

My constituency has seen the biggest loss of anywhere in Scotland resulting from the change from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment—£1.9 million a year out of the pockets of my constituents, and behind that figure is a lot of pain. This is about how fragile people’s lives are, not just about immediate need. Most people’s finances are delicate, and one unexpected crisis in their life—a failed relationship or job, an unexpected cost because their central heating has failed, or whatever it might be—could push them into relying on welfare. The truly horrendous thing is when they get into that spiral. Alison says,

“I vowed I wouldn’t take out credit cards or loans. But you find you get gobbled up, you have to do it because there’s no other way”.

People end up in the debt spiral, compounded by this Government’s universal credit policies. Instead of focusing on the immediate need for cash and income and the ability to bridge finances, there is the initial loan, which creates a spiral of decline as people dig themselves into compounded debt. That is the biggest tragedy.

In the case of Alison, we can see the build-up of debts. The milestones are indicated in the report. She is a lone parent with two sons, both of whom have disabilities.

Alison loses her personal independence payment. Her son’s DLA is downgraded. Alison loses the carer’s allowance. Her son attempts suicide. As we all too often see, after she went to her Member of Parliament for help, the PIP and the higher-rate DLA were both reinstated—so it was an injustice from the start. But where was the pain? The pain was that her son tried to take his own life.

That is someone in Dundee. I cannot believe that it is happening in 2019. This is what we are up against, and it is seen as socially acceptable. All of it has been clouded out and displaced by the squabbling over Brexit and the high-level stuff that we have been consumed by. Going into this election campaign, I think most of us want to get down to saying, “This is a choice between death and life for so many people in this country.”

That is what is on offer here. It is not about what flags are where, what borders are where or what is going on in the constitutional sense; it is about whether we can get money into people’s pockets quickly through political decisions made here and elsewhere in this country, to improve lives. That is the priority for us all, I think; let us hope we can achieve that as best we can and make those arguments out there.

There is a multifaceted approach. Many hon. Members have talked about different aspects of child poverty. It is fair to say that it mostly tracks decisions made at a UK Government level, because the primary driver of the social security system, the dynamic in this country, is the Department for Work and Pensions. That is the primary driver, and the behaviour of incomes will track the decisions made there.

I will point out that there is a big opportunity in Scotland now, with the changes in devolved policy. I welcome the measures that have been taken. There has been a divergence between Scotland and the rest of the UK in terms of poverty after housing costs, but there is an interesting aspect to that. The reality is that that happens because more people in poverty in Scotland live in the social rented sector than in the private rented sector, and the larger social rented sector has long been considered a key reason why poverty after housing costs is lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK.

We can see why that would happen. It is all about income. The rents are lower in social housing because there is more opportunity to control them—but that is still not going far enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill mentioned house building; I do not want to get into the quibbles over it, because I find them a bit tedious, but I point out that the records have been fairly consistent. If we look at completions per year, it was 3,617 units per year over the eight years of the Labour-Lib Dem Government in Scotland under devolution. Since then, it has been 3,316 per year under the 12 years of the SNP Administration from 2007.

However, there has been a significant drop-off in the rate of completions since 2010-11, which we need to address. Let us work together on this, because there is an opportunity to recapitalise Scotland’s social housing capacity, which is a key driver of bringing down poverty. Not only must we do that, but we must focus on rent controls. I am very proud of the idea of a Mary Barbour Act. Putting rent controls on not only the social rented sector but the private rented sector is a huge opportunity to reduce the overall cost burden on families living on

[Mr Sweeney]

the breadline. That is a major impact and we can make it now. Those policies are devolved. We can have an impact on that front. We can also improve aspects of poverty and access to work through transport improvements; removing the costs of transport and commuting can help families. However, we must also utilise the great capacity of financial powers to top up and enhance welfare benefits wherever we can.

The introduction of certain benefits has been positive, but we are seeing some teething problems. We know that the Scottish child payment is generally a great thing—it is a good idea and I congratulate the Scottish Government on it—but we also know that 58,000 children face losing out on the £520-a-year benefit on their sixth birthday, because their low-income families will stop getting the payment.

I know that that is to do with the transfer of information and so on between the DWP and Social Security Scotland, but we need to get a grip of it quickly. We need better management and better collaboration between the two Governments to get that sorted out, to ensure that we can lift another 30,000 children out of poverty more rapidly. I hope that that can be achieved, and that we can really make some inroads on it.

We must also look at the aspect of childcare—I will finish on this issue. One of my constituents, who I went to school with, wrote to me and said:

“My second child arrived in April this year. He is a very healthy child who I hope will go on to great things when he is older. However for the moment he is only 6 months old and when he is 9 months old my wife is to return to work after 9 months on maternity leave.”

They are a typical working-class Glaswegian family, with only relatively modest incomes. His wife is currently receiving the bare minimum statutory maternity pay, so as a family they are struggling financially, and have been since their first child was born. He states that he is, “extremely dissatisfied with this mediocre maternity pay amount in what is supposed to be 5th largest economy in the world”.

My constituent’s main issue is how this new 30 hours of free child care scheme is being applied. His argument is that it is essentially

“robbing Peter to pay Paul”,

as resources for nursery are being pulled from the baby stage, from nought to two years, and reallocated to the toddler stage at two years-plus. He goes on to say:

“For a long time this government have been woefully inept at providing sufficient support to families, who particularly during the 9 month to 3 years stage...where the mother is required to return back to work as state/employer benefits stop at this point. How this 30 hour free scheme is being applied is just the icing on the cake.”

My constituent’s argument is that we cannot continue to allow this gap of nearly two years to continue. As it stands, his boy cannot get a place in nursery, because the cheaper ones are full and cannot take more, and the ones that are available charge a hefty day rate of £50 a day. It is completely unfair, and certainly does not make work pay for his family, so he wants that looked at. Access to childcare liberates people to get to work as well, so that is a critically important point in tackling this, and it cuts across Government, so let us hope something can be done.

I will not take any more time, but I think we can see that the problem is multifaceted. I hope that all Governments can work in collaboration to solve this intractable problem in our society. We know it can be done through political action, political agency and political choice, so let us make it a priority in this election campaign.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing this important debate. There is no doubt that he is a passionate campaigner on this issue, and he knows me well enough to know that I share his passion for tackling poverty in all its forms.

The hon. Gentleman said that there are too many children living in poverty. I agree entirely—in my view, one child in poverty is one child too many. It is absolutely a priority for me, as it is for this Government. As he will know, I have not been in this role for very long—and, who knows, in six weeks’ time I may not be a Member of Parliament, let alone a Work and Pensions Minister—but I stress that I have made this a priority from day one in the Department, and I have been looking at all sorts of options that we could take up to tackle child poverty.

Hon. Members across this Chamber will recognise that very few of the figures that cross my desk end with an “m”; they end with a “bn”. They tend to be very expensive measures indeed, requiring a fiscal event, but I hope that hon. Members will rest assured, knowing me as they do, that I have been exploring those options and making submissions to the Treasury accordingly.

A number of issues have been raised, and I am conscious that, as always with these debates, we have very little time to address them in the level of detail and granularity that I would like. However, I stress to colleagues that—subject to my being back here in six weeks’ time—as I have always said, my door is always open and I am happy to discuss these matters with a group or on an individual basis. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill raised topics including in-work poverty, universal credit, food insecurity and food banks, housing and temporary accommodation, and homelessness; I will try to address as many of those issues as possible in a very short period of time.

On the question of housing, I kindly ask the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill to make representations elsewhere. Although I have responsibility for the housing benefit budget, which is some £23.5 billion—with regard to his representations to me, he is largely pushing against an open door when he raises the need for more affordable housing and homes for social rent—I encourage him and hon. Members across the House to make such representations to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and to the Treasury, because in my view secure and stable housing plays an important part in tackling poverty at its root.

We also heard powerful contributions from the hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whom I have huge respect for and have worked with on a number of other issues.

I take their representations very seriously indeed. I do not agree with every point that they made—they would be surprised if I did—but I thank them for the constructive nature of their contributions.

As the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill said, we all have the same objective: to tackle child poverty and wider poverty at its root causes. We do not want to see any children in poverty. We have different ideas about the journey and how to get there but, ultimately, we all want the same thing. I am absolutely determined to work as closely as I can with the Scottish Government, working hand in hand where we can and learning from each other about the different measures that we try, to ensure that we have the best approach to truly tackling child poverty. I will talk about that a little bit.

Delivering a sustainable, long-term solution to all forms of poverty remains a priority for me and the Government. Our welfare reforms are driven by our firm conviction that the benefits system must work with the tax system and the labour market to support employment and higher pay, so that everyone has the chance to succeed and to share in the benefits of a strong economy. Supporting employment is also key to ensuring better long-term outcomes for disadvantaged children, because we know that children in working households do better at every stage of their education.

We are proud, as a Government, of the progress that we have made. We now have a near record-breaking labour market, with more than 3.6 million more people in work across the UK compared with 2010. The unemployment rate has more than halved since 2010.

Marion Fellows: I understand the improvements in employment, but child poverty is not improved if people cannot make a decent living even when they are employed. Does the Minister agree?

Will Quince: I will talk about in-work poverty, because that issue was raised. We take child poverty extremely seriously. I raise the additional 3.6 million people in work—around 1,000 per day since the Government came into office in 2010—because of the clear evidence that children in working households are not only less likely to grow up in poverty but have significantly better life chances.

To give the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw the statistics, a child living in a household where every adult is working is around five times less likely to be in relative poverty than a child in a household where nobody works, and children growing up in workless families are almost twice as likely as children in working families to fail at all stages of their education. It is important to note that 44,000 fewer children are in workless households in Scotland compared with 2010, and that child poverty in Scotland remained the same or decreased across all four main measures in the three years to 2017-18, compared with the three years to 2009-10.

It is important to stress that the Government believe that tackling poverty requires an approach that goes beyond providing a financial safety net through the Department for Work and Pensions. That requires a collective approach that addresses the root causes of poverty and disadvantage to improve long-term outcomes for children and families, which is why we have taken

wider cross-Government action to support and to make a lasting difference to the lives of the most vulnerable, who often face complex employment barriers. That is people whose ability to work is, for example, frustrated by issues such as a disrupted education, a history of offending, mental health issues, or drug and alcohol abuse. That is why our jobcentre work coaches work with external partners to offer individualised, specialist support to help some of the most vulnerable people in our society to turn their lives around.

Dr Whitford: I do not think anyone would argue with the Government's going beyond mere income, but the problem is that income is still part of poverty, and therefore taking other action instead of dealing with a lack of income simply does not solve the problem.

Will Quince: It is not the case that we have just pushed people into low-paid and insecure, part-time work—I do not know whether that is the point the hon. Lady is making. However, it is important to stress that around three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work. We know, because I shared the statistics, that being in full-time work substantially reduces the risk of being in poverty. There is only around a 7% chance of a child being in relative poverty if both parents work full time, compared with 66% for two-parent families with only part-time work.

Several hon. Members raised universal credit, which I do not think I have time to touch on in the detail I would like. However, universal credit supports full-time work through smooth incentives to increase hours, a general expectation that lone parents and partners should work—unless caring for young children or a disabled person—and generous childcare subsidies. It is important to note that we have also gone much further to support working families than previous Governments.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for giving way; I know he is short of time. He touched on universal credit. Will he commit to looking at the five-week wait and people having to take out loans, which pushes them further and deeper into persistent poverty? People's ability to repay them is not considered, and families and children suffer tremendously as a result. Will he commit to taking that up with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions?

Will Quince: I look closely at all elements within my portfolio. Universal credit is probably the largest element of my portfolio, newly added in the most recent reshuffle. On the first assessment period, it is important to stress that it is not a loan but an advance of the first indicative award, and it is interest-free and repayable over a 12-month period. We are already going further, because that will go up to 16 months, and I am exploring ways in which we could potentially increase that further. At present, around 60% of people take that up. The issue the hon. Lady raises is often raised with me by a number of the stakeholders and organisations that the Department works closely with. I am looking at it, of course, but fundamentally we can have a system based either on advances or on arrears.

We now also have a two-week roll-on of housing benefit for those moving on to universal credit, and as of 2021 that will include a two-week run-on of income

[Will Quince]

support, jobseeker's allowance and employment support allowance. This month we are reducing the maximum level of deductions from 40% to 30%. We are listening and we do make changes, but those changes can only be made within fiscal events. Of course, as I mentioned at the beginning, it will come as no surprise to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran to hear that I am looking at a number of measures ahead of the next fiscal event to improve universal credit, because we do listen to Members from across the House and to the stakeholders that feed into the Department.

I am conscious of the time, and I want the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill to have an opportunity to wind up the debate, so I will conclude. I reaffirm our view that the long-term approach that we are taking is the right one if we are to deliver lasting change. However, we are not complacent; this is an area of real focus for me and the Department. The Government believe that work provides economic independence, pride in having a job and improved wellbeing. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues from across the House, the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations and charities to tackle poverty in all its forms.

3.58 pm

Hugh Gaffney: I thank everybody who has spoken, including my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), and the Minister. I also thank the Library for the information that it supplied, as well as the Poverty Alliance, Shelter Scotland, Oxfam, all the food banks and, more importantly, all their volunteers. Finally, I thank all parents who do their best to feed and look after their children; I know that some of them starve themselves just to do that.

As I said at the beginning, we all care about our children. After all, they are the future adults who will, hopefully, care for us later in life. I thank all Members again. Hopefully, whoever returns to the House after the general election will pick up what we have said and, more importantly, will eradicate child poverty, not only in Scotland but across the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered child poverty in Scotland.

Bus Passes: 1950s-born Women

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

3.59 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered bus passes for 1950s women.

Thank you very much for chairing the debate, Sir Christopher. You and I have known each other a long time, and this is probably one of the last debates in which I will take part in the House of Commons. I thought that I might end my political activities by raising an issue that is very important to about 4 million women in this country. But I should make it clear right at the beginning of the debate that providing bus passes would not be a substitute for putting right the wrongs in relation to these women's pensions; it would only ease the situation for them.

Everyone in this room will know of the tireless campaigners fighting for justice for the nearly 4 million women born in the 1950s who are affected by the pension changes. They are particularly active in Coventry, but are also active nationally, and I will take this chance to congratulate them on their work so far, because it has been a long, hard road for many of these women. Many have written to me, describing how helpful a bus pass would be to them. I recognise that every little helps, but a free bus pass would not be the solution to the issue as a whole, as I have already stated.

The pension changes were rushed through the House, and the impact of the legislation has been colossal. It gave those affected no time to plan for their retirement. Women who were expecting to retire in a few years began to wind down at work, working fewer days, or left their career entirely, knowing that they could afford to take time off, as they would soon be in receipt of their state pension—or so they thought.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I appreciate all the work that the hon. Gentleman has done on this issue; I have often been with him in the Chamber. He is making a very important point. Does he agree that the cost of providing bus passes would be negligible, but they would make a difference to a lot of WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality? The reality, however, is that the Department for Work and Pensions needs to be investigated by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, because of its lack of adequate communication all those years ago, in the 1990s.

Mr Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. As I understand it, a number of WASPI women or women born in the early 1950s have submitted complaints and given evidence to the parliamentary ombudsman, but we do not know the outcome of that yet; we will have to wait and see.

The state pension is not a benefit, or a lottery win that people get once they retire. The state pension is the return of money that people—in this case, women—have paid into the system throughout their working life. The worst-affected women have lost out on tens of thousands of pounds and will retire six years later than they expected.

Last month, the High Court was sympathetic to the 1950s women, but ultimately ruled that they had not been discriminated against. However, the pace at which the changes have taken place certainly puts them at a particular disadvantage compared with men. These women have already suffered considerable inequalities and, in some cases, sexism in the workplace. They would have entered the workplace in the 1960s and '70s. At that time, women were openly discriminated against. They were refused promotions and refused adequate pay for skilled work. In some cases they were refused maternity rights, and in other cases those rights were non-existent. Those factors mean that many of these women are already at a financial disadvantage.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): My hon. Friend is a true champion of this cause. Does he agree that it is a great irony that many of the women who are suffering hardship as a consequence of the pension inequality will themselves be working in organisations such as bus companies, when they should be benefiting from a free bus pass from them?

Mr Cunningham: I fully agree. The factors that I have set out mean that many of these women are already at a financial disadvantage. The Conservatives' changes to the state pension age only add to that.

The WASPI women have put up an excellent fight against the injustices, but the Government have refused to admit their mistakes or address the problem. The May Administration and now the Johnson Administration have refused to compensate these women for the money that they have lost out on. I note that the Prime Minister, when he was campaigning to be Prime Minister, acknowledged that there was an injustice there, and that it should be put right, but so far we have seen no action. Instead, we have a general election. It will be interesting to see what he does afterwards.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being very generous about interventions. He is making an excellent case. Does he agree that one of the biggest injustices was that this was supposed to be a gradual change, yet in reality it is a cliff edge? People either get the bus pass or they do not. Many people are having to wait five years for something that, if they had been born a few months earlier, they would have got automatically. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a problem?

Mr Cunningham: It is a problem, but an additional point is that central Government could fund the bus passes and not leave that to local authorities. We all know that at the moment local authorities are cash-strapped, to say the least. I will not go down that road, but I emphasise that the Government should compensate local authorities for the bus passes.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very sound, thoughtful and definite call to Governments, of whatever hue, to do something to ameliorate these things now. Obviously, there are issues to do with misinformation and all the rest of it, but does my hon. Friend agree that one thing that this Government could seriously consider—there are precedents for this in other areas—is the proposal from the Opposition Benches to return eligibility for pension credit to the state pension age timetable of the Pensions Act 1995,

but with the qualifying age continuing to increase to 66 by 2022? Hundreds of thousands of women would benefit from that offer. I am thinking of the WASPI people who have come to see me in my Blackpool constituency and who have been on low incomes or had to dial down their work to support an aged relative. Of course, eligibility for pension credit takes them into other areas of credit. That would be a modest but very significant improvement on their position.

Mr Cunningham: I agree with my hon. Friend on those credits, but I think that what he refers to can only be an interim measure. We have to look at the longer term and putting the injustice right. Interim measures are all right, provided that they are not permanent. When they become permanent, we perpetuate the injustice, frankly.

That is why today I call on the Government to give these women the small compensation of free bus travel from the age at which they were meant to retire before the 2011 changes. Right now, bus passes are given to those in receipt of their state pension at the discretion of their local authority. I have just said that there should be adequate funding, and I once again draw hon. Members' attention to that point.

The Government must provide the necessary funds to ensure that all 1950s women can enjoy a free bus pass. This concession is small, and by no means replaces the tens of thousands of pounds that 1950s women have lost. However, constituents have written to me to describe the benefits that it would bring them. Many of these women are now unemployed, living off savings or supported by their spouse—and that is not to mention the women who are widows and do not have a spouse to support them.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): This is a really important issue for WASPI women. All we are asking for on their behalf is a bus pass. It seems to me that there are comments attacking the older generation now. People want to take their free TV licence off them, for example. The WASPI women are suffering financial hardship. These people have worked and paid taxes all their life. They do not ask for a lot, and I fully support the provision of free bus passes to the WASPI women.

Mr Cunningham: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's amazing contribution, and thank him for his tutelage. I wish him all the best in his retirement.

On the point about working-age women who will not get this benefit at the age when they expected to get their pension, many of those women, including in my constituency, still have to work, because they have no other option, even though they may work in manually intensive jobs and suffer from disabilities. They cannot walk great distances and they do not drive, so they rely on public transport, which is a cost to them. They have to work for extra years. Surely this would help them, and is better than letting them suffer further financial detriment while the fight for justice goes on.

Mr Cunningham: I agree wholeheartedly. For women who are isolated, live on their own and do not have children, the bus pass is a means of communicating with the outside world. Without it, they find themselves trapped at home, friendless in some instances. People living on their own is a major issue in this country.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There are 8,000 WASPI women in Plymouth, but many doughty campaigners will not get a free bus pass, even if the Minister agrees to one, because they died before they received pension justice. A lot of WASPI women in Plymouth need medical attention, and public transport is their only way of accessing it. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister could do a good deal for the WASPI women in the general election by assuring us that they will get a free bus pass? That would be a step towards getting pension justice.

Mr Cunningham: I agree. We could go a step further. I do not know if the Minister has any input on the Conservative manifesto, but if he has, my hon. Friend has just given him a good idea to put in it. Free travel around their towns and cities would allow 1950s women to save a great deal of money on travel while in the limbo period between their working life and the point at which they will receive their state pension.

There are many benefits to bus passes for pensioners. A bus pass combats isolation and tackles loneliness, as I have mentioned. The cost of childcare is so high that many 1950s women in Coventry South and across the nation have become daytime carers for their grandchildren, and in some instances they care for their spouse, too. A free bus pass would allow them to give their grandchildren meaningful and exciting days out. In my constituency, these women will benefit from taking the bus pass to medical appointments, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) just mentioned, to avoid astronomically high hospital car park charges. Car park charges are another big issue; they affect not only the WASPI women, but medical staff. At some hospitals, the staff have to pay their own car parking charges, which has an impact on their salary.

Everyone will benefit from giving the 1950s women free bus passes. Pensioners' cash-spending power is a powerful tool in combatting the loss of high street stores and banks. The use of buses ensures that services remain in place and of a good standard. Public transport is important for tackling air pollution caused by cars.

In summary, I call on the Government to provide local authorities with the necessary funds to ensure that the 1950s women, who have been treated so badly, receive the small concession of a bus pass at the age at which they were due to retire before the 2011 changes. The Government do not seem interested in providing that. However, when the Minister replies, I am sure he will tell us that he is putting the idea in his manifesto. While the Government refuse to compensate the 1950s women, I hope that they will afford the 1950s women the small compensation of a bus pass. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): On behalf of all hon. Members, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on what is perhaps the last debate he will initiate in this House. He has been a faithful servant in this place since

1992. I have had the privilege of serving on Select Committees with him. I know he has also served on the Panel of Chairs. Along with other hon. Members, I wish you a very long, successful and happy retirement.

4.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (George Freeman): Thank you, Sir Christopher, for the chance to serve under your chairmanship. I echo your justifiably warm comments about the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). It is a pleasure for me to make my first appearance as the newly created Minister for the Future of Transport, but it is also a real pleasure to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman. In my 10 years here, I have seen the quality, calibre and tenacity of the representation that he has given to the people of Coventry South. I am aware that this may be his last debate. He has given 50 years of public service, including as a city councillor leading the council and as an MP since 1992. Whoever returns in December, this House will miss the hon. Gentleman for his contributions.

My constituency is affected by the pension changes. It defies the stereotype of Norfolk as the playground for the golden Range Rovers from Chelsea to go to the coast. Mid Norfolk is a low-income, largely blue-collar, rural constituency. I well appreciate and understand the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised, and the importance of concessionary fares on public transport and these pension reforms.

I want to set the scene by reminding everyone why these reforms were necessary. First, they reflected changes in average life expectancy. When the pension system was created, life expectancy was decades younger than today, when it is going up by about a year every decade. These are substantial changes to our workplaces and in the demography of our nation.

Changing the state pension age was a difficult but, in my view, necessary decision. It was necessary not least because we had to deal, in 2010, as a coalition Government, with the horrendous Budget deficit that we inherited. To remind those who are not familiar, the Government at the time were borrowing £1 of every £4 they were spending. Some very tough decisions had to be made. It is worth remembering that these changes were part of recognising some incredible and welcome changes in the workplace of modern Britain. Women now rightly enjoy—it is long overdue—the chance to fulfil careers based on equality in the workplace and to work long, healthy lives, and to enjoy the opportunities that have been dominated by men for too long. That is part of what the reforms were about. However, I totally accept, as I have with my constituents, that where there is a change or threshold in any benefit, concessionary travel or pension situation, there will be people who are caught at the margins or the cut-off point. That is what has happened in this case.

I would not be doing my job if I did not point out that women who reached the state pension age in 2016 will have received, on average, more state pension over their lifetime than women ever have before. Furthermore, if we had not equalised the state pension age, women would be expected to spend on average more than 40% of their adult lives in forced retirement. There are two sides to this coin.

On the suddenness of the change, although many women in my constituency were surprised in 2010-11—as I am sure they were in the hon. Gentleman's—the changes have been coming. The Pensions Act 1995 included plans to increase the women's state pension age from 60 to 65, to align with men. The Pensions Act 2011 moved the state pension age for both men and women to 66. As he signalled, the High Court ruled in favour of the Government in its judicial review ruling of 3 October.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I would need to check it out, but I understand that there may be an appeal on that ruling, so I do not think that the matter is finished.

George Freeman: There may well be an appeal, but I obviously cannot comment on it. I simply make the point that the appeal will be against the ruling in favour of the Government.

On concessionary travel, we all know that for many people the concessionary bus pass can be an absolute lifeline, providing access to work, public services, healthcare, education and, particularly in rural areas, to the very fabric of community and the fabric of active and healthy societies. That is why the Government continue to support concessionary bus travel to the tune of £1 billion a year through local authorities in the UK, to try and ensure that no older or disabled person in England is prevented from travelling by bus for reasons of cost alone. However, I accept that we must go further, and I will set out shortly what the Government will do.

Stephen Lloyd: As the Minister knows, one of the challenges with bus passes is that there is a bit of a postcode lottery: they vary between cities and rural areas. In the spirit of positivity that the Minister spoke about, will the Government make any proposals to ensure that people get the same level of bus pass across the piece, so that WASPI women in rural areas will not suffer more than they would if they lived in London?

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point; will he drop me a line about it? As he knows, I am a champion for rural areas and tackling rural inequality, and I will be looking at what we need to do in our new bus package, which I will describe shortly, to ensure that rural areas do not suffer.

In April last year, we announced a change in the legislation to protect the concessionary travel scheme in its current form so that it can continue to provide free travel for eligible older and disabled people for years to come. I should point out that equalising the age difference between men and women removed the anomalous situation in which non-disabled citizens of working age received free bus passes.

To mitigate the effect of the state pension age changes on the people worst affected, Parliament has already legislated for a £1.1 billion compensation package, which reduced the proposed increase in state pension age for more than 450,000 of the hardest-hit men and women. That means that no woman will see her pension age change by more than 18 months relative to the 1995 Act timetable. I accept that that does not deal with all the issues that the hon. Member for Coventry South raised, but for me that is really important. Some of the constituents I have spoken to are among the most seriously affected, and the idea of the package is that it will help at least to substantially mitigate the impact on them.

In addition, the Government are committed to improving the outlook for older workers. We are helping many of the people who had planned to retire but now work, to get back into work, including by removing many of the barriers that they may face. To enable older people to work for longer, as many want to, we have reformed the legislation to remove the default retirement age, which means that people are no longer forced to retire at an arbitrary age. We have also extended the right to request flexible working to all with 26 weeks' continuous employment, which means that people can propose and discuss a flexible working requirement to suit their needs.

Alongside those significant legislative reforms, we have been successfully challenging negative perceptions about older workers through a major programme, Fuller Working Lives, which is led by the Department for Work and Pensions. We have appointed Andy Briggs as the business champion for older workers, to spearhead the Government's work to support employers in retaining, retraining and recruiting older workers, to actively promote the benefits of older workers to employers across England, and to influence them both strategically and with practical advice. I am not being pat when I point out that the hon. Member for Coventry South is a walking embodiment of the agility, impact and leadership that people can provide in their senior years. There are many people in this country who have a lot to give, in Parliament and in society, and we want to help and encourage them.

There is strong demand and competing claims for concessionary fares. There are many calls on the Government for extensions to the statutory concessionary bus travel scheme for important groups, including young people in search of work, jobseekers and carers, as well as those who are affected by the changes in the state pension age. Each of those groups may have a different and engaging case for access to cheaper travel, but if the Government are to protect the current scheme, which costs £1 billion a year, we must ensure that it is financially sustainable. With that in mind, I will shortly announce, as part of my reforms in my new role, a series of changes to the way in which we tackle demand-responsive bus travel in rural areas.

Concessionary travel legislation gives all local authorities in England the power to introduce local concessions in addition to their statutory obligations, so that authorities that have a particular problem can deal with it. I am delighted that that has happened in the west midlands, which includes the constituency of the hon. Member for Coventry South: the West Midlands Combined Authority, led by its excellent Mayor, Andy Street, has introduced a women's concessionary travel scheme that gives free off-peak bus and tram travel to women who live in the west midlands and were born between March and November 1954. More than 9,000 women across the region are set to benefit. Lest anyone should think that I am being politically partial, let me say that a similar scheme has been put in place by Mayor Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, and that schemes that offer free bus travel to residents aged 60 and over exist in London and Merseyside. Local leaders can, and in some cases do, put additional measures in place.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful that the Minister has set out the fact that that can happen, and that it is a good thing when it does. Has he considered carrying out a

[Luke Pollard]

cost-benefit analysis, looking at the benefits to society from giving WASPI women the free bus pass that he so praises in the west midlands and in Manchester?

George Freeman: I am grateful for that excellent question. In my new role I am looking not just at that issue but at the costs and benefits of widening access to bus and public transport for people in areas where it can tackle disconnection and help to drive up productivity. In my constituency, and possibly in the hon. Gentleman's, many communities are quite cut off and isolated from the very exciting areas that are creating jobs and have zero unemployment. Cambridge is 40 miles down the road from Mid Norfolk, but I have many constituents who cannot get there, so they cannot get those jobs. As part of my role, I am looking at the cost-benefit ratio for the Treasury of having better travel, better training and better skills.

The Government have committed to seriously transform bus services across the country for the first time in a generation. I therefore welcome, as I hope colleagues across the House will, the announcement of our £220 million package, "A better deal for bus users". Whatever else one might think about politics in this country at the moment, I welcome the fact that we have a Mayor as Prime Minister—someone who not only gets buses, has designed them and paints them in his spare time, but deeply gets the importance of public transport and interconnected transport for modern connected places. That is, in no small part, why we are introducing our major bus reform, with £50 million to deliver Britain's first all-electric-bus town or city; £30 million in extra bus funding, paid directly to local authorities to enable them to improve bus services and restore lost services; and £20 million to support demand-responsive services in rural and suburban areas.

On the point that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) raised a moment ago, as Minister for the Future of Transport I am working actively on whether we can take a more intelligent place-based approach. When we look at a county—Norfolk, in my case—or a city, instead of asking how best to spend our money on subsidising bus services, we should ask a different question: "How best can we help the people in this area who need help to get to work or to get access to public services?" I am absolutely sure—indeed, I have seen it working—that by using digitalisation or simple telephone demand systems, we can make it easier for people to log on and signal where they need to go the next day, and we can ensure that we provide for a mixed economy. Whether it is for two or three people in a car-share, 10 people in a minivan, or 20 or 30 people on a bus, we can do much better in using technology to provide smarter public and community-based travel and support services.

I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Coventry South for raising this important matter, for the chance for us all, at the end of this Parliament, to signal that we need to get this right, and for allowing me to highlight what the Government are doing to get it right. As this Parliament winds up, I congratulate him on his very, very distinguished parliamentary career.

Question put and agreed to.

Gujarati Community in the UK

4.28 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of the Gujarati community to the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Sir Christopher. I am deeply grateful to the Chairman of Ways and Means for allowing the debate; I believe that the House of Commons has not debated the subject before, although the House of Lords has. I welcome the Minister to his place, congratulate him on his appointment and look forward to his speech. I also welcome hon. Members present, who probably have substantial Gujarati communities in their constituencies and will no doubt wish to participate.

The reality is that the Gujarati community in the UK is sizeable but at the moment we have a severe shortage of data to measure both the size of the community and the contribution that it makes. One of the asks that I have of my hon. Friend the Minister is whether we can start to compile some of that data in future, so that we can measure what the Gujarati community provide. It is important that we recognise their contribution. However, we can say without question that over about two and a half generations the Gujarati community have integrated fully into the host community.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, on a subject that has so far been missing in the Commons debate structure. Does he agree that although we do not have much data, in our constituencies and our local communities we can identify Gujarati individuals, as well as the Gujarati community at large, contributing effectively in different spheres in our society, and that we should respect that?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is the chair of the Indo-British all-party parliamentary group, for his intervention. As the chair of that group, he would naturally raise such a subject and I also know full well how much work he does in his constituency to integrate the various different communities, and I recognise what he has said.

The Gujarati community has integrated so well in Britain because of their religious/spiritual leanings and their ethos of hard work and networking across the community, which we should celebrate.

Most of the Gujaratis in the UK—not all, but most of them—are of Hindu origin and practice Hinduism. All of us who celebrated Diwali last Sunday know that it lasts from about 1 September to 31 January, given the celebrations that go on over that period, but of course last Sunday was the holy day. And we just celebrated the Hindu new year on Monday, so a new year gives us a new opportunity to celebrate what Gujaratis have done here. I wish all those who have been celebrating, "Noutan Varshna Abhinandan", which is Gujarati for "happy new year".

First, perhaps, we should consider the state of Gujarat. It is obviously a state in India, which is located on the western coast, near the Arabian sea and bordering the south-eastern tip of Pakistan. It is comprised of 33 districts, it covers just under 76,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 69 million people.

The state, as we know it now, came into being in 1960, when the state of Bombay was revised, and then divided into Gujarat and Maharashtra. So it is a relatively young state in India. The capital city is Gandhinagar. The city of Ahmedabad, which is also in the state, is clearly one of the economic powerhouses of India right now. It is a major population centre and, of course, among the most crucial textile hubs in India.

Figures from the relevant Indian ministry suggest that Gujarat produces 7.69% of the entire GDP of India, so that Gujarat is ranked fifth of the 33 states and union territories of India in that regard. In terms of religious breakdown, which I mentioned earlier, the latest figures show that about 89% of the population are Hindu, 9% are Muslim, 1% follow Jainism, 0.5% follow Christianity, 0.2% follow Sikhism and 0.1% follow Buddhism.

It is fair to say that when Gujarat was created as a state, it was very run-down; in fact, it was a desert. It did not have the economic power that it now has. In fact, it is now recognised as being the economic powerhouse of India, not least because its chief minister between 2001 and 2014 was none other than Narendra Modi, who went on to become the Prime Minister of India and is now delivering for the whole of India what he delivered previously for the state of Gujarat. Under Modi's premiership in Gujarat, the finances and wellbeing of the state were rapidly improved, in terms of the economy, the lifestyle enjoyed by its citizens and the other indicators that show Gujarat is a vibrant state. And clearly he is doing the same thing for India as a whole.

Most of the Gujaratis in the UK came here in the 1970s; there were Gujaratis who came here before that, but in general Gujaratis came here from east Africa in the 1970s. That started when Idi Amin became dictator in Uganda. Although the Gujarati community in Uganda were delivering the economic benefits of the Gujarati people to the country, Amin took against them. That was because, as a despot, he persecuted ethnic, religious and political groups with whom he did not agree. He deliberately went after the Asian and European communities in Uganda, and approximately 80,000 Asians who had come to Uganda, who were mainly Gujaratis, became the prime target of his blitz on minorities.

Of those 80,000, around 30,000 moved to the UK. I am very proud of the fact that when Idi Amin decided to evict the Gujaratis and other Indians from Uganda, it was Ted Heath, a Conservative Prime Minister, who took those people in and welcomed them. At the same time, Indira Gandhi, who was the Prime Minister of India, refused to take them back. I think that demonstrates how this country has always welcomed immigrants who will participate fully in our country.

Nevertheless, we should remember how some in Britain welcomed those people who came here. In particular, I think of Leicester City Council, which chose to put adverts in the Ugandan newspapers, saying, "Please don't come to Leicester". The result is that the Gujarati population now in Leicester is about 15,000, so that advertising was clearly not very effective. And good on the Gujaratis who went there, despite what they were being told.

I was at school when the first of those people arrived and I remember that most of those I met were—I have to say—a bit disorientated. They arrived in snow, which

they were not used to. However, they had better English than we had, they were better educated than we were and they were very smart. But they were bewildered. None the less, many of those people I met then are still my friends today. That demonstrates how they came in, participated in the work of the UK and moved ahead straightaway.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that the decision by Idi Amin was certainly his country's loss and our country's gain? At the time, people would often criticise and even abuse Gujaratis for being shop owners. However, the reality is that they not only contributed to the economy, looked after their families and paid taxes, but had a significant impact on the rest of society, by bringing about the changes to the trading laws—particularly the Sunday trading laws—that we all now enjoy.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Remember, when these people were expelled from Uganda, they were told to leave everything behind; all they had was literally what they could carry and about £50 in their pockets. They were not coming here with riches and they were not necessarily able to enjoy the fruits of their labour in Uganda. Equally, this movement of people happened not only in Uganda but in Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia and other parts of east Africa, where people recognised that such treatment was going to happen.

When Gujaratis arrived here, the host communities were not always welcoming; I have already mentioned Leicester. However—this demonstrates one of the great characteristics of Gujaratis—they spotted an opportunity. If people remember, back in the 1970s our shops would open at 9 am, they would shut at 5 pm or 6 pm, they would close early on Wednesdays, and they were certainly not open on Sundays. Those Gujaratis clearly saw that there was an opportunity, and they went in and bought those shops, borrowing money to do so, and they ran them from about 6 am until 11 pm. They worked hard and they saved money. They wanted to save that money so that their children would have a better life than they had, which is another of the great characteristics of this community, which we have in our presence and do not recognise enough.

That work also meant that the Gujarati community very quickly got to learn the language. If they were not abreast of English already, they certainly came up to speed quickly. That meant that they could provide, as an extended family, a home for their brothers, sisters, wives, children and so on within one home and continue that process. I am glad that the process continues to this day. One of the key characteristics of the Gujarati community is their extended family ties.

I will go through what I consider to be some of the great characteristics of the Gujarati community. They believe in hard work and effort. In other words, they do not rely on state benefits; they get on with the hard work, earn their money and then use it for their families and communities. They believe in enterprise and free-market thinking. It does not get much more free-market than taking over a corner shop and turning it into an outrageous success, which has happened for a number of UK businesses.

[*Bob Blackman*]

I mentioned integration. Gujaratis have ultimate respect for authority, as we can see from their obedience to the rule of the law. According to the latest statistics, released at the end of March 2018, only 343 Hindus were in prison—Gujaratis are predominantly Hindus—out of a total prison population of nearly 83,000. That demonstrates that Gujaratis are far more likely to be victims of crime than criminals. It is their obedience to the law that often means that their contribution to the community goes unnoticed.

Gujaratis also have a great habit of looking after mum and dad. Rather than putting them in a home or saying, “Sorry, we can’t cope,” they will look after them in their own home and ensure that they are looked after in their old age. The whole of society can learn from that. Around 37% of my constituents are from the Gujarati community. Often when I am going about, particularly during the daytime, the grandparents will be looking after the children while mum and dad are at work. That is a great symbol of the extended family and how it helps mums, dad, grandparents and children to stay together as one big family.

I mentioned the desire for education and how important that is. It is very clear that where there are Gujarati families the standard of education in schools shoots up, because they are demanding. They insist that their children get the best possible education. Equally, where Hindu and other faith schools have been set up, demands for improved education are made.

The Gujarati community add value to our community at large, and I am delighted that they have done so, but often they do not speak up enough. My one criticism is whether they have learned the lessons from their forefathers and foremothers of what happened in east Africa, where their positions were taken for granted and ignored. I often say, “You must speak up and speak out for the contribution that you make, and make sure that your hard work achieves recognition.”

We should also pay tribute to the number of Hindu temples—mandirs—that have been created by the Gujarati community in the UK. At the last count, there were some 150 mandirs in the UK. I am pleased that in my short time in politics I not only was able to attend the foundation stone laying of Neasden temple, but enabled the community to buy the site for the Ealing Road temple. I was present at the inauguration of both those fantastic UK mandirs. I have also been to many other mandirs that have been set up over the past 30 years. It is important to recognise that the mandir is not just a place of worship, but a community facility where the whole community come together to learn about religion and to celebrate it.

There are enormous numbers of Hindu festivals throughout the year—hon. Members will know that because we get invited to them, and we celebrate with the community. It is important that during those times the community is warm and welcoming, and brings people in. That is a message for all religions across the country. If they are welcoming, people will understand their religion, and that will end the myths that often build up about particular religions.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making some excellent points. I do not know whether he has yet had the pleasure of coming to

the Glasgow Hindu mandir, which recently had a celebration that epitomised what he was saying. Worshippers were celebrating in Kelvingrove Park, with the bands and drums, really bringing people in to enjoy it and embrace it. Does he welcome that kind of community activity?

Bob Blackman: I do. The hon. Lady may not know that there is a bagpipe band that celebrates and is normally present at the Kingsbury mandir. It comes to a range of functions. In fact, I was with the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) only recently where that band led the parade.

Mr Virendra Sharma: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman has raised one aspect of the community. The community also includes very skilled craftsmen and women who bring their professions into better repute. As he said, there is a focus on education, and families encourage their children to go into professions such as accountancy, medicine and the law. However, the community are not only in Wembley or Harrow; the hon. Gentleman has visited temples in my constituency to see the services that they provide and the community centres that they have set up. Those temples are not only for worshiping deities; they have an integration aspect, with different cultures brought together to provide services to society—social services. He mentioned some of those services, but does he agree that temples provide other social services too?

Bob Blackman: I do. It is clear that the first generation had to do the difficult jobs of taking on the economy and building up their family economies. Subsequently, all the families I have come across want their sons and daughters to be doctors, dentists, accountants or lawyers. They want their children to be professionals and to go on and succeed in life—and, in the main, they do. Gujaratis have become some of the most successful businesspeople across the United Kingdom, and some of the most important professionals, be it in our national health service or in other guises.

I will also mention the Gujarati community’s contribution to charity. All the mandirs and community centres are created through voluntary contributions. If they borrow money, they pay it back, but they do not depend on taxpayer money for the creation of any of those centres. That is another thing for which we can be grateful to the Gujarati community. They do not demand money and they do not expect it, but, boy oh boy, do they manage to raise it in their communities.

Let me end with a couple of questions for the Minister. I mentioned that we need a clear way to capture data to measure the immense contribution made not only by the Gujarati community, but by others. There have been debates in this place on the Sikh community and others, and we must ensure that we capture the data in an appropriate way. Several of us have campaigned to get Gujarati as a language retained on the national curriculum for those people who want it. Having that data enables us to demonstrate the importance of having that language in our schools, if people want to raise that point. Equally, retaining Gujarati as an A-level and GCSE qualification is important to that process.

The Gujarati community can be used as a prime example of how a community can come to this country and integrate. We should highlight the contribution it

has made, possibly to show other communities that this is the way that they can not only come to this country and make a success of it, but organise appropriately; to have their own religion and celebrate their culture, but still integrate within the host community. The Gujarati community is a shining example to all communities that they can do so. In his reply, could the Minister shed some light on how we can use their example as a means of saying to different communities who come to this country and make it their home that this is an ideal way of doing so, and how we can celebrate what those people have done and the contribution they make?

4.51 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I find myself in the unusual situation of agreeing with most of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)'s contribution. It is a most uncomfortable experience.

Bob Blackman: It will not last.

Gareth Thomas: I am sure it will not last beyond today.

On behalf of the Gujarati community that I am proud to represent, I wanted to add to the list of requests made of the Minister. The first is about flight links to Gujarat. There is a direct flight from Heathrow to Gujarat, but given the scale of the travel needs of Gujaratis in the UK—as I understand it, we are the third largest home for the Gujarati diaspora worldwide—anything that the UK Government could do, perhaps on the back of discussions about the third runway, to encourage more direct flights to Gujarat would be extremely helpful to many of my constituents.

Turning to the issue of visas, many of my constituents still experience difficulties helping their relatives who want to visit, particularly at Diwali. Perhaps the consulate in Ahmedabad could offer advice sessions to the family members of our Gujarati community about what they need to do to have a decent chance of their applications being processed. The last figures I saw suggested that over 60,000 applications for visas from India were being turned down, and given the size of the Gujarati community, I suspect that many of those—the vast bulk of them—are from people hoping to come from Gujarat to visit relatives here.

The hon. Member for Harrow East mentioned the teaching of Gujarati. It is time that we considered providing some funding, through Government or lottery sources, to support the many Saturday schools that are key for those children who take Gujarati at GCSE and, crucially, A-level; relatively speaking, A-level Gujarati has a very small number of applicants. Many of the mandirs that the hon. Gentleman mentioned facilitate those Saturday schools at considerable expense, but other community organisations often have to provide the teaching, and in these hard times, it is increasingly expensive to provide that teaching and book the facilities for it.

The last of my main asks is this: I do not understand why there are not more trade missions to Gujarat, to take advantage of our substantial business links with it. Gujarat is the economic powerhouse of India, and we should not be frightened of turning to the talents of British Gujaratis to unlock further business opportunities for our country in Gujarat.

I was disappointed at the Government's unwillingness to support the campaign for Diwali, and indeed Eid, to be recognised as a national holiday. If the Government are not willing to reconsider their opposition to making those days public holidays, they should, at the very least, have conversations with business organisations to encourage businesses to be sympathetic to requests for time off on those days. Those are the most important spiritual days for the Gujarati community, so that would be extremely helpful. As the Minister may know, the Jains and Zoroastrians who form part of the Gujarati community in the UK do not get proper recognition on the census. Both have been running campaigns to get those faiths on to the 2021 census, so that their religion can be properly respected, and it would be good if the Minister would use his influence to unlock a more common-sense response from the Office for National Statistics.

I view the Gujaratis in my community through the businesses and services that they provide, beginning with the garage directly opposite my office, which is run by the Halai family, who came over from east Africa but had a home in the Kutch area of Gujarat. They have provided jobs to people in my constituency and provide a much-appreciated service through their garage. They are active in the Shree Kutch Leva Patel Community, which does so much in north-west London; I wish its premises were based in my constituency, but sadly, they are in Northolt. The SKLPC has secured planning permission for a fantastic new India Gardens project, and I wish its trustees well in turning their vision into a reality.

Also linked to SKLPC are the Vekaria family, who run the Vascroft business—contractors that build temples, hotels and many other things. They employ huge numbers of people and are well known in the building community. That business was set up by two brothers from east Africa, but again with huge links to Gujarat, in January 1977. It is a family business still; it has great values, and it is based in Park Royal. All us Members from north-west London have constituents who work for Vascroft.

There is also Sandip Ruparelia, who has links to the International Siddhashram Shakti Centre in Harrow—which, I suppose, is my home temple in my constituency—and to the ISKCON Foundation at Bhaktivedanta Manor. His family, too, was originally based in Tanzania, but had strong links to Gujarat. He arrived in the UK in March 1980, and now runs a huge business, providing banqueting facilities among other things. Perhaps crucially, in the context of the debate about the future of our public services that we will have over the course of the next six weeks, he also runs an important care home service, providing much-valued services to the elderly in my constituency and beyond. He employs 2,500 staff and generates substantial tax revenues for our economy. He is another example of a member of the Gujarati community who recognises his responsibilities to the country in which he lives, but has also kept his links to Gujarat and is hugely proud of them.

The Dhamecha family are part of the Lohana community. Again, they have strong links to Gujarat and have helped the Lohana community in the UK, which is part of the Gujarati diaspora, to set up two centres, both of which, I am pleased to say, are in my constituency. That is much appreciated. Pradip Dhamecha and his family run a huge cash and carry business, which generates substantial tax revenues for the UK economy.

[Gareth Thomas]

The Solanki family are a north-west London Gujarati family who originally came from east Africa. The father, Mr Solanki, came over in 1964. They run the Asian Media Group. The business is now run by the second generation, with a third generation of Gujaratis actively involved in taking that successful media business forward. All the individuals I have referenced are fiercely proud of their Hindu faith and have links to many of the mandirs, be they part of the Swaminarayan family or other temples in the area.

I also acknowledge the contribution of Gujarati Muslims in my constituency. The superb Dr Merali, a local GP and entrepreneur, is a trustee of the Mahfil Ali mosque in north Harrow. He provides hugely important public services as a GP and through his work with nurseries. He is also engaged with a series of other fundraising projects to support those in need in the UK and back home in Gujarat.

I am privileged to host the headquarters of the Zoroastrian community in the UK in Rayners Lane in my constituency. It is hugely proud of its links to Gujarat, and the fact that the first MP from an ethnic minority background was a Gujarati Parsi. Again, we should acknowledge the huge contribution that the Zoroastrians have made, as part of the Gujarati community, to life in the UK.

All those Gujaratis, in different ways, support my seven reasonable asks of the Government, which I hope the Minister will take seriously in his response.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): We will start the wind-ups at 10 past, so I hope that the next two speakers are suitably brief.

5.2 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) in the warmest terms on securing the first ever debate in the Commons about the role of Gujaratis. The story of the Gujarati community in Britain is inspirational. He has already mentioned the Gujaratis' incredible get-up-and-go enterprising qualities. Many of them, particularly in my constituency, fled here from the murderous Idi Amin with nothing but the shirts on their backs, and they have built incredible businesses and transformed the local economy. If I were to name all of them in my constituency, we would be here for days.

The Gujaratis have made an incredible social contribution to our area—they are social entrepreneurs. As part of the wider Indian community in my constituency, they run countless voluntary groups, community groups and charities, with a particular emphasis on helping and caring for older people. It is always wonderful, when I go to Gujarati homes, to see the grandma and grandpa seated with great respect at the end of the table. That is a wonderful part of the culture that we could all learn from.

The Gujarati community is a patriotic community that has become integrated and part of the great tapestry of this country. I enjoy the cultural contribution that it has made to my constituency; there have been huge Diwali celebrations in recent weeks in Leicestershire. I particularly enjoyed dancing at the Navratri celebrations at Gartree High School in my constituency. As hon.

Members might imagine, I am a terrible dancer, but it is a warm and forgiving community, so it was wonderful to be there.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I pay tribute to the Surrey Hindu Cultural Association, which is based in Woking. It is not a huge community, but it puts on the most amazing Diwali festival every year, for which all the citizens of Woking are grateful. That also takes place across many other constituencies, and we pay tribute to the community for that.

Neil O'Brien: That is extremely nice to hear.

What more can we do? I am always working to make sure that everybody is looked after in our community, which is one reason I support drives to get more tissue and blood donations, which we are desperately short of, from Gujarati and other Indian communities. I also work to improve community life and relationships between the different communities in my constituency, which is why I am pressing my local councils to try to find space for a Hindu community centre. We have lots of churches, a great mosque and a wonderful gurdwara, but people still have to go into the city to go to a temple. I would love to find something to house all those wonderful voluntary groups in my constituency.

To summarise, the story of the Gujaratis in Britain is a story of enterprise, strong family life, charity and strong voluntary commitments. It is a story about a group of patriotic people who have come to this great country and put down deep roots.

5.6 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), it is unusual for me to agree with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), but I thank him for securing this timely debate.

I have a small, minority Gujarati community in my constituency, predominantly of Muslim heritage. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the contribution of the Gujarati community to my constituency, and to associate myself with the comments about the community's contribution, regardless of faith, to Great Britain. As the hon. Gentleman said, there are lots of inspirational stories about the community from across the country, and it is no different in Bradford West. The community makes up almost half the Indian community by size; it is diverse in religious belief, but united by language, heritage and history.

Many of the Gujarati community came to the UK as migrants from not just India but east Africa. Some were tragically forced out of countries such as Uganda by the likes of Idi Amin. Many overcame struggles and challenges on their journey to the UK, as well as the racism that was often faced by first-generation Gujaratis on their arrival, to become leaders in our community. Many hon. Members have mentioned the huge economic contribution that the community makes. Its long history in trading was transformed into entrepreneurial efforts, as we have heard. There was a revolution in the way that Gujaratis turned corner shops into empires, and built on that success to become business leaders in the UK.

Second and third-generation Gujaratis treat our ill in hospitals, teach our young people in schools and work at the highest levels of the public and private sectors,

which shows just how important a contribution the community makes to the UK. Whether Hindus, Sikhs, Khojas, Ismailis, Dawoodi Bohras or Sunnis, they have often been at the forefront of charitable work across the UK, especially to support those most in need in the cold winter months.

Leadership and the fight against struggles are attributes woven into the rich history of Gujarati communities. Two of the most prominent leaders who fought British colonialism in India—Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, and Mahatma Gandhi—have roots connected to Gujarat.

Gujaratis in the UK have held firmly to the lessons of standing up to injustice. One of the best examples of that is from my aunties in the Gujarati community, Jayaben Desai and Yasu Patel, also known as the “*strikers in saris*”. In 1976, in the face of inequality, poor working conditions and low wages at the Grunwick film processing factory, they took to the streets. When even those who were meant to be supporting their cause had abandoned them, they led a campaign joined by almost 20,000 people.

Jayaben Desai quit her post in the factory in solidarity with her sacked colleague. As she left—I love this bit—the line manager compared her and her colleagues with chattering monkeys. She replied, “What you are running here is not a factory; it is a zoo. But in a zoo there are many types of animals. Some are monkeys who dance on your fingertips; others are lions who can bite your head off. We are the lions, Mr Manager.”

Like those lions, many of us have fought within the Labour movement to make the Labour party the vehicle of change that we see today. I want to show my gratitude to the Gujarati community, because their contribution to the UK makes it a better place for all across this great nation. I particularly thank the Khalifa Centre, which always welcomes me, and the communities in the Quba mosque in my constituency for their contribution to not just business, but faith, humanity and wider society. We are better for it.

5.10 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I pay huge tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for again bringing us a debate that allows us to think about the many cultures that bring us together as a society, and about their contribution and the special place that each of them has. I thank him very much for his efforts to do that. He set out very well the contribution that the Gujarati community have made and the challenges they have faced.

It was also good to hear from the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas)—we are stuck between Harrow East and Harrow West in this debate—and the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), who spoke about the Gujarati community's social and economic contribution. We had a beautiful contribution from the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), who spoke so nicely and powerfully about lions of the women's movement in her part of the world—it was a very interesting and profound story of the contribution that women have made, because that is often not recognised well enough among the good contribution made by the Gujarati community. She also reminded us of their mixed Muslim and Hindu heritage.

Gujaratis are a small but significant part of the communities in Scotland. The 2011 census showed that there were only 878 Gujarati speakers in Scotland, but we value each and every one of them. Some perhaps did not complete the census last time—when we get the new census, it will be interesting to see whether that has changed and whether there are issues of language, as other hon. Members mentioned, and whether there are issues where we have to support the community more to ensure that the younger and older generations do not lose their links with their past and to their original countries of origin, be it east India or parts of Africa from which they fled in the 1970s or came earlier in the 1950s and 1960s, because they are incredibly important in allowing those communities to tell their own stories of where they have come from.

The Gujarati people have made an invaluable contribution to life in Scotland and the UK. We must remember, as the hon. Member for Harrow East mentioned, the challenges that the community faced in coming here. The Gujaratis came at a time when the UK economy was faltering and provided a significant boost to the economy. It certainly undermines any myth that the UK was doing them a favour by allowing them to come here. In fact, it is the other way around—the Gujarati community, and the many communities that make up the UK, have actually done us a huge honour and favour by choosing this country as their home, or by coming here if they had to. We welcome them and say that this is their home. We look forward to future generations building on the great success that the original generation had made.

The hon. Member for Harrow West mentioned visas, which are a huge issue in my constituency. I have many constituents who struggle to get visitor visas, spousal visas or visas to stay if they have come to study. It is a huge issue, and I urge the Minister to look in more detail at the impact that has on community relations and on the way Britain is perceived in the world. Although Scotland has no choice about our immigration system, we are bound by it. We are done down by it, because we cannot welcome people as we would want to. The hostile environment is a huge issue for many of my constituents, who turn up at my constituency surgeries in tears week in, week out, because they cannot get their granny to come and visit, or they cannot have family members come and stay for a while so that they can show off the place they now call home and say, “This is Scotland; come and visit.” It is a huge disappointment every time that happens.

The hon. Member for Harrow West also mentioned the important links to Gujarat and the importance of having flights and facilitating travel the other way as well. As I mentioned in my intervention, the wider Indian community in my Glasgow constituency is growing and vibrant. They are very keen to do things such as have cricket contests in the west end. They had me out playing cricket, which was terrible—I really should not do that, because I am not very good at it. They were very encouraging of that. They had women's and men's teams, and they had all kinds of people involved. It is really positive on the whole, and it is good to see such a vibrant community.

I particularly want to mention Piush Patel of the Gujarati Society of Glasgow, which is a non-profit organisation run entirely by volunteers. There was originally

[Alison Thewliss]

a Gujarati Society in the 1970s, but that committee retired and the new generation have picked it up. They have held a Dandiya celebration for the past seven years, and Navratri is one of their biggest festivals. They said that, during the nine days of Navratri, each night was celebrated with prayers and dancing. Their Facebook page has pictures showing some of those celebrations, which look like a lot of fun. I hope to join them at some point soon, if we are not going to be here so much. The committee has been holding such events and has had a huge turnout. Despite it being a small community, they have sold out, with 250 to 300 tickets for each night when they run the event. They could probably get more people in if they had a bigger hall in which to hold the events.

The influx and number of Gujaratis in Scotland is significant, and they feel as though more people are coming and joining the community. They feel that they have a huge contribution to make, and that having these celebrations is also a good way to reach out to teach people about Gujarati culture, the festivals and, of course, to enjoy the food when they come together.

I welcome the debate that the hon. Member for Harrow East has introduced, and I hope that the Minister will pick up on some of the concerns that have been raised.

5.16 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this really important debate. I also thank him for giving me one last opportunity to respond to a debate from Labour's Front Bench.

It is really a pleasure to speak to the importance of recognising the contribution that the Gujarati community makes to the UK. I had an opportunity to see this for myself last year when I visited the community of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). We had an absolutely wonderful experience, and I thank him and his constituents again for that. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Ealing, Southall. They spoke so passionately on behalf of their Gujarati constituents.

As has been said, our country and Gujarat state in India have close historical connections. Almost half of the Indian community who now live in the UK are from Gujarat—a population of around 600,000. As we have heard, the journey to the UK for many Gujarati families has not, historically, always been easy or direct. Some Gujaratis came directly from India in the 1950s and 1960s, but most came from east Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, as a response to the terrible events that took place in Uganda and their expulsion. They came here for a better and safer way of life. It is interesting that they settled in a number of places of opportunity in the UK: Leicester, Coventry—the midlands—northern textile towns and here in Greater London.

It is hugely important to recognise the contribution that the Gujarati community has made to the UK in all manners of life—cultural, social and economic. Although

the community is diverse and vibrant, with many different traditions and faith backgrounds, including Hindus, Muslims and Jains, they have brought great diversity to our own culture in the realms of music, festivals, dance, quizzing, dress and architecture. Autumn festivals such as Navaratri, which have just passed, bring vibrancy and vigour to our communities, and festivals such as Diwali, which many in the Gujarati community take part in, have become a staple in the British calendar. Gujarati cuisine, with its fantastic use of spices and range of vegetarian dishes, has enriched the shops of many UK high streets.

Buildings such as the Neasden temple—Europe's first traditional Hindu stone temple, painstakingly carved in Gujarat by more than 1,000 dedicated craftsmen and built by a team of international volunteers in London—have brought a magnificent diversity, too, to our architecture. They have also brought much to our economy and industry and, as has been said, they are well known for their entrepreneurial spirit.

I have heard it said many times that Gujaratis have contributed greatly to the revolution of the British corner shop. That entrepreneurial success is even more commendable when one considers the often severe racism that many migrant communities faced in the 1970s and '80s. The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) made that point well.

At a local level, Gujarati mosque and Hindu temple networks continue to contribute to the UK's charitable sector. Gujaratis and people of Gujarati descent continue to achieve great success in all manner of industries, from film and television to sports and politics. Picking just a few prominent people of Gujarati descent in the UK highlights the great breadth of the impact that they have had. They include: Jayaben Desai, who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West said, led the strikes in the 1970s against the working conditions of south Asian women in the Grunwick factory, and was chosen for the "Woman's Hour" power list in 2016; the actor Dev Patel; the cricketer Sameer Patel; and, of course, people here and in the House of Lords with specialisms in political theory and economics. We are very well served. It is paramount that we recognise the unique and special contribution that the Gujarati community makes to this country.

In concluding, I want to raise some quick points with the Minister. We clearly need more information and data about the community, and much better documentation of its positive impact and huge contribution to this country. We also need to solve some of the problems that Gujaratis face in travelling and getting visas for their families.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate and giving me the opportunity to reflect on the significant social, economic, political and cultural contribution made by the Gujarati community in the United Kingdom. Nobody in this House has been a more tireless advocate for the Gujarati community than him. It takes only a visit to his office to see the accolades and gifts of thanks

from the community in acknowledgement of his hard work on their behalf in his near decade as a Member of Parliament. I offer him my sincere thanks.

I want to take this opportunity to send my best wishes to everyone who celebrated Diwali on Sunday. The festival of light is a special time for all to come together, to share gifts, food and memories, and to draw confidence from the knowledge that, ultimately, good will triumph over evil. That is a message for all time, and Diwali's enduring values of duty and service resonate with people of all faiths and none.

It is a huge privilege to represent the Government in this debate. There has been such consensus about the issues facing the community and its contribution to British society. It has been fascinating to learn so much from hon. Members. The Gujarati community is renowned for possessing some of the most prized qualities in British society: a formidable work ethic, a strong sense of charity and an unbreakable bond of community. I am delighted to be celebrating its great achievements and contributions to our country.

The Gujarati community has had a long history with Britain, dating back to the 17th century. Trade between Britain and the Gujarat region stretches back centuries, and I am sure it will continue to flourish and strengthen in the decades ahead. The Gujarati community is also responsible for a phenomenal degree of trade within the United Kingdom. Throughout the country, the Gujarati community can be found running businesses at all levels, from hotels to tech start-ups and international conglomerates, but it is at the most local level that the Gujarati community has had its biggest effect on UK business, through many thousands of local shop owners. I remember from my time working in retail, from leaving school to coming to this House, the phenomenal impact that that famous work ethic had on changing opening hours around consumer need in many retail businesses. It helped to transform a quite old-fashioned set of retail laws in this country forever.

Away from the world of numbers and money, it is important to acknowledge the community's impact on injecting colour and vibrancy into our country. Consider how much duller our country would be without the kind of celebrations that we have seen in recent weeks at Diwali, or the festival of colour. The Gujarati community has helped to transform our social lives and our community through fashion, music and, predominantly, as the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) said, food. There are 10,000 restaurants in England and Wales alone that serve Indian and Gujarati food. That accounts for two thirds of all the dining experiences in the United Kingdom, so it is hugely important to acknowledge that contribution. I agree with what the hon. Lady said about vegan and vegetarian food. The community has injected some spice and diversity into food in this country.

It is important to acknowledge the immense contribution of the Gujarati community, which goes far beyond its cultural flair and entrepreneurial spirit, and extends to the world of charity, as a number of hon. Members have acknowledged. The Shree Prajapati Association is a charity that grew up in east Africa, and when its members were forced to flee because of political oppression, it came to the UK and was re-established here. It now has 13 branches that support causes in India, as well as UK charities such as Breast Cancer Now and the National

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. It is strongly dependent on the amazing support of the Gujarati community in Britain. Sangaam, a charity in north London that many Members will be familiar with, is dedicated to supporting Gujaratis and non-Gujaratis alike with issues such as domestic violence, and it provides legal advice and counselling. Some 6,000 people went through its doors last year alone.

It is also important to acknowledge that the impact of this community is felt not just at a social level. Some individuals have changed our way of life, and arguably even our world. The towering figure in UK-Gujarati history is, of course, Mahatma Gandhi—a man who employed non-violent resistance to lead the successful campaign for India's independence, and who has been held up as a role model for civil rights leaders.

Mr Virendra Sharma: We have recognised the Gujarati community's contribution to business, education and charity work, but it has also contributed to the public life of this country. It is a pleasure to say that the current Home Secretary comes from a Gujarati background.

Luke Hall: I completely agree. The Home Secretary is, of course, the first ethnic minority woman to hold one of the great offices of state, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to put that on the record. The even more famous members of UK society with Gujarati descent are, of course, our royal family, who were shown by recent DNA testing to have Gujarati ancestry. It is important to put that on the record.

There have been a number of points raised in the debate. I fear that I may not have time to address them all, but I will touch on a couple. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and a number of other hon. Members raised the issue of data capture and the importance of ensuring that we have the right information to demonstrate the Gujarati community's contribution. The Government published statistics on Monday detailing the experiences of people from the Indian ethnic community in the UK. This is the first time that that data has been published. Although it focuses on the Indian community as a whole, it provides a valuable insight into the achievements, attainments and contributions of the community. I am very happy to take my hon. Friend's suggestion away and look at what more can be done.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) raised, I think, seven suggestions that he would like me to take away and look at. Because of the time, I will commit to write to him on all seven, but he made some valid points.

In conclusion—I am giving my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East very little time to respond—I want to put on the record my thanks, and the thanks of the whole Government and of my Department, to the Gujarati community for its work and its huge contribution to British society and British life.

5.29 pm

Bob Blackman: I thank Members from across the House for participating in this celebration. It is very rare that we get the chance to end a Parliament with such as celebration, so that is what we should do. I will end with this anecdote. People who go into a temple—a mandir—can sometimes see a multimillionaire cleaning

[Bob Blackman]

the statues and the floors, but they will not know that he is a multimillionaire, because he will show no sign of that. I think that is symbolic of the Gujarati community.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contribution of the Gujarati community to the UK.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 30 October 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

People with Significant Control: Post-Implementation Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Government will today publish the report on the statutory post-implementation review of the People with Significant Control (PSC) regulations. We are required to complete a PIR by virtue of various regulations:

Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015;
The Register of People with Significant Control Regulations 2016;
The Limited Liability Partnerships (Register of People with Significant Control) Regulations 2016;
The European Public Limited-Liability Company (Register of People with Significant Control) Regulations 2016;
The Scottish Partnerships (Register of People with Significant Control) Regulations 2017. The People with Significant Control (PSC) register was established in 2016 to enhance the transparency of ultimate (beneficial) ownership of UK companies. The goals of the register are to promote good corporate behaviour and to deter illicit activity. UK companies and partnerships in scope of the regulations are required to keep a register of their beneficial owners and to report this information to Companies House.

This is the first review of the PSC regulations since the register was established. My Department assessed the operation of the register, the stakeholder engagement with it and the burdens the requirements place on business.

The review report concludes that the PSC register is meeting its objectives and that the costs to business have been proportionate and in line with the original estimates. The register is widely used, has a positive economic effect and contributes to the fight against criminal use of companies.

The report notes the importance of ensuring the reliability of the PSC register information. This is being considered and will be addressed as part of the wider review of the corporate transparency and register reform.

The PSC regulations will, therefore, remain in their current form and we will continue to monitor the operation of the register. The next statutory post-implementation review of the PSC regulations will be carried out within the next five years.

A copy of the post-implementation review report will be laid before Parliament.

[HCWS50]

EDUCATION

Department for Education' Key Achievements

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I would like to update the House on some of the Department for Education's key achievements since 2010.

We are helping families with the cost of childcare. The parents of over 1.4 million children are taking advantage of funded early education in 2019. This

Government are committed to making childcare more affordable and more accessible, saving eligible families up to £5,000 per child every year.

We offer free childcare for three and four-year-olds. The Government offer a free universal 15 hours per week of childcare, with a free additional 15 hours for three and four-year-olds whose parents are in work, a total of 30 hours of free childcare per week for eligible working parents.

The vast majority of eligible children benefit from these entitlements. An estimated 328,200 children aged three and four were benefiting from 30 hours free childcare in the spring term of 2019. Take up of the 15 hours offer is very high, 92% of three year olds and 95% of 4 year olds are benefiting from free hours.

An estimated 600,000 children have benefited from a 30 hours place throughout the first two years of national delivery.

We offer free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds. The Government offer 15 hours of free childcare per week for the most disadvantaged families.

The vast majority of eligible children benefit from this entitlement. In the spring term of 2019, 148,800 two-year-olds from disadvantaged families benefited from 15 hours a week of funded free childcare.

Over 850,000 children have benefited from the two-year-olds entitlement since it began.

Free childcare is popular with parents of two to four-year-olds. There is 95% satisfaction among parents using the two-year-old entitlement, 91% among parents using universal hours for three to four year olds, and 95% among parents using the 30 hours entitlement on how the funded hours can be used. Three quarters of parents reported having more money to spend since they started using the 30 hours, and 80% said the quality of their family life had improved.

We plan to spend around £3.5 billion on our early education entitlements this year alone, and £3.6 billion planned for next year. We want to support early years providers in delivering high quality care and education, which is why the Chancellor recently announced funding to increase hourly rates for the Government's free hours offers for 2020-21.

We are raising the quality and professionalism of the early years workforce by investing £20 million in high quality professional development for early years practitioners.

We are giving schools the biggest funding boost in a decade over the next three years: a total of £14 billion more, a cash increase of £2.6 billion next year, £4.8 billion and £7.1 billion in 2021-22 and 2022-23 respectively, compared to 2019-20.

We are levelling up funding across the country, so that every secondary school will receive a minimum of £5,000 per pupil in 2020-21, and every primary school will receive a minimum of £3,750 per pupil in 2020-21, rising to £4,000 by 2021-22.

This is in addition to the £1.5 billion per year we will continue to provide to fund additional pension costs for teachers over the next three years. Taken together, this means that by 2022-23 we will be providing an additional £150 million a week to our schools.

We introduced the national funding formula to distribute school funding fairly across the country, ensuring funding is based on schools' and pupils' needs and characteristics, not accidents of geography or history.

We are investing additional funding for 16 to 19-year olds, with increased funding of £400 million in 2020-21, the biggest injection of new money into 16 to 19-year old education in a single year since 2010. In addition, we will be allocating at least £100 million in 2020-21 to cover pension costs in the further education sector.

Our education reforms mean more children are getting a world class education at good or outstanding schools. 85% of all children are now in good or outstanding schools, up from 66% in 2010. As of March 2019 there were 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010, thanks in part to our reforms.

Failing schools are turned around as sponsored academies. Over seven out of 10 inspected sponsored academies are now good or outstanding, only one in 10 were judged good or outstanding before they converted. There are over 2,300 sponsored academies.

Where schools are judged inadequate by Ofsted, we act quickly. For a maintained school, this means becoming an academy to benefit from the support of a strong sponsor. For an academy, we will transfer them to a stronger academy trust if necessary.

We are increasing support for schools that need additional help. We will be offering around 2,400 schools rated "requires improvement" by Ofsted optional support in a package worth up to £16.5 million overall.

We are making it easier for under performing schools to access school improvement support. Through the teaching school hubs test and learn phase around 2,000 schools will benefit from reforms to strengthen and improve school leadership. A competitive grant procurement is underway for teaching school hub "test-and-learn" phase, which is the first part of our plans to strengthen the current structure of system leadership.

Introducing a clearer and simpler school accountability system. This offers much greater clarity about when we will and will not intervene in a school, by removing the floor and coasting standards, and acknowledges that Ofsted, as an independent body, is best placed to identify inadequate educational performance which requires intervention.

We are tackling teacher workload. Our wide-ranging programme of work includes publication of the workload reduction toolkit which supports school leaders, teachers and other staff to address workload issues in their school. We have published the "Making Data Work" report, and are acting on the recommendations to tackle excessive data burdens in schools.

In 2018, we announced an additional £7.7 million to support teachers to access high quality curriculum resources and reduce their workload.

The findings from the "Teacher Workload Survey 2019", published on 11 October, suggest there has been a reduction between 2016 and 2019 in reported working hours for teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders of 5 hours a week. Whilst this is encouraging, we will continue to take action to address workload and improve work-life balance.

We are working hard to recruit and retain brilliant teachers. In January 2019 we launched the early career framework. This will underpin a fully-funded, two-year package of structured training and support for all early career teachers, linked to the best available research evidence. We recruited 34,595 teachers to start their training in 2018, over 2,600 more than in 2017-18.

We are making sure teaching is an attractive graduate profession. It is vital we ensure that the pay offer for teachers is positioned at the top of the graduate labour market, and that is why we are setting out plans to significantly raise starting pay to £30,000 by September 2022.

We are opening high performing new free schools to improve choice for parents and outcomes for children. Through the free schools programme, this Government have funded thousands of good new school places and opened schools across the country.

As of 1 October 2019 there are 507 open free schools, 48 University Technical Colleges and 24 studio schools. These will provide over 320,000 places when at capacity.

We have approved a further 227 applications from groups that we are now working with to establish new free schools.

In 2019, seven of the top 15 provisional Progress 8 scores were achieved by free schools, including three of the top five, Eden Boys' School Birmingham, Eden Girls' School Coventry and Michaela Community School in Brent.

Free schools are disproportionately located in more deprived areas, and 18 per cent of all open free schools are dedicated to special needs or alternative provision.

We have opened two specialist Maths Free Schools, offering A-Levels in Maths, Further Maths and Physics, for young people aged 16 to 19 who wish to study mathematical subjects at university. These two schools are achieving excellent results: in 2019 King's Maths School reported that 100% of their students achieved grades of A or A* at A-Level Maths; Exeter Maths School reported that 93% of students achieved an A or A* in their Maths A-Level. There are a further five such schools planned to open with funding secured for a total of eleven, enabling at least one maths free school to open in every region.

We are ensuring that all children are able to succeed, no matter their background. The attainment gap has narrowed between disadvantage pupils and others, as measured by the disadvantage gap index, by 13 percent at age 11 and 9 percent at age 16 since 2011.

We are supporting the most disadvantaged pupils, including those eligible for free school meals, with additional funding. The Government have spent more than £15 billion since 2011—and another £2.4 billion this year—through the pupil premium to tackle educational inequality.

We have increased funding for pupils with special educational needs. We will be investing an additional £780 million in high needs funding in 2020-21, a 12% increase on the amount available this year. This will bring the total spent on those with the most complex needs to over £7 billion.

We are getting reading off to a strong start so children have the literacy they need to succeed. In 2019, 82% of pupils met the expected standard in the phonics screening check, compared to just 58% when the check was introduced in 2012.

More pupils are studying the core academic subjects at school. The proportion of all pupils at the end of key stage 4 entering the English Baccalaureate—studying GCSEs in English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history and a language—has risen from 22% in 2010 to 40% in 2019 in state funded schools.

Since the EBacc performance measure was first introduced in 2010, the proportion of pupils entering the EBacc has increased from 22% in 2010 to 40% in 2019 in state funded schools.

Mathematics has been the most popular A-Level since 2014, making up 11.4% of all A-Level entries in 2019.

This Government have created 1 million more school places. We are on track to create 1 million new school places this decade, the largest increase for two generations. This follows a fall of 100,000 school places between 2004 and 2010.

We are creating T-Levels, a new gold standard technical qualification so that young people gain the skills they need for employment. T-Levels will be high-quality technical alternatives to A-Levels, combining classroom theory, practical learning and a meaningful industry placement.

We are on track for the first three T-Levels for Digital, Education and Construction to be taught from September 2020, with a further seven taught from 2021, and all 25 by 2023.

We have extensive support in place for their implementation, including £60 million to build capacity for industry placements, £8 million to prepare teachers and leaders and a £38 million capital fund.

Each T-Level will require students to undertake a 45-day work placement.

Overall additional funding for T Levels will rise to an extra £500 million a year once the programme is fully rolled out.

Record rates of 18-year-olds are going to university. In 2018, one-third of all 18-year-olds entered full-time higher education, the highest on record. The proportion of 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds entering full-time higher education is up from 13.6% in 2009 to 20.2% in 2018. This is the highest on record.

We have removed the cap on student numbers, allowing more people with the talent and potential the opportunity to be successful at university.

Through the Higher Education and Research Act we introduced a duty to promote equality of opportunity in access and participation in higher education and we expect to see further progress, particularly among the most selective institutions.

All higher education providers must now publish application offer, acceptance, dropout and attainment rates of students by ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background. This will help hold the sector to account for their record on access and retention of students from lower socio-economic and other backgrounds.

Higher education providers have committed to spend £860 million in 2019-20 on measures to improve access and student success, up significantly from £404 million in 2009. The office for students is monitoring how effectively higher education providers spend this money.

Improving higher technical education by establishing new institutes of technology, making it easier to upskill and gain highly skilled employment.

An institute of technology is a legally binding collaboration between further education colleges, higher education institutions and employers.

They are being created to specialise in delivering higher technical training at Levels 4 and 5—above A-Level but below degree level—primarily in STEM subjects aligned to local economic priorities.

Institutes of technology will deliver a mix of apprenticeship and classroom-based provision for industries such as digital, advanced manufacturing and engineering—industries where there are skills gaps and growing demand—in order to provide employers with the skilled workforce they need.

We are investing up to £290 million capital funding to build an institute of technology network across the country.

The first 12 institutes of technology are now starting to go live, following a comprehensive competition, and we have recently announced plans to open up to 8 more to enable there to be an institute of technology in every region of the country.

More people are benefiting from new high-quality apprenticeships. Our reforms have fundamentally changed what apprenticeships involve and the long-term opportunities they provide.

Over 1.8 million people have started an apprenticeship since May 2015.

Over 60% of starts are now on high-quality, industry-designed standards, with over 500 available.

In 2019-20 funding for apprenticeships is over £2.5 billion, double what was spent in 2010-11.

Fewer young people are not in education, employment or training. The number of 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training in the UK is down by 281,000 since 2010.

We have raised the participation age so that young people are now required to continue in education or training until at least their 18th birthday. Young people can choose to participate through full-time education, a job or volunteering combined with combined with part-time study, or by undertaking an apprenticeship. This gives all young people the opportunity to develop skills and qualifications that will open doors to future employment, help them make the most of their potential, and earn more over their lifetime.

We are improving support for the most vulnerable children.

Adoption waiting times have come down. The average time between a child entering care and being placed with a family has reduced by seven months since 2012-13.

We are supporting families through the adoption support fund. This has provided over £130 million to local authorities and regional adoption agencies for therapeutic support to over 5,000 families.

We are supporting foster families to provide on-going support to young people leaving care. We are investing a further £10 million to expand staying put, to create stable homes for care leavers as they become adults. The programme will help more care leavers to continue living with their foster families until they reach 21. We

are providing a further £6 million in 2021-22 to roll out staying close across the country, helping young people leaving residential care to continue to get on-going support from their previous carers they know and trust.

We are helping care leavers achieve their ambitions. We launched the care leaver covenant and are spending £5 million on three social impact bonds to help care leavers into education, employment or training. We are also investing £3 million to extend the pupil premium plus to all 16 to 18-year-old care leavers, supporting their transition into further education.

We are improving support for children in care. Our innovation programme has invested £200 million in 98 projects to enable local authorities to test new approaches to supporting children in the social care system.

We are strengthening families. Building on and scaling the learning and evidence from the innovation programme by enabling up to 60 local authorities to adopt and adapt whole system and targeted projects which have successfully supported more children to stay at home thriving in stable family environments.

The Government have committed £920 million to the second phase of the troubled families programme, which aims to achieve significant and sustained improvement for up to 400,000 families in challenging circumstances.

We are improving the quality and prestige of the social care workforce. More than 2,200 high achieving graduates have been trained through fast-track programmes frontline and step up to social work. The assessed and supported year in employment has supported more than 15,000 newly qualified social workers since 2012.

[HCWS52]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Work of the Department

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): I would like to update the House on the work of the Department for International Trade. It has:

Supported UK exports worth over £2 trillion since June 2016. Since the Department was established, UK exports have grown from £537 billion to £654 billion—an increase of 22%.

Sustained the UK's place as Europe's top destination for foreign direct investment since 2003. DIT has supported 3,118 individual investments in the UK, helping to create 120,000 new jobs between April 2017 to March 2019 and attracting more projects, new jobs and investment capital than any other European country.

Helped to realise the UK's potential as the top destination for tech innovation and talent by attracting international investment. This has resulted in the announcement of billions of pounds of investment in the UK from leading technology companies, including £1 billion from software company VMware, £1.9 billion from software company Salesforce, and £150 million from IT service management company Markly Group.

Dismantled barriers and opened up markets to British businesses across the world. This included:

Securing an agreement with China to lift its long-standing ban on exports of beef from the UK, a landmark move for British producers that was estimated by industry experts at the time of the deal to be worth £250 million in the first five years alone;

Lifting a ban on British beef and lamb exports to Japan, allowing exports which at the time were estimated by industry experts to be worth £130 million over five years;

Lifting the ban on British pork exports to Taiwan in August 2018. This has contributed to £2.1 million of UK pork being exported to Taiwan in the first half of 2019 alone.

Securing changes to public procurement rules on early childhood vaccinations in Bulgaria, supporting the UK to win a procurement worth £35 million.

Kicked off detailed technical preparations to ensure that the UK is ready to have our own independent trade policy for the first time in 46 years. This means that now:

We are ready to take our independent seat at the WTO.

We have a trade remedies investigations directorate to ensure UK businesses are safeguarded from unfair trade practices.

We have established working groups and high-level trade dialogues with key trade partners including the United States, Australia, China, the Gulf Co-operation Council, India, Japan and New Zealand. We also continue to use other instruments such as joint trade reviews with countries including China, India and Brazil.

Delivered a series of consultations on new trade agreements with the United States, Australia and New Zealand, as well as potential accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. These attracted over 600,000 responses from businesses and civil society groups across the UK.

Launched a new export strategy further to raise exports to 35% as a proportion of UK GDP. This will build on the increase of exports from 27% of GDP to 30% of GDP since the Department was created. Created the Export Champion network, made up of over 1,000 export champions and advocates, to provide peer-to-peer support to businesses across the UK.

Shielded UK trade from 85% of the additional duties that would have been imposed, by securing 18 continuity trade agreements with countries that accounted for £109 billion of trade in 2018, together with our temporary tariff regime. This will ensure continuity for UK businesses however we leave the EU.¹

Attracted more than 94,000 bids for international export opportunities from UK businesses via the GREAT.gov.uk platform. We launched a new export opportunities platform to match UK businesses with international opportunities. Over 285,000 export opportunities have already been published by international businesses and Governments, and GREAT.gov.uk is used by more than 36,000 registered businesses as well as around 140,000 unique visitors each month.

Provided over £7.9 billion-worth of backing for exports through UK Export Finance, supporting over 63,000 jobs since April 2017. In June 2019, UK Export Finance also announced an extensive new finance package to support the UK's 5.7 million small and medium-sized enterprises to export into emerging markets.

¹ See gov.uk for more details: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/uk-trade-agreements-with-non-eu-countries-in-a-no-deal-brex>

[HCWS51]

JUSTICE**Prisoner Escort and Custody Services**

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am pleased to announce the Government have awarded two new contracts for the Prisoner Escort and Custody Services (PECS) Generation 4 Lot North and Lot South, to GEOAmey Ltd and Serco Ltd respectively.

This follows a competitive procedure with negotiation conducted in accordance with public sector procurement directive 2014/24/EU. GEOAmey Ltd and Serco Ltd have offered the best overall bids in terms of quality of service and cost, relative to the other bids received.

The new contracts will build upon the current service, and deliver significant improvements and efficiencies to meet the future needs of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS), the Youth Custody Service (YCS) and the police. Both suppliers will deliver more frequent collections from police stations and courts, with quicker collection times from courts (and return to prisons). The new service also includes a new fleet of escort vans with improved safety and security features.

The new contracts will commence on 29 August 2020 for a period of 10 years, and performance of both will be monitored through monthly contract management review meetings to ensure performance is maintained throughout the life time of the contracts and suppliers are held to account.

[HCWS48]

PRIME MINISTER**The Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Publication of its Phase 1 Report**

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning, Sir Martin Moore-Bick has published the phase 1 report of the independent Grenfell Tower inquiry. A copy of the report has been laid before each House of Parliament. This is a difficult day for all those who lost their loved ones, homes and possessions in that unimaginable tragedy, and found their lives devastated. Our first thoughts should be with them.

The report is a very substantial document, which includes a detailed description of the events of the night of 14 June 2017, as well as the Chair's findings about the nature of the building, the origins of the fire, its subsequent development, the response of the London Fire Brigade and the steps taken by the other emergency services. It also contains a number of recommendations that my Government will consider with the utmost urgency. The bereaved, survivors and local residents have waited a long time for the inquiry's report, and it is right that the report should be debated in Parliament on the day of its publication. But given the substantial nature of the report, and the limited time that parliamentarians have had to read the text, I am committed to holding a further debate at the earliest opportunity once Members have had an opportunity to properly scrutinise its contents. I hope that the bereaved and survivors can draw at least some solace from the rigorous, detailed nature of Sir Martin's report.

[HCWS49]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 30 October 2019

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Producer Organisations and Wine) (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019

The following is an extract from the Second Delegated Legislation Committee on 28 October 2019:

George Eustice: There was discussion with the devolved Administrations earlier this year on exactly which matters were reserved and which devolved. These are the matters we have decided and agreed are reserved, which is why we made this instrument.

[Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 28 October 2019, c. 6-7.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice):

An error has been identified in my closing remarks.

The correct wording should have been:

George Eustice: There was discussion with the devolved Administrations earlier this year on exactly which matters were reserved and which devolved. These are the matters we have decided **are reserved**, which is why we made this instrument.

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