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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 17 June 2020

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 4 June).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

Speaker's Statement

11.34 am

Mr Speaker: I remind colleagues that a deferred Division will take place today on the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020. I have approved new arrangements for deferred Divisions to help ensure the safety of Members and staff. The deferred Division will take place in the Members' Library between 11.30 am and 3.30 pm. Members will cast their votes by placing the completed Division slip in one of the ballot boxes provided. Guidance on the new arrangements has been sent to all Members. The result will be announced in the Chamber as soon as possible after 3.30 pm.

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Covid-19: Self-Employed Women

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support self-employed women during the covid-19 outbreak. [903359]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): We have introduced an unprecedented package of support for businesses to get through this incredibly challenging period. More than £10 billion of grants has been paid and over 830,000 businesses of all sizes have been able to access more than £34 billion of finance through our loan scheme. As of 7 June, the self-employed income support scheme has paid out on 2.6 million applications worth £7.5 billion. Of these, 701,000 claims were from women, totalling £1.609 billion.

Theresa Villiers: Can the Minister provide any extra help for new mothers whose periods of maternity leave mean either that they are not entitled to help under the self-employment support scheme or that their entitlement is significantly reduced?

Paul Scully: The Government clearly understand the challenges for the self-employed, in particular, arising from the arrival of a new baby or adoption. We are working on additional guidance for individuals who took a break from work to care for a newborn or a newly adopted child, and for whom no income tax self-assessment tax return was submitted.

Covid-19: Public Health England Review

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What steps she has taken in response to the findings on the risks of covid-19 for BAME people in Public Health England's report entitled "COVID-19: review of disparities in risks and outcomes", published in June 2020. [903360]

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What steps she is taking in response to the findings in Public Health England's report entitled "COVID-19: review of disparities in risks and outcomes", published in June 2020. [903363]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): We are taking the findings of PHE's report, "COVID-19: review of disparities in risks and outcomes", which was published on 2 June, very seriously. The next steps are to fill the gaps in the report, which necessarily had some limitations. The Race Disparity Unit and the Department for Health and Social Care are working with me to do this. This vital work will help us to take appropriate, evidence-based action to address the disparities highlighted.

Ruth Cadbury: Given the delays between publishing the report and publishing the recommendations, and the likely delay now in implementing those recommendations, how do the Government propose to rebuild trust and confidence in their actions with black and minority ethnic groups and individuals?

Kemi Badenoch: I believe the hon. Lady is conflating two different reports. There was no delay in publishing the first report, which did not have recommendations. The second report was published by PHE only yesterday, and many of the recommendations are already in train. I refer her to the written ministerial statement that I laid yesterday, which should hopefully provide additional clarity on that.

Dr Mullan: I begin by paying tribute to the very many BAME staff I have worked alongside in the NHS, including in recent months. They are an absolutely vital part of the NHS team. That is why it is really important that we get this review right. It is crucial that we get the necessary expert advice to help us to do that. What steps is the Minister taking to get that expertise to support the work she is undertaking?

Kemi Badenoch: I agree with my hon. Friend. We are determined to proceed with this in an evidence-led way, and we will be engaging with experts in the field. On Friday, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), and I held a virtual roundtable on these issues with a number of public health consultants and leading academics in this field, including Professor Michael Marmot. I am very grateful for their input. We intend to continue in this spirit by engaging with other experts such as the Office for National Statistics.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) [V]: Professor Fenton's report, finally published yesterday, highlights yet more evidence that socioeconomic inequalities, racism and discrimination are root causes of BAME communities

being disproportionately harmed by covid-19, and that these injustices were already known and have already cost lives. The Government's denial and delay further compound despair at their lack of care and concern. The seven practical recommendations that the Government should have acted on much sooner include risk-assessing our black and minority ethnic workers on the frontline. Black lives matter is more than just a slogan. So what immediate and decisive action will the Minister take now to develop and deliver culturally competent occupational risk assessment tools?

Kemi Badenoch: I refer again to the ministerial statement that was laid yesterday, which covers this. The Government did not delay publishing any report, and the recommendations that were published, on which most of the actions are already in train, can be seen on the gov.uk website.

Covid-19: Women in the Workplace

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that women in the workplace are not disproportionately affected during the covid-19 outbreak. [903361]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The Government are committed to helping all employees during this challenging time. The coronavirus job retention scheme is an unprecedented scheme to protect employment, and it has supported more than 9 million jobs. As always, equalities legislation requires that employers must not discriminate based on gender, or pregnancy and maternity, in the workplace.

Laura Farris: The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that women are 47% more likely to have permanently lost their jobs since the start of the crisis and 15% more likely to have been furloughed. We know that social distancing has severely impacted hospitality, leisure and retail, where women are disproportionately employed in customer-facing roles. What steps can my hon. Friend take to ensure that women do not emerge as the accidental casualties of the crisis?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question and, in particular, for highlighting the situation with regard to the hospitality and leisure sector. I speak to many of the people in that sector on a daily basis. We are actively monitoring the impact of covid-19 on the labour market, but it is too early to draw any firm conclusions. Equality legislation requires that employers must not discriminate based on gender, and this law continues to apply.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab) [V]: As with any other economic downturn, it is women who are at risk of being worst hit by the economic consequences of coronavirus. As childcare responsibilities overwhelmingly fall on women, the closure of schools and childcare facilities could mean that many women are forced to leave work or to reduce their hours as the furlough scheme is wound up. The U-turn yesterday on free school meals is welcome and will help many families, but what will the Minister do to ensure that women are able to return to work in a flexible way

in order to balance childcare commitments and not lose out financially, particularly as schools are not yet fully open?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. It is important that we manage to supply childcare. That is why women should be able to go to their local authority. They may not get their first choice of childcare provisions, but their local authority will be able to guide them. None the less, it remains the case that there should be flexible working: if people can work from home, they should be able to work from home, and employers need to be mindful of that.

Covid-19: Female Entrepreneurship

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential effect on the economy of increased levels of female entrepreneurship after the covid-19 outbreak. [903362]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): The Government's Rose review of female entrepreneurship found that £250 billion of new value could be added to the UK economy if women started and scaled businesses at the same rate as men. We must take the opportunity, as we recover from the covid crisis, to help make this happen.

Craig Tracey: I recently highlighted to my right hon. Friend that very point about the £250 billion, and, as part of that solution, I have been working to try to deliver a set of women's business hubs across the UK, which I know the British Library is also working on. What other steps can she take to ensure that part of the covid recovery benefits women across the UK and encourages more female entrepreneurs?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his work for the all-party group on women and enterprise. He is absolutely right: we need to make sure that, as part of our levelling-up agenda, this is a cross-UK phenomenon. We have growth hubs across the country. We are also working on mentoring schemes and on trying to ensure that investment is available right through the UK to help those start-up businesses get going.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, Caroline Nokes.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My right hon. Friend has shown real passion and commitment to female entrepreneurship, which will be absolutely crucial as we seek to recover from covid. Unfortunately, those same women will not be able to start up their own businesses or to be assisted to go back into the wider workforce unless they can have reliable, accessible, available childcare. What specific discussions is she having across Government to ensure that that childcare is available? We recognise that there are challenges around social distancing and the hours that schools can operate, but will she please enlighten us on what she is doing?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the vital importance of childcare. We also need to ensure that the flexible working practices that

have developed during this covid crisis are available to both women and men following the crisis. We are making sure that educational settings are open as soon as possible. More than 90% of nursery schools and colleges were open on 4 June, and I am working very closely with the Secretary of State for Education and his Ministers to ensure that we reform childcare and make more places available.

Black Lives Matter Movement

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the implications of the Black Lives Matter movement for the priorities of the Government Equalities Office. [903364]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): No one should face discrimination. Individual Departments and their Ministers must take account of the equality impact of their policies, and I can assure the House that my ministerial colleagues take this very seriously. Across the whole of Government, we have already taken significant steps to tackle the sorts of concerns raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, including continuing to act on the Lammy report, working to improve trust between citizens and police forces and ensuring that record numbers of ethnic minority people continue to go to university.

Owen Thompson: Over the past two weeks, we have heard members of the Government, including the Prime Minister, repeat that black lives matter, yet their policies fail to reflect that. The Unity Project's report presented the Home Office with evidence that the "no recourse to public funds" policy discriminates against black British children and leaves them growing up in poverty. What steps can the Minister take to protect black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, and black people in particular, against further discrimination to ensure that the UK Government's words are matched by their actions?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The issue of no recourse to public funds has been raised multiple times, and the Government are doing many things to tackle situations in which people who may not necessarily have been able to access public funds are able to do so. For example, the Government are ensuring that anyone who needs NHS treatment is not being charged, and programmes such as the coronavirus job retention scheme are available to people who have no recourse to public funds.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I wonder whether the Minister agrees that some racism is down to unconscious bias, and helping people to recognise and address their own bias could make a real difference. If she agrees, will she welcome the creation of the all-party parliamentary group on unconscious bias? It will conduct several investigations, starting with racial bias, so will she commit to working alongside us and to consider any recommendations with an open mind?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, I think that that is something that I can definitely agree to.

Conversion Therapy

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): What steps she is taking to end conversion therapy. [903365]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): Conversion therapy is a vile, abhorrent practice that we want to stop. We have commissioned research to look at the scope of the practice in the UK, and we will publish our plans shortly after we receive that research.

Christian Wakeford: I thank the Minister for her words on this abhorrent practice. Will she consider taking specific steps to protect under-18s from conversion therapy?

Elizabeth Truss: I am particularly concerned about under-18s being coerced into so-called conversion therapies, and that is one of the specific points that we will address when we launch our plans shortly.

Covid-19: Economic Opportunity

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure equality of economic opportunity after the covid-19 outbreak. [903366]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The Government take the public sector equality duty into account when developing, implementing and reviewing all policies, including the response to the covid-19 pandemic. We are gathering and developing evidence for the equalities impact of covid-19, which will be used to support and influence planning for the economic recovery.

Alexander Stafford: Flexibility of working is important for both men and women, so will my hon. Friend tell me whether the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has plans to make flexibility the default, rather than an option?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising flexible working. The Government have been clear about the benefits of flexible working for employers and their employees. The manifesto we stood on talked about an employment Bill, which we will bring forward when possible, to make flexible working the default. We look forward to introducing those measures, subject to consultation.

Disabled People: Benefit System

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effectiveness of the benefit system for supporting disabled people. [903367]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): We remain committed to ensuring that the benefit system is effective and positive in supporting disabled people. That includes several measures, such as suspending face-to-face assessments, extending personal independence payment awards where necessary, and increasing the universal credit standard allowance and local housing allowance rates.

Debbie Abrahams [V]: We know that people with existing health conditions are more likely to become seriously ill with or succumb to covid-19 than the population as a whole. For example, more than one in four of all people who have died of covid in hospital in England also had diabetes. What assessment have the Government undertaken of the proportion of people with health conditions in receipt of social security support who have also died of covid?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for raising an important issue. The Department for Work and Pensions looks to identify and learn lessons swiftly. The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon, is engaging extensively and holding conversations with charities and stakeholders on exactly these kinds of issues so that we can understand the impact on the most vulnerable.

Global LGBT Equality

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): What steps she is taking with the Foreign Secretary to promote global LGBT equality. [903368]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): We want LGBT people across the world to be free to live their lives without discrimination or persecution. I am working closely on that with the Foreign Secretary and, as we launch trade negotiations with Australia today, I am delighted to have worked with high commissioner George Brandis, who played a leading role in Australia's legalisation of same-sex marriage. We will continue to work with close allies to lead the world on this issue.

Peter Gibson: In the month of Pride, being celebrated around the world, and looking forward to the rescheduled global LGBT conference being hosted here under the chairmanship of the right hon. Nick Herbert, does the Minister agree that it is essential for us to deliver on our 2018 LGBT action plan in order to preserve our place as a co-chair of the global Equal Rights Coalition?

Elizabeth Truss: I take this opportunity to wish everybody the very best for a happy Pride. I am sure that we will be doing a lot of things virtually rather than on the streets, but it is very important that we celebrate, and I am delighted that we are hosting the LGBT conference on the theme of "Safe to be me". In response to my hon. Friend's question, we will be updating our plans for LGBT rights for 2020 and we want to continue to lead the world on this issue.

Covid-19: BAME Key Workers

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con): What steps she is taking to help ensure that BAME key workers are protected during the covid-19 outbreak. [903369]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): All NHS organisations continue to make appropriate arrangements to support their ethnic minority staff, and NHS human resources directors are considering a range of mitigating actions, including redeploying staff to alternative roles, stringent testing procedures, equity of personal protective equipment provision and training,

and improved occupational health support. For those in other key roles, Government have issued safer workplace guidance, which emphasises the need for employers to carry out risk assessments, to engage with their representatives and to take account of equality impacts.

Kate Griffiths [V]: In my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter, we have sadly lost a number of dedicated frontline workers from the black, Asian and minority ethnic community. My constituents are understandably worried, and I have raised concerns previously in the House about how we can protect those in at-risk groups who work on the frontline. Public Health England's recent stakeholder engagement work contains a number of recommendations. Can the Minister give an outline of Government's progress on them?

Kemi Badenoch: Many stakeholder recommendations are already in progress, as my hon. Friend states, and as part of existing Government work, we are collecting better data on ethnicity—that was one of the recommendations. We agree that that is imperative and we are working to overcome technical barriers. NHS employers have published some excellent frameworks and occupational risk assessment tools, which can be used now; the race disparity unit is working on communication with covid teams across Departments; and I have said that further research to fill the gaps in PHE's review is one of my immediate priorities.

Covid-19: Disabled People

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on disabled people. [903370]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): The Government are committed to supporting disabled people through the covid-19 outbreak and beyond. We continue to monitor its impact on disabled people and those with a health condition, using existing and new data sources to improve our understanding.

Emma Hardy: Many people with disabilities and parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities have contacted me, feeling very fearful that they will face abuse for not wearing a face covering on public transport. Labour supports the use of face coverings, but the Government's messaging needs to be very clear. Will they ensure that their public advertising campaign includes and explains the exemptions and look at supporting local charities that are trying to address that?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this point. We need to recognise that some people with disabilities face particular difficulty when it comes to social distancing and are impacted by the reaction of others due to their inability to socially distance—I understand, particularly, the situation for young children. I reassure her that the Department for Transport has revised transport guidance for travellers and operators and considers the details needed for disabled travellers. I hope that that reassures her.

Covid-19: Gender Pay Gap Reporting

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect on the gender pay gap of the suspension of gender pay gap reporting during the covid-19 outbreak. [903377]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): To ease the burdens on businesses due to coronavirus, we suspended enforcement of the gender pay gap reporting in March. Despite that, more than 5,500 companies have reported to date, and employers continue to do so.

Mary Kelly Foy: Gender pay gap reporting was removed in March, yet even then, just two weeks before the deadline, only around half the businesses expected to report had done so. This cannot become a lost year for narrowing the gender pay gap. Eliminating pay inequality, especially for those women in low-paid, insecure work, must be at the heart of the recovery. Will the Minister tell me exactly when gender pay gap reporting will be restored and how the information will be used as part of the coronavirus recovery?

Elizabeth Truss: We are in a serious economic situation due to covid-19, and my priority, as the Minister for Women and Equalities, is to make sure that women stay in employment where possible and are able to get jobs where possible. That is where I am putting all my efforts.

Topical Questions

[903399] **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): As we recover from the covid-19 pandemic, the Government will ensure that everyone has the opportunity to succeed, which is why the Prime Minister announced that we are setting up a new commission on race and ethnic disparities, and why we will be hosting an international LGBT conference once international travel allows. We will work to support businesses to maintain some of the positive changes we have seen, such as greater flexible working, which benefits women, men and their families.

Neil Gray [V]: In the light of that answer, I refer the Minister to the latest report by the Social Mobility Commission, which highlights that in the past seven years there was little or no action by successive Governments on a third of its recommendations, including on ensuring that child poverty is not exacerbated by universal credit, which received the lowest, red rating, based on evidence showing that 72% of children living in poverty live in households where at least one adult is in work and that black, Asian and minority ethnic children are more likely to be in poverty. Given the total lack of leadership by the Minister's UK Government, as highlighted by the report, will she take ownership so that her Government can finally step up and ensure that that report, and the millions of children in poverty, are not ignored?

Mr Speaker: I think we have got the question.

Elizabeth Truss: The most vital tool in social mobility is education, which is why we are absolutely determined to get children back to school and to support children who are not in school through virtual lessons. I encourage the Scottish Government to follow the leadership that we are showing.

[903401] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Nobody's chances in life should be limited by the colour of their skin or their ethnic background. What progress is the Prime Minister's race disparity commission making, and when might we start to see results?

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): My hon. Friend is absolutely right and touches on why the Government have set up the commission: to understand why disparities exist, what works and what does not, and to present recommendations for action across Government and other public bodies. It should report by the end of the year.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) [V]: The Government ran a consultation on ethnicity pay reporting that closed back in January 2019. Nearly 18 months on, the Government have failed to publish a response to the consultation and have said twice in replies to written questions on the issue that something will be published "in due course". That is not good enough. Mandatory pay gap reporting will be one small but significant step towards addressing pay equality, so when will the Government finally publish their response to the consultation and take urgent action to introduce mandatory pay gap reporting?

Kemi Badenoch: Pay gaps are caused by a range of factors. The hon. Lady is right that we ran a consultation on this issue in late 2018; I will write to her to provide her with an update.

[903402] **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating the good news that the so-called "rough sex gone wrong" defence will now be outlawed?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It was a disgrace that that was being used as a defence in criminal cases of murder. I pay tribute to Members from all parties who have run an effective campaign and congratulate the Ministry of Justice on taking action on the issue.

[903400] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I am pleased that the Prime Minister is in the wings to hear this question. We know that the Disclosure and Barring Service sometimes bars people from work for decades and is, frankly, unfair and discriminatory; we know that the Windrush scandal is still ongoing, and there is dither and delay in the Home Office; and we know that in health and care services there has been a disproportionate impact on those from BME communities, especially among women in nursing and care roles. We do not need another commission to decide this; what we need is some action. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Elizabeth Truss: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about the Disclosure and Barring Service.

Elizabeth Truss: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about the Disclosure and Barring Service. It is something we are looking at, but it is important that we look at this across the board, and that is why we have set up the commission.

[903403] **Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): I have a short question. Being out of school really impacts on children's opportunities. Can the Minister commit to getting every single child back to school in September?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is vital we get our children back into school. My right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is working very hard on this, and we are doing everything we can to make it happen.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[903344] **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 17 June.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and I shall have further such meetings later today.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The journey of Munira Mirza from the pages of the Srebrenica-denying *Living Marxism* and the Revolutionary Communist party into the heart of No. 10 has not gone unnoticed. On Monday, the Prime Minister appointed them to lead the commission—the Government's commission—on racial inequality, and it was greeted with some disbelief, given their well-known views on the matter. So I wonder: can the Prime Minister tell us today, does he agree with Ms Mirza that previous inquiries have fostered a "culture of grievance" within minority communities?

The Prime Minister: I am a huge admirer of Dr Munira Mirza, who is a brilliant thinker about these issues. We are certainly going to proceed with a new cross-governmental commission to look at racism and discrimination. It will be a very thorough piece of work, looking at discrimination in health, in education and in the criminal justice system. I know that the House will say we have already had plenty of commissions and plenty of work, but it is clear from the Black Lives Matter march and all the representations we have had that more work needs to be done, and this Government are going to do it.

[903345] **Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con) [V]: Following the disgraceful events of the last week, with folks defacing national monuments, including Churchill and Queen Victoria, and offending the memory of hero PC Keith Palmer, what will the Prime Minister do to uphold British values and carry out the rule of law?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I can tell her and the House that any incident of vandalism or attack on public property will be met with the full force of the law, and perpetrators will be prosecuted. I can also confirm that we are looking at new ways in which we may legislate against vandalism of war memorials.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Can I start by welcoming the announcement of a major breakthrough in the treatment of coronavirus by UK scientists? That is really fantastic news. We are all behind it and I pay tribute to all of those involved.

Can I also welcome the Prime Minister's latest U-turn, this time on free school meals? That was the right thing to do and it is vital for the 1.3 million children who will benefit. It is just one step in the fight against child poverty.

A report last week from the Government's Social Mobility Commission concluded that there are now

"600,000 more children...living in relative poverty"

than in 2012. The report went on to say:

"Child poverty rates are projected to increase to 5.2 million by 2022."

What does the Prime Minister think caused that?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for what he said about dexamethasone, and I am glad that he is finally paying tribute to the efforts of this country in tackling coronavirus. But I can tell him, on free school meals, that this Government are very proud that we set up universal free school meals. I am very pleased that we are going to be able to deliver a covid summer food package for some of the poorest families in this country and that is exactly the right thing to do. But I must say that I think he is completely wrong in what he says about poverty. Absolutely poverty and relative poverty have both declined under this Government and there are hundreds of thousands—I think 400,000—fewer families living in poverty now than there were in 2010.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister says that poverty has not increased. I have just read a direct quote from a Government report, from a Government commission, produced last week, which says that it has gone up by 600,000. The Social Mobility Commission has a clear answer to my question:

"This anticipated rise is not driven by forces beyond our control".

I gave the Prime Minister the number: 600,000. He did not reply. The report goes on to say, and this is a real cause for concern—[*Interruption.*] The Prime Minister is chuntering. He might want to listen. This is a real cause for concern because the commission goes on—[*Interruption.*] I am sure that the Prime Minister has read the report. On the increase to 5.2 million, it states that

"projections were made before the impact of COVID-19, which we expect to push more families into poverty."

This is a serious issue. I am sure the Prime Minister would agree that an even higher child poverty rate would be an intolerable outcome from this pandemic. So what is he going to do to prevent it?

The Prime Minister: I have understood that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is talking about what he calls an anticipated rise rather than a rise that has actually taken place. A new concept is being introduced into our deliberations. What we are talking about is what has actually happened, which is a reduction in poverty. I can tell him that of course we are concerned. The whole House will understand that of course this Government are deeply concerned about the impact of coronavirus on the UK economy. I think everybody with any fairness would acknowledge that this Government have invested massively in protecting the workforce of this country, with 11 million jobs protected by the coronavirus job retention scheme, unlike anything done anywhere else in the world, and £30 billion-worth of business loans. We intend to make sure that we minimise the impact of coronavirus on the poorest kids in this country. One of the best ways in which we could do that, by the way, would be to encourage all kids who can go back to school to go back to school now, because their schools are safe. Last week, I asked him whether he would say publicly that schools were safe to go back to. He hummed and hawed. Now is his time to say clearly that schools are safe to go back to. Mr Speaker: your witness.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister obviously has not got the first idea what the social mobility report, from a Government body, actually said last week. He talks to me about consistency and U-turns. The Government have had three U-turns in the last month. First, we had the immigration health charges; then we had MPs' voting; and then we had free school meals. The only question now is whether U-turns at the Dispatch Box are before or after. Three U-turns. He argues about one brief one week and one the next; he is an expert in that.

This is not the only area where the Government are falling short. During the pandemic, local authorities have been working flat out on social care, homelessness, obtaining protective equipment for the frontline, and delivering food and essential supplies. On 26 March, the Communities Secretary told council leaders directly and in terms, in a letter to council leaders and in a speech:

"The Government stands ready to do whatever is necessary to support councils in their response to coronavirus".

Does the Prime Minister believe that the Government have kept that promise?

The Prime Minister: We put £3.2 billion extra into local government to tackle coronavirus, but I must say that we did not hear an answer, did we Mr Speaker? How can the right hon. and learned Gentleman talk about tackling the effects of coronavirus on the most disadvantaged? It is the most disadvantaged kids who need to go back to school, and it is those groups who unfortunately are not going back to school. Let's hear it from him one more time: will he say that schools are safe to go back to? Come on!

Keir Starmer: This is turning into Opposition questions. If the Prime Minister wants to swap places, I am very happy. I could do it now. The only bit of an answer he gave to the question I asked was about £3.2 billion—*[Interruption.]* It is a lot of money. The Conservative-led Local Government Association has said that councils

will have a shortfall of £10 billion this year—*[Interruption.]* The Health Secretary heckles. The Conservative leader of Lancashire County Council wrote a letter to the Communities Secretary a month ago, on 7 May. He said that

"the overall financial impact on councils nationally and locally will be far in excess of the £3.2 billion provided to date".

He went on to say that

"we... would like some assurance from you that all councils will be fully reimbursed for the costs of... covid-19".

These are the Prime Minister's own council leaders. He must have known about this problem for months. Why has he been so slow to act?

The Prime Minister: We have not, because in addition to the £3.2 billion, we have already put in another £1.6 billion to support councils delivering frontline services, plus—from memory—another £600 million to go into social care. I want to return to this point about poverty. We want to tackle deprivation in this country. I want kids to go back to school. The unions will not let the right hon. and learned Gentleman say the truth. A great ox has stood upon his tongue. Let him now say that schools are safe to go back to.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister just does not get how critical this is. I spoke with council leaders from across the country this week. The Prime Minister must know that they face a choice between cutting core services and facing bankruptcy under section 114 notices. Either outcome will harm local communities and mean that local services cannot reopen. That will drive up poverty, something the Prime Minister says he does not intend to do. Local councils have done everything asked of them in this crisis—the Government have not. Will the Prime Minister take responsibility and actually do something?

The Prime Minister: With great respect to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, I have outlined what we are doing to support local government, and I think this country can be very proud of the investments that we have made. It can be very proud of the incredible work that local government officials have done across this country, but I must say that there are some councils, particularly Labour councils, alas, that are not opening their schools now when they could be opening their schools. I say to him, for I hope the last time: now is the moment when he can say to those Labour councillors that it is safe for kids to go back to reception, to year 1, to year 6, to early years, as they can. Will he now say it?

Keir Starmer: Every week, the Prime Minister seems to complain that I ask him questions at Prime Minister's questions. If he wants to swap places, so be it.

Finally, I want to return to the Prime Minister's other recent U-turn, which was on the immigration health surcharge for NHS and care workers. Following Prime Minister's questions on 20 May, the Government announced that they would drop that deeply unfair charge—that is nearly a month ago. Nothing has happened. The British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Physicians and Unison have all written to the Prime Minister, so he must know about this. One doctor was quoted on Monday as saying:

“My colleagues who have applied, even yesterday, one of them said he had to pay for himself, his wife and four kids so that is £6,000...The Home Office is...saying that...nothing has been implemented”.

These are people on the frontline. The Prime Minister said he would act. When is he going to do so?

The Prime Minister: I am genuinely grateful for an important question, because it is vital that people who are working on the frontline, and NHS workers in particular, get the support that they need. That is why I said what I said a few weeks ago. What I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman is that NHS or care workers who have paid the surcharge since 21 May will be refunded, and we are getting on with instituting the new arrangements as fast as we possibly can.

[903347] **Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s rejection of the extension to the Brexit transition period. Does he agree that taking back control of our fishing waters in January 2021 will benefit the fishing communities within the Great Grimsby constituency?

The Prime Minister: I can tell my hon. Friend that it certainly will when we become once again an independent coastal state. I know how brilliantly she campaigns for fisheries in Grimsby and I urge her to engage with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make sure that the people of Grimsby can exploit the recapture of our spectacular natural marine wealth.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: Marcus Rashford has shown more moral leadership in tackling poverty in a matter of days than this Tory Government have in the past decade of cuts, but, as he says, people are struggling all year round and more needs to be done. This morning, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children published research showing that the ongoing health crisis is causing six in 10 families to borrow money, seven in 10 to cut back on essentials and over five in 10 to fall behind on rent and other essential bills. An extra £20 a week in social security support would prevent millions of families from having to make the choice between paying their bills or feeding their children. Will the Prime Minister now immediately uplift the child element of universal credit and child tax credit by £20 per week?

The Prime Minister: This is a Government who have done everything we possibly can so far to help families in need to make sure that nobody is penalised for doing the right thing during the crisis. I know how difficult it has been. That is why we uprated the universal credit by £1,044, benefiting, I think, 4 million families in this country. I say in all sincerity to the right hon. Gentleman that we are fully aware that there will be tough times ahead and we do stand by to do more where we can.

Ian Blackford: Twenty pounds a week—twenty pounds a week to help families with children. That is what we are asking for. We are talking about an extra £20 a week to stop families having to make the choice between paying their bills or feeding their children. That is the harsh reality, Prime Minister. This is a question of helping people survive. This Tory Government have seen a decade of austerity that has driven people into

poverty, and they have scrapped child poverty targets. Rather than reversing their damaging policies that have pushed millions into poverty, the Prime Minister is more interested in finding money to spend on his own vanity project: a luxury VIP plane. Is he seriously saying that he will not find £20 a week to help families who are struggling to survive?

The Prime Minister: No, of course not. That is why we are investing massively in universal credit, employment and support allowance, and benefits across the board, to say nothing of the novel schemes we have introduced, such as the coronavirus job retention scheme, which is a model that I think the whole world is admiring. There is no other country that has put its arms around 11 million workers in the way that this Government have supported jobs and supported incomes across the whole of the UK. We are going to get this country through it, and I hope the right hon. Gentleman supports our measures.

[903348] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): This morning, with the Social Market Foundation, I published my report entitled, “Unlocking Britain”, which sets out 10 reforms that the Government can put in place to help our economy recover once the health crisis is behind us. Would the Prime Minister agree to work with me and consider some of those ideas, in particular my idea of a recovery fund for British small and medium-sized businesses—indeed, small and medium-sized businesses from the entire United Kingdom—to help to reduce their debt burden and give them equity, so they can power our recovery forward?

The Prime Minister: I have studied my hon. Friend’s proposals with interest. He is an expert in what he speaks of and we will certainly look at all kinds of imaginative ways in which we can stimulate a strong rebound, a strong economic recovery. He should stand by for what the Chancellor is going to be announcing in the next few weeks.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Due to the covid crisis, tens of thousands of British businesses face bankruptcy and millions of British people face redundancy. In Britain’s hour of need, will the Prime Minister put the practical imperative of saving jobs before his Brexit ideology, rather than risk a bad deal or a no deal due to the deadline set before coronavirus? Why does the Prime Minister not show some good old-fashioned British common sense, give our economy the chance to breathe, and accept the EU’s offer of a delay?

The Prime Minister: I put it to the right hon. Gentleman that there is another way of looking at it. The first point is that the people of this country are heartily sick of us going on about Brexit. They wanted to get it done. We got it done and we are going to move forward. The other point is that when we come to the end of the transition period, we will be able to do things differently. We will be able to respond to our economic needs in a creative and constructive way, looking at regulation and looking at ways in which we support industries in a way that we have not been able to do before. That will be very productive for this country. Let us not delay that moment; let us get on with it.

[903349] **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am sure everybody will be delighted that my right hon. Friend is back in this House in such robust form. He will be pleased to know that almost 50% of the children in Gloucestershire who qualify are back at school now, but their education has suffered over the past few months. Will he consider therefore doing two things? First, will he ask all teachers to set all their children and pupils a catch-up plan before the summer? Secondly, will he ask all headteachers to get a recovery plan so that everybody can go back in September?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed; it is absolutely crucial that we do that. There is a big catch-up plan that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is going to be announcing very shortly. It is vital that kids catch up on the education that they have lost, but even more vital, as I think I may have mentioned to the House already this morning, is that the kids who can go to school should go to school. Would it not be a fine thing, Mr Speaker, if we heard from all parts of the House that schools are safe to go to, rather than the wobble-wobble we have heard from the Opposition this morning?

[903346] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab) [V]: A strong UK steel industry is essential for the UK's economic recovery. Plants such as Llanwern and the Orb steelworks in Newport—the only electrical steel plant in the UK—can play a key part in that recovery, but we are three months into the crisis and steel companies are still waiting for Government liquidity support. That is critical. Will the Prime Minister commit to addressing that now?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, because we take the issue of the UK steel industry very seriously. We are doing everything we can to maintain UK steel production. Clearly it was always facing difficulties, even before corona struck. I will make sure that I look at the particular needs of the concern that she raises in Newport East. We will ensure that we do everything we can. I just remind her that we have supported 9,200 workers in her constituency through the furlough scheme.

[903352] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Coronavirus has underlined the importance of improving broadband infrastructure. Does the Prime Minister agree that extending the existing relief on business rates for new full-fibre infrastructure could see the release of the investment we need to level up rural areas such as North Devon? Will he thank telecommunications workers for their efforts during the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why we have provided 100% business rate relief for all new fibre investment. I am very happy to join her in thanking telecommunications workers for their amazing work. Many of them have kept going throughout the pandemic to put in that broadband infrastructure. I thank them with her.

[903350] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): The Prime Minister has previously stated to the House that he had no correspondence or discussions with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about the Westferry Printworks application. Will the Prime Minister now also confirm that none of

his officials or advisers had such correspondence or discussions with the Secretary of State or his officials and advisers? Will the Prime Minister undertake to publish all correspondence relating to the matter when the Cabinet Secretary reports?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I certainly had no correspondence about the matter myself, nor as far as I am aware did any of my officials, but if there is anything to be said, I think the hon. Gentleman has written to the Cabinet Secretary, and I know that he will be writing back.

[903353] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): The reopening of non-essential shops in Aylesbury on Monday has been a very welcome boost to restart the local retail sector. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he will do everything necessary to stimulate the rest of the Buckinghamshire economy in the weeks and months to come, for example, by easing restrictions on outdoor tables and chairs, cutting unnecessary regulation and, perhaps most importantly, providing a dedicated stimulus for our small businesses—the businesses for which the county is rightly renowned?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for the way he campaigns for business in Aylesbury. We will do what we can to flex the social distancing rules, but only as we make progress in driving the incidence of the virus down. I think everybody understands the tension that the whole country is operating under and the trade-off that we have to make. We must continue to defeat the virus. We will stick ruthlessly to our plan to continue with the opening of hospitality sectors on 4 July at the earliest and proceed on that basis.

[903351] **Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Last week, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), the Prime Minister said:

“newly shielded people may be asking themselves whether they will be entitled to furlough funds. I have been made aware of the issue very recently. I can assure her that we will be addressing it forthwith.”—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 281.]

Since then, the deadline for applying for the furlough scheme has been and gone, and there has been no announcement about the support for shielding workers. Is this yet another U-turn, or has the Prime Minister just forgotten what he said in the Chamber last week?

The Prime Minister: No. The furlough scheme should be available for everybody.

[903354] **Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): It is really good to see the Prime Minister looking fighting fit. Where are we in the process of trying to stop repeated vexatious claims against servicemen and women who have been involved in fatality shootings in the Northern Ireland campaign?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. We will be bringing forward legislation that focuses on protecting people who have been involved, whether victims or veterans alike, ensuring equal treatment in Northern Ireland for our veterans and also for those who have served overseas.

[903355] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): One million people with no recourse to public funds cannot access the universal credit safety net. I agree with the Prime Minister's point at the Liaison Committee that hard-working families in that position should have help of one kind or another. Will he deliver help by suspending the "no recourse to public funds" restriction for the duration of this crisis, and do it before the school summer holidays, so that destitute families can at least claim the free school meal vouchers he announced yesterday?

The Prime Minister: Of course they should be eligible for those, but as I have said to the right hon. Gentleman repeatedly in the Chamber, those who have no recourse to public funds do have access to the coronavirus job retention scheme, the self-employment income support scheme, the measures that we have introduced to protect renters and the mortgage holiday for those who need it. When an individual has been working for long enough in the UK and enough national insurance contributions have been made, they may also be entitled to employment and support allowance. Although "no recourse to public funds" sounds as though it means just that, it is a term of art. There are many ways in which we support the poorest and neediest in this country. We are proud to do so, and we will continue to do so.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I welcome efforts by companies such as Facebook to make the internet a safer and less misleading place. I know my right hon. Friend will agree that we cannot leave online platforms to regulate themselves, so may I urge him to allow no further delay in bringing forward the Government's response to the online harms White Paper consultation and legislation that will enable this country to play the global leadership role on this that it can and should play?

The Prime Minister: I know that my right and learned hon. Friend has campaigned on this issue, and I remember the interest that he has taken in online harms. They are an evil. There is a real risk that, during the lockdown, terrible things have been going on behind closed doors and closed curtains in this country on the internet. We had a summit on the matter in No. 10 recently, and we are working at pace, as he knows, on new legislation against online harms.

[903356] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As if BA's behaviour has not been bad enough, an agency in its supply chain, Shorterm, did not pay staff during the covid crisis, claiming that it was awaiting clarification from HMRC about furlough. The workers could not access benefits and have now been made redundant after 10 weeks of zero income. Will the Prime Minister ensure that HMRC clarifies the matter and considers an extension to the furlough deadline? If Shorterm is found to be bluffing, what will he do to stop companies treating workers like numbers on a spreadsheet?

The Prime Minister: I am concerned about the behaviour of some companies, and many colleagues in the House will have received similar representations from their constituents. I do not want to single anyone out, but it is

important that companies recognise that the Government—the taxpayer—have gone to huge lengths to help and to put our arms around UK business. They should do what they can as well to look after their workers in very difficult times, because those workers will stand them in good stead when the economy turns up again.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): In Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, I have the incredible Chatterley Whitfield colliery. Once the beating heart of the industrial revolution, Chatterley is now, sadly, at risk of being lost. Will my right hon. Friend support me, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Historic England and the Friends of Chatterley Whitfield to protect and preserve this historic landmark by creating an industrial heritage park to stimulate tourism, create new green jobs and memorialise the history from the pits to the pots?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend and the Friends of Chatterley Whitfield colliery on the ambition that he has just outlined for a heritage park. It is a proposal that he needs to work up in more detail and bring to the Government, and we will certainly look at it with interest.

Mr Speaker: Question 25 has been withdrawn by Amy Callaghan. I am sure all those in the House pass on our best wishes to her and are looking forward to her speedy recovery and return to the House.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree with me that as our country emerges from this crisis, we have an opportunity to be bold in putting innovation at the centre of our response, to support high-growth sectors such as green energy and FinTech, and also to use innovative financial solutions such as social impact bonds as a tool in delivering our levelling-up agenda?

The Prime Minister: Yes. My hon. Friend may not believe it, but when I was the Mayor of London we pioneered social impact bonds to tackle the most entrenched rough sleepers and to give value to companies and charities for their success in dealing with that terrible problem. I am proud to say that those social impact bond schemes are now being used in seven projects across the country to tackle rough sleeping. We have made huge progress in dealing with rough sleeping. The number of rough sleepers has been a scar on our consciences. It has got much, much better over the crisis, but we must make sure it does not recur.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Beef farmers in my constituency produce high-quality products in which consumers can have confidence because our farmers can demonstrate lifelong traceability of their cattle. Their efforts, however, are undermined by labelling legislation in this country, which allows beef from anywhere in the world to be labelled as British beef as long as it is packaged in this country. If the Prime Minister is serious about maintaining food standards, especially in light of any future trade arrangements, will he do something to close that loophole?

The Prime Minister: Yes. If what the right hon. Gentleman says is indeed the case—I am sure that he knows exactly whereof he speaks—I can only say that it

must be one of those things that is currently governed by the laws of the EU, to which he is bound to return an independent Scotland, should that catastrophe ever arise. On this side of the House, we intend to take advantage of the freedoms that we have—the freedoms that the British people have decided to take back—to make sure that Scottish beef farmers have the protections that they need.

Mr Speaker: In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am suspending the House for three minutes.

12.34 pm

Sitting suspended.

Coronavirus

12.38 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): (*Urgent Question*) To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on coronavirus.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I am grateful for the chance to update the House on the urgent matter of coronavirus.

Yesterday's treatment breakthrough shows that British science is among the best in the world. As a nation, we can be incredibly proud of our scientists. The UK is home to the best clinical trials, the most advanced immunology research and the most promising vaccine development work of any country. We have backed the science from the start, and I am sure the whole House welcomes the life-saving breakthrough that was announced yesterday. Today, I will briefly update the House on all three aspects of that national scientific effort.

First, on clinical trials, our recovery programme, which looks at the effects of existing treatments in real-world hospital settings, is the largest of its kind. As of yesterday, 11,547 NHS patients had been recruited to the programme, which is operating across 176 sites in all four nations. In Oxford University's dexamethasone trial, over 2,000 NHS covid patients were given a course of the drug—a commonly used steroid—over 10 days. For patients who were ill enough to require oxygen, the risk of dying fell by a fifth, and for the most seriously ill patients on mechanical ventilators, the risk of dying fell by over a third.

This is an important moment in the fight against this virus, and the first time that anyone in the world has clinically proven that a drug can improve the survival chances for the most seriously ill coronavirus patients. In February, we began the trial, supported by £25 million of Government funding, and in March we began recruiting patients, and started the process of building a stockpile in case the trial was successful. As of today, we have 240,000 doses in stock, and on order. That means that treatment is immediately available and already in use on the NHS. I am incredibly proud that this discovery has happened right here in Britain, through a collaboration between the Government, the NHS, and some of our top scientists. It is not by any means a cure, but it is the best news we have had.

Throughout this crisis, our actions have been guided by the science, and that is what good science looks like: randomised control trials; rigorous and painstaking research; moving at pace, yet getting it right. The result is that we now have objective proof—not anecdotes, but proof—that this drug saves lives, and that knowledge will benefit many thousands of people all around the world.

Seven other drugs are currently being trialled as part of the recovery process, and a further nine drugs are in live clinical trials as part of the ACCORD programme, which is looking at early-stage treatments. We look forward to seeing the results of those trials. I thank everyone involved in that process, and put on the record my thanks to our deputy chief medical officer, Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, who led the work in government, as

well as to NHS clinicians, the scientific teams and the participants in the trial who took the drug before they knew that it worked.

Our immunology research, again, is world leading. Last month, I announced a new antibody testing programme to help us understand the immunological response to the disease and whether someone acquires resistance to coronavirus once they have had it and recovered. I am part of that programme, and as of yesterday, 592,204 people have had an NHS antibody test. The nature of immunity research means that it takes time, and we must wait to see whether someone with antibodies gets reinfected. However, with every test, we improve our picture of where the virus has been, and we grow the evidence to discover whether people who have had the disease and have antibodies are at lower risk of getting or transmitting the virus again.

Crucially, that work will help to inform how we deploy a vaccine, and it is moving at pace. Earlier this week Imperial College began its first phase of human clinical trials, and 300 participants will receive doses of the vaccine. Should they develop a promising response, Imperial will move to a large phase-3 trial later this year. Yesterday, AstraZeneca signed a deal for the manufacture of the Oxford vaccine, AZD-1222, which is the world's most advanced vaccine under development. Its progress, while never certain, is promising.

None of that happened by accident. It happened because the British Government, scientists, and the NHS put in place a large-scale, programmatic, comprehensive, well-funded, systematic, rigorous, science-led system of research and innovation. We have been working on it since the moment we first heard of coronavirus. There is more to do in this national effort, but that is how we will win the battle. We will leave no stone unturned as we search for the tools to hunt down, control, and ultimately defeat this dreadful disease.

Mr Speaker: May I just say to the Secretary of State that he has gone way over the allocated time? It would have been easier for him to make a statement rather than having to have an urgent question. In future, perhaps he could come forward with a statement if he needs the extra time, and I will certainly grant that and support him in doing so. Some extra time for Jonathan Ashworth as well, and for Philippa Whitford.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I welcome the news from the Secretary of State about dexamethasone. As he said, this is an important moment and good news, and I congratulate all those involved. It is a reminder that we can be immensely proud of our science base in this country. I note what the Secretary of State said about vaccinations. A vaccine is crucial, and I hope he will join me—I am sure he will—in saying that when a vaccine is available, we must have no truck with those who spread poisonous anti-vax propaganda on social media. Vaccinations save lives, and ultimately that will be the exit strategy from this dreadful, horrific disease.

The good news is tempered by the high death rate. The Prime Minister likes to boast of flattening the *sombrero*, and it is certainly true that deaths from hospitalisations are coming down, but we still have 58,000 excess deaths across England and 13,000 in care homes; and 300 health and care staff have sadly lost

their lives. All our NHS staff deserve great praise, so may I ask the Health Secretary about a specific matter that has emerged in the past couple of days? Why are student nurses who joined the frontline six months ago as part of the coronavirus effort now seeing their paid placement schemes terminated early, leaving them with no income? That is no way to treat student nursing staff.

This week, the World Health Organisation has warned that the UK remains in a “very active phase of the pandemic”. The right hon. Gentleman will accept that if a second wave comes, especially if it coincides with flu season, that would be completely disastrous. Can he reassure the House that the decisions that he and the Prime Minister are making on easing lockdown measures, such as the mooted relaxation of the 2-metre rule and the opening of non-essential retail this week, will not precipitate a deadly second wave of the virus? Would he update us on the latest thinking on that by the Home Department? In the past, the right hon. Gentleman has said that he is prepared to institute local lockdowns, but local authorities continue to say that they do not have the resources or powers to enforce that. Can he update us on when he will give local authorities powers to enforce those lockdowns?

Yesterday, the *Health Service Journal* said that for people in the shielding group, shielding will come to an end at the end of July. We were promised a full update on shielding on 15 June, two days ago. Can the right hon. Gentleman update the House now on what is happening and what the future is for the shielding group with regards to getting their medicines and supplies and whether they will be able to leave their homes by the end of July?

We have always said that testing, tracing and isolating is crucial to the safe easing of the lockdown. On testing, local authorities say that they are still not getting the specific test data that they need. Indeed, the Deloitte contract, as confirmed in a written answer from the Minister for Patient Safety, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, did not specify that it needed to report test results to GPs and local directors of public health. We need to fix that.

Why is the right hon. Gentleman still not publishing the number of people who have been tested, and can he explain something that is puzzling many of us? The tracing figures that he revealed—we are grateful for them—suggested that 8,000 people went into the contact tracing system in England, but in that week, the Government testing figures said that there were around 12,500 positive cases in the UK. Even if we can make an assumption about how many of those cases are in England, that still suggests that there are around 2,000, perhaps 3,000, cases not being traced and contacted. Can he explain why that is and what he is going to do to fix it?

Finally, we have now seen Public Health England recommendations on the impact of covid on those from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. Those recommendations are welcome. Many of them, such as mandated ethnicity data collection and recordings on death certificates, should have been done years ago, but when will those recommendations be implemented? Black people are nearly four times as likely to die from covid as white people, and over 90% of doctors who have died during the pandemic were from black, Asian and minority

ethnic communities, so surely this is a matter of urgency. We cannot wait, and we need those recommendations to be implemented straight away.

Matt Hancock: I will try to answer as many of the questions as I can. First, I concur entirely that we should have no truck with anti-vaccination campaigners. The reason we are working so hard with full-blown clinical trials on these vaccines is to ensure that they are safe, and if they are declared scientifically safe, anyone who is recommended to have one should have one.

The hon. Gentleman made a case on student nurses. It is wrong to suggest that student nurses and midwives are being made redundant. All student nurses and midwives are required to complete placements during their training. As part of the response to covid-19, those hours have been paid and will be until the end of the summer. NHS England has been provided with the funding for student salaries as part of our response to covid-19. The chief nurse has taken that forward.

The hon. Gentleman made a point about local authorities getting data. We have provided more data to them, and we will continue to do more. He asked about the steps that will be taken in future on lifting the lockdown. As ever, we will move carefully and cautiously. Thankfully, all the main indexes—the main ways that we measure this disease—are moving in the right direction. We are winning the battle against this disease, but we will be careful and cautious in the next steps that we take.

We are working very closely with local authorities on local lockdowns. The hon. Gentleman specifically raised the point about powers, as he has before. I have powers under the Coronavirus Act 2020, passed by this Parliament. If powers are needed by local authorities, then there is a process to raise that requirement up through a command chain that leads to a gold command, which I chair, and then those powers can be executed on behalf of local authorities if they are needed.

The hon. Gentleman asked about shielding. We will bring forward the proposals for the next steps on shielding very shortly.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about the positive cases that do not go into the NHS test and trace scheme. That is largely because they are in-patients in hospital, and therefore testing and tracing in the normal sense does not apply because we know exactly where the person is and who has been in contact with them as they have been in hospital, in a controlled environment. That is the case for the large majority of the gap.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): On that last point, 20% of the people with coronavirus in hospital are estimated to have caught the virus while in hospital. So when does the Health Secretary plan to introduce weekly testing of all frontline NHS and care home staff as a way of bridging the still very significant gap between the number of people we test and trace and the number of people getting the infection every week?

Matt Hancock: The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee makes an incredibly important point. The approach we are taking is a targeted one of repeat testing, which has started already but needs to spread much further. The reason is that some people in hospital settings are at higher risk, and it is better to focus the resources for repeat testing on those at higher risk. For

[*Matt Hancock*]

instance, somebody working in finance might be at lower risk than somebody in a frontline setting. The NHS has a strategy on this, and I will write to him with further details of how that is going to work.

Mr Speaker: We are now heading to the SNP spokesperson, Dr Philippa Whitford, with some extra time.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: I, too, welcome the positive outcome of the recovery trial showing the contribution of dexamethasone—a drug that is cheap and accessible across the world.

Despite claiming to be well prepared for this epidemic, the Secretary of State has struggled to provide sufficient personal protective equipment to NHS staff in England. He has now awarded £350 million of PPE contracts, but can he explain why £108 million of that was awarded, without being advertised, to Crisp Websites Ltd, which trades as PestFix, a small pest extermination company? Why was such a large contract awarded to a company with no expertise in trading or supplying any PPE, let alone highly specialised equipment for NHS staff? How do the Government think that such a small company, with only £18,000 of registered assets, can manage the cash flow required to procure £108 million-worth of PPE? Is this not just a reprise of the Seaborne Freight scandal—the ferry company with no ships?

Matt Hancock: No. We have enhanced, under the leadership of Lord Deighton, the supplies of PPE across the whole United Kingdom. I work very closely with the SNP Government on this matter. We have made sure that PPE is now available, in large part, across the whole NHS and social care workforce, and for all those others who need it. Demand for PPE rose exponentially across the world in this crisis. It was difficult for a time—there is no point denying that—but we have made huge strides in ensuring that we now have long-term contracts in place. I am really glad that the supply and distribution of PPE is much wider.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his science-led strategy, from which we are now reaping the dividends and which is genuinely saving lives. But the science also tells that as we reduce the propensity of the virus in the population, we can also reduce the social distancing that we applied. Businesses, residents and teachers across Arundel and South Downs are united in their appetite to move to 1 metre as quickly and as carefully as possible. Will he update us on that?

Matt Hancock: The answer is that we keep all our non-pharmaceutical interventions—the social distancing measures—under review. The 2-metre rule is another social distancing measure in the same way that other parts of the lockdown have been. It is the sort of thing that, of course, we want to lift, but we need to do that in a way that is careful and safe. The scientists, along with the economists, are reviewing it, and we will take forward further measures on this when it is possible and safe to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as vice-chair of the all-party group on pancreatic cancer. My colleague the other vice-chair is the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), whom you referred to earlier on, Mr Speaker. After discussions with other Members, I am glad to hear that she is showing some improvement. Very clearly, Mr Speaker, that is an answer to our prayers.

The Secretary of State has been made aware of the concerns of the leading cancer charities, which say that it is estimated that 2.4 million people are waiting for cancer screening due to the delays caused, in part, by lockdown. Can he outline his intention to implement the 12-point recovery plan, which is backed by 24 cancer charities, including the one for pancreatic cancer?

Matt Hancock: I am incredibly grateful to the cancer charities for the work that they are doing, highlighting the importance of people coming forward for screening, which has been part of the problem, and making sure that we get the screening programmes back up and running in the full sense as quickly as possible.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, although we have reached the peak of the transmission later than other areas, the virus is in decline in the midlands, and my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent are safe to go out and shop and can do so as long as they follow social distancing guidelines?

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is right. In the midlands, as in other parts of the country, this virus is abating. The number of cases is coming down, which is good news. That means that we were able to relax some of the social distancing measures, for instance, on Monday, saying that it is perfectly safe for people to go and shop and that the shops can open so long as they do so in a covid-secure way. I am glad to say that the vast, vast majority of shops have been very careful about how they have reopened, making sure that that social distancing is in place, and therefore it is safe to shop in the west midlands and in the rest of the country.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): One in six people in the UK have hearing loss and rely on lip reading and facial expressions to communicate. The use of face coverings, while important for controlling the virus, is a real barrier for them and risks increasing misunderstanding, anxiety and isolation. That is particularly the case when they are used in hospitals. What is the Secretary of State doing to accelerate the development, testing, production and use of clear-panel face masks, including for clinical settings, and, more immediately, will he support a public awareness campaign on good communication tactics?

Matt Hancock: Yes, the hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that matter. It is a really important consideration. I have been talking to audiologists in the NHS about what we can do to try to make sure that we have the least negative impact possible. Obviously, a face covering has an impact on people who are lip reading. It is an unfortunate but entirely natural consequence of wearing a face covering, and anything that we can do to mitigate that, I am up for doing.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Remarkable consultants, doctors, nurses, support staff and domestic workers at Princess Alexandra Hospital in my constituency of Harlow have saved and nursed back to health more than 270 patients from this awful coronavirus. Will my right hon. Friend pay special tribute to the workers at Princess Alexandra Hospital and the management team and also confirm—because of the pressures on that hospital—that we will get our new hospital and a new site as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend is the greatest friend that there is to the Princess Alex Hospital in Harlow. He has campaigned on it absolutely rigorously—ruthlessly, too—since he was first elected. First, I pay tribute to all the frontline staff and support staff, who have worked so hard at the Princess Alex through this crisis, for their service. Secondly, I reconfirm that we will rebuild the Alex and make sure that it is a world-class hospital.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): One of the recommendations of the now fully published Public Health England report into the impact of covid-19 on the BAME community is that the Government should look to reduce health inequalities, and fast. This is something the Welsh Labour Government are taking seriously, with a comprehensive risk assessment of BAME workers devised by Professor Keshav Singhal being rolled out across the NHS in Wales. The risk assessment is simple to use, produces clear outcomes and will save lives. Can the Secretary of State outline exactly how and when a comprehensive risk assessment will be implemented in England to protect our BAME communities and prove that black lives really do matter?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is right to raise this important issue. We are rolling out a risk assessment across England for all those with a higher risk of suffering from coronavirus, including BAME staff in the NHS in England, who do so much to keep the service on its feet.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con) [V]: The impact of coronavirus has been significantly greater in less affluent areas, such as Stoke-on-Trent Central, where one in four children have free school meals. Does my right hon. Friend agree that tackling the health inequalities in constituencies such as mine is essential if we are to make progress on the issue of inequality of opportunity?

Matt Hancock: I agree 100%. The need to level up is no greater than in health inequalities. The differences in life expectancy between different parts of our country is stark and has been laid bare further by this crisis. The crisis has been like sheet lightning that has laid a light on some of the health inequalities that were there before but which must be addressed with increased urgency. That is one of the big learnings from this crisis. It is something we all knew before but which we must redouble our efforts to resolve after this crisis is over.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Last Friday, it was confirmed that the UK was eligible to participate in a European scheme to place advance orders for vaccines currently in development and to ensure priority access

to any successful vaccine. What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the potential merits of UK participation in such a scheme?

Matt Hancock: We are having such discussions—I have had conversations with my German, French and Italian counterparts on exactly this subject—but the most important thing is that we will not let those discussions get in the way of the much more advanced discussions we are having directly with the vaccine producers to make sure that even if the two great British vaccine hopes do not come off, or if one from somewhere else in the world comes off first, we have access to a vaccine for citizens across the UK.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): It is fantastic news for the whole country that Oxford University has successfully trialled a drug to reduce mortality rates by up to one third for covid patients on ventilation. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that that will be made available soon so that the people of North Cornwall can benefit from it as part of the wider NHS?

Matt Hancock: I am delighted to say that, because we made the stockpile in advance, the treatment is already in place, as of yesterday afternoon, in Cornwall—in Treliske Hospital—and right across the country.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: Any reduction at all in social distancing inevitably carries a risk of increasing the spread of the disease, so can the Secretary of State give an assurance that before the Government announce any reduction, he will publish his assessment of the public health, transmission and infection implications of any such change?

Matt Hancock: I am legally obliged by the Act that governs this area of policy to undertake such a review before those changes are made.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): The drug trial breakthrough is fantastic news and will save a huge number of lives, and it is great news that, as the Secretary of State said just now, the drug treatment is already available on the NHS. On the vaccination trials, it is great that Britain is leading the world, but this is a global problem. What steps are we taking to work with vaccination trials across the world so that we can get a vaccine as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: That is a really important point. Not only do we contribute more to the global vaccination funding programme than any other country—and we hosted the GAVI summit, which raised over £8 billion for global vaccine research—but we are engaged with other countries on the two British vaccine candidates, particularly the Oxford one, because it is so much further advanced. It is the most advanced in the world and the soonest hope for a vaccine, should it come off—touch wood; none of these things is certain. We secured early doses here in the UK, and it was confirmed yesterday that these are being manufactured, with the contract agreed between AstraZeneca and the manufacturer. AstraZeneca is now engaging with countries across the world—in Europe, in the United States, where a deal has already been signed, and elsewhere—to ensure that, if the vaccine works, it will be available globally.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): All of us who grew up in Wythenshawe are very proud of Marcus Rashford today. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Health Foundation that people facing the greatest deprivation have a higher rate of exposure to covid and more severe outcomes when they contract the virus? Wythenshawe residents are twice as likely to die as those in neighbouring areas.

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do agree. I pay tribute to Marcus Rashford. The way he has conducted himself in making his argument has been absolutely brilliant. I was reading Harry Potter to my son last night, and it was clearly still stuck in my mind at 7 o'clock this morning, when I started on the TV. We all make errors sometimes, and I apologise to Marcus for getting his name wrong on one occasion. I had no reason to make that mistake, but what really matters is his brilliant campaign and the volunteering that he has done throughout this crisis.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): It is great news that steroids can save some lives, and I pay tribute to those involved, but as the Secretary of State has said, many people will not get a treatment that works. He says that there are seven other treatments in tests, which presumably started at a similar time, using different groups and families of drugs with different impacts. When will we know the results of those?

Matt Hancock: As soon as possible. The trials will also look at whether, in combination with dexamethasone, which we now know is effective, these drugs save lives. The way the trials work is that we will keep the treatments in trial until we know, to a point of rigorous scientific proof, that they work. As soon as that point is reached, we will roll them out. That point was met on Monday; I was told on Monday night about this success. We had stockpiled in advance, so we could immediately make the announcement and make the change through the NHS. I do not have a date, because it is all driven by the science.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The Government's handling of coronavirus has been marked by complacency. Complacency led to NHS cuts and PPE stockpile shortages; complacency led to a delayed lockdown, the disaster in care homes and the neglect of test, track and trace. We have one of the highest death tolls in the worlds and scientists say that tens of thousands of deaths could have been avoided. Will the Secretary of State end the complacency, put public health before private profit, and ease lockdown only when it is safe to do so?

Matt Hancock: We will of course ease lockdown only when it is safe to do so, but had the hon. Lady listened to my statement, she would know that the case I was making was that right at the start we put the science in place and started to stockpile. We gave scientists support and funding so they could deliver on the sort of research on which we have led the world and delivered ahead of anybody else.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Despite the virus being with us since January, it took until mid-April for the Government to issue guidance for

routine testing to take place before discharge into care homes, and now, regardless of whether or not people have the virus, homes are still expected to take residents. Every week, I speak to distressed staff and heartbroken families. Over 16,000 people have died in our care homes. Does the Secretary of State accept any responsibility for that?

Matt Hancock: I accept responsibility for everything that happens across the health and social care piece. It is incredibly important to work with care homes, as we have, and to fund care homes, as we have, to put in place infection control. Of course, being in hospital is also not a safe place for people who do not need to be in hospital. The infection control procedures are now there in care homes, with the funding, and that has been the case since the start—since well before the date the hon. Lady mentioned. Although the challenge in care homes has been very significant, we have thankfully seen in this country a lower proportion of overall fatalities from this disease in our care homes than in those across the rest of Europe. That is a good thing, but that is not to say that there have not been significant challenges.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): What further examination of the potential use of co-trimoxazole has taken place, and when will we know the results?

Matt Hancock: Co-trimoxazole is another the prospect that we are looking at, but I am afraid that, as with my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), the timing has to be driven by the science. If we get success, when a result in which the clinicians have scientific confidence can be met, we will stick with the clinical trial methodology that leads to concrete results. Too many other places around the world have pulled clinical trials early because of promising results that have turned out not to be well founded.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: The Fawcett Society has completed an important report that addresses the mental health issues of women with disabilities during this pandemic. As chair of the all-party group on disability, I am particularly concerned that the report found anxiety and isolation in more than 50% of respondents. Will the Secretary of State increase funding to mental health providers, with a view to helping disabled people to access the specialist support that they so crucially need?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady asks an important question. We have been increasing funding to mental health services, which are an incredibly important part of the response. Our mental health services, certainly across England, the area for which I am responsible, have risen admirably to the extraordinary challenge presented by coronavirus and I pay tribute to their work.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I represent a number of aerospace manufacturing companies; the whole sector is currently very hard hit and is particularly worried about the impact of the 14-day quarantine. The Secretary of State will know far better than I, but is it not possible to do very simple temperature checks on people as they come into this country?

Matt Hancock: I have looked into that idea in great detail, and I am afraid that I am advised, and have been persuaded by that advice, that it will not work. It has been tried in other parts of the world and they have found that the number of false positives is very high, meaning that they end up quarantining more people. The number of false negatives is also very high, so such checks actually find very few of the people they are looking for. I am afraid it is not a recommendation that I feel I could make on the current evidence that I have seen.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Which are the countries in Europe that have a higher infection rate than us and from which we are protecting ourselves with the Secretary of State's blanket quarantine policy?

Matt Hancock: First, I would rather not see any new infection coming to the UK. Secondly, on a point of policy, the approach that we are taking is to ensure that we protect this country from the incidence of disease coming in from abroad, and also to look at travel corridors when we can be confident that we can have that travel without reimporting the virus.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: The chief executive of the Nuffield Trust has written:

“Even if a second wave is prevented, resuming routine hospital, primary care and dental services...is going to be all but impossible without a vaccine.”

The Secretary of State will be aware that losing such vital services will simply lead to lives being lost through a variety of other causes, so what discussions has he held with healthcare professionals about a medium to long-term strategy to allow vital services to resume under the changed conditions of the new normal?

Matt Hancock: This is an extremely important point. Infection prevention and control within the NHS is vital, but it also leads to constraints on how the NHS can operate, and it is one of the main things that we are worried about as we get the NHS restarted.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the British Army units based in my constituency, in Wiltshire, on the support that they have given to the NHS in coping with the crisis on logistics, building the Nightingale hospitals and so on? Does he welcome the new spirit of collaboration and openness by the NHS, which has shown a great willingness to collaborate with other parts of the public sector? Can we hope that that might be sustained?

Matt Hancock: Yes, it must. I agree with my hon. Friend strongly on both counts. The Army and all the armed services have played a huge role in responding to this crisis, on the logistics, the delivery of testing, the building of Nightingale hospitals right across the UK and much more. The NHS has worked like never before with organisations public and private outwith it, and that culture of openness, porous borders and working collaboratively with councils, the armed services, private companies and the rest of government has been a huge step forward for the NHS and one that we should never take back.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Research from Harvard and Queen Mary University clearly shows a dramatic increase in the level of deaths and infections from covid-19 in higher pollution areas. Given that BAME communities tend to live in higher pollution areas, will the Secretary of State accept that this is a major factor in their disproportionate death rate? What is he doing with colleagues to ensure that we have low pollution levels as we come out of covid? Will he meet me to consider proposals from scientists, businesses, academics and local authorities, published by the all-party parliamentary group on air pollution, on a strategy for coming out of lockdown with low air pollution to reduce death and infection rates?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman—he is my hon. Friend when it comes to air pollution—and I share a passion for clean air. He is right about deaths being correlated with areas of high air pollution. We are looking at the reasons behind the disproportionate number of BAME deaths, and we will take air pollution into account in that work. On the final point, it is a bit like an earlier question asked by one of my hon. Friends from a completely different angle—some things have got better in this crisis. Overall, of course, the crisis has been terrible, but some things have got better. One is air pollution. Let us cling on to that and redouble our efforts to keep clean air for the future

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): During the covid crisis, the relaxation of constraints on data sharing has enabled my local hospital, Stepping Hill, Stockport Council and other bodies such as the CCG and partners to work together. The information sharing that they have been able to do has given a better service to patients. Is that something we could take forward? Perhaps a report could be commissioned by the Department or the National Audit Office on the benefits of enhanced data sharing.

Matt Hancock: Yes. This is the third question in a row on some of the benefits we have learnt about during the coronavirus crisis. We made clear at the start of the crisis that data-sharing rules should not get in the way of treatments that can improve and save lives. That has had a hugely positive impact on people's capability to treat individuals and do research, and we will not be going back on that. The one pager that we put out to the whole NHS on how to manage information governance in a way that keeps information secure but does not get caught up by some of the out-of-date data protection rules that had been followed will stay. Indeed, I hope to strengthen it in order that data can be better used right across the NHS.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving us this update. Groups such as Links Counselling in my constituency report that referrals to children and adolescent mental health services are down as much as 50% in some areas during lockdown, which he will agree is very concerning. Can he outline what recent assessments have been made of the impact of covid-19 on children and young people's mental health—specifically the impact of school closures—and what steps he will take alongside the devolved regions to address this vital issue?

Matt Hancock: This is a vital issue and the hon. Lady is right to raise it. We have to ensure that we have the mental health services and that, crucially, people come forward for support for their mental health if they need it. We have found in paediatric mental health that telemedicine—treatment and psychiatry over a screen—can in fact be more effective than face-to-face treatment, because it is easier to do it in one's own home rather than having to go through the worry and concern of travelling. That is an interesting and important finding. We have to make sure that we seize those benefits, as well as, of course, ensuring that people come forward and that the availability of mental health treatment is there.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): In Buckinghamshire and the south-east, accident and emergency activity is still down by about 22% and cancer referrals are running at about 60% of the baseline average. Will my right hon. Friend join me in sending out a clear message once more that if people think something is wrong and they need medical treatment, our incredible NHS is open and they should seek the help they need?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The NHS is open and we need people to help us to help them by coming forward, especially if they have a fear of cancer, heart disease, stroke or any of the predictive signs of a much more serious illness. On A&Es, we have seen a very sharp decline in the number. We want people who need emergency treatment to come forward. The sharpest decline has been in the number of people attending with the lowest acuity problems. They may be able to find healthcare more appropriately elsewhere. People should consider carefully whether they really need to go to A&E. Instead, it may be beneficial to call 111.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that question, there are two other aspects of the coronavirus lockdown. First, a lot more people are using bicycles, which has led to a very significant increase in the number of head injuries, in particular to children who are not wearing helmets. Some areas are reporting that the total this year has already exceeded the total they had for the whole of last year. Secondly, a lot more people are in the open air and in the sun. Many of them are not covering up and getting sunburnt, which is a real danger in terms of future skin cancers. Can the Secretary of State please start two specific pieces of work: on skin cancer and ensuring we get the right message out about covering up in the sun; and on wearing a helmet and looking after people who have had brain injuries?

Matt Hancock: Yes. I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman about what we can do in those two areas, on which I know he has campaigned very hard. The one thing I would say on the positive side is that over the past few months the early signs are that the likelihood of dying as a five to 14-year-old has probably been at its lowest ever. It has been much safer in lockdown because, for instance, there are far fewer road traffic accidents and because the likelihood of dying from coronavirus as a child is very, very low. Overall, it has been a safe time if measured by that ultimate measure of how many children have died. It is much lower than usual, which is a good thing, but he is right to raise the points he does.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Over 10,000 people in the UK, including my wife, suffer from cystic fibrosis. Coronavirus adds a significant risk to CF patients, who already have a limited life expectancy. CF sufferers and their families were offered a significant lifeline when the Secretary of State agreed to fund the lifesaving drug Orkambi last year, but there is a new drug called Trikafta that has been granted a licence in the US. This is a wonder drug that will extend the lives of CF patients. The father of Sarah Jayne Lilliman, from Eastwood in my constituency, who sadly passed away a few years ago, has asked if the Secretary of State can assure the CF community in the UK that he will do all he can to make sure this drug is available and extend the lives of thousands of people.

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will do absolutely everything I can. I did not know that my hon. Friend's wife suffered from cystic fibrosis. I am absolutely determined to make this happen. I worked really hard with the CF community to land Orkambi and I was very proud when we managed to do that. Thank goodness we did that before coronavirus struck, because for many who caught coronavirus it was literally a lifeline. Trikafta has great promise: it promises to be able to treat almost all CF sufferers, as opposed to the approximately half that Orkambi successfully treats. I have been working on that even during the crisis and I really, really hope we can make some progress.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP) [V]: On 5 May, the first trial of the NHS covid-19 app started on the Isle of Wight. Since then information on the app's development has been scarce. It has been beset by delays, with media reports suggesting that the app has some technical problems with accurately estimating distance between phones. That is worrying because the app is intended to expand contact tracing in England. When will the Health Secretary publish the results of the pilot and outline his plans for a wider roll-out of the app?

Matt Hancock: Those reports were wide of the mark and the app does not have a problem with the measurement of distance. But I will come forward with an update very soon.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): The staff at Epsom General Hospital and the Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust have done a fantastic job in recent weeks dealing with the virus. The Secretary of State will know that this is one of the trusts that has a provisional allocation of funds to build a new hospital in the area. I am particularly concerned to ensure that before final decisions are taken on exactly how that money should be spent, the lessons from the pandemic are learned and any changes that need to be made as a result of what we now know and that may be needed for future hospital services are taken into account. Can he give me an assurance that he will make sure that happens?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is an incredible campaigner for Epsom General Hospital. The injection of approximately half a billion pounds into the local health economy will be a very welcome step. We absolutely have to ensure that the lessons of covid are learnt before the new development goes ahead, but I commend all those staff at the Epsom and St Helier hospitals for the

work they have done, some of which has been done under great pressure. I also commend the leadership of the trust, who have done a fantastic job.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Secretary of State did not answer the question from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), so I thought I would give him another chance. Can he explain why £108 million of the £350 million of personal protective equipment contracts was awarded, without being advertised, to Crisp Websites Ltd, which trades as PestFix, a small pest extermination company? Why was such a large contract awarded to a company with no expertise in trading or supplying any PPE, let alone highly specialised equipment for NHS staff? How do the Government think that such a small company, with only £18,000 of registered assets, can manage the cash flow required to procure £108 million of PPE?

Matt Hancock: When the demand for PPE shot up, as it did not only here, but around the world, we worked with so many companies to deliver extra PPE, and we have managed to deliver on what was needed. That is why we have now the medium-term supply chains in prospect. I pay tribute to all my commercial team, who did extraordinary and sometimes innovative things to make that happen, and that is what they did.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): From the very beginning, clinicians in every developed country in the world have thrown the entire contents of the medical cabinet at this disease in the hope of finding something that works. To what does the Health Secretary attribute the success that he has reported today?

Matt Hancock: I attribute the success to great British science, Government-supported funding, the NHS, and the three working together. I put it down to British ingenuity in our brilliant university base, combined with the funding that we put in right at the start and with the fact that with the NHS we can get easy access to a very large patient base, which means we have the biggest clinical trials in the world. In addition, crucially, when we were under pressure and others around were saying, “Hydroxychloroquine is going to solve all your problems,” we stuck with the clinical trials and with the science, and we have successfully delivered this one treatment. It is not a cure, it is a treatment, but it is a good stride down the road.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned student nurses who were taken on for six-month extended clinical placements back in March and said that he would continue to pay them until the end of the summer. Can he just clarify for the House that that means the full six-month contracts will be honoured? Many of these nurses gave up other paid jobs and will be left in hardship if they do not have their contracts honoured.

Matt Hancock: The statement that I read out in response to the urgent question was drawn from work that Ruth May, the chief nursing officer, has been doing to ensure that that is what happens.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Loneliness and isolation have been the constant companions of many over these past few weeks, so I warmly welcome the

social bubbles that will help ease them. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking my constituents Tracy Carr of Talk It Out, Beverley-Jayne Last of Super Neighbours, and the occupational therapist Justine Norris, who have been working tirelessly over the past few weeks to support the mental health and wellbeing of so many people at home during this pandemic?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend speaks movingly of the support that so many have given, and her three constituents deserve our praise for their work—along with hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of others—to support those who have been living alone. Whether the 2.2 million people who are shielding because they are clinically extremely vulnerable, or the over 8 million people who live on their own and therefore have had to stay on their own during lockdown, this has been a difficult time for many. I pay tribute to the community spirit and support for others that so many have demonstrated.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The link between poverty and poor mental health is well understood. As the covid easing continues, we face the prospect of an economic depression the likes of which we have not seen since perhaps the 1930s, and ahead looms the potential for a post-covid mental health pandemic. What specific and additional resources is he prepared to commit to alleviate that risk?

Matt Hancock: Nobody wants to see the sort of economic consequences that we have already seen—even if there are more to come—but we have to take these measures to tackle this pandemic. We have put extra support into mental health, and more is to come. It is a really important part of the solution.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): This is the first opportunity that I have had on the behalf of my constituents to thank publicly the Secretary of State, his ministerial team, the entire civil service team and all their families for what they have contributed in this national effort. I thank all those people through him.

Local authorities in Bedfordshire have the highest incidence rate of coronavirus across the east of England. The Secretary of State said in his statement that the processes are in place to escalate concerns if there needs to be a local lockdown, but there are local concerns about the availability of local data. What is the current state of localised data? What efforts is he making to improve its availability?

Matt Hancock: Localised data is available through the work of Public Health England and local directors of public health, including the director for Bedfordshire, and then through our survey data, although that is stronger at the national level than at the regional or local levels. Pulling all this data together, and then ensuring that it gets to the decision makers so that they can base their decisions on it, is the task of the joint biosecurity centre. I will ask its head to write to my hon. Friend with details of the data it has on Bedfordshire and what further data it is working on, to answer the questions that my hon. Friend rightly asks.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Will the Health Secretary confirm that, in May, his Department wanted local councils to have local outbreak plans

[James Murray]

ready for 1 June, but that councils had to ask him to move the deadline to later this month because his Department had been so late in asking them?

Matt Hancock: I do not recognise that, no.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): The nation's health recovery and the important strides made in recent weeks give us an opportunity, as well as a responsibility, to leave no stone unturned in our drive for economic recovery. To that end, does my right hon. Friend agree that the regeneration of Winsford town centre, the building of the women's football national centre of excellence and the reopening of Beeston Castle and Tarporley station are all projects in Eddisbury that a go-getting Government can now get on and deliver?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. Given the economic consequences of the pandemic, it is vital that we get on with these go-getting economic projects. I wish my hon. Friend well in his support of them, and I wish everybody involved in them well in delivering them.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Test, trace and isolate is obviously key to stopping a second wave, particularly in England, where lockdown has been relaxed at quite the rate. Is it not therefore a little bit shambolic that the Government's flagship app is still only available on the Isle of Wight?

Matt Hancock: No.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I would like to begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend on the successful roll-out of dexamethasone, but my question is about international comparison. We were one of the later countries to be hit by the virus. There are others who have begun the process of moving out of lockdown ahead of us. Which countries does my right hon. Friend see as the paradigm for the United Kingdom, and what steps, if any, are we taking to share information with healthcare professionals to emulate best practice?

Matt Hancock: This is a great question, and we look all the time for countries around the world that we can learn from. It is true that, in terms of where we were on the epidemiological curve, we went into lockdown before many European countries—before Germany, Spain and Italy—with lower cases per million. But we still learned from them. For instance, one of the lessons from Germany is that a massive testing regime is incredibly important, and we now have a much bigger testing regime than Germany, which is terrific, and we have built that up. We also look to the far east, with its lessons from severe acute respiratory syndrome and middle east respiratory syndrome, which it learned more directly. It has the contact tracing, which we are putting in place. We are constantly learning. Probably the single most important thing that we can do in this crisis is constantly look around the world for places where we can learn best practice, and then implement it here.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State will be reassured that on Monday the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government heard from representatives of the Local Government Association and directors of public health

that relationships and co-ordination between the local level and the centre on testing, tracing and contacting people had substantially improved. But two concerns were raised. First was the number of people who were testing positive and refusing to give details of their contacts. Should we not bring in penalties to try to ensure that that happens? Secondly, there was concern about people who were contacted after having been traced, but did not want to isolate. Recognising that people can lose substantial amounts of income in this situation, should we not bring in something like the furlough scheme to recompense people who can lose out financially by isolating themselves?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman raises three points. First, we have put a huge amount of effort into ensuring that the local-to-national links are strong in test and trace. I pay tribute to Tom Riordan, the chief executive of Leeds City Council, who has come into the programme on secondment from Leeds to deliver those links. He has done an absolutely brilliant job, and I pay tribute to him. On the hon. Gentleman's second point, we do not rule out mandatory contact tracing, but we want to get the system up and running, and it would be far better if it worked on a voluntary basis in the first instance. On his third point, we have put in place more support to ensure that people get the financial support they need to be able to do the right thing. The evidence is that the vast majority of people do, but of course we keep this under review.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in welcoming the tremendous news on treatment with dexamethasone. Following on from that, can he update the House first on what progress we are making towards a vaccine, and secondly on what progress we are making with our manufacturing capacity for a vaccine, so that when we get it, we are able to roll it out at speed, including with Cobra Biologics in my constituency?

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely determined that should a vaccine come through, we are able to roll it out—in the first instance to those who are most vulnerable—across the UK, including to my hon. Friend's constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme. That is incredibly important. As I said in my statement, AstraZeneca has now signed the contract to manufacture the vaccine, even ahead of the successful conclusion of clinical trials, which shows confidence. The Imperial vaccine, which is not as far ahead as the Oxford vaccine, but is promising and based on a different vaccine technology, which is important—it is slightly different—has gone into human trials as well.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): The findings of the PHE report into the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on black and minority ethnic people are or should be embarrassing—they should be collectively embarrassing. If we agree not to point the finger and if we all take our share of the blame for the structural racism that so very clearly exists, can we stop denying it, stop making excuses for it and start working together to dismantle it? And can we do it quickly, because people have rightly had enough?

Matt Hancock: I agree with every word that the hon. Lady says.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in celebrating this best of British treatment that we are getting, but does he also share my concern that not everyone is going to the NHS who needs to for cancer and A&E? Will he join me in telling the people of Rother Valley, “If you need treatment, please go to Rotherham Hospital, please go to the NHS, please get treated.”?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right. The NHS is open, and if people need NHS treatment, please come forward. If people are advised by a clinician to go to hospital, please do that.

Mr Speaker: Including A&E.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Absent a vaccine, the key to unlocking our economic and social lives is an effective test, trace and isolate system. The app, which can really help save lives, is behind schedule, so can the Secretary of State update us on the Isle of Wight trial, and specifically whether it has raised issues with the technology on Apple and/or Android phones; the levels of take-up; and an idea as to when it will be more widely available?

Matt Hancock: As well as being a huge enthusiast for the A&E in Chorley and working on that, Mr Speaker, I am also a huge enthusiast for the use of technology. The No. 1 lesson we learned from the Isle of Wight was that it is important to get the human contact first and use the technology to underpin the human contact tracing. What is interesting is that we are learning that to persuade people to isolate—it is obvious really—a human contact, a phone call with a real person on the other end, is the best way to do it. We have a much higher number of contact tracers per head of population in this country now than almost any of our comparators.

Mr Speaker: I am pleased the Secretary of State is a fan of Chorley A&E: we look forward to it opening very shortly.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I welcome the psychological first aid training that my right hon. Friend launched this week so that frontline workers can support people with mental health problems. However, I am also concerned about the mental health of key workers themselves, particularly those in the NHS who have been working non-stop since January, many with last-minute rota changes and no prospect of a break soon. Will my right hon. Friend outline what we are doing to support key workers at this difficult time?

Matt Hancock: Yes. My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, which is that the mental health of our key workers, including those working in the NHS and social care, is incredibly important. One of the things we put in place in the crisis is a hotline. That support should have been there long before, frankly, and we will maintain it for as long as possible, because is so important to support the physical and mental health of the carers who care for us.

Mr Speaker: In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members who have been participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am now suspending the House for three minutes.

1.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (Accession)

1.46 pm

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Today’s launch of trade negotiations with Australia and New Zealand is an historic moment for this country. When we left the EU, we did so on the promise of trading more with friends and allies across the world. Deals with Australia and New Zealand are a powerful expression of our new-found independence and our intent to build a global Britain. I say to our old friends: Britain is back. These agreements will strengthen ties with like-minded countries who share our values and our commitment to free trade. They will create more opportunities for British businesses and more choice for British consumers, and provide us with greater economic security. Strategically, they will also help us to forge closer economic ties with the wider Pacific region.

The foundations for both deals are strong. We already have close ties in areas such as cars, steel, services, and food and drink, and 31,000¹ small businesses export to Australia. One in every five bottles of wine drunk in Britain comes from Australia. Free trade deals can build on those successes, boosting UK exports to both countries by around £1 billion. They will also show the rest of the world that Britain is prepared to defend and advance the ideals of free trade and freedom.

Deals with Australia and New Zealand are a key step towards membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, one of the largest free trade agreements in the world. Along with Japan, with whom we launched trade negotiations last week, both Australia and New Zealand support our membership, and today we have formally announced our intention to pursue accession to the agreement. We do so for three reasons. First, we do so to secure more trade and investment, to help our economy to overcome the challenges posed by coronavirus. Hitching ourselves to the fastest-growing part of the world will help to deliver on the growth and prosperity we urgently need. Secondly, it will help to diversify our trade and supply chains, to make our economy more resilient and open up new export opportunities in industries such as tech and digital, food and drink, and automotive. Thirdly, it is an important part of our strategy to turn the UK into a global trading hub. We want to put the UK at the centre of a network of modern free trade agreements.

CPTPP is a high-standards agreement, spanning four continents. Its members are 11 like-minded nations, all of whom believe in the principles of free trade, international co-operation and the rules-based system. Our trade with individual CPTPP countries is already worth more than £110 billion. By joining the agreement, we can open up even more opportunities for our go-getting businesses and turbo-charge trade and investment. Membership will help us to sell more British buses to Mexico, more life-saving antibiotics to Vietnam and more medical technology to Peru, and, of course, it will help us to export more of our world-class food and drink, including more Welsh lamb to Japan and Scotch whisky to Canada.

We firmly believe membership will support all UK businesses, not least the small businesses that have suffered most during coronavirus. Access to the agreements dedicated SME chapter will ease barriers to trade for small businesses by cutting tariffs and reducing red

1. [Official Report, 24 June 2020, Vol. 677, c. 4MC.]

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tape. It will give thousands of businesses access to this most dynamic group of markets and couple Britain to one of the most vibrant economic regions in the world. We have already explored membership with all 11 countries, in line with CPTPP's accession process, and we are now moving to the formal stage.

At a time of unprecedented global upheaval, now is the time to look out to the world, not turn our backs on it. It is a time to be ambitious and seek trade deals with nations who share our values and our commitment to free trade. Agreements with New Zealand and Australia and are an important step towards our vision of a truly global Britain—a Britain that is once again a fierce campaigner for free trade; a Britain that leads by example. Membership of CPTPP is the next logical step. Joining the agreement would show the rest of the world that we are back as a proud, independent nation, prepared to look far beyond our own shores. I commend this statement to the House.

1.52 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement and for always keeping the House up to date on the progress of her trade negotiations. On my count, in those six weeks, the Secretary of State has formally launched new trade negotiations with four different countries—the US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand—on top of the 16 negotiations that she is already leading to roll over our EU third country agreements, all of which, according to her own timetable, she wants signed and sealed within the next six months. In addition, we now have today's statement committing the Government to begin negotiations on the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, CPTPP—I am going to pronounce it “C-tip” for short.

As the Secretary of State said, CPTPP currently comprises 11 members, accounting for 13% of global GDP, making it the third-largest free trade area in the world. So in theory, the UK becoming a member sounds like it deserves the fanfare that the Secretary of State has given it today. However, let us now look at those 11 countries. With seven of them, we already have free trade agreements, courtesy of our membership of the EU—that is Japan, Canada, Singapore, Mexico, Chile, Peru and Vietnam. With two of those—Chile and Peru—roll-over deals are in place to continue free trade beyond December. With the other five, bilateral negotiations are still ongoing to get roll-over deals agreed. That is seven out of the 11 taken care of.

Then, just this morning, the Secretary of State formally launched free trade negotiations with another two CPTPP members, Australia and New Zealand. Just to be clear, according to the Secretary of State's plans, by the time we join CPTPP, we should already have bilateral free trade deals in place with nine of its 11 members, accounting for 95% of the UK's current trade with the CPTPP area. In fact, the only new free trade agreements that we stand to gain from membership of CPTPP are with the kingdoms of Malaysia and Brunei, which, between them, accounted for just 0.37% of the UK's total world trade last year.

I ask the Secretary of State: what are the benefits of joining CPTPP for UK trade, growth and jobs, over and above the benefits that she has already forecast from

trade deals with Japan, Australia and the seven other CPTPP countries with whom bilateral negotiations are already complete or still in train? Could she then tell us how these potential benefits stack up against some of the potential risks of CPTPP membership? First, will the UK be subject to the provisions in CPTPP for investor state dispute settlement, with all the risks that that poses to our ability to protect public services, consumers and the environment from corporate profiteers? Secondly, will membership of CPTPP demand the sharing of our citizens' data, including health records? If so, how will that data be protected? If other CPTPP members are not compliant with the general data protection regulation, how will that affect the ability of UK service companies to access EU citizens' data?

Thirdly, will CPTPP membership oblige us to accept a “list it or lose it” approach to private competition in the public sector? If so, can the Government guarantee a blanket exception for our NHS and other essential public services? Fourthly, will we be obliged to accept the regulatory standards on animal welfare and food production established under CPTPP and, if so, are they compatible with other existing standards?

Finally, will the Government negotiate the terms of our CPTPP membership to benefit key British trade sectors, or will we have to accept the existing terms of an agreement shaped in the interests of others? I raise those questions not from confirmed opposition to CPTPP but simply because we need to know whether the risks are worth taking if the only distinct benefit is the prospect of free trade with Malaysia and Brunei. That debate has not yet been won, and I urge the Secretary of State to reopen it for consultation with industry, unions and other stakeholders who did not have the time to study the proposals properly during the busy Brexit negotiations in autumn 2018.

In closing, we cannot divorce this debate from that around the still busy Brexit negotiations. The businesses I speak to around the country simply cannot understand why the Government are spending so much time and effort trying to negotiate international trade deals of relatively low value when they have yet to secure our continued trade with Europe. I am all for expanding the 0.3% of global trade that we share with Malaysia and Brunei, which is all the statement ultimately amounts to, but as the 47% of our trade that depends on Europe is hanging in the balance that is where the Government's priorities should lie.

Elizabeth Truss: I am not surprised that the right hon. Lady is trying to do down our efforts to secure trade agreements with the vast majority of the world and join some of the most exciting free-trade areas in existence, because the Opposition refused even to support trade deals with Canada and Japan when we were members of the EU. She talked about a continuity agreement, but she did not even support signing it in the first place. Only the Labour party could call low value a trade area where the UK has £100 billion-worth of trade. I do not know what mathematics or economics that relates to, but it is certainly none with which I am familiar.

Let me be clear with the right hon. Lady. The deal of which we would be part with CPTPP goes much further than the existing roll-over agreements that countries such as Canada have with the EU. For example, CPTPP has an advanced digital and data chapter. The UK is a

data and digital superpower. We are third in the world for the number of billion-dollar tech companies, after the US and China. CPTPP has an advanced digital and data chapter to which the EU would not sign up. That chapter gives us access to that in Canada, Mexico, Peru and Chile across the agreement.

This agreement removes 95% of tariffs—again, going further than many of the roll-over agreements. We are talking about joining one of the most advanced trade agreement areas in the world. The measure goes far beyond what the EU was willing or able to agree, which is a huge opportunity for the UK. It is completely wrong to suggest that this is about Malaysia and Brunei, although I do not deprecate Malaysia, which is a fast-growing market and a good trade opportunity for the UK. To say that CPTPP is simply equivalent to the deals that the EU is negotiating with those nations betrays a lack of understanding of the text of these trade agreements. I am very happy to share with the right hon. Lady the additional chapters in question.

The right hon. Lady suggested that I will close all these trade deals in the next six months, and I am very flattered by her belief in my superhuman power to do so. I have not said that we are going to close all the trade deals we are negotiating in the next six months. For example, we have set no timetable on a United States trade deal, so it is simply not true to say that we have a target of closing all them in the next six months.

We will do deals that are good for Britain, and we will be prepared to walk away if we do not get what the UK wants. For example, the national health service is not on the table and the price we pay for drugs is not on the table. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Lady has asked me a series of questions, and she might listen to the answers, rather than chatting to her colleague on the Front Bench, the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson).

I am very clear that we will not lower our food import standards. We have an excellent independent agency, the Food Standards Agency. As part of the withdrawal agreement, all our import standards, including those on chlorinated chicken and hormone-injected beef, will be on the UK statute book, and it would take a vote in Parliament to overturn them. We are not negotiating that as part of any of these trade agreements. It is simply scaremongering from the right hon. Lady.

We have a huge opportunity here to forge a new future for global Britain, and we are not going to listen to the scaremongering and negativity from the Labour party. We are going to take those opportunities, and we are going to move forward.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. If Britain joins CPTPP, it will create a trade grouping of roughly the same size as the European Union, now that Britain has left, but without the political restrictions on the UK and with some new strategic advantages, not least vis-à-vis China. Of course, trade is not just about trade agreements, so can my right hon. Friend tell us what help will be given to British exporters to help them get into the markets of CPTPP, both here and overseas? Without trade, trade agreements are no more than a piece of paper.

Elizabeth Truss: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work he did as International Trade Secretary in pursuing this ambitious agenda. It is great that I have

the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), the Minister responsible for exports, on the Front Bench with me, and we are working on a new export strategy precisely to take advantage of the new trade agreements we are negotiating. One thing we are negotiating in all those agreements is a dedicated SME chapter to make it easier for our small and medium-sized enterprises to get through procedures, to get rid of a lot of the red tape and to get into those overseas markets. We will be spending this year helping those companies to do that.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for early sight of it. I agree with her that forging trade links with the wider Pacific region is a good thing to do. I would also say that membership of CPTPP, if we can join on the right terms, may help to claw back some of the enormous losses that will result from Brexit.

At its heart, however, the Secretary of State's statement was little more than hopeful rhetoric about the UK's future trade prospects, and those prospects are by no means certain, as is evidenced by the rather modest rise in Canadian exports to partner countries. Her statement did not tell us in any detail what is actually proposed to be discussed, and it does rather beggar belief that she did not see fit to report to the House the challenges, difficulties and sticking points that she foresees in future negotiations; nor, I suspect, has she given any comfort to those who raised many significant concerns over accession in the last consultation.

What limits will the Secretary of State set in her negotiations on lowering barriers to allow for greater market access for foreign services suppliers? What limits will she place on the removal or weakening of behind-the-border non-tariff barriers, and what about important things such as workers' rights, product safety regulations and food quality standards? What action does she propose to ensure that the monitoring of partner countries adheres to core International Labour Organisation standards, and that freedom of association is allowed in partner countries? What action will she take to avoid product dumping via partner countries becoming a very real problem? How will she allay concerns over investor-state dispute settlement provisions reducing the Government's ability to legislate? Unless and until those and many other concerns are fully and transparently addressed, huge anxiety will remain in the public about whether CPTPP is even right for the UK.

Elizabeth Truss: What we are announcing today is our intention to accede, and we are talking to all 11 partners of CPTPP to have those preparatory discussions. Our formal application to CPTPP will require 11 different market access agreements to be sought with all the separate nations with which we are negotiating. We have absolutely no intention of lowering our food safety, environmental or labour standards, or any other standards. We are a high-quality, high-standards nation, and we want to work with the CPTPP countries on that basis. We believe in free trade and the rules-based system, and that is very much what CPTPP stands for.

The hon. Gentleman asked about investor-state dispute settlement systems. We have signed up to a number of those already, in a series of investor agreements that the

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UK has already made. Indeed, there are investor provisions in the comprehensive economic and trade agreement, which we are seeking to roll over with Canada. We will always ensure that the UK Government have the right to regulate, that we have control of our public services and that the NHS is not on the table. If we do not get those things in any of the agreements we try to negotiate, we will simply walk away.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: There can be no doubt that my right hon. Friend is doing all she can to seize every possible opportunity as we grasp our new freedoms, not least for Melton's stilton and pork pie producers. Does she agree that our joining CPTPP is important if we are to strengthen trading relationships with allies who respect international norms and values, better to isolate rogue trading practices by states that use trade as a weapon?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. One benefit of CPTPP is that it is a free-trade, high-standards arrangement with countries that follow the rules. We want to create alliances with like-minded allies across the world and ensure that that is the way the world trade system operates. It is also important to diversify our trade, so that we are not dependent on single countries or regions for imports, or for where we export to. We must have options as a country and be able to work with those who share our values.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Many people in my party have long had their suspicions about the extent of the Government's plans after Brexit, but I do not think that any of us, even in our wildest dreams, imagined that leaving Europe meant relocating to the Pacific. Given that the Government have such limited time and bandwidth while dealing with the pandemic, is this the right time to be entering into negotiations to join a partnership that currently represents just 8% of our exports? We are still a long way from agreeing a trade partnership with the EU, which represents 45% of our exports. What are the Government's priorities?

Elizabeth Truss: As we seek to recover from coronavirus, it is incredibly important that we protect and expand our exports, which represent 31% of the UK economy and include vital industries such as the steel industry, the car industry and the food and drink industry. We must find new markets for those exports and link to fast-growing parts of the world. We must also protect against protectionism. One of the benefits of signing free trade agreements is avoiding tariffs on our goods and services, and CPTPP represents 13% of the global economy—16% if we add the UK—and includes fast-growing parts of the world. At a time when we are seeking to revive the economy, this is exactly the type of agreement we should be joining. In parallel, of course, we are negotiating with the EU to secure a good agreement with it. It is not an either/or; we need to be trading with all the world.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Montgomeryshire has many Japanese-owned manufacturing businesses and the UK's largest livestock market ready to ship Welsh lamb across the world at the drop of a hat. I welcome my

right hon. Friend's statement. Given that Japan accounts for nearly half of the GDP of this partnership, what outreach have we done with our close economic friends and allies, what are the Japanese Government saying about our accession and what support can we rely on from our allies to help us accede to this great partnership?

Elizabeth Truss: Japan is a very important partner of the UK, and we are separately negotiating our bilateral trade agreement, but when I spoke to Minister Motegi, who is responsible for negotiating on Japan's behalf, he was very clear that he supported the UK's accession to CPTPP. We are also pursuing accession with Australia and New Zealand. These bilateral partnerships are a way of accessing that wider arrangement in Asia-Pacific. My hon. Friend is right—there are huge export opportunities for Britain into Japan and huge investment opportunities for British firms into Japan and for Japanese firms into the UK.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I too welcome the negotiations the Secretary of State has announced with Australia and New Zealand. New Zealand is an interesting case, because CPTPP includes provisions for an investor-state dispute settlement, allowing major corporations to challenge the ability of Governments to regulate in areas such as environmental protection. Will she follow the example of New Zealand and seek to exclude the UK from this mechanism?

Elizabeth Truss: In the negotiations, we are very clear that we will not allow any agreement to interfere with our right to regulate in areas such as the environment, food standards and public services such as the national health service. That is a clear red line for us.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): In my constituency, we do not have any shipping ports, but we have plenty of computer ports that connect us to entire world. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the CPTPP negotiations and discussions, and all the work being done, will enable all the digital businesses in my constituency to trade gladly around the world?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that the advanced digital and data chapter in CPTPP will provide huge confidence for those seeking to buy products in that region from British businesses. It is extraordinary that the Labour party does not think that is of any value. It does not think that the EU, which is prepared to sign these digital and data chapters, has agreements any different from the type of agreement we are seeking to accede to, missing out a huge part of the UK economy.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said earlier, the original consultation on membership of this partnership took place over a three-month period in autumn 2018, when most of industry and this country was preoccupied with the Brexit negotiations. Would it not be sensible now to have a second consultation so that stakeholders can have a proper chance to assess and comment on the implications for them?

Elizabeth Truss: We have conducted a consultation already. We gave businesses a chance to respond. But rest assured, we will engage with businesses throughout

this process through our system of expert trade advisory groups, which consult specific industries on the aspect of agreements they relate to. We are negotiating these deals precisely to benefit British businesses—to get the tariffs removed on cars, whisky and so on. We will consult businesses throughout this process to make sure every sector and area of the UK benefits.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Scotland has a great trading history and that its historical links with Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada place it well to take advantage of the negotiation that she is announcing today? Do quality products such as Scotch whisky not give us an advantage? This is about quality; it is not about reducing standards.

Elizabeth Truss: Scotch whisky is a hugely successful export right around the world, including to Japan, Australia and New Zealand. One of my aims in these negotiations is to get the tariffs removed on this excellent product so that people can drink even more of it around the world. My right hon. Friend is right about Scotland's proud trading history. I hope that the businesses and people of Scotland listen to him rather than the negative voices we heard from the SNP.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now go to Stirling, to Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: An apposite time to make my contribution, Madam Deputy Speaker—thank you.

I have to stress that Scotland's farmers are united in their concern about what they are losing from leaving the European Union rather than otherwise, however much breathless vacuity can be presented about the ambitions of these trade deals. They are deeply concerned, to the extent that the Secretary of State is having to misrepresent the views of, particularly, the National Sheep Association. I refer to her article in *The Scottish Farmer* newspaper last week. Phil Stocker, the chief executive of the National Sheep Association, took her to task on this, saying that her misrepresentation of its position as in favour of her plans was

“a result of either laziness, or manipulative intentions.”

Can she tell us which it was, and can she assure the House that she will not do it again?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the House that for every sector of agriculture there are benefits to be found from the trade deals we are negotiating around the world. Currently, UK lamb is not allowed into the US market due to a ban. I want to get that ban removed. The US is the second largest importer of lamb in the world. That is a huge opportunity. Likewise, we will make sure that we maintain our standards, that we do not lower our import standards and that we protect British farming against any unfair competition.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The Secretary of State is well aware of my passion for maintaining our strict animal welfare and food standards. She also knows what a challenging time it has been for my dairy farmers and my sheep farmers during this covid crisis. What trading opportunities with New Zealand and Australia does she see for them as we go through the CPTPP?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is a huge champion for his farmers. What we have seen in British agriculture is increasing success in exports. We are now a net exporter of dairy products for the first time in recent years. We are getting increasingly large exports of all kinds of meat products, dairy products and finished food and drink products. He can be assured that when we are negotiating the specific market access schedules in CPTPP, we will always be looking out for British farmers, making sure that they are getting the benefit of the deal.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: Nearly half of the UK's carbon footprint probably comes from our trade overseas to satisfy UK demand. What impact assessment has the Secretary of State made of the environmental costs of expanding UK trade into the Pacific region?

Elizabeth Truss: We are very committed as a country to our zero carbon target by 2050, and we are working hard on the new COP—conference of the parties—summit to make sure that we achieve that. In all the trade negotiations we are conducting, we want to have strong environmental protections protecting our environmental legislation in the UK but also reduced tariffs on low and zero carbon goods.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the good progress she is making with the bilateral trade agreement with Japan, which will be very welcome to many people employed by Japanese companies in Shropshire. I welcome her announcement and, indeed, the announcement by the Prime Minister on Australia and New Zealand today. Specifically on the partnership agreement that she has announced, could she give the House an idea of an indicative timetable—when she thinks it might be signed and whether she thinks that will be quicker than many of the trade deals that the European Union has signed?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his overall comments. In terms of the timetable for CPTPP, it is an agreement with 11 members, so inevitably that means that we have to be in discussions with all those 11 members and seek agreement with all 11 members. The convenient aspect of course is that there is already an agreement fleshed out, and we will be working within that framework. We are already in discussions with all 11 members. We are negotiating bilateral deals with some of them. When we are in a position, we will put forward our formal application, and I hope we can make rapid progress. There certainly is enthusiasm about having the UK as part of CPTPP, because people see us as a high-standards country that believes in free trade and the rules-based global system. I will reach an agreement as quickly as I can, but I will make sure that at all points we get a good deal for British industry and that we do not cross any of our red lines.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. If everyone who has expressed an interest in speaking is to have the chance to do so, we will have to go rather faster. I make no criticism of the Secretary of State, who has had to answer complicated questions and give lengthy answers. If the questions are shorter, then the answers can also be shorter, and then everyone will get a chance to come in.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Given the Secretary of State's ambition to have tariffs removed, will she tell us why nine of 11 products—including cheese, honey and butter—that the EU can export tariff-free to South Korea are subject to tariffs for this country under the UK-South Korea continuity agreement, which the Government have negotiated?

Elizabeth Truss: It is my aim in all our agreements to secure the maximum tariff-free access for our products, but in any given agreement there are always trade-offs. My key priority is making sure that we do not cross any UK red lines.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, looking across the world, free trade agreements have been shown to reduce inequalities, create jobs and boost incomes? As such, the opportunity is great from these trade deals with fast-emerging countries, both for the people of Grantham and Stamford and for Britain as a proud global independent nation.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. Free trade has lifted a billion people out of poverty in the past few decades, and that is a record that no other policy prescription can match.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): As an integral part of the United Kingdom, businesses and people in Northern Ireland, including my constituents in Upper Bann, want to benefit from the deal in the same way that any other constituted part of the UK can. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the Northern Ireland protocol will not affect Northern Ireland exporters' ability to benefit from any trade deal and Northern Ireland businesses and consumers being able to import goods covered by such a deal?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are working very closely with the Northern Ireland Executive to make sure that Northern Ireland is fully part of any trade deal we agree, and we are specifically consulting Northern Ireland businesses to make sure that they benefit.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement today. The Pacific region has a growth rate that is double that of the EU. Does the Secretary of State agree that, while the modern dynamic free trade agreement that is sought stands to boost trade enormously, it is not all about numbers? We should also be welcoming the chance for close strategic ties with friends who share our interests.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to pursue a trade policy that is economically beneficial to the UK and levels up our country, but helps achieve more resilience for our country, protects us against protectionist urges that we are seeing around the world and diversifies our trade away from dependence on single nations or regions that we might come to regret.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a bit difficult not to come to the conclusion that, basically, the Government want to form new trade deals with countries that are less financially significant to us in terms of trade but

speaking English. If we add up all the trade that the UK does with the countries in the Commonwealth, it does not add up to the trade that we presently do with France and Germany, does it?

Elizabeth Truss: I could read to the hon. Gentleman the list of 11 countries—I assure him that many of them do not speak English as their main language, but that is not really the point. The point is that we want to be the centre of a global trading network. That network, of course, includes our friends and partners in the European Union. It includes the United States and the Americas. It includes the Asia-Pacific region as well. We can have all those things by creating this network of free trade agreements, and we are making rapid progress on that.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): The Indo-Pacific region represents 50% of international trade and is the fastest growing region in the world. Does my right hon. Friend agree that being able to accede to the CPTPP, with all its opportunities for our strong services economy, highlights the Brexit benefit of having an independent trade policy that we can pursue on our own terms?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. She is right that we are able to pursue this policy because we are not a member of the EU, and we are able to sign up to things, such as an advanced digital and data chapter, that the EU does not want to be part of. We have recently launched our new network of digital trade emissaries around Asia precisely to push the case of British business.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): While part of the EU, quotas are imposed on imports of New Zealand lamb. With the free market deal that the UK Government are chasing, and their willingness for a no-deal crash out of Europe in December, do Scottish farmers not face a double whammy of greater imports of New Zealand lamb and tariffs being applied to lamb exported to the EU?

Elizabeth Truss: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that New Zealand is not actually using all its current quota of lamb, because there is massive demand for New Zealand lamb around the world, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, which is closer to production. I can assure him that, when we are negotiating these deals, we will make absolutely sure that British farmers do not have their standards undermined.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Our application to accede to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, alongside our application this week to become a dialogue partner in our own right to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, highlights our commitment to Asia, as the Secretary of State has said. It is worth noting that the Kingdom of Brunei Darussalam is both party to the TPP and in the chair of ASEAN next year. Does she agree that it would also be a huge game changer if the United States of America decided to become part of the Trans-Pacific partnership, as it has already mooted?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all his excellent work as trade envoy to countries such as Malaysia. I know that he is a big fan of Brunei and visiting it and working with it. In terms of the Americans'

trade strategy, I would not presume to advise them on which networks they should seek to be part of. It is certainly the case that the TPP is a very high-quality agreement, and we want to make it one that more members who believe in free trade and the rules-based global system want to join.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): If we go a bit faster, we will be able to get everybody in.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We all want the highest standards. Can the Secretary of State explain a bit more the road map to ensure the highest food standards? Will the Government look again at setting up a food standards commission when it comes to trade deals?

Elizabeth Truss: We already have the Food Standards Agency, which is specifically established as a non-ministerial department to ensure independence over high-quality food standards. Any change to British food standards would need to be voted on by the UK Parliament. That is very strong protection.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): This is great news for global Britain. The Trans-Pacific partnership contains countries stretching from the Arctic to the Southern ocean, from South America to Asia. I very much welcome today's start of talks with Australia and New Zealand on a trade agreement, but is this not also a good opportunity to engage with emerging markets, particularly in south-east Asia?

Elizabeth Truss: It is correct to say that there are major opportunities with Australia and New Zealand. As well as being champions of free trade in that region, they are extremely well-connected to the Pacific market, so it is an opportunity to reunite with our old friends and allies, as well as to reach out to new trading partners across that very important region of the world.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I very much welcome the statement by the Secretary of State to the House today. Does she agree that what this country and British business need is confidence at this time of uncertainty? They need messages that bring about greater opportunity for diverse trade and increasing volumes of trade and that do not compromise on our stance of free trade wherever possible. They do not need the opposite messages that we are hearing today, which destroy confidence in British business.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. There are people in this Chamber who seek to do our country down and say, "We can't achieve this. We can't sign up to these deals. It is all too difficult. Let us have another consultation and delay it for another few years." Then there are those people who are go-getters, who want to help businesses in their constituencies to succeed, and who want to help us recover from coronavirus. I know which side I am on.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Let us be clear: irrespective of what the Secretary of State delivers, she will be unable to replicate the economic success of our membership of the European Union, but, if she is intent on going down this path, can she give a cast-iron

guarantee to UK manufacturers and producers that they will not have to compete with cheap goods being dumped in the United Kingdom?

Elizabeth Truss: That is a bit of a cheek coming from a party that wants to separate from our extremely successful Union here in the UK. We want a good trade deal with the EU, just as we want a good trade deal with CPTPP.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Unlike SNP Members, I very much welcome the opportunities of international trade not just for Scotland, but for the entirety of the United Kingdom. I know that the Government recognise the importance of Japan to Scotland and to UK farmers, particularly to those farmers who export malting barley and grain. Does the Secretary of State agree that a new trade agreement with Japan not only helps Scotland's farmers to exploit those opportunities, but potentially gives us access to that part of the world?

Elizabeth Truss: We are the second largest malting barley exporter to Japan after Canada and we have fine products both in Scotland and in my own region of East Anglia. Getting access to that wider CPTPP agreement, as well as reducing the tariffs in Japan, will give more opportunities to those fantastic producers.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: With the grave threat posed to our own public services, let alone to those of developing nations, by the investor-state dispute settlement, will the Secretary of State commit to seeking an exemption in future trade deals, as has been achieved by New Zealand through bilateral negotiations with CPTPP?

Elizabeth Truss: I have already said that I will not sign up to something that threatens our right to regulate here in the UK.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): The CPTPP comprises a dynamic mix of nation states, from like-minded Commonwealth countries to rapidly developing economies. Does my right hon. Friend believe that the UK's accession will encourage further expansion of the trade bloc to the benefit British exporters?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that it is an agreement of which many people want to be a part. In fact, other countries are looking to accede alongside the UK. One reason that our friends and allies across the world want us to join is that they see the UK as a key asset to CPTPP.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Will the Secretary of State ensure that product, environmental, health and workers' standards do not fall below EU standards in order not to jeopardise an EU trade deal that is 47% of our trade? Equally, will she seek an exemption, as New Zealand has, from the investor-state dispute settlement, so that, in the event that we want to raise our standards of health and environment above EU standards, we will not be sued by big corporations? She has given a verbal undertaking, but will she put that into action and seek an exemption now?

Elizabeth Truss: I have been clear about my position on ISDS, but in the EU negotiations that are being conducted by our lead negotiator, David Frost, we are very clear we are not having a level playing field with the EU. One of the reasons for Brexit is so we can decide our own regulatory policy independently.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. The agreement goes much further than the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement of 2018 and there is much to like about it, not least for businesses in Cumbria that want to trade out and into the world. What assurances can she give me that we will not go back on our high food and environmental standards in joining this agreement?

Elizabeth Truss: We are absolutely committed to our high standards. That is one of the reasons why countries and people around the world want to buy British products. They trust British products; they trust the Union Jack flag; and they appreciate what we offer. Let me be clear: any change to domestic legislation resulting from any trade agreement would need to be voted on by this House, so there is a clear parliamentary process to make sure that any change has full support, but we will not be lowering those standards.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): On the topic of East Anglia, I am sure my right hon. Friend will recognise the importance of a port at Felixstowe and how it needs to have the infrastructure necessary to step up to help Britain achieve its global potential. Will she commit to working with Highways England to make sure that its ridiculous plan to close a bridge when it is windy is stopped, so that we never have to go through another windy period in winter when our town grinds to a halt because road freight from the port of Felixstowe has to go through a town centre and not across a bridge?

Elizabeth Truss: There is no greater supporter of East Anglian infrastructure than me.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): My constituents in Putney are very worried about the implications of the partnership and all the Brexit agreements for the NHS. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the NHS and other key public services will not be opened up to competition under the negative list system in the trans-Pacific partnership?

Elizabeth Truss: The NHS is not on the table. The price the NHS pays for drugs is not on the table.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I welcome the accession to the CPTPP, which could be good news for UK dairy farmers. Canada, which is a member, has a lot of unused quota and there are not many other dairy producers in the partnership, so there is a huge opportunity for UK dairy there. More important, though, is transitioning the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement, because this will be a medium to long-term ambition. Where are we on the transition arrangement for CETA?

Elizabeth Truss: I had a good conversation with my Canadian counterpart, Mary Ng, last week to talk about,

first, our mutual commitment to free trade, but also how we are going to improve our trading relationship with Canada.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): One of the reasons why the UK Government and in particular Tory Brexiteers were salivating over the idea of Brexit was about reducing red tape and cutting lots of regulation, so clearly when embarking on trade agreements the Government are going to compromise on things like food standards and workers' rights. Will the Secretary of State tell us up front which of them she will throw on the Brexit bonfire, like the Brexiteers wanted?

Elizabeth Truss: It is a shame that the SNP appears to be intent on scaremongering rather than looking at the opportunities for Scottish farmers and businesses from this excellent deal.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Conservative Members are optimistic and positive about the opportunities ahead. We have heard about the opportunities for our dairy farmers, but is my right hon. Friend aware of the opportunities for our arable sector in striking a deal with the Japanese, whose desire for British malt is insatiable, at a time when so much malting barley is sat in the sheds and warehouses of our brewers and farmers? We should be excited about opening up these new markets.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. This country produces high-quality malting barley, and my ambition is to overtake Canada in exports to Japan and to become No. 1 on the Japan malting barley list.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State referred to CPTPP as "11 like-minded nations" and said that

"now is the time to look out to the world".

Will she not therefore see that it is time to follow Canada's example and give a formal role to the devolved Administrations in establishing trade policy? Or will Scotland get that opportunity only with independence?

Elizabeth Truss: We have in this country a clear procedure for determining our trade agreements and a clear treaty-ratification process, which I think works well. We are committed to working closely with Scottish Members of Parliament and Scottish businesses to make sure that every part of the UK benefits from our trade-negotiation strategy.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): When I think about trade deals, I think about the benefits that deals like CPTPP will bring to exporters in my patch, such as Equus Leather in Winston, which my right hon. Friend visited with me a few months ago. As she is a champion of global Britain and of free trade, does she agree that UK businesses want the UK to sign up to CPTPP and cement our relationships with top economies such as Japan, Australia and New Zealand?

Elizabeth Truss: Equus Leather is a fantastic business, but the fact is that it currently has to fill in lots of forms when it wants to export not only to America but to other parts of the world. I want to get dedicated SME chapters to get rid of that red tape, so that companies can focus their efforts on producing fantastic products that people around the world want to buy.

Points of Order

2.42 pm

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The House authorities have done a magnificent job in this time of covid-19 in terms of preparations for debates and voting in the House. Today, we are engaged in, and some of us have already cast our vote in, the deferred Division process, but much to my annoyance I discovered that there was no attempt by anyone to ascertain my identity as I voted. I cast my vote in the Members' Library with a deferred Division slip, but there were no personnel present to establish that I was who I said I was, and I saw no means of identification other than a signature on the deferred Division list. Is that the process? Is it appropriate that that is how we should vote in a deferred Division Lobby?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Yes. The hon. Gentleman's signature is unique, and it is recorded here in the House because he will at some point have put his signature in a book in front of the Clerks—when he swore in at the beginning of this Session of Parliament, he will have gone out there and given his signature—so his signature on that deferred Division form is his form of identity. If the hon. Gentleman were to suggest to me that there was some sort of forgery going on, we would have to look at that, but for the moment hon. Members are honourable and their signature identifies them.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not in any way attempt to challenge your ruling—I accept it—but given the subject matter of the deferred Division, which is the abortion regulations in Northern Ireland, about which Northern Ireland people feel very strongly, I would have thought there should have been some way of personnel establishing that each Member is who they say they are, as we do in the normal process. There appears to have been no communication about this beforehand.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. We are not going to have a prolonged argument about it; the signature is the identity. If the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that some sort of

personation has occurred or some sort of fraudulent action has occurred, I hope he will come to see Mr Speaker about it privately, because it would be a very serious allegation. That not being the case, I am certainly satisfied that hon. Members are honourable and there is no suggestion that anyone has attempted to vote who does not have the authority to do so, on that subject or on any other subject.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is on a completely different matter. You will know that yesterday the Prime Minister announced that he intends to merge the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development. He said in the House that he was intending that there would still be proper scrutiny of both elements of that work by the House. I gather that yesterday the Foreign Secretary and the International Development Secretary wrote to the Chair of the International Development Committee to tell her that her Committee would be abolished. Can you confirm that that is actually a matter for the House? It is a matter for our Standing Orders whether that Committee exists. For that matter, the allocation of Chairs between the various Select Committees of the House is a matter that has to be arranged between the usual channels.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Yes, the hon. Gentleman, as usual in these matters, is absolutely correct. The House will be well aware that when changes are made to Select Committees—the chairmanship, the membership, the name, or any changes made to a Select Committee—they appear on the Order Paper and the matter comes before the House. There is the potential for a vote to take place upon it, so, yes, I can confirm that these matters will be dealt with in the proper manner.

Virtual participation in proceedings concluded (Order, 4 June).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): As we have had a pause between the previous business and the next business, I do not propose to suspend the House for three minutes. It appears to me that everyone who was going to leave has already left, so let us go directly to the 10-minute rule motion.

Sexual Offences (Sports Coaches)

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

2.46 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Sexual Offences Act 2003 to make sports coach a position of trust for the purposes of child sex offences; and for connected purposes.

I rise today to introduce this Bill out of sheer frustration at the lack of progress to extend the positions of trust legislation to sports coaches. I was in post as Sports Minister when the scandal of historic abuse in football broke. It was a no-brainer that while safeguards in sport are much better than they were, loopholes existed and this is by far the greatest of them all. When positions of trust was first discussed in the late '90s, organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Christian Institute and others raised concerns about the exclusion of sports coaches. They continue to welcome efforts, alongside newer organisations such as the Offside Trust, to expand the legislation to protect young people from abuse by those who hold some form of power over them.

I will never forget the bravery of the former Crewe Alexandra player Andy Woodward, who publicly revealed that he was a victim of Barry Bennell, a prolific sex offender who is now in prison for multiple counts of abuse. Owing to Andy coming forward, the Football Association and the NSPCC set up a hotline dedicated to helping footballers who had experienced historical sexual abuse. In the first week, the hotline received nearly 900 calls. The footballer sexual abuse scandal has been widely documented, but the problem is not limited to football. In the weeks that followed, I listened to heartbreaking testimonies of athletes from various sports, speaking out about their experiences of historical sexual abuse at the hands of coercive coaches or managers who abused their position of trust for their own gratification.

How sport reacted to those horrific stories is something that should be recognised. The FA did what it had to do for football and the same was done for other sports. Within a relatively short time, sport as a whole, while recognising that many of the incidents in the press were historical and took place before much of our child protection legislation was in place, instigated internal changes to safeguarding practices to ensure that procedures were in place today to maximise protection against abuse in sport. All sport, with support from Sport England and the NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit, made positive changes in a relatively short time to the way they keep their participants safe. They rightly took responsibility and they took it seriously. Yet the one reasonable request of Government they asked, one that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and I supported, is the one area that still lacks progress: to close the loophole in the misuse of positions of trust legislation to include sports coaches.

Under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, it is illegal for certain professions, such as teachers, to engage in sexual activity with a 16 or 17-year-old, as they are considered a person in a position of trust. The Act prescribes a limited number of roles, but does not extend into a range of non-statutory settings that may be subject to

far less scrutiny than those covered by the Act. We should perhaps reflect briefly on why we have that particular section of legislation in the 2003 Act. People who work in schools as carers or youth workers will have gone through the required Disclosure and Barring Service checks. Although some might fall through the cracks, ultimately people who pose a known risk to children or vulnerable adults will not, if the system works properly, be allowed to work in that sector. The legislation adds an extra layer of safeguarding to prevent those in positions of trust from forming relationships with children who, although they are over the age of consent, are not considered legal adults and could be abused, given the nature of the power balance. At present, a continued reliance on the law of consent and the accompanying Crown Prosecution Service guidance, such as the aide-mémoire on the abuse of power, places the responsibility on young people themselves to recognise and resist sexual advances from adults in positions of authority over them who are not on the current prescribed list.

Therefore, when an adult occupies a position of authority over a child, it is not practical or possible to differentiate the inappropriate utilisation of this position by the adult from the potential exertion of the influence. It also requires children to go through a criminal justice process that some might argue is currently not supporting victims of child sex abuse, given that the latest Office for National Statistics data suggest that only 4% of cases of child sexual abuse reported to police lead to a charge.

I have spent a significant amount of my life coaching sport, so I concur with sports and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children that in sport, especially but not exclusively, the elite pathway is a vulnerable area. In my view, the Ministry of Justice should have acted straightaway to close the loophole in the 2003 Act. When I was dealing with the issue as Sports Minister, it was claimed that if the legislation was extended to sports coaches, it would also need to be extended to music teachers, private tutors, and faith and driving instructors. My response, as the daughter of a social worker who has spent her working life dealing with child sexual abuse, is, "Yes, it absolutely should be." I fail to understand why it should not. Concern about the scope of the prescribed list is a poor reason to avoid taking a policy position and changing the positions of trust provisions. Anyone in a position to influence another person's journey through life, meaning that a power balance rests with them, should not be able to abuse that position via a sexual relationship. Someone's place in the team or time on the pitch, or the competitions in which they are entered, should not be vulnerable to another person's physical or emotional demands.

The legislation can be easily amended, either by adding to the list or removing it altogether. The MOJ, at the time, asked for evidence of why change was required, and although evidence was provided, nothing has happened. A freedom of information request found that between 2014 and 2018 there were 653 cases in which adults who could be regarded as being in a position of trust had had a sexual relationship with a 16 or 17-year-old. Of the 495 cases in which the adult's role was recorded, the majority were in sport, and the data showed that such incidents had increased. Sport is doing what it can to prevent dangerous people from working with children and young adults. It has enhanced its safeguarding procedures, as part of the implementation of the sports governance code, which I oversaw as Minister, and many

use enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks. However, while the loophole exists, in the eyes of the law it is deemed okay for someone to have sex with someone over the age of 16 who is in their trust while in sport. Therefore, coercive and abuse behaviour will continue, legally, and the lives of many more youngsters will be ruined. There is no time for dither or delay. The legislative loophole needs a legislative solution. So although I do not need to, as it goes without saying, I commend my Bill to the House.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak very briefly and strongly in favour of this 10-minute rule Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman has misunderstood the procedure, and I misunderstood the hon. Gentleman. He only has locus to speak at this point if he wishes to oppose the Bill.

Richard Graham: There is no danger of that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I was giving the hon. Gentleman the chance, in a lawyerly way, to say that he is opposing the Bill in order that he might say what is good about it, but given the time pressure today, I would appreciate it if he did not try to do that, as he cannot now speak in support. I note that he has registered his support for the Bill, and I think the House and the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) are grateful for that.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tracey Crouch, Richard Graham, Sarah Champion, Jim Shannon, Carol Monaghan, Sir Roger Gale, Bambos Charalambous, Damian Collins, Christina Rees, Jonathan Gullis, Anthony Mangnall and Holly Mumby-Croft present the Bill.

Tracey Crouch accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 July, and to be printed (Bill 140).

Madam Deputy Speaker: As we did not suspend the House after the previous item of business, I will now suspend the House for three minutes in order that the usual cleansing process can take place.

2.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill [Lords]

Considered in Committee

[DAME ELEANOR LAING *in the Chair*]

2.58 pm

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): I should explain that in these exceptional circumstances, although the Chair of the Committee would normally sit in the Clerk's Chair during the Committee stage, in order to comply with social distancing requirements I will remain in the Speaker's Chair although I will be carrying out the role not of Deputy Speaker but of Chairman of the Committee. If Members obey the rules to the letter, the occupant of the Chair at this time should be addressed not as Deputy Speaker but as Chairman of the Committee. Just before we commence, I should inform the Committee that there has been a production error on the amendment paper. The names of Bob Blackman and Nick Fletcher should not have been published in support of new clause 4 and new clause 5.

Clause 1

DIVORCE: REMOVAL OF REQUIREMENT TO ESTABLISH
FACTS ETC

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 2, line 8, leave out "20" and insert "46"

This amendment would extend the minimum legal period for a divorce from six months to one year (with the additional six weeks between the conditional and final orders).

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 2, page 2, line 9, at end insert—

'(5A) For the purposes of subsection (5), "the start of the proceedings" means—

- (a) in the case of an application that is to proceed as an application by both parties to the marriage, the date on which both parties apply for an order under subsection (1), or
- (b) in the case of an application that is to proceed as an application by one party to the marriage only, the date when the notice of an application for a divorce order has been received by the other party to the marriage.'

This amendment would define the start of divorce proceedings so that it is clear when the 20-week period would start.

Amendment 3, page 2, line 19, at end insert—

'(8A) In the case of an application that is to proceed as an application by one party to the marriage only, there shall be no commencement of financial provision proceedings until the end of the period of 20 weeks from the start of the proceedings for the divorce order unless—

- (a) the other party to the marriage agrees to the commencement of financial provision proceedings, or
- (b) there is an application under section 22 for the court to make an order for maintenance pending suit.'

This amendment would ensure that there are no discussions about financial settlement in the 20 week period unless both parties agree or there is an application to the court for interim maintenance and financial injunctions.

Clause stand part.

Clauses 2 and 3 stand part.

Amendment 4, in clause 4, page 4, line 9, at end insert—

‘(2A) For the purposes of subsection (2), “the start of the proceedings” means—

- (a) in the case of an application that is to proceed as an application by both civil partners, the date on which those persons apply for an order under section 44(1), or
- (b) in the case of an application that is to proceed as an application by one civil partner only, the date when the notice of an application for a dissolution order has been received by the other civil partner.’

This amendment would define the start of dissolution proceedings so that it is clear when the 20-week period would start.

Amendment 5, page 4, line 18, at end insert—

‘(5A) In the case of an application that is to proceed as an application by one civil partner only, there shall be no commencement of financial provision proceedings until the end of the period of 20 weeks from the start of the proceedings for the divorce order unless—

- (a) the other civil partner agrees to the commencement of financial provision proceedings, or
- (b) there is an application under schedule 5, paragraph 2(1) for maintenance pending suit.’

This amendment would ensure that there are no discussions about financial settlement in the 20-week period for the dissolving of a civil partnership unless both parties agree or there is an application to the court for interim maintenance and financial injunctions.

Clauses 4 to 8 stand part.

Government amendment 6.

Clause 9 stand part.

New clause 1—*Increased support for marriage and civil partnerships—*

‘(1) Section 22 of the Family Law Act 1996 (Funding for marriage support services) is amended as follows.

- (2) In subsection (1), for “may” substitute “must”.
- (3) In subsection (1)(a), at end insert “, both before and during a marriage”.
- (4) After subsection (1)(a) insert—
“(aa) marriage counselling for any partners to a marriage where an application has been made to the court to dissolve the marriage under section 1 of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973.”

(5) After subsection (3) insert—

“(4) Any reference to marriage or marital breakdown in this section also applies to civil partnerships.”

This new clause would ensure increased support for marriages and new support for couples where an application for divorce has been made to the court.

New clause 2—*Report on the impact on divorce applications and marriage support—*

‘(1) The Secretary of State must publish an annual report on the impact of this Act on divorce and dissolution proceedings and marriage and civil partnership with the first report to be published no later than 18 months after the day on which this section comes into force.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must include, but is not limited to—

- (a) the number of divorce and dissolution applications made under the provisions of this Act by the sex and income of the applicant and respondent, and
- (b) the number of children in the relationships subject to the divorce and dissolution applications, and
- (c) the number of married couples or civil partners who seek counselling during the divorce process, broken down by geographic location, and

(d) a statement on the support services and marriage counselling available to married couples or civil partners as an alternative to divorce proceedings under this Act, broken down by geographic location.

(3) The report under subsection (1) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament.’

New clause 3—*Divorce after one year separation with consent—*

‘(1) The Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 1(2), omit subsection (d) and insert—

“(d) that the parties to the marriage have lived apart for a continuous period of at least one year immediately preceding the presentation of the petition (hereafter in this Act referred to as “separation for one year”) and the respondent consents to a decree being granted;”

(3) In section 10(1), substitute “separation for one year” for “two years’ separation”;

(4) In section 10(2)(a), substitute “separation for one year” for “two years’”;

(5) In section 10(2)(b), substitute “separation for one year” for “two years’”.

The intention of this new clause is to adopt in England and Wales the approach currently available in Scotland allowing a no-fault divorce to be granted on consent grounds in just one year.

New clause 4—*Civil legal aid for divorce, dissolution or separation—*

‘(1) Schedule 1 to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 is amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph 18, insert—

18A Civil legal services provided in relation to the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 and the Civil Partnership Act 2004.’

This new clause would add divorce, dissolution and separation proceedings to the list of civil legal services qualifying for legal aid.

New clause 5—*Legal aid for divorce proceedings report—*

‘(1) The Secretary of State must conduct a review of the cost and benefits of providing legal aid for divorce proceedings.

(2) In conducting the review under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must take account of the disparity between men and women in their capacity to afford legal advice in matrimonial proceedings.

(3) The Secretary of State must make arrangements for a copy of the report of the review to be laid before both Houses of Parliament no later than six months after the date on which this Act is passed.’

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to carry out a review within six months of the impact of extending legal aid for divorce proceedings, taking account of any disproportionate effect on women of lack of access to legal aid.

New clause 6—*Financial abuse qualifying condition in legal aid family matters—*

‘(1) Schedule 1 to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 is amended as follows.

(2) In paragraph 12 (1) (a) after “violence” insert “or financial abuse”.

(3) In paragraph 12 (1) (b) after “violence” insert “or financial abuse”.

(4) In paragraph 9, at the end insert—

““financial abuse” includes—

- (a) having money or other property stolen,
- (b) being defrauded,
- (c) being put under pressure in relation to money or other property, and
- (d) having money or other property misused.”

This new clause would add financial abuse (as defined in section 42 of the Care Act 2014) to the domestic violence condition under which civil legal aid may be provided in a matter arising out of a family relationship.

New clause 9—Review of Act in relation to children's financial status—

(1) The Secretary of State must conduct a review of the financial effects of this Act on families where the marital status (including a current or dissolved civil partnership) of a parent explicitly determines the eligibility for benefits for dependant children.

(2) The Secretary of State must make arrangements for a copy of the report of the review to be laid before both Houses of Parliament no later than six months after the date on which this Act is passed.

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish by the end of this year a report on how this Act will affect the financial status of children and families where benefit entitlement is linked to the civil partnership or marriage status of one or both parents.

Amendment 7, in the schedule, page 19, line 4, at beginning insert—

() Section 22 of the Family Law Act 1996 (funding for marriage support services) is amended as follows.

() In subsection (1), leave out “may, with the approval of the Treasury,” and insert “must”.

() In subsection (1)(a), at the end insert “, both before and during a marriage”.

() After subsection (1)(a) insert—

(i) marriage counselling for any partners to a marriage where an application has been made to the court for a divorce order under section 1 of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973.”

() After subsection (3) insert—

“(4) Any reference to marriage or marital breakdown in this section also applies to civil partnerships.”

That the schedule be the schedule to the Bill.

Fiona Bruce: This Bill is a bad Bill. It sends out the wrong message at the wrong time. No-fault divorce is really state-approved unilateral divorce. Ministers like to say that it is all about the divorce process and not about marriage. They are wrong. The removal of fault sends out the signal that marriage can be unilaterally exited with no available recourse for the party who has been left. The public get it, even if Ministers do not. In the “Finding fault?” national opinion survey, 71% thought that fault should remain in law. That is a survey on which, in other respects, the Government have relied in bringing forward this legislation. Even in the Government's own consultation, 80% opposed the proposals, and the Bill was not even in our manifesto.

3 pm

Making divorce easier and quicker will inevitably change the nature of the commitment that is made when marrying, because those doing so will recognise that it is something that can be exited easily and quickly, without having to prove that the relationship has broken down. Commitment within marriage will become unreliable. People will marry less due to the low expectation of permanence in marriage, and they will cohabit more as the distinction between the two is eroded and what marriage really means becomes confused: no longer “till death us do part”, but “until I give you six months' notice to quit, with no reason given.”

Asymmetric relationships will increase—that is, people entering marriage with different expectations. That is a recipe for misunderstandings, instability and heartache.

I accept that in some cases—though by no means all, or even a majority—faults cited on a petition may bear little resemblance to the actual reasons for a marriage faltering. This appears to be the root of the Government's reasoning for this Bill—namely, that exaggerated allegations may increase conflict. But herein lies the problem. In seeking to address this issue by removing any requirement to give a reason and by speeding up the process to just six months, the Bill will, in my opinion, create far greater problems. It will fundamentally alter the whole meaning of marriage, with far-reaching consequences. Legislation affects behaviour and culture. That is why we are here. Whether Ministers agree or not, the signal the Bill will send out is that relationships, including marriage, can be transient. Instead of supporting parties when difficulties arise, as we should, the Bill offers an easy way out. That is why I so strongly oppose it.

Stable relationships are good for society as a whole: instability in relationships is the opposite. Unstable relationships are costly for society as a whole. I accept that not all marriages are saveable, but the Bill will accelerate divorce rates, not only with an immediate spike but potentially long term, too. Make something easier and there will be more of it. The Bill will result in fewer marriages. Why bother if marriage does not mean that much? Fewer stable relationships will result. It is likely to foster a preponderance of short, even serial relationships in early and mid-life for those who can obtain them, with a sad parallel in the proliferation of loneliness in old age. It will result in less trust in marriage, more insecurity and, critically, more children experiencing fractured families—particularly more children experiencing shocks at the sudden fracturing of a marriage. It will result in quick splits, with some children left grieving potentially for years afterwards. For some, their health, educational and employment life chances will be gravely affected.

Generations to come will pay a high price for the Bill, in terms of emotional and physical health and wellbeing, a loss of wider family relationships—not least between grandparents and grandchildren—and the support and security they bring, and a further weakening of community life, because stable marriages promote stronger communities. When we are unhappy, we are very often less efficient in our studies and at work, and so there will be lower productivity and hence a less prosperous nation with the state—all of us—picking up the financial and other costs involved. In sum, there will be less human flourishing.

So many others, apart from the parties, suffer when marriages break up. There is an epidemic of loneliness in this country today. Why? In many cases, it is fractured families. There is an epidemic of mental health problems in children. Why? In many cases, it is fractured families. Those promoting the Bill should recognise its wider implications, not just provide a quick and easy exit for one or both parties. That is why amendment 1 is so important, and I am minded to test the will of the House on it. It would extend the minimum legal period for a divorce from six months to one year. The 20-week period in clause 1 is far too short. It needs extending, and I urge colleagues to support amendment 1, not least to help reduce the shock for a vulnerable woman with young children, like the one I described on Second Reading, who could be left in a potentially desperate position.

Here is a scenario anticipated by one experienced family lawyer as a result of the Bill. He describes how a man, if he wants to get out of a marriage, can railroad

through his application in six months, leaving the woman at the end of that period without anything like adequate financial means. She could then be forced into a poor financial settlement simply to survive. We have talked a lot in this place in recent years about non-violent domestic abuse: would not that really be another form of that? In many cases, the stronger and more financially endowed partner will leave their partner—often a woman, occasionally a man—extremely vulnerable. It is a so-called petitioner's charter.

Saying that the Bill will reduce conflict surely misses the point. If a man—or woman—can behave unreasonably by walking quickly away without being held to account, giving a reason or dialoguing rationally, why should he behave any more reasonably during negotiations relating to finances or children, which is when the real conflict occurs, as experienced family lawyers tell us time and again? The Bill does nothing to address that. That would have been a better place to focus on in the Bill rather than removing fault.

Amendment 1 would at least give more time for discussion, a longer breathing space an opportunity to take counsel, or at least help to bring a better end to the most important, legally binding and emotional commitment any two people can make to each other, to help them plan for life after divorce and, critically, more time to help prepare any children of the marriage for the impact on them and on wider family relationships. Of course, as I say, not all marriages can or should be saved, particularly where there is abuse, but a great deal more may be salvageable than is commonly assumed. Interestingly, research from the Marriage Foundation has found that

“high conflict warring couples are a rarity among couples who split. The vast majority of family breakdown involves low conflict couples, who are largely indistinguishable”—

a year—

“before they split from couples that remain together. Most”—

divorce involves previously

“happy couples and therefore comes out of the blue.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for her considerable contribution in setting the scene for us. She and I have a very similar outlook on life, as I believe others in this House have as well. Is it her intention to ensure, through her amendments and new clauses, that services to save marriages—Relate and others—are available from the very beginning of a relationship breaking down to almost the end of it, so that every person at every stage will have a chance and an opportunity to save a marriage, rather than let it fall apart?

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely agree—indeed, not just from the very beginning of a marriage, but from before it, as I shall mention shortly when I refer to new clause 1.

I return to the important point that a great many family breakdowns may be a lot more salvageable than is commonly assumed, and therefore help towards that is important. Statistics bear this out: only 9% of married couples who split one year later could be categorised as high-conflict couples who reported quarrelling a lot in the year before the split, and 60% of married couples who split were low-conflict couples who also reported some degree of happiness. This Bill should have focused

on helping to keep them together, not least, as has just been mentioned, by offering every couple going into marriage a pre-marriage course.

Such courses would help couples to appreciate that it is not all plain sailing; to understand what the commitment they are making will involve in practice and how to resolve conflict; to understand that better times do not always follow a break-up; and to equip themselves to persevere through difficulties to better times within their marriage. Such difficulties include the disruption a first child can bring, which is so often a crunch point in a marriage, and the current lockdown crisis, which has understandably exacerbated stress in some relationships. Indeed, lawyers report an increase in divorce inquiries of over 40% at present. The last solution offered by the Government for this should be a quick, spur-of-the-moment escape route.

This Bill is not focused on helping to keep marriages and families together; it does exactly the opposite. That is why new clause 1 is so important, and I am also minded to test the will of the Committee on it. New clause 1 would ensure increased funding for relationship counselling and new support for couples where an application for divorce has been made to a court. The availability of marriage support services in this country is wholly inadequate and requires substantially greater Government investment. This is no doubt one of the reasons why we have one of the highest rates of relationship breakdown in the western world.

It was encouraging that, in the last Budget, the Chancellor committed £2.5 million towards this, but much more is needed. Importantly, it is needed for less well-off couples, who cannot afford the private relationships counselling that better-off people can afford. The Government say that they want to remove conflict flashpoints and reduce areas of conflict in the divorce process. Improved relationship support and counselling would help achieve that. The Bill should have focused on it, and new clause 1 will amend this omission. I was encouraged by the support from those in many parts of the House for this on Second Reading.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is most gracious in giving way. She will understand and agree with me and probably others that churches offer such services. Is it possible within this legislation, with the extra money that will come through if the new clause is accepted, for the Government to work alongside churches to ensure that relationships can survive?

Fiona Bruce: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Some excellent marriage counselling and, indeed, pre-marriage courses are supplied through church organisations. They are very popular, and I personally think it would be marvellous to see a lot more of them and to see some Government-funded support for them.

Counsellors help parties to understand the implications of what marriage means and, when difficulties occur, of what splitting up would mean for them, their children, and their wider families. They help people to consider what a split will involve practically, regarding contact arrangements and finances, and whether the option of staying together might be something that they could look at. Counsellors give people tools to help work through the problems, since they may not have had a role model to copy in earlier life. Critically, if the

divorce goes ahead, such help can assist a couple to navigate their future relationship in a way that is best for the future wellbeing of their children, and that will, hopefully, foster continued co-operation and constructive communication, while avoiding, or at least minimising, unnecessary acrimony and relationship acidity over the many years—often decades—to come, for the benefit of all involved. It might help people who receive such counselling to know two interesting facts. First, in a study that involved more than 1,500 people, Professor Janet Walker found that two years on from a divorce, many people wished they had been warned beforehand of the harsh realities of life after separation and said that if they had been forewarned, they might have sought reconciliation. Another piece of research from the US in the early 2000s found that people who are unhappy in their marriage are more likely to be happier five years later if they do not divorce than if they do.

3.15 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I am learning a lot from my hon. Friend, and I am grateful for her contribution. She will be able to inform me better, but one thing that occurred to me is that in the process of divorce—I am talking about friends of mine who have been through this—all the voices are about separation. That could come from the legal profession, to which I mean no disrespect, or from friends who get drawn into separate camps, but there does not seem to be much space for conciliation in the most important contract that two people will ever make. Does new clause 1 seek to address that disparity and the way that such forces work in those difficult circumstances?

Fiona Bruce: That is exactly its point—very much so. That goes to the heart of the key purpose of new clause 1. Relationship support for couples in difficulty can help them to work together, so that the roots of their conflict can be addressed and terminated, rather than the relationship itself. Investment in relationship counselling would help not just the parties, but their children and wider society. Strikingly, the one provision of the Family Law Act 1996 that was retained is section 22, which enables the Government to provide funding for marriage support services, research into the causes of marital breakdown and research into ways of preventing marital breakdown. Sadly, in recent years it seems that those provisions have not been used, and no funding has been provided specifically for marriage support. In February 2020, the Government said that between 2014 and 2019 they had invested £46.9 million in relationship support services. With family breakdown costing the UK at least £51 billion each year, surely it is now time to increase support specifically for marriage with this new clause.

On Second Reading, the Lord Chancellor said that he is a supporter of the institution of marriage. I encourage him to take a leaf out of the forward to the consultation response written by his predecessor, who stated:

“I believe that we should do everything we can to try to rebuild relationships before they become irretrievably broken down... This includes, where possible, helping to ensure that relationships can be saved before they are legally ended.”

Will my right hon. and learned Friend pass what might be called the “Gauke test”, by doing everything he can to support saveable marriages and support new clause 1?

Let me turn to amendments 2 and 4. Amendment 2 would define the start of divorce proceedings, so that it is clear when the 20-week period would start. This is an important concern about the Bill. Amendment 2, and amendment 4 with regard to civil partnerships, seek to deal with a serious defect of the Bill. At present, the petitioner for a divorce must prove service on the other party before proceedings get under way. They must prove, on the record, that the other party has received notice and knows that they are being divorced. This Bill contains no such requirement. The applicant can simply lodge his application at court and the 20-week clock referred to in the Bill for proceedings to commence starts ticking.

The Bill needs amending to provide for the 20-week period not to start until the application for a divorce has been received by the other party to the marriage and this has been confirmed at court. Otherwise, as the Bill now reads, one party to the marriage could have far less than 20 weeks’ notice—if, for example, they are away from home, ill, or for some other reason the notice is not effectively served on them—prior to a court making a conditional order, leaving only six weeks left before a final order. Worse still, the Bill, as currently worded, gives a green light to unscrupulous petitioners to ambush their spouse by ensuring that by one means or another, their spouse does not receive the notice of claim filed at court promptly—so-called bombshell applications—because proposed new section 1(3)(b) of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 says that if the 20-week clock has ticked, the court

“must...make a divorce order”.

That can leave as little as only six weeks, or a few days more. It is possible for a devious partner to give a vulnerable spouse little over six weeks’ notice that they are being divorced—as I have said, a petitioner’s charter. That mischief needs correcting.

The Government will say that the Bill limits the opportunity for respondents to delay, control or frustrate the divorce application, and I should be grateful if the Minister clarified where in the Bill it states that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): On the very good point that people need to know that the proceedings have commenced, what does my hon. Friend think would be good service so that we can be satisfied on that matter?

Fiona Bruce: In my view, it is important to ensure that service is recorded. Service can be made by someone who professionally serves notice and then registers that fact at court. At present, the process of service has to be evidenced before the divorce proceeding process continues any further. All I am asking is that we have the same regulations now.

Even the Law Society, which supports the broad principles of the Bill—to my regret, as I am a member—is supportive of both parties having the same minimum period, so this is a very serious point, which needs to be addressed. As it stands, the 20-week period starting on application is, I believe, defended by Ministers because it makes the process simple. However, in this Bill’s simplicity lies its harshness or, as the noble and learned Baroness Deech has said in another place, its brutality. The shock for many people of being divorced within six months will be hard enough. The shock of being divorced in little over six weeks would be wholly unjust.

[*Fiona Bruce*]

The Lord Chancellor has said that he will work with the Family Procedure Rule Committee to address this point. I await the Minister's reassurance on this, which will need to be very strong to counter my view that this amendment to protect vulnerable respondents needs to be in the Bill.

I now turn briefly to amendments 3 and 5 and new clause 2. Amendments 3 and 5 would ensure that there are no discussions about financial settlements in the 20-week period—or ideally, a longer period if amendment 1 is passed—unless both parties agree, or there is an application to court for interim maintenance and financial injunctions. The point of these amendments is that they give a breathing space for the parties to dialogue. Sadly, there is no requirement for this in the Bill—a litigation-free period in which it is hoped the parties may take counsel and try to establish whether they could be reconciled.

New clause 2 would require the Government to report annually on the impact of this Bill on divorce applications and marriage support. It would require them to report to this place on the impact of the Bill and, importantly, on those who are vulnerable, whether financially or otherwise, including children, and, equally importantly, on the availability and take-up of counselling and support services for those involved in divorce proceedings across the country.

In conclusion, as I am sure colleagues will now be aware, I fundamentally oppose this Bill. It does not promote fairness or justice, as I have sought to explain. What is fair or just about someone being able to just walk swiftly away from their relationship responsibilities, especially if children are involved, with no dialogue and without being held to account? Nothing in this Bill will help to reduce the inherent pain of the ending of so many relationships—of the rejection, the loss, the severance of a relationship that started with so many high hopes. This is a sad day for this House and my saddest in 10 years here.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Put simply, Labour supports this Bill. It is in line with Labour party policy. It sends the right message, we believe, many years later than it should have arrived in this place.

We support reforming some of the archaic and outdated hoops that people have to jump through if they want their marriage to end. People who may never have sought or needed a divorce may not know that there is currently no such thing as a no-fault divorce and that one of the parties must be “to blame” for a relationship ending. They may not know that if there is no blame to be laid, people must spend two years separated before they can file for divorce. They may not know that if one of the parties objects to divorce, the other must remain married to them for five years. That is why we hope that Ministers will reject amendment 1. I will turn specifically to that soon.

Marriage is supposed to be a happy and special occasion where two people come together in front of their loved ones and commit themselves to each other, and then set up their lives together. But we would be naive to think that all marriages will last forever. People change and life changes. Something that may have once seemed perfect will not necessarily be that way forever.

There is no reason why, in situations where there is no fault, two people should be forced into a hostile situation where they have to find blame, keeping them married for long periods and preventing them from moving on with their lives.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Of course what the hon. Gentleman says is entirely reasonable—that where there is no fault it is right that that should be acknowledged. Where there is fault, should that be acknowledged, or ignored or concealed, or what?

Alex Cunningham: I think that is a matter for the individuals involved. Adults who are embarking on divorce are supposedly mature people and they should be able to sort these things out for themselves. If they want to blame somebody for some reason, that is very much a matter for them.

It is right that this Parliament is taking action to bring divorce law into the 21st century and recognise that in many cases there is no blame—there is just no desire to be together any more. We should be facilitating peaceful endings of marriages where that is possible. I am pleased that this Bill makes excellent moves towards achieving that.

Yet the Opposition have identified several related matters that we felt needed to be heard and considered. From the list of amendments, I see that some Conservative Members also felt that some changes were needed. I plan to address these in turn. Amendment 1 would extend the minimum legal period for a divorce from the six months in the Bill to a year. We did not see what value or benefit this would provide; it would simply force two people together for longer than they need to be.

Fiona Bruce: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman listened to my speech when I was talking about the opportunity for more time to discuss potential reconciliation.

Alex Cunningham: I think that when people embark on divorce proceedings, it is not because they have just changed their mind overnight—relationships break down over a long period and they get to that point. So extending the period anywhere beyond six months does not serve any great further purpose.

I know that it is up to the Government to defend their Bill, but we hope that Ministers will not give way on this issue. Amendment 1 is not within the spirit of the Bill, and it fails to recognise that, by the time a married couple reach the stage of deciding to file for a divorce, they have already made their decision. It is highly unlikely that they will change their minds simply because they have to wait longer for the divorce to be finalised. We are talking about adults—adults who were deemed to have the ability to consent to get married in the first place, and adults who still have the capacity to consent to end that marriage.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What does the hon. Gentleman make of the surveys that show that up to 50% of people who divorce come to regret it? Does he think that they are merely deluded, or are those surveys wrong? What is his assessment of that?

3.30 pm

Alex Cunningham: I will address that later in my speech, but I am in favour of greater support for people who want to see whether they can reconcile their relationship.

Let us not prolong the hurt and difficulty that people inevitably go through when they decide that their marriage is no longer what either of them wants. As the Secretary of State said on Second Reading, a minimum period of six months provides

“an equality of approach that will no longer discriminate in favour of those couples who perhaps have the means and the wherewithal to either separate and live separately”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 97.]

We must take into consideration the impact of our decisions on people’s lives. I see no reason why six months would be too short a time for this process to take place. Dragging out the proceedings would not be fair to either party, and it certainly would not be fair on any children involved; we have a duty to take their welfare into consideration, too. It would be infinitely better for children to have two parents who separated and divorced quickly and quietly, rather than those children enduring years of something that can be very traumatic and have a lasting impact on them and their future relationships.

On Second Reading, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) said:

“We have all experienced in our surgeries those parents who continue to use their children as weapons in prosecuting a continuing war against their former partners. The removal of fault will not remove that entirely, but I am confident that it will certainly diminish it.”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 113.]

He was right. Why should anyone’s children be used as weapons for years on end, causing more pain, distress and doubtless illness as well? Let us not delay proceedings even further. Let us acknowledge that, by the time a divorce has been filed, the parties have already made up their minds and should be allowed to dissolve their marriage without having the legal period extended to a year.

Amendments 3, 4 and 5 appear to be an attempt to frustrate the process of a speedy resolution to divorce proceedings. Amendments 3 and 5 would strengthen the hand of the person who has control of the financial resources in situations where there is financial abuse. Maybe I have missed something, but it seems to me that it would do nothing to help the party who does not have the financial upper hand. Financial settlements are needed as quickly as possible to enable a divorcing couple to live apart. If the intent is for divorcing couples to remain living together during the period of the divorce due to financial restrictions on one party preventing them from moving out, this would be ill-advised. It would not lead to some miraculous reconciliation, but will allow for even greater friction, and it would be counterproductive to the aims of the Bill to encourage amicable divorce and separation. The Law Society has said:

“There can be severe, sometimes irretrievable, financial prejudice to an applicant if final divorce is granted before a financial settlement is reached.”

It is important for discussions on financial settlements not to be delayed, which would only delay divorce proceedings and cause further hurt and frustration.

I turn to new clause 1. I do not think anyone can fail to agree that increased support for marriages is a good thing, but we need much more clarity on how it would work and how it would be funded. I certainly do not

think it is something that could or should be made mandatory for couples who are petitioning for divorce. The availability of support for people who wished to access it would be welcome, and I am mindful that couples who would like support may not have the resources that others are able to pay for. If the Government are not minded to adopt this new clause, perhaps the Minister could commit to bringing his own plan to the House designed to provide more support for couples petitioning for a divorce, as well as support for couples who want help to try to put things right before they petition for a divorce.

On new clause 2, we would be in favour of a report on the impact on divorce applications and marriage support. This House works best when it is informed by facts and the reality of people’s lives, and the hope is that this report would give us a true insight into the impact of the Bill. I hope the Minister will comment on that.

Jim Shannon: I probably have a different opinion on this from the hon. Gentleman, but if we are dealing with facts, I understand that there is an evidential base of facts that shows that 50% of people who have divorced, as the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) referred to earlier, wish to have had the opportunity not to have divorced. If there is an evidential base and the facts are there, why not take those on board?

Alex Cunningham: We do take the facts on board. People may feel that they have got it wrong, and we have all seen examples of people who get married, get divorced and get remarried. We have seen examples where people have done that more than once, which is remarkable. People have the choice, but that does not mean we should lengthen the period that people have to wait before they can divorce. It will be particularly interesting to see how many couples opt for no-fault divorces as an alternative to laying the blame at the feet of one person in the relationship.

Some of the impact of this Bill may be unmeasurable, but it does not make that impact less important. For example, we might not know the true impact of quicker and more amicable divorces on children and how that affects their wellbeing and future lives, but I am confident in saying that having two parents apart but happy is infinitely better for a child than having parents stuck in an unhappy marriage for years on end. I hope the Minister will comment on that.

That leads me to new clause 3, which would reduce the time period to allow a divorce with consent from two years to one. I do not believe the new clause is needed, as the provisions within the Bill are better than what the new clause would achieve. It would still require couples to stay married for a year before they can petition for divorce, and it completely ignores the reality in which people live their lives. To be separated, people have to live apart and at least sleep apart, which simply is not possible for many people. Many homes do not have the luxury of extra bedrooms, and I doubt that 12 months on a sofa is very acceptable. Many couples do not have the disposable income for them to live separately and they have nowhere else to go, so I am not sure what benefit the new clause is supposed to have. Allowing a no-fault divorce is infinitely preferable to forcing an unhappy couple to stay married for a year before they can divorce.

[Alex Cunningham]

New clause 4, which stands in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, and in mine and those of other right hon. and hon. Members, relates to funds and income. It is undeniable that there is a problem with access to legal aid, not just in divorce, but across a wide spectrum of areas. The huge cuts made to funding over the past 10 years have led to unfairness and a lack of justice across our nation. Without adequate legal aid for divorce proceedings, we have a situation where some people cannot afford to petition for divorce. We are essentially forcing people to stay married to someone they do not want to be married to simply because they do not have enough money to take legal action.

If the Minister agreed to act, he would have the support of the Law Society. In a briefing, it told me that respondents should have sufficient time to respond to a petition and seek advice. It also stated:

“In our evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights in regard to the human rights implications of the Bill, we highlighted that there is the potential for issues under article 14 of the Human Rights Act 1998 due to its potential to have a particularly detrimental impact on women, who due to a range of societal issues are more likely to be less resilient to financial risks...While divorce affords some protections to women at the end of a marriage, they can only make best use of these legal safeguards if they can participate in the proceedings fully.”

It is right and just that we extend legal aid to divorce, dissolution and separation proceedings to allow people to escape unhappy marriages and civil partnerships. While we welcome the provisions in the Bill to make divorce easier, will the Government acknowledge that without legal aid, we are simply making divorce easier for those who have the funds to petition, while little change will be made for those who do not have such funds? I hope the Minister will go away and consider that, as we must do better for those who do not have the resources to use the legal system.

New clause 5 would require the Secretary of State to carry out a review within six months of the impact of extending legal aid for divorce proceedings. We in the Opposition are particularly interested in the disproportionate impact that an absence of legal aid has on women and how Government can help put a stop to that. Does the Minister agree that we should be conducting research to collect facts about the impacts of decisions made by this House and the potential impacts that decisions made by this House could have? With this in mind, I hope the Minister will accept that we must actively seek out areas where a group of people are being disproportionately negatively impacted, and make the necessary changes to fix that.

We know that legal aid is available in some circumstances, but, as we say in new clause 6, we would like to see financial abuse listed as a specific condition under which civil legal aid may be provided in matters arising out of family relationship. If a person is being financially abused, they simply do not have the funds to petition for a divorce. Does the Minister accept and acknowledge this fact? If he does, perhaps we can make some progress. This could be transformational change for those who have been essentially kept from having their freedom by their partners because they do not have the resources to pursue a divorce. Can the Minister tell me now whether he will seek to introduce financial abuse as a part of the domestic abuse conditions that allow access to legal aid?

If not, is it the case that the Government do not wish to provide real and tangible assistance to those who are being financially abused and cannot escape an abusive relationship without that assistance?

There are other areas of family law that I would like to be addressed in the Bill, such as the out-of-date, archaic approach which means that families are entitled to bereavement support only if the parents are married. Not only does this fail to recognise that many families have happy and secure lives without the need for marriage, but it means unhappy couples may be discouraged from petitioning for a divorce because of the potential financial consequences. However, it goes much wider than that.

I have a constituent who when living with her partner had a child with him. Sadly, the relationship was not sustained but her partner, who left, kept up regular maintenance payments for his child until his death. Despite having those regular payments, my constituent is denied bereavement support. When I wrote to the Government seeking clarity on this, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Baroness Stedman-Scott, responded by simply saying that marriage was a key part of benefit entitlement. This is an outdated approach, and we must reframe our public policy on it. We live in a society where families come in all shapes and sizes, and we should not be deeming one shape or size as preferable to another.

The chief executive of Child Bereavement UK said:

“The inequality that unmarried parents face in the bereavement system denies them access to this financial support at a time of great distress and anxiety on many levels following the death of a partner...It is a gross injustice that the current system ultimately disadvantages bereaved children, who have no influence over their parents’ marital status.”

For bereavement support when one parent dies to be permitted only if the parents were married is backwards, and I hope the Government recognise that and will take action to right this wrong.

New clause 9, which is in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and in mine, is an important one. I will not steal my hon. Friend’s thunder, but it is absolutely right that the Secretary of State publish by the end of this year a report on how this legislation will affect the financial status of children and families where benefit entitlement is linked to the civil partnership or marriage status of one or both parents. As I have said, basing benefit entitlement on marital status is outdated and not representative of the modern society in which we live.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the YouGov poll commissioned by Resolution, which represents more than 6,000 family lawyers and family law professionals? It shows that 71% of the population agrees that no-fault divorce is urgently needed to protect the long-term interests of children.

Alex Cunningham: I have seen that particular information. It cuts to the very core of what this is about. It is not just about the two partners in a relationship; it is about the children. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about the extended family and the need for grandparents to be involved with their grandchildren. It would absolutely break my heart if I were to lose contact with my grandson. It is very important that we recognise that this will actually make life easier for children, which is why we support it.

As I was saying, basing benefit entitlement on marital status is outdated, so I hope the Minister will go away and collect the information to share with the House. The Government have acknowledged that we need to make divorce easier and more straightforward, which this Bill does, but the Government cannot and should not ignore the negative repercussions of the positive changes being brought in with this Bill.

In conclusion, this is a good Bill that will change people's lives for the better. But there is always room for improvement, especially changes in the spirit of this Bill recognising modern relationships and families as well as legal aid. I hope the Minister will agree that there is much more change needed in this area of family law, but this is a good first step.

3.45 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Rosie, and to follow the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham).

I listened with great care to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). I have great respect for the sincerity with which she expresses her views. I have to say that I profoundly disagree with the fundamental basis of her analysis, but I do not mean that with any disrespect to her or others who take a different view. This is not a Bill on which we should be judgmental, any more than we should be judgmental in relation to divorce itself. The Bill is, to my mind, a sensible one. It reflects reality, which is often painful—painful not least for the parties and for their families. As I said on Second Reading, I start from the proposition—it also informs my approach to these amendments—that nobody gets married setting out to get divorced. Divorce arises only as a result of a great deal of hardship, heartache and heart searching.

In my experience, as a constituency MP and lawyer—I did not predominantly practise family law as a lawyer, although I did a bit at one time, and I have many friends who continue to do it at every level—divorce is not undertaken lightly, any more than any relationship breakdown is undertaken lightly. When it happens, however, it is better that it should be done with the minimum of conflict and the minimum of confrontation. Over the years, we have made reforms to the law of divorce to try to make it closer to the reality of the society in which we live, because, ultimately, that is what law has to serve. In this regard, I support the Bill for attempting, and succeeding in large measure, to do that. So although I understand that the amendments are well intentioned, I cannot support them.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend will, of course, understand from the personal experience of his constituents and from other experience that he has enjoyed that the acrimony he described is often about the dispersal of assets and the custody of children. It is not about the process of divorce; it is about the business of divorce. The custody of children and the agreement about assets will continue regardless of the process. Acrimony is a feature of the human condition, not a legal process.

Sir Robert Neill: The only part that I agree with my right hon. Friend about is the fact that acrimony can be a feature of the human condition. I am afraid that I

have to profoundly disagree with the rest of his analysis. I regret to have to say that a divorce process that entrenches confrontation absolutely has the reverse effect to that which he suggests. The reality is that the acrimony, sadly, has arisen in the course of the breakdown, which, all too often, may have been a long time coming and may have happened for a number of reasons, which cannot be laid necessarily always at the door of one party or the other. But the law, as it stands, does not fit that reality fairly and sensibly. Whatever its intention, it actually makes matters worse, so I do have to part company with my right hon. Friend on that.

There is much to be said—I will take it out of turn but I think it relates to the principle of this—for the various amendments that relate to improving the attempts to support marriage and conciliation. I understand that and hope the Minister will have more to say about what more we can do in that regard. The truth is that, by the time we get to the issuing of the proceedings for divorce, the horse has bolted. We should do more to prevent that from happening and help couples when they run into difficulties at the beginning, but that is not what this Bill is changing.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Do I detect from what my hon. Friend has said that he is supportive of new clause 1 and amendment 7, which are, in fact, identical in terms of marriage and relationship support? That has always been a feature of this aspect. It was part of the Family Law Act 1996. Is he supportive of what those two amendments are trying to do?

Sir Robert Neill: I am supportive of the objective, but I would like to hear the Minister's comments on whether those are the best means of achieving it in the context of the Bill. I entirely accept what my hon. Friend says about the objective, and he and I share views on a number of issues. I would prefer to see the Bill pass cleanly and then to work constructively with the Government to find means of giving that sort of support, because there are other methods that I think could be used to do that. However, I take on board the importance of the point he makes.

Against that background, it is important that we seek to minimise conflict and that we face the fact that, however much we might wish it were otherwise, a bond that is no longer meaningful to a couple is not best served by forcing them together. That is neither socially desirable nor just; nor is it Christian or ethical in terms of any faith.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend used the phrase “the horse has bolted” in reference to the time the petition is initiated. In fact, in recent years tens of thousands of petitions have been abandoned after being lodged at court; the marriages have remained intact. Is not that something we should celebrate and encourage?

Sir Robert Neill: I think it rather depends on the grounds on which the petition is abandoned. If someone was coerced into abandoning a petition, I would not regard it as something to celebrate, to be perfectly frank, as that would be allowing a coercive party to win. That may not be the case in most instances, but that is a reality as well. The evidence also shows that about 10% of petitions do not proceed to their final conclusion,

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

but that is very often because of procedural reasons, and sometimes because of no co-operation on the part of the respondent. With respect, I am not sure that that is the best argument.

Unfortunately, and as has been pointed out, amendment 1 appears simply to delay dealing with an issue that needs to be resolved. It is merely reinserting and increasing the time period. The longer the period goes on, the greater is the likelihood of conflict and hardship, and the greater is the risk that the stronger partner—whether financially or emotionally—in a relationship that has not always been happy and who may have verged on being coercive or been outright coercive, will have all the cards in their hands. The longer it goes on, the more they can push back against the person who is seeking to leave an unhappy relationship and genuinely move their life on. I do not believe the amendment would have the effect my hon. Friend seeks of making the divorce process easier or better.

Naz Shah: The hon. Gentleman is making very valid points, which I agree with. Does he agree with me that, especially where domestic violence is involved, that partner has the power to prolong cases for up to two years—in some cases, five years—which has a negative impact on both the abused partner and on the children?

Sir Robert Neill: Unfortunately, that is also true. I think most of us will have seen that in our surgeries.

It is also worth saying that the pilot information meetings held under the Family Law Act 1996, which was passed but never brought into force, indicated very strongly that, by this stage, very often people have made a decision and want to move on. In reality, there may be another family, or a new relationship has started. People should not be forced to point a finger of blame. A law that requires that is doing no social or ethical good.

Amendment 3, in effect, restates and retains the fault-based approach. That is opposed by Resolution—an admirable body—and not supported by the Marriage Foundation either. I simply do not think that professionals believe that anything is gained by this approach.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has reiterated that certain professionals will not gain out of this, but is not the unfortunate fact that some professionals in the legal field will set themselves up as the expert in finding the loophole, the expert in the quickie divorce, the person who can get people over the hurdles even faster? As we have seen in other fields, there will be some unscrupulous individuals who market themselves on that basis. That is a problem that the Bill introduces.

Sir Robert Neill: I do not think the Bill adds to that problem at all. If it exists, it can exist in any profession and can be dealt with by proper regulation. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great respect, that the current situation makes that problem worse, because people have to go through what is rightly described by the research from the University of Exeter as a legal farce—a legal ritual of saying, “What is the minimum form of words that your client will accept that will meet the legal test to enable us to get divorced?” That is the sort of thing that can be taken advantage of and it is

where the unscrupulous will come in. Removing fault removes the ability for the unscrupulous person to play upon fault, be they a purported adviser or a party to the divorce. Maintaining that approach and resisting these amendments, however well intended, is important and I urge the Government to do so.

It is important to look at the international comparisons. In England, a disproportionate amount of reliance is placed upon fault as the grounds for divorce. There are other grounds for divorce, but because it is complicated at the moment some 60% of divorces in England are based upon allegations of adultery. By that stage, people have split up and are often living apart. There is the business of having to point the finger about who did what. My old pupil master, whom I believe I mentioned on Second Reading, was around when we still had to go through the charade of getting an affidavit from a chambermaid or the receptionist in a hotel to prove divorce. It was a demeaning business and thank God we got rid of that. Maintaining a fault system, which, as I say, entrenches conflict, does us no credit as far as that is concerned.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that there is only one ground for divorce, which is irretrievable breakdown, and there are five areas where one can adduce evidence of that irretrievable breakdown? Should we not be concentrating on that one issue: irretrievable breakdown?

Sir Robert Neill: It seems to me that that is precisely what the Bill is seeking to do. The problem is the requirement to prove the following facts to support that because, inevitably, that evidential requirement elides into the grounds, and the conflict created by the need to prove one or other of those facts is the difficulty. So I think that the Bill is moving in the direction that my hon. Friend, with his own experience in the law, will probably wish us to go.

Fiona Bruce: So now we are substituting the requirement to prove a fact with someone merely being able to state their opinion and that being accepted as fact. Does my hon. Friend think that is right?

Sir Robert Neill: If the ground is made out that the marriage has irretrievably broken down, I think most people would say that there is no merit in seeking to go beyond that. I know it is suggested that there ought to be some finding of fault on the record. This is not a criminal process and I do not think that helps anyone. Ultimately, the court process is not there even to assist someone in a measure of trauma, I have to be blunt about that. That is not what the court process is there for. By all means, help people when their relationships get into trouble and do more than we already do. I would not support the Opposition’s amendment in the form in which it currently appears, but I hope the Minister will have more to say about what can be done to make access to legal advice more readily available to people when their relationships start to fall apart and when divorce looms. Legal aid was withdrawn from divorce overall. I understand the financial reasons behind that and I understand the argument that, if we move to a system where we do not have the level of confrontation, it may not be necessary in many cases, given the other changes—the online portal and other matters—to go down the route of requiring lawyers at every stage.

Alex Cunningham: Would the hon. Gentleman support the idea that information relating to financial abuse should be specifically categorised in the law so that people get legal aid in those circumstances?

4 pm

Sir Robert Neill: That is an interesting point and I would like to see what the Government can come up with to deal with that, but I am not convinced that it needs to be in the Bill. I do, though, think that the Government need to look at it, not least because under the existing legislation that is retained there is, very properly, the ability to take conduct into account when dealing with financial matters. To me, that is where conduct ought to be relevant, rather than in proving the fact of an irretrievable breakdown. That is the way I would look at it.

I know that the Minister is particularly alert to these matters, and I hope he will want to think about how we can have greater access to early legal advice for people. Legal aid may be one route for that, but there may be other means that we can use to supplement it. One of the things that was said when we withdrew legal aid from family cases was that many more will go to mediation; that never happened, and the reality is that that is because lawyers are normally the gateway to mediation. Unless someone has some form of legal assistance to go to a lawyer in the first place, they are not going to end up moving into mediation, which is where we want people to be. That is where I am in agreement with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), but I hope that there is another means of achieving what he is looking for in a proportionate way.

I hope I have set out why I think Members will resist the amendments—not because they are not serious issues, nor because every one of us does not want to try get the Bill into the best possible condition, but because they would muddy the waters of the Bill and, in fact, would undermine it in a number of important respects by adding back in much of the confrontational process, and they would cause delay when delay is many people's biggest concern. In particular, some of the technicalities of the amendments would actually strengthen the arm of the spouse who wants to exert influence on the petitioner either not to proceed with the divorce or, even worse, to settle for an unsatisfactory financial arrangement or an unsatisfactory arrangement for the children.

I do not see how, whatever their intention, amendments that have the practical result of strengthening the hand of the party who is putting pressure on someone at a time like that are in the public interest. For those reasons, I hope very much that the House will not accept the amendments but will take on board some of the legitimate points made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and by the shadow Minister, which I think would chime with many people throughout the House, about how best we give people support at such a difficult period in anyone's life.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): First, I associate myself with the comments from my colleague and good friend on the Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), who gave us a clear outline of where the Labour party and the Opposition are on the amendments that have been tabled.

I rise to speak in particular to new clause 9 and to ask the Ministers to consider the financial status of children. I also associate myself with the comments from Members from all parties about the importance of supporting people with marriage, because it is obviously an issue for people to access support.

New clause 9 speaks to the conversation that we appear to want to have as a House. We should talk about marriage, and we should talk about how marriage and divorce are seen in public policy making, because there are ramifications, and there are ramifications that go far beyond the straightforward question whether and how people can get married.

I wish to start with a wonderful quote that struck me very strongly:

“People stay married because they want to, not because the doors are locked.”

Those words were said by a gentleman who had a 50-year marriage: the great actor Paul Newman. Many of us are aware of Paul Newman's marriage to Joanne Newman, which was celebrated throughout Hollywood—perhaps an area to which the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) would not look for marriage guidance, and I probably agree with her about that. Nevertheless, when we think about our role as parliamentarians in law, it is worth reflecting that even Paul Newman was married to somebody else when he met Joanne Newman and had three children.

The reality is that sometimes relationships do not work out, and sometimes people choose not to use marriage as a way of cementing their relationship. In the 21st century, it is right that, when we look at legislating on marriage and divorce, we ask ourselves what the consequences of any changes we might make will be for people's real lives. It is right that we never lose sight of what really matters here, which is the people we represent and their families and day-to-day lives, and what the consequences would be. Indeed, it was Nietzsche who said that it was “not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.”

An environment is created when we say that we are either standing up for or detracting from marriage, because forcing people to stay unhappy or, as some are suggesting with this Bill, making divorce easier and therefore traducing the concept of marriage, misses out something fundamental about this legislation and about how we treat marriage within the legislative process. That is where new clause 9 is coming from.

New clause 9 seeks to take up the test that the hon. Member for Congleton set out in her amendments. She suggested that people will marry less and cohabit more and that somehow, therefore, we need to act against that. My point in tabling this new clause, with the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North, who feels strongly about this, too, is that we can lose sight of what really matters here and, in particular, lose sight of the consequences for children. I would wager that the hon. Member for Congleton and I may have differences of opinion on many things, but we would agree that children should matter and that we should never legislate in this place without thinking through the consequences for children.

The challenge here, and the reason why I tabled new clause 9, is that the way in which marriage is portrayed in our legislative process, in particular how it is explicitly

[Stella Creasy]

referenced when it comes to benefits, has consequences. It has very real consequences for the destitution of children. I agree with the hon. Member for Congleton that marriage breakdown is hard on children, but imagine a child who loses a parent and how awful that must be for that child. The trouble here is the way in which we think about marriage has consequences for children who are already facing the trauma of having lost a parent.

I hope that new clause 9 is actually a relatively straightforward piece of work, because there is a hangover from the Beveridge report, which sought to support widows, particularly widowed women who lost their husbands and, therefore, were having to look after children after losing the family income. The challenge for this piece of legislation, because I know Dame Rosie would say, “Well, this is a separate issue,” is that when we change the way in which we talk about marriage—or when we change the way in which we talk about divorce, because this will affect the children of divorced parents, too—the knock-on consequences may have severe financial effects for children. If we do not give them a voice in this process, we miss a trick. New clause 9 asks us to do precisely that.

Although the hon. Member for Congleton and I may have different views on marriage, we would find common cause in saying, “Well, actually, we should look and see whether this is going to affect that group of children,” because right now we know that the way the law is cast does affect those children. It affects thousands of people in this country who are already facing the trauma of losing a family member, whether through terminal illness or through sudden death, and who suddenly find that they are not entitled to support because of the marital status of their parents,

The widows legislation was in the Beveridge report, and it was updated in 2001 to take in fathers—some hon. Members will be pleased to hear that, and I would agree that we should not discriminate between fathers and mothers. Having worked on this issue for a number of years, with some fantastic organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group, the Grieving Parents Support Network, and Widowed & Young, I have heard some horrific stories about families and the impact of the changes upon them.

Crucially, this is based on national insurance contributions. That is why when we change access to marriage or change the rules around divorce, it has a knock-on effect on this particular piece of welfare policy. There are few other areas of policy that I can see that have such an explicit connection to marriage and divorce. The benefit is specifically not available—this is written into law—to partners who were not married or who were divorced. In earlier incarnations, it was also not eligible to parents whose partner was in prison—I am not quite sure why that was—or if the parent marries or cohabits. It was changed again in 2017 to the bereavement support allowance, and it was altered to shorten the amount of time that a family might be eligible to it, not to recognise the families who may miss out.

However, those are the very families about which I am sure the hon. Member for Congleton would say, “Well, actually, they should be getting married, and

what we should be doing is having legislation that encourages and promotes marriage.” The challenge that I have here is that unless we recognise that people may choose for their own private reasons not to marry or may be in the process of getting married, we hit those families when we change the law on marriage and divorce. We are talking about a not inconsequential sum of money. Over the course of 18 months it adds up to £10,000, so we can see immediately that for families who lose a parent and a breadwinner, whether through terminal illness, which might have already caused problems for their finances, or through sudden death, the loss of £10,000 on top of the loss of a partner is a huge cataclysmic shock to them and their family. The reality is that in modern Britain one in five parents are raising children who cannot claim this benefit if their partner dies. That is about 2,000 families a year, which is about 3,500 children in total.

Some 49% of cohabiting couples believe that being in a cohabiting relationship gives them legal rights, which obviously is incorrect. The Bill will reinforce some of those challenges. Crucially, that number rises if they have children: 55% of cohabiting couples believe erroneously that, were the worst happen, they would still have the same right as if they had been married to that support which they have, after all, paid for with their national insurance contributions. I think that is why the Government have lost several court cases on this issue, yet we have not seen any progress being made. I believe we have not seen any progress being made because of the idea, to which the Bill speaks, that somehow we must cement marriage to the exclusion of all other concerns within our public policy-making process.

In August 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that denying the widowed parent’s allowance to unmarried parents was incompatible with human rights legislation. In February this year, the High Court ruled that denying the new bereavement support allowance to bereaved parents was also incompatible. Every day that we delay resolving this situation, recognising that how we talk about and legislate on marriage has practical implications for families who face the trauma of losing a parent, there are more children in this position. Indeed, in the current circumstances where people cannot have marriages unless in extreme circumstances—it is only recently that we have seen that—we face the vision of families losing someone to this awful virus and then discovering that they are in a financial crisis moment because they cannot get the support that they reasonably thought they were entitled to because their family member had paid their national insurance contribution.

Other countries, which have strong feelings and strong legislation on marriage and divorce, have treated the matter differently. Other member states of the Council of Europe and Canada either pay a survivor’s pension direct to the partner or pay what is called an orphan’s pension to the child. They explicitly say, “However strongly we may feel that we want to promote marriage and however strongly we may feel that divorce in itself should not be something that the state is propagating, we do not punish the child for the decisions of the parent. We do not push the child into financial destitution. Whenever we change the law on marriage or divorce, we seek to put the child at the heart of the decisions we make.” If the Minister wishes, he can read the stories of women like Laura Rudd or Joanna Niemeyer from my

community in my constituency, or the examples raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North about the human consequences of talking about marriage and divorce to the exclusion of all concerned for children who may have to deal with the aftermath.

If my new clause is about anything, it is about understanding the true effect of everything that we are doing. The Minister may say to me, “Well, it would not just cover bereavement support payments.” That is true. We would probably have to look at the married couple’s allowance, which is our previous attempt to promote, encourage and sustain the concept of marriage. I am very mindful that that is not claimed by the vast majority of people who are entitled to it. This is a small change to protect bereaved families. We are not talking about hundreds of thousands of people: a few thousand people every year could be covered by it. If only 1.7 million of the 4.2 million families who are entitled to the married couple’s allowance claim it—one question the review could consider is whether the ways in which the Minister is changing access to marriage and divorce might affect that—then the £20 million we estimate it would cost to put this right could come from that budget and we would not be asking little children who face the loss of a parent to deal with a double financial blow because their parents were not married. After all, when their parents are alive we recognise their relationship in the tax credit system. It is a hangover from a previous era in how we dealt with benefits and marriage. It is right, when we are looking at legislation on marriage, to ask whether there will be a further consequence.

I ask the Minister—I recognise that he may say the Bill is not the right place for this debate—not to forget those children in this debate.

Will he go to the Department for Work and Pensions and say, “It’s been two years since the courts said that this was a human rights breach. That’s thousands more children who have been left out and left in destitution, who have missed out on that money, which their families need at a crucial, vulnerable time.” Whether their parents would choose not to get married because the law is changed to make it easier to get divorced, or whether that would not make any difference, they deserve to be heard in this place, they deserve an answer, and they deserve our support. It is never right to tell a child that the sins of the father should be prosecuted on them, and yet by default the way we treat marriage in public policy will do that to these children.

4.15 pm

I know the Minister will feel strongly that the Bill is about recognising sensitive family situations—not about locking doors but about treating people as grown-ups. We should treat people as grown-ups, but not at the expense of missing out on their children. I ask him, therefore, to look favourably—he did not talk about it when we raised it on Second Reading—on the point the amendment makes about the importance of gathering data on the impact and dealing with those human rights judgments, so that we do not have more children being punished for the decisions their parents make, however strongly people may feel. The hon. Member for Congleton seemed to believe that most of the ills of the world were coming from those of us who have chosen not to get married, but I would hope that she would not think that my daughter should be damaged as a result.

Sir Christopher Chope: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who made a compelling argument in support of new clause 9. I am convinced by it, and I hope that others will be as well.

I wish to speak in support of the amendments and new clauses tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). If any more evidence was needed that our Government have lost their moral compass, this Bill provides it. I never thought that I would be asked by a Conservative Government to support a change in the law that gives unilateral access to the courts without any requirement to establish facts. It is completely at odds with the values of justice that I hold and that I think most members of the Conservative party, if not the nation, also hold.

I was a pupil in chambers specialising in family law around the time that the 1969 legislation was introduced that changed the divorce laws to say there was only one ground for divorce, and that was that a marriage had broken down irretrievably. There were five ways in which that irretrievable breakdown could be satisfied on the evidence. The Bill retains irretrievable breakdown as the ground for divorce but enables that to be proved by mere assertion by one of the parties to the marriage without the need to provide any evidence in support, even if the other party profoundly disagrees.

We know that our courts are under pressure, but how can this justify the expedient of removing the requirement to adduce any facts as evidence? Reliance on mere assertion was how we used to deal with witches, and it is still a favourite tool among dictators such as Putin and Erdoğan, who govern by decree. I did not think we were going to venture down that route in this Parliament under a Conservative Government.

I am particularly attracted to the provisions of new clause 3, which skilfully avoids the use of summary justice. It adopts the Scottish approach to separation with consent by reducing the separation period from two years to one. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough has told us that some 95% of divorces in Scotland are now on the basis of that provision—in other words, with consent after one year. The Law Commission recommended that instead of one year or six months, the right time would be nine months. The Lord Chancellor has arbitrarily rejected that suggestion. The argument deployed was merely that the approach to divorces in Scotland is piecemeal. I profoundly disagree with that conclusion. I think the approach in Scotland is a much more sensible one, and I do not say that just because I had the benefit of a Scottish university education when I studied Scots law, among other things.

Many marriage breakdowns are temporary and not irretrievable. That is why the issue of evidence for irretrievable breakdown is so important. Sometimes the parties interpret a breakdown as irretrievable, they get divorced and they live to regret it later. Who can doubt that many divorcees on their own during the covid-19 lockdown desperately wish that they had persisted with their marriage? My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) referred to some 50% of people who get divorced having regrets about having done so. I suspect that, following this lockdown, that percentage might increase even further.

Andrea Leadsom: Further to the statistic that up to 50% of people said they regretted divorcing, the reasons they gave were things like they felt they still loved their partner and that they missed their partner, so for all the huge number of comments that this is all financial, it is very genuinely emotions.

Sir Christopher Chope: This is a very emotional subject, and we ignore that at our peril.

The Bill and the lack of response by the Government to the criticisms that were made on Second Reading lead me to believe that the Government do not really accept the important role that family life has to play in maintaining social cohesion in this country, with the institution of marriage at its heart. The Government almost seem to be venturing down the same route as those who support cultural Marxism. Are the Government inadvertently collaborators with cultural Marxism in seeking to undermine nuclear families?

In the opening speech on Second Reading, the Lord Chancellor said that

“it is often too late to save a marriage, once the legal process of divorce has started.”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 95]—

but he sought to avoid the concerns of the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about access to free counselling for those with marriage difficulties, and he cited the Department for Work and Pensions programme of £39 million on reducing parental conflict as the solution.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman mentions my comments to the Secretary of State last week. I do feel that the opportunity for Relate and marriage guidance should be available, as the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, before the marriage starts but also as the process comes to its end. It should not just be available in the early stages—I understood from what the Secretary of State said that it would only be available early. Is it not important that at all stages the chance to reconcile and save a marriage should be paramount and should be tried in every case?

Sir Christopher Chope: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. My regret is that the Marriage Guidance Council ever changed its name to Relate because I do not think that as many people understand what Relate is actually about. Of course, after the hon. Gentleman put that point to the Lord Chancellor, there was a non-response—I think that is the generous way of putting it. Then my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire intervened and asked about guarantees that the DWP programme would continue, because at the moment it is only funded for the next nine months. Again, there was no willingness to give any assurance from the Front Bench that that programme would be renewed or even that the Lord Chancellor would support such a renewal. That is why I am sceptical about all this.

The Lord Chancellor said that the aim of the Bill is to “reduce conflict”. He described it as being about the “legal process”, not about stopping the decline in the institution of marriage or, as he put it, “committed relationships”. He also conceded that this Bill is not going to make divorce less attractive, and he did not think it was intended for that end. However, surely this is a golden opportunity to expand marriage guidance services and to make them more easily accessible. It is an opportunity that has been missed, and that is why I shall be supporting new clause 1 if it is put to the vote.

Marriage is something that people have to work at, and I think most marriages will have had their ups and downs. The temptation now is that a party to a marriage going through a bad spell can suddenly, arbitrarily, unilaterally and without consulting their spouse terminate the marriage, and then within six months have a divorce, and I think that is highly unsatisfactory.

The Lord Chancellor seems to believe that nobody embarks on divorce other than in circumstances where the marriage has ended. May I draw his attention to the fact that one of the side-effects of this will be to facilitate the development of more sham marriages? A sham marriage can then result in a sham divorce, and sham divorces will be able to follow on much more quickly than they have been able to do hitherto. Ironically, I think this is going to promote sham marriage and all the abuse of our immigration law and other laws that that leads to.

This Bill is essentially introducing what I would call marriage shorthold, a legal agreement that can be terminated unilaterally after six months, without any evidence of fault. Is it not ironic that, while the Government are introducing marriage shorthold, they are seeking to abolish tenancy shorthold? Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 allows a six-month housing tenancy to be terminated unilaterally after six months, without evidence of fault. What is the justification that the Government are putting forward for ending tenancy shortholds? It is because tenancy shortholds undermine security. What does this lead us to conclude? It leads me to conclude that the Government value housing security above marriage security, and I think that is a really perverse order of priorities.

I suppose, as a supply side supporter, I could be arguing that, in the same way that the supply side reforms in the 1988 Act—I was privileged to be a Minister in the Department of the Environment when we bought it in—had the consequence of increasing the number of tenancies and the availability of rental options, perhaps the supply side changes to our divorce law will have the consequence that people will feel they can enter into marriage more easily because they are going to be able to end it after six months if it does not work out. That is not a justification so far put forward by the Government, but I would be interested to hear from the Minister how he finds consistency in the approaches to shorthold tenancies and to shorthold marriage.

I think this Bill lacks ambition, and that is another reason why I am not going to be able to support it. I think it should be used as an opportunity to help address conflicts in marriage and between married partners, but it should not be designed, as I think it is, to undermine the institution of marriage in itself.

In conclusion, let me just say this. My right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has repeatedly described himself as a doughty champion of family values, but I think it is significant that throughout the debates we have had on this Bill, he has been remarkably diffident about promoting the positive benefits of marriage, as many of my right hon. and hon. Friends have done during this debate. Unless the Government accept the amendments before the House today—particularly, in my view, new clause 1—there will be no evidence to back up the Lord Chancellor’s assertion of being a champion of family values. Indeed, like a party

to a divorce under this Bill, he will have absolved himself of any requirement to establish the facts. What a sad state of affairs that is.

4.30 pm

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind right hon. and hon. Members that because we are in Committee I cannot impose a time limit, but I am sure that everyone can see from the call list that there are still nine speakers. The debate has to finish at 6 o'clock. I am sure that hon. Members will want the Minister to have a good chunk of time to address the points that have been raised and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) to have some time to respond. If everyone continues to speak for 15 minutes, not everyone is going to get in. I am just pointing that out and will leave colleagues to adjust their speeches appropriately.

Andrea Leadsom: I went into politics to make the world a better place. It has been my lifelong ambition since I was a kid to try to improve the world around me. The problem I have with this Bill is that it is just not clear that it does that. When I was four years old, my parents divorced, so I know first-hand what it is like to be the child of divorced parents. I have met so many of these people in my constituency surgeries. There are the estranged wives who say, "He's a beep beep beep, he's been horrendous, he does not turn up when he says he will, he's been a terrible father." Then the men come into my surgery saying, "She denies me access to the kids, she was unfaithful, she was this, she was that." I have seen the problem of warring couples. Of course, as many colleagues have said, the children are often the ones to suffer.

Now we also have the more modern case where a couple cohabit and either do or do not have children, with the challenges for them of relationship breakdown and how they solve that. In recent years, since I have been a Member of Parliament, we have introduced civil partnerships for same-sex couples and then for opposite-sex couples, all designed to give people options, but ultimately, in my view, to help people have strong and happy relationships.

What do we do in this place if it is not to try to help people have better, happier lives—and what does that mean? I have heard an awful lot of, frankly, lawyers talking about the problems of this and the problems of that, the legal position here and there, and the financial position and so on, but ultimately this is about human happiness. What all of us in this place know is that human beings need to be together in communities. Just over the past few months, we have tested to destruction the idea of separating people into their single units to be lonely and isolated. We know that people want to be together, and yet what we never do in this Chamber is say, "We stand up for people being together and sticking together and loving each other, and we want to help them in every way we can."

I really do not know what to make of this Bill, as someone who experienced divorce myself, and whose kids, now in their teens or early 20s, have friends whose parents split up and whose lives have been wrecked by the experience. I know so many people who have been

through traumatic relationships. I also know lots of people who have divorced and got back together again—people whose relationships have been severely challenged and they have managed to find a way through it. I cannot see in this Bill any attempt to help them to stay together, to help them to get through a rough period, or to encourage them to stay together to focus on the children. It does not seem to me to do any of those things, which we all absolutely know are in the interests of a stronger and a happier society.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Lady is outlining the issues clearly. I understand that when relationships break down there is anger, pain, and hurt, but at the same time there are also children, grandparents and other family relationships. How important is it to ensure that there is time for people to consider those matters before the final step, which could be a detrimental and backward one, is taken?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because he brings me to my key point: I totally support the idea of minimising the angst, pain and further acrimony of a terrible divorce, as that is in no one's interests—it is not in the interests of the warring couple, and it is certainly not in the interests of any children—but we are not talking about the other side of the coin. We are saying to people, "You can get divorced much more easily," and that, in my view, is a good thing, because if the relationship is irretrievably broken down, it is right to make the process much easier. However, statistics show that up to 50% of people later come to be sorry about their divorce, and as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), that is because they still love their partner, or miss them, or because they are lonely. Yes, it might be because they are financially deprived. They might now be in a one-bedroom flat, whereas previously they were in a nice three-bedroom house with a garden. People may regret a divorce for all sorts of reasons, so why would we make this provision for six months? I literally do not get it.

Why not say that a couple can judicially separate after six months—they can move out of the family home, divide up their possessions, sort out arrangements for any children, decide who gets the cat and so on—but that they should at least then have a period of reflection? I simply do not understand. I think all the points have been made, and as a non-lawyer, I do not propose to get into that area, but I just feel that we are missing an opportunity to add to human happiness.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means: Order. I have now to announce the result of today's deferred division on the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No.2) Regulations 2020. The Ayes were 253 and the Noes were 136, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), with whose comments I completely agree. The community I represent contains some of the most deprived wards in England, and the magnitude of some of the social challenges in Blackpool is frankly enormous. When I visit our local soup kitchens, or work with community groups who help the most marginalised in society, I speak to many

[*Scott Benton*]

of those who are reaching out for support. There are, of course, a wide variety of different personal circumstances, and a plethora of reasons why people need additional help. It always strikes me, however, that some form of family breakdown usually lies at the heart of it.

The traditional family is a cornerstone of a strong society, and marriage is the glue that holds families together. Marriage creates a stable environment in which children can thrive, and we know that children born to married parents are more likely to go to university, get married themselves and find long-term employment. Strong families and marriage provide the support and stability that benefits not just the individuals concerned, but society as a whole. Indeed, it is a sad fact that anything we do to weaken the family unit and marriage by making a divorce easier to obtain will result in greater family breakdown, and there will be more people falling on hard times and invariably presenting themselves for support at those community groups and food banks that I visit in my constituency.

The benefits of marriage speak for themselves. There is so much more that I would like to say on this, but I would like to associate myself with the comments made in the excellent speeches on Second Reading by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who highlighted many of the points that I would make this afternoon, had I more time.

I have reservations about this Bill and the message that it sends out to society. As a Government, we should be encouraging marriage and supporting the principle of the traditional family. If we introduce compulsory no-fault divorce in a six-month timeframe, the result will inevitably be an increase in the divorce rate and the problems within society that family breakdown creates.

One obvious way of mitigating the impact of the Bill is the provisions in new clause 1, which would ensure increased support for marriages and new support for couples where an application for divorce has been made to the court. Of course, there will be sad occasions when it may not be in the couple's best interests to stay together, but I am speaking more generally when I say that it is in the national interest for couples to stay together.

Surely it would be an effective use of public funds for the Government to make available grants for marriage support services before marriage and during a marriage—that is, before couples appear before a court seeking a divorce. The estimated cost of family breakdown is £51 billion per year. In stark contrast, the Government's forecast spending on relationship support in the last financial year was a paltry £10.2 million. So family breakdown costs us £51 billion, yet we spend only £10 million trying to fix the source of it. Sadly, I am not sure that will make much of a difference.

A number of Government Members have expressed concerns about the Bill. It would go some way to show the Government's support for marriage if they were minded to invest in relationship support, counselling and marriage preparation. Those programmes will make a significant difference. The Government's own commissioned evaluation of relationship support provided in the UK found that counselling and relationship education resulted in statistically significant

“positive changes in individuals' relationship quality, well-being and communication”,

and that couple counselling and certain types of marriage preparation were

“cost effective, providing substantially greater savings to society than they cost to deliver.”

The Relationships Alliance, a group that includes Relate, has published evidence on why good-quality couple and family relationships matter. In that publication, it stated:

“International evidence, including several randomised control trials, shows that relationship counselling or therapy can be effective in improving relationship quality, relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution skills, and wellbeing and mental health.”

Relationship support really does work, and it is clear that it would make a significant and effective difference. Services offered should be local and able to respond to a couple's needs within days, especially given the minimum timeframe that the Bill currently specifies. I sincerely hope that the Government will see that the proposal in new clause 1 fits with their key policy objectives on divorce law reform, which include sufficient opportunity for reconciliation, and will therefore ensure that marriage counselling is made available to spouses when an application has been made for divorce.

4.45 pm

Andrew Selous: When we had the Second Reading debate on the Bill not so long ago, the Lord Chancellor made the very good observation that if we were serious about strengthening marriages and relationships in this country, we needed to do so through what was termed “the right end of the telescope”.—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2020; Vol. 99, c. 677.]

I think he meant that we needed to have a greater focus on three areas: marriage preparation; marriage enrichment; and marriage counselling when marriages get into difficulty and relationship support for all couples. I like the phrase used in the Family Law Act 1996, which talks about marriage and relationship support, and as I said on Second Reading, although I am an enormous fan of marriage and always will be, I will always stand up for people who have never been married and those who are divorced as well as those who are married. I think that that would go for all my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Conservative Benches and no doubt across the House.

Returning to the Family Law Act 1996, a previous Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay, was absolutely clear at that time that marriage and relationship support services were an entirely necessary part of divorce reform. That was a good, sensible point, and I do not want this Government, of whom I am an enormous supporter, to depart from that principle. What worries me a little is that the Government's position appears to have moved slightly away from wanting to try to support saveable marriages. I say that because the previous Lord Chancellor, talking of these reforms, said:

“Sometimes, a marriage will still be repairable at the point at which one spouse seeks the divorce”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 March 2020; Vol. 802, c. 1431.]

The current law offers little opportunity for repair, but it was a clear commitment by the previous Lord Chancellor, not so long ago, that we should look at being able to save marriages even when a divorce is potentially imminent.

However, what the previous Lord Chancellor says contrasts with the view of the current Lord Chancellor, of whom I am also a great fan. I believe him when he says that he supports marriage and family life, but he did say that

“by the time a decision to issue a divorce petition has been made, matters have gone beyond that, to a great extent—not in every case, but in my view, in the vast majority of cases.”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 95.]

I am a huge fan of the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), and I know that he is personally a great supporter of strengthening marriages and couple relationships, but perhaps he could explain why the Government’s position seems to have hardened a little in this area of marriage and relationship support over the past six months.

Looking at the figures, I note that in 2018 in England and Wales, there were 91,299 divorces. My parents also divorced, so I know the pain and grief that that causes. In some ways, I think it is a greater pain even than a bereavement. We know from academic studies that around 10% of people who engage in marriage counselling services, even when a divorce is starting to be undertaken, decide not to divorce. That would be around 9,000 divorces a year that potentially would not take place, were we to offer services that the previous Lord Chancellor seemed to say were sensible; Lord Mackay of Clashfern said they were an absolutely essential part of divorce law reform.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend is making a compelling argument on an amendment that seeks to make what most sensible people would regard as a modest change to the Bill, which is simply to say that where we can support reconciliation, we will do so. The Government have been offered that compromise, and I am astounded, frankly, that they have not accepted it.

Andrew Selous: I agree with what my right hon. Friend says.

Eagle-eyed observers of the amendment paper will have noted that new clause 1, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and amendment 7 are identical. In fact, I have a confession to make to the House: neither my hon. Friend nor I wrote it. In case we are accused of plagiarism, I think it came from Lord Michael Farmer in the other place. It was a good amendment; it was raised in the other place a couple of months ago, and it has stood the test of time. When it was in the other place, I noted that it had the support of Conservatives, a member of the Democratic Unionist party, the Liberal Democrat Front Bench and the Bishop of Salisbury.

From what the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), said today, I think he supports the spirit of the amendment—not perhaps the actual words, but the objectives, as far as I understood him. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, also said he supported the spirit of the amendment, so I think we have a great deal of cross-party consensus on this issue, which I really hope we can take forward.

New clause 1 and amendment 7 need not actually cost the Government anything. Although “may” changes to “must”, the measure just says “make grants” in respect, effectively, of marriage preparation, marriage enrichment and marriage support, and the same for civil partnerships and more widely for relationship support. However, it does not specify an amount. We are not imposing a financial requirement on a Government

who, my goodness me, are already struggling with enormous financial demands on them at the moment, but we are specifying where this work should take place, and on a very good evidential basis.

It was noted in another place, when the Bill was debated there, that support for marriage and relationship support has seemed to depend a bit over the years on the whim of whoever was Prime Minister and whichever set of Ministers were in place. That is a pity because, until recently, there has been cross-party support on this issue. Labour and Conservative Governments, ever since the Denning report of 1947, have seen it as core business, and there is a greatly increased need for it, not least because of lockdown, which has been referred to.

We know that family relationships are under enormous pressure in the pressure-cooker environment of lockdown at the moment. We also know that families coming through lockdown perhaps slightly better than others are often those where there are strong family relationships, and they have helped children and others to cope well. I know that Marriage Care, which contacted me after Second Reading, is having many people come to it asking for support that it and other members of the Relationships Alliance, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) quite properly mentioned, are unable to provide, because the financial means is not there, as Government support in the reducing parental conflict programme is quite narrowly focused on working couples where there is parental conflict—a laudable objective, but not actually wide enough.

Understandably, the Government are always nervous about new requests for spending, but the fact is that when these relationships go wrong, the Government pick up the tab big time. There is no debate about the benefits, the extra housing costs, the mental health support and other health support that will be paid out. We pay that out in our billions without question, so, as my hon. Friend said—and, indeed, as the Lord Chancellor said on Second Reading—let us put a bit more emphasis on the other end of the telescope to try to strengthen these relationships in the first place.

As we—hopefully—emerge from the pandemic, we need to rebuild not just a strong economy, but a strong society. All my hon. Friends were elected only last December on a manifesto that said absolutely clearly that a strong society is built on strong families. As one or two of my colleagues have said, we need evidence of that. That is a grand statement, with which we all agree. What are the actual building blocks to put that in place? I do hope that my hon. Friend the Minister, of whom I am a great fan—I was absolutely thrilled to see him be promoted—will give us some comfort on that, because very many of us really want to see it.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I rise to speak in support of amendment 1 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and in so doing I take this opportunity to praise her, particularly for all the work that she does in this and so many other areas, and our former colleague David Burrowes, who also has done a huge amount of work on this issue. Amendment 1 would increase the minimal legal time period for divorce to 12 months, instead of the six months proposed in the Bill, and it is both necessary and sensible.

[Sir David Amess]

I toyed with thinking that I would not speak in this debate, because it would be a waste of time. I have been a Member of Parliament for a little while, and I have been a member of my party for more than 50 years, and when I first joined, the view that I have was the majority view. As each Parliament has gone by, I have seen some slippage, certainly among my colleagues, but I am delighted to be speaking now, because I have heard a number of speeches that I have been particularly encouraged by, including from a new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). What a joy it was to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) speak. My goodness am I glad that I supported her in her first attempt to become leader of my party. She addressed a whole range of issues in a succinct way, and I entirely agreed with everything she said.

This is not a debate about whether it is right that people live together and do not get married; it is not that sort of debate. It is a debate about marriage itself. Marriage is very popular in the Amess household at the moment. Last year, one of my daughters got married in America. It was one of these new-style weddings, where it is an open venue. Next week, I have another daughter in America who is getting married. My wife and I cannot be there, and it is saving us a huge amount of money. Next year, we will have another wedding here, which will be slightly over the top. Another daughter was due to get married this year in August, but as with many other colleagues, that wedding cannot go ahead and will be taking place next year.

I have many constituents who have been married for 70 years, and I say to them, “Aren’t you sick of each other?” They say, “No, we still love each other just as much as when we first got married.” I can hear my own father being asked whether he had ever had a row with my mother. He would say, “Only once, and that row hasn’t finished yet.” In my own household, my wife and I never row, because she is right about everything. Well, I give her the impression, anyway, that she is right about everything.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister—I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous)—that I and other colleagues are delighted to see him as a Minister, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire said earlier, the Bill seems to treat this as a legal matter, and the emotional side just is not there at all.

When the House debates anything that can slightly be termed “moral”, the general public are not enamoured by that, because we as a class of politicians are seen as big-time sinners who should not have a view. I so agreed with what my right hon. Friend said, having represented first the constituency of Basildon, which in those days had the highest number of single parents in the country, and now Southend West. So many of us in our surgeries can see the impact of divorce at a practical level, and it seems crazy that we have people planning for their marriage for a year, two years or three years and it can now end in six months. That is quite extraordinary.

On Second Reading, the Secretary of State said that under the new law, “the legal process of divorce will take longer for about four fifths—80%—of couples”.—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 104.]

There is a crucial caveat in that sentence that the House must be aware of, namely that the Secretary of State is talking about the legal process of divorce—that is only the time from the first application to the final decree. The problem with that analysis is that it does not take into account that the proposals in the Bill operate in a fundamentally different way from the current law.

In the current system, the period of two years’ separation with or without fault or five years’ living apart comes before the legal process of divorce, and that accounts for about 40% of divorces. In the proposed system, the period of separation starts after the legal process has begun, so it is disingenuous to compare the length of legal divorce proceedings under the Bill and under the current law.

That is comparing the Pope with Donald Trump, frankly. It is simply not defensible to say that 80% of divorces would take longer under a six-month separation period, when 40% of divorces currently take more than two years.

5 pm

I hope that the Committee is minded to support the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. I hope that we will reflect that six months is simply too short a time to consider such life-changing decisions and make arrangements for children, housing, finances and many more things. It is extraordinary that at a time of national crisis the Government are going ahead with a Bill that will water down marriage to a six-month commitment. My noble Friend Lord McColl, who used to be Sir John Major’s Parliamentary Private Secretary—a wonderful colleague—said on Second Reading:

“How will it seem if we propose that people have a general right to expect that they can exit a lifelong commitment in 26 weeks, when we are tied to our mobile phone contracts for 12 months?”—[*Official Report*, *House of Lords*, 5 February 2020; Vol. 901, c. 1843.]

It appears as if the Government are prioritising the ability easily to leave marriage, which is a bad signal, rather than encouraging some sort of commitment and stability. It seems a very strange time for our party to do that, when couples are unable—I have said this is true for one of my children—to marry due to covid-19 lockdown rules.

I am concerned that the proposals could mean that in future couples would marry in the knowledge that if things did not work out they would not be committed to stay together forever. I do not want the violins coming out for the words, “Until death do us part”—I realise that life is not always like that—but it is amazing how a tiny argument can grow into something much bigger, with terrible consequences for people. I agree with colleagues that we need time for reflection.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire quoted the 1996 measure, which I remember well. The great Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay, wrote in the foreword to that paper:

“This year-long pause for reflection might be used in many ways but I hope that during this period some will change their minds about going through with divorce.”

Parliament thought that the recommended 12 months was not long enough, and amended it to 18 months—my goodness, how things have changed—where the couple had children or where one party was being divorced against his or her will. The feeling in 1996 was that

12 months was too short, but that is all that we are asking for. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to reconsider the matter.

In conclusion, the Government have introduced many policies to assist families, including measures on flexible working, paid parental leave and childcare provisions, but the Bill does not seem to be family friendly. It makes it much easier for couples to separate without sufficient time for reconciliation. I think that they should be assisted to resolve their problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton led a wonderful delegation to meet the Chancellor of the Exchequer and discuss family hubs, which are a wonderful idea, with a one-stop shop enabling people to seek advice and counselling.

Family breakdown is undoubtedly one of the root causes of poor educational attainment, antisocial and criminal behaviour and mental health problems. Given that that is the case, simply shortening the process of divorce, rather than helping families to stay together, is entirely the wrong direction to take. I say to the Minister that I am delighted that the UK, over the past 25 years, has had the biggest fall in the number of divorces. Personally, I would like to see far fewer marriages if, as a consequence, there are far fewer divorces. I think that as a result of the legislation the number of people getting divorced will increase.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. A reminder that there is pressure on time. There are still quite a few speakers, who would be well advised to take pretty well under 10 minutes to allow everyone to speak.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I rise to speak to new clause 3, which stands in my name. It would replicate Scottish law, which replaces the two and five-year separation with a no-fault divorce after one year. It is a moderate compromise and I have no doubt that the Government will accept it.

I believe the Government are making a huge mistake. That is not just my opinion; the research is clear that liberalisation and expansion of no-fault divorce, wherever it has been introduced, has led to the most vulnerable in society being worse off. Look at the evidence from Sweden, Canada and various US states—it all points in the same direction: we will have more divorces, and the worst-off will be hurt the most.

The Brining study in the US showed that 75% of low-income divorced women had not been poor when they were married. The Parkman studies show that, overall, women living in American states with no-fault divorce work, on average, 4.5 more hours a week than their counterparts in states with fault-based divorce. In this country in 2009, the then Department for Children, Schools and Families produced an evidence review that showed that a child not growing up in a two-parent household was more likely to be living in poor housing, to experience more behavioural problems, to perform less well in school, to need more medical treatment, to leave school and home when young, to become sexually active, pregnant or a parent at an earlier age, to report more depressive symptoms, and so on.

We now understand the intent behind the Bill: it is to make divorce easier and to propel more families, and particularly more women, into poverty. We know that,

in reality, the Government's intention is to speed up the divorce process, which they say will make it more efficient, but look at the side-effects I just described. Surely the cure is much worse than the disease. I realise that I am out of alignment with Government policy—a rare event for me—so I want to outline the purpose and rationale of the new clause. I admit it would constitute a rewrite of the Bill, but I think it is quite a moderate rewrite, and it accords with the central purpose of the Bill, which is to encourage no-fault divorce and, like it or not, to speed up the process.

Hon. Members will recall that the current law sets down the five facts that must be established before a divorce is granted. The separation ground does not require proof of fault, so we already have no-fault divorce, but the Government say the period is too lengthy. The problem campaigners have with the current no-fault divorce law is that it takes too long, and I agree. As Baroness Deech in the other place has said,

“the essence of the demand for reform is speed.”

I think the Government should be honest about wanting to speed up the whole process. Ministers do not like to be reminded that they are making divorce easier, but we must be honest: if a process is made easier, human nature being as it is, more people will do it. Of course, for many divorce is an agonising decision, but when married couples are having problems, the quicker and easier it is to get a divorce, the more likely they are to choose divorce, instead of choosing the hard work of talking out their problems.

My parents met at Bletchley Park during the war, and it was a great pleasure to attend their 50th wedding anniversary celebration in 1994, shortly before my father's death. It was a shock for my sister and me to find some extraordinary and poignant letters written in the 1940s that showed our parents were clearly having enormous problems, but it was just as obvious that they were determined to make a go of it. People might say, “It was a previous generation,” but there were many couples like my parents in their generation. I owe them so much for keeping together and looking after us, and always being ready to help my brother, my sister and me. I am proud of what they did and the sacrifices their generation made, and I worry about what my own Government are doing in sending the wrong signal—sending the signal that marriage is not one of the most precious things in the world.

It has already been said that people can sign up to a mobile phone contract and be stuck with it for two years, in which they have to fulfil the obligations of the contract, but they can have a church or civil ceremony, profess lifelong fidelity before the law, before God, before friends and neighbours, and after just six months walk away. Basically, they just say, “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you,” and that is that. What sort of message is our own Conservative Government sending to society? I believe we should be Conservative with a big C and conservative with a small c—socially conservative. I know that not a lot of people in Parliament agree with that message, but I have no difficulty with it. People out there understand what is at stake. In one poll, 72% of people said that no-fault divorce may make people more blasé about divorce. We do not need to look at a poll; it is obvious that it will make people more blasé about divorce.

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

Clause 1 abolishes all five fact grounds and replaces them with a system where one spouse can simply resign from a marriage and get a divorce in six months. My new clause would make a much less dramatic rewrite of the law. We can maintain the fault grounds for those who wish to use them, while substantially speeding up no-fault divorces, but still giving people time to reconsider. Far from giving couples in difficulty more options, this Bill takes them away. Is it a Conservative option to take away options, rather than keep them to provide people with different ways of getting a divorce if that is what they really want to do and give them more time to reconsider?

We should think of the wife who is faithful to her husband for 30 years only for him to run off. She will have no way of getting a divorce that recognises who was in the right and who was in the wrong—that is taken away. Abolishing fault deprives spouses who wish to obtain a divorce on fault grounds any opportunity of doing so. We should think of the man or woman who is mentally or physically abused by his or her spouse. He or she will be unable to get any recognition of that through the divorce process. This new system will be blind to all suffering and to all injustice. The spouse being divorced against his or her wishes will have zero opportunity of contesting the divorce to try to save the marriage or to slow things down and plan for the future.

Sir John Hayes: But it is even worse than that because, as the Law Society points out, the respondent might not even know that they were being divorced. It will usually be a lady who is divorced by a man who has gone, as my right hon. Friend has described, and they might not know and then they would be divorced by January. That is the harsh reality we are facing and it is appalling that a Conservative Government should impose that on us.

Sir Edward Leigh: Some of our amendments make it clear that there must be proper service and a reasonable length of time, and the respondent must know that the service is being made. Those are quite reasonable amendments, and I suspect that they will all be resisted by the Government.

My new clause simply mirrors the approach taken in Scotland—quite a sensible jurisdiction, you might think. It would leave open the option of seeking a fault-based divorce, while reducing the separation periods to one year with consent and two years without consent. Just 5% of divorces in Scotland now take place on fault-based grounds, so it is there for the minority who need it, while the majority can choose a no-fault option. This is Scotland. It works and it is not unreasonable. I see no reason why we should not replicate Scottish law, and that is what my new clause does. I cannot understand why the Government have not chosen a more sensible route such as that, as it would be far less controversial. Members will recall that the public consultation on these proposals met with considerable resistance—80% did not agree with the proposals, but they were ignored.

One argument made in support of the Bill has been that the waiting periods for separation encourage or force couples who want a divorce quickly to use fault facts rather than separation facts. If we really are worried

about people using the fault grounds to speed up their divorces and allegations of fault increasing acrimony, what is wrong with the Scottish approach, where people can get a no-fault divorce on consent grounds in just one year and where only 5% of divorces now allege fault? Why not make no-fault divorce an option for those who want it, rather than forcing everyone to do it the Government's way?

Again, we should think of the most vulnerable in society. Let us consider what happens in Sweden, a place that many Opposition Members praise. Even the extremely generous Swedish welfare state has proved totally ineffective at breaking the link between family breakdown and poverty. The incidence of poverty among children in single-parent families is more than three times that in families with two parents. The number of Swedish households in poverty headed by a single parent is more than four times the number of households in poverty headed by couples. It must be emphasised that Parliament does not exist in a vacuum. The laws that we make here will have repercussions in every community in the country. Do we want more children to be disadvantaged? Do we want to see women poorer and working longer hours? Do we want to deprive innocent spouses of having their blame business being recognised in the divorce process? I hope that the answer is no.

5.15 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): We have had a very wide-ranging debate this afternoon with some very impressive contributions from Members. I wish to focus on two particular areas of concern for me, which are my driving motivation for supporting the Government in bringing forward this legislation. They are the significance of fault in the context of divorce and, most importantly from a personal perspective, the impact that it has on children and their future life chances.

On the significance of fault, it is very clear from all the contributions made by right hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber that there is strong cross-party consensus about the importance of supporting effective, strong and stable relationships for the benefit of our society. All of us will have seen in our constituency casework those situations where relationships have broken down. For a variety of reasons, they may well not be the reasons that end up being cited as couples seek to part through the process of divorce. An example of that is domestic violence, which can be enormously difficult to prove. Abuse may have been going on for a long time behind closed doors, but the requirement to demonstrate fault and to demonstrate that through the legal process may lead to other issues being used as a proxy in a way that demonstrates something that is deeply unproductive for people who are seeking to bring an end to a relationship in the best possible interests of each party. For society as a whole, it may lead to us pushing our citizens down a route that forces them to bring about an acrimonious end to a relationship with all the damage that that causes to their family and their wider community of friends and neighbours when there is an alternative available to us that is represented in this Bill. Therefore, it seems that it is a positive step that we will no longer require people who wish to separate to enter into this deeply conflictual and damaging process.

Sir John Hayes: We are already in that place. There was a time when what my hon. Friend says is right—that fault had to be established to get divorced at all. But for a very long time now, we have had a legal circumstance where people could get divorced without fault by being separated, and the significant majority go down that road.

David Simmonds: My right hon. Friend makes a very powerful point, but we also need to recognise that the context of our society today is very much of the view that five years is a long time to wait and that the process that is required where fault is established to undertake the divorce more quickly is one that inevitably leads to this degree of conflict. Let me move on to the key point—

Sir Edward Leigh: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

David Simmonds: If I may, in respect of others who wish to speak and time being short, I will move on.

This issue of conflict and the impact that it has on children is at the heart of the concern that I feel and, for me, the significance and the value of pressing ahead with this legislation. The organisations that I have cited previously in the discussions on this issue—the Early Intervention Foundation, Tavistock Relationships and the Local Government Association—have a huge stake in supporting children in our society. They may have a political or a religious affiliation or no affiliation whatever, but all identified that it is not the fact that a divorce is taking place, but the fact that there is conflict in the relationship between those two parents that causes the damage to children and their life chances. For me, that is incredibly important, and it is backed up not just by the evidence on the relationship damage caused by divorce, but, conversely, by very good evidence about the significance of really effective and positive co-parenting. Society, I think, has already moved in that direction. We see many, many examples of non-traditional couples, who are brilliant and effective parents, giving children a fantastic start in life. Of course, many of us enjoy and are positive about seeing that in the context of traditional marriage. However, we need to recognise that, when such a relationship runs into difficulty, the opportunity we can create through this Bill for a less acrimonious separation—to help preserve and support that effective co-parenting relationship between the two separating adults—is incredibly important for the future opportunities and life chances of those children.

Finally, I would like to make the point that I very much support what a number of colleagues have said about the significance and importance of counselling. When people have made the enormously important decision to get married, it is a very significant decision to move away from that, and counselling should be supported and made available as far as possible. However, that is not a reason not to support this legislation.

I am extremely passionate about the significance that the absence of conflict will have for children, who could benefit from a constructive co-parenting relationship with adults who have none the less sought to divorce. That should be available to those children, rather than potentially perpetuating a situation in which acrimonious division between separating parents has a lifelong impact

on their children. For those reasons, I remain strongly in support of the direction that the Government are taking.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Twenty-two years ago, I did a silly thing—I got married. It was not the marriage that was the problem; it was a fact that I coincided it with my wife's birthday, thinking it would be a money-saving tip. It has been nothing of the sort, and it has caused me hardship on 27 June ever since. However, in tune with my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), when we talk about the marriage, I say, “I would never leave my wife—I just couldn't go through this again.” Again, that is not a negative; it is because I know the hard work that we have both had to put in to get to what is now a rich and fulfilling marriage, which is also raising three fantastic children.

The truth is that, in 22 years of marriage, the only involvement of the state has been when we signed the register and when we received the marriage certificate. I am fortunate to be one of those who still received a certificate when it was handwritten, and beautifully handwritten at that. The only thing I have received from the Government in support of my marriage is the certificate.

It is true that Parliament has played quite a big part in my marriage. It has not always helped. In fact, looking back, the last three years have made it somewhat stronger. However, I often think of my wife, as well as the many wives, husbands and partners around the House, having to go through a pretty torrid time because of the life that we have chosen.

I have some sympathy with the intention of the Bill, because if it can lead to easing additional acrimony in family breakdown, I would support that. However, I have risen to speak today in support of amendment 1 and new clause 1, basically because I believe there is an argument, as has been said already, for extra time and for extra money. I appreciated a lengthy conversation with the Minister before the debate last week—it was really helpful—and I appreciated and listened carefully to all that was said on Second Reading last Monday, but I believe there is something of an identity crisis for marriage, which has partly been exposed by this Bill.

I guess the question is: who owns responsibility for marriage—is it the Government, the Church or faith groups, the spouses themselves, or close family, close friends and society as a whole? I would suggest that all share some responsibility and some part, but today we are talking about the arrangements made in law when a marriage fails. Because the state sets the rules for the marriage to start and, sadly, at its end, it is my view that the state and the Government cannot shrug off responsibility for marriage itself.

As I have said, in 22 years of marriage, the state's involvement has only been the certificate and signing the register at the time, and, as I have said, I am one of the fortunate people who received a handwritten certificate. My wife and I have enjoyed the support of the Church, close friends and family. That is not the privilege of many. Even if it was, the state has, over time, increasingly taken a back seat when it comes to helping marriages thrive.

With that in mind, it is imperative that the Government adopt these amendments, to give more time, to offer appropriate support, to give an opportunity for a marriage

[Derek Thomas]

to be restored before it is too late and to commit much more finance towards tools and proven methods that help to strengthen marriage and family life, to avoid the devastating and acrimonious divorce proceedings that the Bill attempts to address. The arguments on those points have been made well this afternoon.

I will conclude, because I appreciate that time is short. The state taught me maths, English, science, rugby and even the Cornish language. It has never taught me how to have a strong marriage or any other relationship, how to manage my money or how to raise my children. As the Government consider how marriages can be brought to an end when necessary, we should also look at the causes of marriage breakdown and ensure that we provide support in all areas of life, not just academic support. Marriage, raising children and managing money are such a big part of today's society—a part that the Government could do more to support.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): I rise to support the Bill and to outline my concerns about some of the amendments that have been tabled. As a proud Conservative, I fundamentally believe in individual freedoms, and I believe that current divorce laws inhibit that freedom in the broad, vague name of keeping families together. In reality, these laws foster conflict and blame, driving families even further apart and affecting children the most. To be the child of a broken home is not easy, but nor is it easy being the child of parents forced to stay together, witnessing their arguments, the sheer unhappiness and the downward spiral of their parents' mental health. That can be even more damaging for a child than a divorce, particularly a divorce that can be carried out swiftly and without blame, as the Bill intends, allowing both parents to move on, regain their happiness and provide not one unhappy home but two happy and loving homes for their children.

Nobody enters into a marriage lightly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) outlined in his typically well-considered speech, nobody gets married setting up to get divorced. Nobody enters into a marriage imagining or hoping that it will fail. Marriage vows often say, “until death do us part,” and that is taken very literally by many, but I believe that the death spoken of in marriage vows can occur without the loss of life; it can occur in the death of a relationship itself. It is a fact of life that sometimes relationships fail—marriages fail. Sometimes this is recognised by both parties, but in some circumstances, only one partner sees it. In those circumstances, the unhappy partner may be trapped in that marriage, with their spouse unwilling to accept it, ready to contest it or even to dither and delay and refuse to sign papers.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) spoke about the importance of considering how the legislation we discuss in this place will have very real consequences for people in our communities. For our constituents—those we are here to represent—our existing outdated divorce laws can have real impacts. Let me give an example. A couple of days ago, I received a Twitter message from a young man thanking me for supporting the Bill on Second Reading, because for over two years, his mum had been trying to divorce his dad, but his dad refused to give consent. He spoke of

the devastating impact that this had on his mum and on him, and of the bitterness, anger and hardship of living in a friction-filled home. In this place, we can help those people by passing this Bill.

I personally know people who are deeply unhappy in their marriages and are desperate to separate but are fearful of filing for divorce because they cannot afford the legal costs, should it be contested. Let me make this point really clear: a divorce should not be a luxury item. Our constituents on low incomes—those we are here to represent—should not be priced out of their happiness. Allowing blameless divorces and divorces without contest in the courts reduces the amount of legal representation needed and will help to keep the cost of divorce down.

For some in our society, our existing and outdated divorce laws mean being trapped in abusive relationships. There are women in our country behind closed doors pulling down their sleeves and putting on extra make-up to cover up bruises—women checking their bank statements, fearing that they cannot afford a divorce were it to be contested, and knowing that if it were, they would have to battle through the courts and face potential repercussions from their partner before they can escape. This Bill is for them.

On that note, I cannot support amendments 2 or 4. Giving those in abusive relationships the breathing space of submitting their divorce petition, knowing it cannot be unfairly dragged out by abusive partners, is a way to help them escape that coercive control.

5.30 pm

We all know that relationships have the power to make or break a person's emotional wellbeing. When relationships fail, they can tip a person's mental health over the edge. Perhaps right now people will be sitting at home, staring at the walls, deeply unhappy and wanting to leave, but not feeling strong enough to handle all the hardship that a contested divorce would present. The Bill is for them.

Choosing whether or not to marry is a very big decision, but choosing whether or not to divorce is, in my opinion, an even bigger decision, and not one ever made lightly. As the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) highlighted earlier, people do not have a rainy day in their marriage and immediately decide to divorce. People come to those decisions over time and after serious consideration. Filing for divorce is only the final step in that lengthy decision-making process. I do not believe it is a fair argument to say that a six-month minimum period is too short, because the process of deciding to divorce will start long before those documents are first signed. That is why I categorically cannot support amendment 1 today.

A painful marriage breakdown and divorce will have a heavy impact on people's lives, in terms of both the legal process and the human process, too. We are taught as children that the best way to remove a plaster is to yank it off quickly with a short, sharp burst of pain, rather than the prolonged agony of trying to peel it away slowly. To extend that minimum period for a divorce to be granted would only be to prolong that pain.

Finally, there are couples who have amicably agreed that they want to separate, but neither wants to cast blame on the other. They face a two-year separation before being able to even apply for divorce. They must

spend two years apart but are still tied in law and cannot get the closure they both seek. Some couples do not have the financial means to live in separate homes for two years just to satisfy that separation criterion. This Bill is for them.

I was deeply saddened a few weeks ago to hear one of my colleagues on this side of the House declare that to support this Bill is thoroughly un-Conservative. Forgive me, but that is not my understanding of Conservatism. The Conservatism that runs through me, and on which I was fortunate enough to be elected to this place, means giving people the freedom to live their lives, the freedom to love, the freedom to marry—I am so proud to represent the party that introduced gay marriage and equal marriage—and also the freedom to separate where that difficult decision has been made. To leave people trapped in unhappy or abusive marriages and deny them their freedom is not the Conservatism that I know.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): C S Lewis said:

“We are all fallen creatures and all very hard to live with.”

Since the fall from the state of grace, the prevailing condition of humankind has been imperfection. Because we are imperfect creatures, the relationships we form are imperfect, too. They are full of the joys, triumphs, disappointments and disasters that perpetuate through the human condition and that everyone in this place will have known during the course of their lives. So it is preposterous to suggest that a change in the process of divorce will iron out enmity or acrimony. The end of a love is by its nature acrimonious. It is full of disappointment and sorrow, and it will ever more be so. Let us not pretend that we are in a fairy tale, whereby if we change the business of divorce, we will change the content of that doubt and disappointment, for we will not.

As I said in an earlier intervention, the principal cause of that enmity is issues over children, and they will remain. The second cause is the sharing out of assets, and that will remain. Arguably the period that currently prevails gives a chance to sort that out, and certainly it gives a chance to take advice, to consider carefully, to contemplate and to reflect. One in 10 divorces that are begun do not end for that very reason—people do think again, and when they think again, they often try again.

We are condemning many women, in particular, to a very sorry future, because for the most part it will be women who are left by men—not always, of course, but for the most part—and many will not even know they are being divorced, as the Law Society points out in its analysis of the Bill; divorce will be initiated, and women will learn that they will be divorced in a few months, but they will be given no cause, no reason, no justification and no explanation. That is what this Bill does. Thus I regard it as extraordinary that the imperfections that, as I say, have always been so are not recognised by this House as being bound to prevail regardless of this Bill.

Governments are imperfect, too. I spent 19 years on my party's Front Bench, many of them as a Minister, so I know how imperfect Governments are. Governments bring legislation to the House that is ironed out during its scrutiny. I do not blame for a moment the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), because he is a new

Minister, a good man and a fine fellow, and he would not be calling the shots on this, but I find it extraordinary that the Government have not compromised.

All the time I was in government—people on both sides of the House will remember this—I used to listen to arguments from both sides to allow legislation to develop and mature through scrutiny and argument. Many times, I would go to my civil servants and say, “Well, the point that the shadow Minister is making is right, isn't it? We ought to take that on board.” Yet this Government have remained entirely resistant to the measured overtures of the Bill's critics. We conceded on the point about fault, but all we asked was that the Government think again about the time. The duration could be 12 months, as recommended.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Member will be aware that the Government have said that they are going to reduce it to six months, but is he aware that the pilot scheme was able to do divorce proceedings in three months? In other words, a quick divorce could become a really, really quick divorce if we follow the process proposed by the Government.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, if the Government carry on down this road, we will have Las Vegas-style drive-through divorces. The hon. Gentleman is right. The Law Society suggested 9 months, and it was 12 months the last time reform of the law was suggested some years ago, so I am astounded, frankly, that we have come up with six months. It is an imperfect world, but a still more imperfect Government and, most of all, a wholly imperfect proposal, on which the Government have been resistant to amendment or change in any way.

The second thing I want to talk about is learning, because we learn from listening. The Government issued a consultation, and completely ignored the fact that most of the respondents did not want what the Bill now proposes. Most people felt that, even where they believed that the law should be changed, it should not be changed in this way. This is the most radical reform of divorce, with no public appetite for it, which completely contradicts the Government's own consultation. That is how bad this is. I have seen many pieces of legislation come before this House as I have endured and enjoyed many Governments of many colours, but I can rarely remember a Bill that I would be less likely to vote for than this one.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will happily give way briefly, but I do not want to truncate the Minister's time.

Carla Lockhart: The Government did consult, and does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, with three quarters of respondents disagreeing with the Government plans, this Government are making people disenchanted about consultations on such issues?

Sir John Hayes: With a mix of assiduity and diligence, for which she is becoming well known in this House, the hon. Lady has fleshed out my argument with the facts that I did not have at my disposal, so I am grateful. She is right. I mentioned that the consultation was not listened to, but she has shown just how much the Government ignored what they were advised by the people they consulted.

[*Sir John Hayes*]

The third thing I want to talk about is time. It is absolutely right that we should take time over this sort of legislation, which is challenging by its very nature. The Bill is being rushed through the House at a time when we are enduring one of the worst health crises of all time—certainly, the worst in our memory—and families are under intense pressure and relationships are strained, inevitably. Yet the Government regard this as the right time to bring this Bill before us for consideration? I find that quite extraordinary—quite astounding.

In respect of time, let me say this. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who spoke at the beginning of the debate, is absolutely right that time is necessary so that people can engage with those services designed to encourage the very reflection I recommended. Counselling does matter. Time to think about how we are going to sort out our lives, even if we cannot rebuild our relationships, matters. To limit that to a few months—what amounts, in practice, to a few weeks, because of the way the process is now going to work—seems to fly in the face of all experience, given what we hear from those engaged in that process of mediation and counselling.

Dehenna Davison: Does my right hon. Friend not agree, though, that a lot of that consideration is done before the point at which people will initially file for divorce? That six-month period is not really a six-month period, but is more prolonged.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, that is certainly true. Relationships do decline over time. Of course, my hon. Friend is right that in some cases the process of beginning a divorce will not be the start, but a fingerpost to a destination that had been established long before. In some other cases, however, a divorce will come as a complete surprise, because the Bill moves the emphasis towards the person who initiates the divorce and away from the respondent to such a degree that the respondent—usually, in my judgment, a woman—will be profoundly disadvantaged by this legislation.

Mr Evans, what a delight to have you in the Chair and to speak under your benevolent guidance. Finally, let me deal with the matter of family breakdown and children. A lot has been made of that in this debate. We know from all the evidence—I saw my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) in his place a few moments ago—and in particular the evidence from the Centre for Social Justice, that typically children do considerably worse in broken families. In broken families, children tend to do worse educationally and in all kinds of other ways. It is our job as a society to build strong and stable communities, which comprise strong and stable families, and the Bill just will not support that objective. We want a better society. That is why we are all here across the House. Marriage is a key component in building that more wholesome and better society, which will allow us to bring up children in a responsible and dutiful way to be the citizens of tomorrow.

The Bill undermines marriage, weakens families and risks weakening social solidarity. It is being rushed through the House by Ministers who refuse to listen to measured and moderate argument. If hon. Members do not agree with any of that, they can vote for it. On the other hand, if hon. Members think that any of what I

have said is meaningful, they should certainly vote against it. In doing so, they will be sending a signal from this House to the people that we care about marriage, and because we care about marriage, we want fewer people to be divorced.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): It has been a genuine privilege to hear the speeches today. They have been powerful, poignant and humorous, but above all, on every single occasion, principled. From whichever point of view people have approached this argument, it has been from a position of principle. As I say, it has been an enormous privilege to have heard it.

Before I respond to the amendments and new clauses, let me make some brief introductory remarks. First, there is a suggestion that the Government are somehow diffident about marriage; that is not so. We recognise—and we are not diffident about saying it—that marriages and civil partnerships are vital to society. Why? It is because they are a way in which couples can not only formally express their commitment to each other but, yes, contribute, through stable relationships, to stable communities. I support marriage and the Government support marriage.

5.45 pm

The Bill is not anti-marriage, and I respectfully suggest that those who characterise it in that way are not being entirely fair. In essence, the Bill is anti-bitterness. For those sad cases in which a marriage has irretrievably broken down, the Bill removes unnecessary and artificial flashpoints, to reduce the scope for pain, recrimination and harmful impacts on children. We must accept that some marriages end and, frankly, that some marriages should end, because they can be a vehicle for abuse, heartache, misery or sorrow.

The Bill replaces a broken system that for decades has not operated as its framers intended. It is no wonder, we would submit, that Resolution, which represents 6,500 family justice professionals who work day in, day out in the field, supports it. It is no wonder also that distinguished professionals, be they judges or others, use words such as “hypocrisy”, “sham” and “charade” to describe the process that currently operates. We should not support a system that leads to those sorts of adjectives.

One of the principal problems of the current statute is that it incentivises conflict, and it does so in relation to those who wish to divorce before a two-year separation period because of the need to particularise the respondent’s unreasonable behaviour. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) made a powerful point: he said, “Look, this is nonsense, isn’t it? You should have to put your money where your mouth is and make the allegations, and they should have to be proven.” If that were the case, I would understand, but that manifestly does not happen; instead, the parties are encouraged to make what are serious and hurtful allegations, without the court having the mechanism to determine their accuracy or lack thereof.

What happens is that individuals find themselves having to accept that they are guilty of unreasonable behaviour or adultery, or whatever it is. Lo and behold: according to the academic study “Finding Fault?”, 43% of those identified by their spouse as being at fault disagreed with the reasons cited in the petition. That leads to

resentment, and that resentment is not just bad in and of itself; it is bad because it damages children. If I have one criticism, which I make gently and with diffidence, it is that we did not hear much about the impact on children. They can be harmed because the existing process toxifies the atmosphere in which a couple approach the negotiations over arrangements for children and finances. The president of the Law Society himself said this, which I respectfully suggest bears listening to:

“For separating parents, it can be much more difficult to focus on the needs of their children when they have to prove a fault-based fact against their former partner...Introducing a ‘no-fault’ divorce...will change the way couples obtain a divorce—for the better.”

The principal objection can be characterised, I hope not unfairly, as follows: “Look, what you’re doing is making it easier, and if it is easier, you’ll get more of it.” That is the principal argument if we boil it down, but that argument presupposes that parties study the terms of the legislation before deciding, with great sadness, to end their marriage. Do they do that? No. That gives the lie to the idea that putting grit into the machine and deliberate friction into the process somehow disincentivises breakdown; instead, after a long period of sorrow, heartache, misery and pain, when they decide to take that step, they come to look at it, and all too often they discover, having spoken to a lawyer: “Goodness me, what on earth is it that we are being asked to do? To come up with some sham idea of unreasonable behaviour or adultery or whatever?” They do not make the decision based on what is in the statute.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): On speedy divorce, the difficulty is that there is a statistic available that states that in 50% of divorces that have taken place—that is quite a high percentage—people regret going through the divorce process. The Bill will just make it all the more easy for it to happen.

Alex Chalk: If that is right—I do not suggest that the hon. Gentleman is wrong about the statistics, although I have not seen the study—surely if we are in favour of reconciliation, we should be in favour of a process that does not so irretrievably toxify relations, so that there may be the chance of reconciliation. Instead, we are accessories to a system that encourages people to sling mud—mud that ultimately they cannot substantiate, which means that people can end up branded as unreasonable without the court having made a finding to that effect. That, in and of itself, reduces the chances of reconciliation.

Sir John Hayes: I say this in the spirit of generosity that characterises my view of the Minister, but we conceded that point about fault. The amendment suggests that the Government support reconciliation, irrespective of the fact that the Bill gets rid of fault. The amendments are incredibly measured and moderate—the Minister must know that.

Alex Chalk: I do not suggest that any of the amendments are improper or immoderate, but not all of them would have the impact that my right hon. Friend calls for.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The Minister knows my grave concerns with the Bill, especially about the quickie nature of divorce. Will he reassure me that the Bill does not undermine the sacred marriage vows that I, and so many hon. Members, have taken?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is another example of an extremely principled individual who I know has misgivings about this Bill. I can give him that assurance, but I want to deal with that point specifically in the course of my remarks. He has spoken to me; he has principled objections that I have listened to carefully.

On amendment 1, let me begin by noting what appears to be common ground between all parties—namely, all are agreed that introducing a minimum period before someone can apply for a conditional order is a sensible way forward. Currently—this bears some emphasis—there is no minimum period. Using the online service, a divorce can currently be secured in a matter of weeks—it is currently an average of 17 weeks up to the conditional order, which the Government think is too short. That is why we have prescribed a minimum period of 20 weeks before the conditional order, and six months in total, to allow time to reflect and, in appropriate circumstances, to think again. Crucially, however, as a result of the Bill, that reflection need not take place in an atmosphere that is toxified by hurtful accusations.

I also stress the word “minimum”, because issuing an application does not start a sort of countdown clock, or a ticking bomb that proceeds remorselessly to the dissolution of a marriage; no, it simply imposes a minimum period that, on expiry, changes nothing. The court makes no order, until such time as the further active step is taken to apply for a conditional order. At that point, the marriage still endures, and a further minimum period is triggered. Once again, at the end of that period, the marriage does not automatically dissolve; it persists until such time as a further active step is taken to apply for a final order. In other words, it takes three active steps before a marriage can be dissolved. It is no wonder that the impact assessment prepared in advance of this Bill—here I am in the unhappy position of gently disagreeing with my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) who gave such a brilliant speech—indicated that around 80% of divorces are expected to take longer as a result of these measures. I respectfully suggest that that gives the lie to the “quickie divorce” label.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) wishes to extend the 20-week element to 46 weeks, so that a marriage cannot be legally ended until more than a year after the initial application, averring that it has irretrievably broken down. My first concern is that the amendment would not affect civil partners—that cannot be right, although I do not suppose it was deliberate. On the wider issue of the appropriate minimum period, to make a fair judgment we need an appreciation of the state of relations between the parties that typically prevails at the time a petition is issued—my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) made this point. Is it the case, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said, that applications—which, by the way, cost £550—tend to be issued in a fit of pique after a row, or as she powerfully put it, on the “spur of the moment”, or does the issuing of a petition tend to come at the end of many months, or even years, of sorrow, pain, periods of separation and attempts at reconciliation, counselling, or all of the above? Overwhelmingly, I respectfully submit, it will be the latter. The solemn and grave decision to seek a petition is rarely taken lightly or impetuously. That assessment does not only reflect our lived experience of the world that we bring to these

[*Alex Chalk*]

proceedings; it also reflects empirical evidence from the 2017 study by the Nuffield Foundation, which is the only recent large-scale study on this issue in England and Wales.

Fiona Bruce: I do not believe that I gave the impression, and if I did I wish to correct it, that the majority of cases would be issued on the spur of the moment, but I did say that I believed that some would be.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

On that issue, though, the 2017 Nuffield study noted that for people who have come to the hard decision to divorce and have begun the legal process of divorce, only one of 300 cases was known to have ended in attempted reconciliation. We believe that a total minimum period of six months, mindful of the circumstances that prevail at the time that it starts, is the proper—difficult, but proper—balance. We should bear in mind, too, that for those applicants who take the step after years of domestic abuse—again something that we have not really considered in this debate—six months may feel markedly or even unfairly onerous. Some people need to move on with their lives. Let us not forget the point made by the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham)—that 12 months would be especially harsh for couples who had already been separated for any length of time, not least because of the potential financial hardship. That, as I say, has a particular application for victims of domestic abuse, as they may be left in dire financial straits. Put simply, until they can sort out the divorce—until they can finish the process—how can they then move on with their lives, fund their lives, and fund the lives of their children?

Amendment 2 talks about joint applications. I will not go into that because I simply do not have time, but let me talk about sole applications. This is a really important point, and I have enormous sympathy with it. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton effectively says that we should start the period when notice of proceedings has been received by the other party. I absolutely get this point. We entirely understand that no one wants to see respondents being ambushed; it would be nonsensical. I listened very carefully to what she said about this so powerfully on Second Reading. I will return shortly to the measures to address the risk. In fact, I will have to do it now because I am running out of time. In short compass, I spoke to the chair of the Family Procedure Rule Committee only this week. We would like, through that committee, to ensure that timings are imposed when people should serve these notices. That is a really good thing.

I anticipate that my hon. Friend will say, “Well, that’s very interesting, but why didn’t you put it on the face of the Bill?” My simple point about that is that overwhelmingly, whether in the criminal jurisdiction, the civil jurisdiction or the family jurisdiction, it is left to the rule committees to provide these rules. Indeed, there are rules for service of claim forms, particulars of claim and so on. It would create a strange imbalance if we had some rules in statute and some in the rules. It would create inconsistency that would be difficult for practitioners as well as, most importantly, for the individuals concerned. However, we entirely sympathise with the point and would want to see it addressed.

Amendment 3 seeks to prevent either party to a sole application for divorce from making any financial applications, pending suit, if the other party agrees to a financial application during the 20-week minimum period. While acknowledging the intention behind the amendment, such a restriction would introduce the scope for significant adverse financial impact on one or both of the parties, and, most importantly, on any children.

There is so much that I would love to go into, but I cannot, and I will have to write to my hon. Friends to give time for my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton to respond. We are unable to accept the amendments or new clauses. The points have been made very powerfully, but we are left with the position that this Bill, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), will be pro-happiness because it is anti-bitterness. I commend it to the Committee.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for his comments about addressing with the Family Procedure Rule Committee the very great concerns that I have regarding shortage of notice. I look forward to hearing from him how that issue will be addressed. Obviously, I would have preferred it to have been in the Bill, but I thank him for his assurance.

I am sure that the Minister will have heard the grave and fundamental concerns about this Bill, particularly among Conservative Members. By my reckoning, more than half of today’s speakers have spoken with deep concern about the implications of the Bill. Given, in particular, the weight and volume of opposition during this debate on the shortage of funding support for relationships, for marriage and for reconciliation, I am minded to test the will of the House on that issue and, in due course, to press new clause 1 to a vote. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

6 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Order, 8 June).

The Chair put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83D).

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9

SHORT TITLE

Amendment made: 6, in page 6, line 28, leave out subsection (2).—(*Alex Chalk.*)

This amendment removes the privilege amendment inserted by the Lords.

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

INCREASED SUPPORT FOR MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS

(1) Section 22 of the Family Law Act 1996 (Funding for marriage support services) is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), for “may” substitute “must”.

(3) In subsection (1)(a), at end insert “, both before and during a marriage”.

(4) After subsection (1)(a) insert—

“(aa) marriage counselling for any partners to a marriage where an application has been made to the court to dissolve the marriage under section 1 of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973.”

(5) After subsection (3) insert—

“(4) Any reference to marriage or marital breakdown in this section also applies to civil partnerships.””
.—(*Fiona Bruce.*)

This new clause would ensure increased support for marriages and new support for couples where an application for divorce has been made to the court.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The Committee proceeded to a Division.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): I now have to say something, because we are moving into new territory. The Speaker announced yesterday that we will be using the new system in the voting Lobby, recorded by pass readers. I will not give the instruction to lock the Doors earlier than 25 minutes after this Division has now been called, although I expect that time to be reduced as the new system beds down. I urge all hon. Members to be patient during this process and, in particular, to observe the requirements of social distancing. I ask all hon. Members, other than the Front Benchers and Tellers, to leave the Chamber by the Doors behind me. Members should join the queue to vote in Westminster Hall to vote. Members should enter the Lobby and swipe their pass on one of the pass readers.

The Committee having divided: Ayes 31, Noes 400.

Division No. 57]

[6.1 pm

AYES

Amess, Sir David
Blackman, Bob
Bruce, Fiona
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Fuller, Richard
Girvan, Paul
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lockhart, Carla
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
Millar, Robin
Offord, Dr Matthew

Paisley, Ian
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Robinson, Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Smith, Henry
Stevenson, John
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Derek
Vickers, Martin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Christopher Chope and
Mr Peter Bone

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Ahmad Khan, Imran
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir

Allan, Lucy
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Fleur
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria

Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barker, Paula
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Jake
Betts, Mr Clive
Bhatti, Saqib
Blunt, Crispin
Bowie, Andrew
Brabin, Tracy
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Brokenshire, rh James
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Browne, Anthony
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Dawn
Butler, Rob
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Chalk, Alex
Chamberlain, Wendy
Charalambous, Bambos
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Feryal
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Rosie
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Creasy, Stella
Crosbie, Virginia
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.

Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies-Jones, Alex
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
De Cordova, Marsha
Dinenage, Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Doughty, Stephen
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Dromey, Jack
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duffield, Rosie
Duguid, David
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Elliott, Julie
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elmore, Chris
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Esterson, Bill
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Farry, Stephen
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Furniss, Gill
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Glen, John
Glendon, Mary
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Gwynne, Andrew
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian

Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Hanna, Claire
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, Helen
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hoare, Simon
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollern, Kate
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Hopkins, Rachel
Howarth, rh Sir George
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Kim
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Levy, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lloyd, Tony
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia

Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lynch, Holly
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Malthouse, Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCartney, Jason
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McMahon, Jim
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mishra, Navendu
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, Grahame
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nichols, Charlotte
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norris, Alex
O'Brien, Neil
Onwurah, Chi
Opperman, Guy
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Owen, Sarah
Parish, Neil
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Pollard, Luke
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Powell, Lucy
Prentis, Victoria

Pursglove, Tom
Quince, Will
Qureshi, Yasmin
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees, Christina
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Reeves, Ellie
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Roberts, Rob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Sambrook, Gary
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Cat
Smith, Greg
Smith, Jeff
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Sobel, Alex
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevens, Jo
Stevenson, Jane
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stone, Jamie
Streeter, Sir Gary
Streeting, Wes
Stride, rh Mel
Sturdy, Julian

Sunderland, James
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Western, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Yasin, Mohammad
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
David Rutley and
Mr Marcus Jones

Question accordingly negated.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Schedule agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill, as amended in the Committee, considered.

Third Reading

6.30 pm

Robert Buckland: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members from all parts of the House for their careful scrutiny of the Bill throughout its passage. I am deeply grateful to all those who have contributed to the debate in Committee today and on Second Reading last week. I acknowledge that there have been some dissenting voices on reform of the law—first, as a matter of principle—and differing opinions on precisely how to reform it, but I am happy to make it

clear that those contributions have been of no less value than those that have supported the purpose of the Bill and its approach to reform. We have been fortunate to have these debates enriched by the variety of viewpoints expressed.

During the passage of the Bill, Members have rightly raised questions about its potential impact on families, but I believe that it actually has marriage and families at its heart. It is for that reason that I believe so strongly in the measures contained within it. While no one wants marriages to break down, the proposals in the Bill are based on the very sad reality that some do. When they do, the law should seek to reduce conflict and to create the best opportunity for the parties to agree future arrangements. It is not for the law to try to keep a couple in a loveless marriage, and nor can the law in practice adjudicate on who was to blame for its breakdown. That is an intensely private and personal matter between the couple themselves.

This is a measured Bill that will bring much-needed reform. It is reform that many of its supporters believe is long overdue. It will allow parties to move forwards, not backwards, and it will deliver a legal process that reduces conflict and its impact on children while safeguarding the importance of marriage.

During its passage through both Houses, the Government have listened with interest and care to the issues raised. In the other place, there was debate concerning the law on financial provision on divorce and concerns that it, too, can drive conflict. Some Members in this place have also made that important point. My noble and learned Friend Lord Keen gave assurances that the Government would conduct a review of that area of law, which has remained unchanged for nearly 50 years. That is a substantial undertaking where we will need to be led by the evidence, which has yet to be gathered, and it is thus not a matter for this Bill.

We have also listened to concerns about the start point of the new 20-week minimum period prior to the conditional order of divorce, and we have given an undertaking that we will work with the Family Procedure Rule Committee to consider how court rules may provide for a requirement on applicants to serve notice within a specified period. We listened to concerns from the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee about two delegated powers in the Bill that would allow the legal minimum periods for divorce orders and dissolution orders to be amended. Those powers will now be subject to the enhanced scrutiny procedure via the affirmative mechanism.

Beyond the Bill, many detailed changes will be needed to divorce procedure, court IT systems, online information and guidance. We will take the opportunity to look at ways to improve signposting to the services that can help couples when facing the prospect of a divorce and during the subsequent legal process. We recognise the value of relationship support and mediation services, which can play a vital role in addressing relationship breakdown. The Chancellor announced £2.5 million to fund research into how best to integrate family services, including the emerging family hub model. The Department for Education will ensure that strengthening relationship support is part of that research programme, so that vital work is completed in that area.

It is important to take a moment to focus on what the Bill does not do. I believe that that is necessary because I have been concerned about certain misconceptions

that have arisen about it. First, it is not a quickie divorce Bill—quite the contrary. It will, for the first time, provide a new 20-week minimum period between the start of proceedings and the conditional order. Secondly, the Bill does not undermine marriage. It is a Bill to reform the legal process for divorce once the sad stage of irretrievable breakdown has already been reached.

Thirdly, the Bill does not in any way undermine the hugely valuable and vital mediation, counselling and relationship support services that can and do assist reconciliation. Finally, the Bill definitely does not come at the wrong time. Its current stage is the culmination of a lengthy process.

Andrew Selous: I apologise for missing the start of my right hon. and learned Friend's remarks. I do not know whether he had a chance to watch any of the Committee stage, but looking at what his predecessor said on the Bill, there seems to have been a slight hardening of the Government's stance in relation to counselling provision. The previous Lord Chancellor was open to that, but it seems that my right hon. and learned Friend is not quite as keen or does not think that there are so many possibilities at that stage. Could he address that specific point?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his continuing interest in, support of and commitment to issues relating to the family. They are values and views that he and I share. I take the view that this legislation is not the vehicle to deliver the sort of services and support that he and I want to see. This is very much about the end of the process, as opposed to what he and I think needs to be done well before that, to support families to help themselves, to enrich family life and to ensure that every proper assistance is given to couples who perhaps do not have the benefit of wise advice from parents or other support circles and might be dealing with the problems and challenges of every relationship alone, and who, frankly, could benefit from the wherewithal and the support that I know he believes in so passionately.

For that reason, I take what I would regard as a more direct and straightforward approach. I make no apology for that. I think it is important to be direct about these issues and not to conflate legislative process with policy progress. My commitment to my hon. Friend and to all others who are legitimately concerned about these issues is that, as a Government, we will work harder to co-ordinate, to bring together the strands of policy that sit with various Departments and to ensure that we have a family policy that is fit for the 2020s, in the way that he wants to see. I look forward to that continuing dialogue with him.

As I was saying, the Bill does not come at the wrong time, because its current stage is the culmination of a lengthy process that was delayed by a general election and a new Parliament. Its timing has nothing to do with the current covid-19 emergency. The Bill's reforms will not come into force on Royal Assent, because time needs to be allowed for careful implementation. At this early stage, we are working towards an indicative timetable of implementation in autumn 2021. As I have said, the Bill will deliver much-needed reform in respect of which there is clear, strong and broad consensus. I again thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.39 pm

Alex Cunningham: I thank colleagues who contributed to the robust debates we have had on Second Reading and in Committee. The Opposition are pleased to support the Bill at its final stage. We are correcting an outdated notion that the only reason two people should get divorced is if there is some blame to be laid. We know that that is not always the case in every relationship. Sometimes marriages break down over time—not always because one great wrong has been committed by one party, but because people change, situations change, and compatibility at one time is not always permanent.

It will always be a difficult time in any relationship for two people to acknowledge that the marriage is over, but it is still best for them to part ways. The best role that we as law makers can play in such a situation is to make sure that they are able to part quickly and amicably. This is not just in the best interests of the spouses; it is crucial in limiting the emotional pain felt by children left in the middle as their parents' marriage is split apart. The Bill will help to limit the turmoil of divorce because it acknowledges that sometimes there just is no fault.

I have enjoyed the specific discussions on the amendments and new clauses and on how the Bill could be improved. Although the proposed changes did not make it into the final Bill, I hope Members will agree that there was real merit in many if not all the issues raised. On some cases, such as families in which the parents are unmarried not getting benefit payments, I hope that the Government will go away and reconsider their position.

I was a little disappointed that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), did not have sufficient time when he summed up to address the issue of legal aid. I hope the Government will take that away and look particularly at the issues when there is financial abuse in a relationship.

As I have said, we have made great progress with the Bill in recognising how modern marriages, relationships and families are; it would be a great shame if we failed to recognise that across other policy areas. We do not oppose Bills for the sake of it; we want to do what is right. Today, we have achieved real progress that will have a real and positive effect on people at one of the most vulnerable points in their lives.

6.42 pm

Sir Robert Neill: It is a pleasure to see the Lord Chancellor in his place. I am sorry if the queue—or perhaps short legs—meant that I arrived just as he was getting to his feet. I did not get the chance earlier, but I pay tribute to the work of the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who dealt with the Committee stage with great skill and commitment.

I welcome the Bill because, as I said on Second Reading, I am a one nation, mainstream Conservative who believes that it is as well to legislate for the world as it is rather than the world as it should be. That is what we have done with this Bill. Ultimately, a law that does not reflect the way people live their lives falls into disrepute. We are avoiding that situation with this legislation. I know that that is genuinely painful for a number of Members in this House, but it is also genuinely painful for anyone to go through the matter of divorce.

I was glad that my right hon. and learned Friend gave the indication that he did to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), because he raised an important point about how we deal with assisting people through this most difficult of situations. I know of my hon. Friend's good faith in this matter and that he will pursue that; many people have much sympathy with that point.

I wish to say one other thing. We will rightly remove the question of the need to prove fault and the contention and antagonism that that causes. I hope that we can now concentrate on the question of financial orders and children and that we make sure that that can be done as expeditiously as possible. The other thing that could perhaps remove antagonism in the process is access to early legal advice.

I have always taken the view, as the Lord Chancellor knows, that we perhaps took too much out of legal aid funding in some areas; the removal of legal aid support for early advice in matrimonial matters was, I think, an error, and it does no harm to admit that. The Justice Committee has called in a number of reports for it to be reinstated. I accept that this Bill is not the vehicle for it, but I hope that, when the Lord Chancellor has discussions with the Chancellor and others, he will bear in mind that that would be a sensible, humane and civilised thing to do. In practical terms, it will be much better if mediation can be used to resolve many of those matters once the process of divorce is dealt with in a much less stringent manner, and it has been demonstrated clearly in evidence to our Select Committee that the best gateway to mediation and a much more collaborative approach to achieving resolution is through early access to a lawyer, because the lawyers are the gatekeepers of the mediation process. Money spent on that would, I submit, be money well spent both in terms of savings of court time and burdens on social services when having to resolve confrontational custody and child-related applications and in terms of society as a whole. It would also be the decent thing to do. With those comments and with the knowledge that my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor will take them on board, I commend the Bill to the House.

6.45 pm

Sir Edward Leigh: Introducing Third Reading, the Lord Chancellor said that this is not a quickie divorce Bill. It is a quickie divorce Bill—six months sounds pretty quick to me. The Lord Chancellor said it does not undermine marriage. This Bill does undermine marriage, because it can be dissolved without people giving any reasons at all—indeed, it forces people to get divorced without giving any reasons. The Lord Chancellor said it does not undermine reconciliation. Well, it certainly does nothing for reconciliation.

The amendments we proposed were moderate. We simply asked for more time—from six months to nine months or one year. All our amendments have been swept aside by the Government. In the last vote, we asked for more money to be given for reconciliation. The Government brought the full might of their machine to vote down our amendment—a very moderate amendment. Divorce costs us £50 billion a year, but we are spending only £10 million. In his introduction, the Secretary of State said that the Bill is not coming at the wrong time. It is the wrong time—precisely the wrong time, when relationships are under so much strain.

We have a fundamental principal objection to the Bill. The Bill furthers the claim that the present law is based on hypocrisy. Leaving aside the fact that no one has to allege fault, this is part of a liberal point of view that getting rid of any sort of moral compass in society and any pain means that society will suddenly become painless. No doubt the next argument used by our Government will be that our present abortion laws are based on hypocrisy, because anyone can get an abortion but they have to give a reason, so why not have abortion on demand all the way through? Or they will say that our present laws on euthanasia are based on hypocrisy, because in reality we all know that many people are not kept alive and their lives are quietly ended painlessly, so let us have euthanasia. We will have abortion on demand and euthanasia on demand, and we have divorce on demand.

I tell right hon. and hon. Members that if they get rid of pain, if they get rid of all moral compass, they will find that it is not the process of divorce that causes the pain; it is the fact of divorce and the fact that we have one of the highest rates of marital breakdown in the world. It is a bad Bill; it is a quickie divorce Bill; it comes at the wrong time; and we do not agree with it.

6.48 pm

Sir David Amess: I am not a lawyer and I make no apology for that. We who are elected here come from all sorts of backgrounds, and whatever our background, we are equal and our voices should all be heard.

I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) said about fashions and all that. When I was first elected to Parliament, Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister and Lord Hailsham was the Lord Chancellor. I fully accept that the world was different then. When I and people like me compare what our party is doing now to what it did then, it is a bit of a shock. If I fast forward to when Lord Mackay of Clashfern was Lord Chancellor—a wonderful Lord Chancellor, who is very much on the ball these days, even though he is over 90—and remember the position he took in 1996, I share his worries.

As I said earlier, I do not think this debate is about saying that people should not live together, or that it is about celebrating marriage. Regardless of how my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has explained the situation, I am worried that my party is giving out a message, and when messages are put out on social media and in the newspapers, that is what people grab. I am just a little worried that, although my right hon. and learned Friend, to whom I listened carefully, has reassured us about reconciliation and all other matters, it may just make a margin. I go back to what I said, to pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, that yes, people change, but at the end of it all, human beings are human beings and relationships are relationships. It is a big step to get married, and the fallout of divorce is truly shocking. The Minister, who did a wonderful job in summing up, responded to the amendments earlier, but I repeat that I would much prefer fewer people getting married, if marriage is no longer going to be fashionable, than see divorce increase.

The final thing I would say to my right hon. and learned Friend is that I think the whole House wants him to succeed with this legislation, but if he is wrong and I am right, and we see more divorces, I would be very interested to learn how the Government will deal with that situation. Obviously, I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend is right about what he wants to achieve, but I have been here and listened to many Ministers state things before, and of course there is a huge gap between their saying something and learning how it impacts five, 10, 15 or 20 years later. I just hope that on this occasion I am wrong.

6.51 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I intend to speak only briefly, but I would like to reflect a lot of the wisdom that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) has brought to bear not only on this Bill, but on other Bills, such as on the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill the other day.

I speak as a supporter of marriage, but also as a supporter of the Bill. I think that, wherever possible, divorce needs to be amicable, and we need to remove blame as a necessity. In earlier stages of the legislation, we heard some hon. Members, including from my recent intake, speak personally of the pain they are going through at the moment with the blame levels in divorce. I disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). I think the Bill does help remove some of that pain by removing some of the blame, and we are doing an important thing today in removing that.

I conclude by saying that I support the Bill, and I am glad the Government have brought it forward. As somebody with grandparents who have been married for 66 years and parents who are rapidly approaching their 40th wedding anniversary, I hope they continue, but I also hope, for others who are not in such a lucky situation, that the Bill will help remove some of the burden on them.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Earlier, the deferred Division on abortion legislation for Northern Ireland was announced, and the votes were Ayes 253, Noes 136. My mathematical calculations indicate that there were 261 abstentions. My understanding would be that many of those people abstained because they felt the Northern Ireland Assembly should have been the body that looked at this. If we add the Noes, who voted against the abortion legislation in this House, and the abstentions, it comes to a figure of 397 out of 650. My point of order is: has the House expressed its true wishes in relation to this legislation?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. The short answer to that is yes: we only count the votes of those who actually vote. We do not know what lies behind those who abstain.

Covid-19: Asylum Seeker Services in Glasgow

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

6.54 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope before I start the debate that you will allow me to say a few words about the scenes in George Square this evening. A peaceful protest—a peaceful protest—of those who wish to campaign about the conditions of asylum seekers has been met by a counter-demonstration of the far right who sought to disturb that particular demonstration. I am sorry to see scenes of violence on social media in relation to the protest. Let me be quite clear that I condemn the racism of the far right and I celebrate those who wish to protest about the unfair conditions that asylum seekers are faced with in Glasgow. No doubt further news will develop as this debate goes on, but I want to make it quite clear that this demonstration tonight had nothing to do with statues, but was to address the issue of conditions in the city.

I thank you for allowing me to say that, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank Mr Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate on a topic that has gained much media interest both in the mainstream media and the new media outlets with some horrific stories of asylum seekers and their treatment by the Home Office contractor. We have also seen the sorry sight of asylum charities having to submit supplementary written evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in response to Mears, the Home Office contractor, and the claims of how asylum seekers are being treated in Glasgow. We have seen the campaigning ability of organisations such as Living Rent and the No Evictions Campaign, organising to help their friends and neighbours.

There are a number of issues: first, the Home Office cannot be allowed to regress to business as usual, and it must fit with—and not fetter—devolved Government and local authority public health recovery plans. I want to focus many of my remarks today on the asylum support regime and the need for Ministers to act responsibly in full compliance with public health policy and, as such, with local and devolved Government covid-19 recovery plans.

I must start with the asylum support rates. I understand that the Minister is well known for collecting data, so he will know that the asylum support moneys are only at about 42% of the social security breadline. That is not a lot and is less than every other person in this country is entitled to. I am not a data man. I am more interested in real life, so, to illustrate, the data tell us that a 300-page pad and six pens are sufficient for a child's home education. That is what the methodology states, but even with the pitiful amount of £39 a week, the Home Office only raised the old rate by 26 pence per day. I see asylum-seeking families every day. There are 2,000 of them in Glasgow and I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that 20 pence per week is pitiful. The difference that makes is that a child can ask their mum or dad to get them a tiny chocolate Freddo bar.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. Does he agree that there are wonderful facilities in Glasgow for asylum seekers, but that asylum seekers generally in this country are not

treated with and given the dignity that they deserve, particularly at this moment during covid-19, when we should be thinking much more about them than we are at the moment?

Chris Stephens: I certainly agree with that. Many of the asylum seeker services are actually provided by the charities. The support that they provide to asylum seekers is often against Home Office policies, and I will come on to that later.

Let me be clear that I am being not trite, but deadly serious. This increase was an insult to desperate people and children and to add to the injury officials quite callously did not make that data-driven decision until after lockdown, rather than before it. I urge the Minister to look beyond the data and show a bit of leadership. Perhaps he should give Marcus Rashford a call, because he can give Government some tips, as he told the Prime Minister, about real life, about children and parents going hungry, about how terrified mums and dads are about how their child will keep up at school when they go back to blended learning in August or September because, as we know, there is no wi-fi in asylum accommodation. There is no digital connectivity and no computer for the children to do their homework on. That is the real world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose—*

Chris Stephens: It would not be an Adjournment debate without the hon. Gentleman, and, for the benefit of his many Twitter fans, I give way to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Jim Shannon: What a really good issue this is. I have had similar correspondence in my constituency, and Refugee Action is one of the charities that have contacted me as well. It is difficult for people in our asylum system to buy food and other essentials in sufficient quantity to minimise trips or to prepare for self-isolation, and it is incredibly hard to make a choice between food and medicine. Does hon. Gentleman agree that the Minister must respond in a way that ensures that asylum seekers who are in a crisis get the financial assistance they need at this time? That is why I support the hon. Gentleman.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the asylum support work of Refugee Action and other charities, and I certainly support what he said today.

My constituent Simon wrote to me in advance of this debate:

“Access to a mobile phone and the internet has never been more important. As well as Refugee Week, this is also Loneliness Awareness Week and action is needed to address loneliness and social isolation in the asylum system, including by ensuring that people seeking asylum have the digital resources that they need to stay connected, access support and continue education.”

Simon goes on to say:

“The UK continues to face a global health emergency that has disproportionately affected people from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, including here in the UK, with many minorities

living in deprivation simply left dead by covid-19, not protected adequately by the UK Government. It remains vital that everyone, irrespective of their immigration status, can live in dignity, afford the most basic things and to be safe.”

My constituent Saffie also wrote to me:

“Even before coronavirus I was barely surviving on around £5 per day. We have to travel to the bigger shops that have lower prices, but now with lockdown we can’t travel and the small shops have hiked their prices. Things like soap and hand sanitiser are very expensive and leave only a few pence for food and other essentials. Since lockdown, essential support services...have closed their doors, so you have to have phone credit or data to even contact them for help. This means deciding to eat or to get phone credit. The recent increase of 26p per day to asylum support is heart breaking. I just want to live in dignity, afford the most basic things and to be safe.”

My first question to the Minister is: as we come to Refugee Day this Saturday, will he please reconsider the asylum support rates, and will he promise not to penalise asylum-seeking families who receive digital packages and laptops so that their kids can keep up at school with blended learning? The coronavirus is a public health crisis, but it is also a humanitarian crisis for people in the asylum process.

I turn now to a welcome and, in public health terms, essential safeguard to asylum accommodation when lockdown was announced. It was stated that asylum seekers would not have their financial support and accommodation cut off—that they would not be evicted—and that that would last until, at the very least, the end of June. As the Minister will be aware, we in Glasgow have called for an end to asylum homelessness and eviction for years. Most recently, we resisted Serco when it tried and failed to make hundreds of people street homeless through cruel forced lock changes. We showed the way, and we urge all dispersal areas to resist asylum accommodation evictions and homelessness.

I welcomed the pause in evictions, as did Glasgow City Council and many other asylum local authorities, who for years have demanded that the Home Office take responsibility for the care of vulnerable asylum seekers, rather than shunt them heartlessly onto the streets.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Through him, I say to the Minister that we need to look again at this idea of how we disperse asylum seekers throughout the city of Glasgow, moving them on so often. Asylum seekers, who will often get involved in community group, a church or with charities, are frequently moved on to another area, where they will have no community support. I commend what is being done, but if we are to have a wider conversation about accommodation, we need to impress upon the Minister the need for people to be able to stay in one part of Glasgow, rather being shunted around all the time, which is no good to them.

Chris Stephens: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I hope the Minister responds to that. I will have some questions for the Minister about his contact with Glasgow City Council, but I am sure that all us Glasgow MPs would welcome any opportunity to meet him to address the many issues that asylum seekers face in the city of Glasgow, including how to give them better protection.

Let me tell the Minister that the asylum evictions policy has, way before covid-19, blighted the lives of women and men thrown into homelessness on to the streets of councils that have been, and remain, decimated

by the Government’s austerity programme. What a short-sighted and irresponsible policy austerity was. It has been ruthlessly exposed by the dreadful covid-19 pandemic. As the Health Secretary knows well, the facts are that we are no longer in a fragile recovery phase out of lockdown. The virus is still out there and the R rate varies by locality. It attacks the most vulnerable. They were the most vulnerable before the pandemic, have been during it, and, unless the Government act, will be after it.

I and many others are furious to now learn that last Thursday, when I was being told that I had been selected for this debate and presumably in a ministerial office far from the streets of Glasgow, Liverpool, Swansea and Middlesbrough, the Government decided to restart support cessations and, by implication, the imminent eviction in July of asylum seekers, both those who have been granted refugee status and those who are being refused asylum. That could mean hundreds and thousands of vulnerable asylum seekers rendered street homeless into an ongoing life-threatening pandemic. To increase the risk, it will be happening in some of the most deprived communities in the United Kingdom. I know that the Minister and his staff were telling local authorities in these areas last Friday that that is what they plan to do.

Let us just think about what that means. The Government are getting back to the Home Office’s “business as usual” while everyone else in society is grappling with the new normal. Why is the Home Office different? This “business as usual” will make people street homeless at a time of an ongoing pandemic. This is all to happen while all other evictions are rightly postponed. The Housing Secretary in this place has paused evictions until the 23 August, so why have the Home Office not done the same?

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point. Would he agree that any such drastic decision could not possibly have been made, surely, unless the Home Office had sought advice from Public Health England? If that is the case, it is imperative that the Minister publishes the advice he received from Public Health England on the matter.

Chris Stephens: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. There should also be an equality impact assessment of the decisions the Government are making in that regard.

In cutting off support and making people homeless, the Government are not only placing them at acute health risk, including from covid-19, but are undermining the wider community and the local government and devolved Government recovery out of covid-19. What was decided last Thursday is, in my view, deeply irresponsible. I urge the Minister to reconsider, and I know I am not alone in that. I know that local authorities and, I am sure, public health directors feel the same way. It is basic common sense that we do not evict anyone into homelessness during an ongoing pandemic. It is inexcusable, especially for asylum seekers and those in the black and minority ethnic community.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for taking an intervention. I had been intending to stand and talk about the No Evictions Network: what good people they are and the incredible work they do in not just holding up placards, but

[Anne McLaughlin]

providing one-to-one, face-to-face support for people. I am sorry I missed the beginning of the debate. I am sure he has mentioned, or will mention, the attacks they have come under in Glasgow tonight. Does he agree that another issue with asylum seekers being made street homeless is that if the people campaigning for them are being attacked by the far right just for supporting them, they will be in even more danger and that makes it even more irresponsible?

Chris Stephens: At the very start of my speech, Mr Deputy Speaker allowed me to say a few words to condemn the violence we have seen in Glasgow tonight, as I am sure the Minister will. There is no place for far-right thuggery anywhere in the United Kingdom. People are entitled to protest peacefully if they think the Government are not making the correct decisions. A peaceful protest was planned for tonight and they were met with thugs. I am sure that we will see and hear more about that on the news later this evening.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. May I urge him to please urgently reconsider and confirm to me today in writing that he will not restart any support cessations, or the evictions that will inevitably follow, without the express agreement of asylum local authorities, public health directors and, where relevant, devolved Administrations? Will he confirm that the last meeting to have taken place with local authorities, political leaders and Ministers was just less than a year ago, when the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) was the Immigration Minister? What does that say about the Home Office and its relations with political leaders in local government dispersal areas? Can he tell us when the next meeting with the local government dispersal areas will be?

On the acute risk of covid-19 and severe illness and death for BAME communities, I turn briefly to a critical matter touched on earlier that is of the utmost public interest. As the evidence is now overwhelming that BAME communities living in areas of deprivation and often higher population density are at an acutely high risk of contracting covid-19 or of dying from it, this already high risk will escalate if BAME communities are made homeless. The asylum seekers are from BAME groups, with people from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nigeria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and China, among many others. They are at a higher risk of dying from covid-19. Surely given that, the Minister must not end, but extend, the ban on asylum support cessation and evictions. It would be even more irresponsible in public health and safety terms to restart business as usual. Given the evidence about those who are homeless catching covid-19 and, for BAME communities, of dying from it, will the Minister urgently extend the ban on asylum support cessation and evictions, and set out how he is paying due regard to this public sector equality duty in deciding to end the current pause on cessation and evictions?

My third point is about hotel detentions, which was the subject of tonight's peaceful protest in Glasgow. I have read the exchanges between Mears and the Home Affairs Committee. I have seen that the asylum charities have had to supply supplementary evidence. I have read the reports in the media and new media, and I have read the Minister's letter to Councillor Jen Layden, so let me lay out the facts.

A decision was taken by Mears in the first week of lockdown, on 23 March, to quickly uproot 300 asylum seekers from single-occupancy or two-bedroom serviced apartments in the city—de facto households—into hotels. Asylum seekers have contacted my office and the offices of asylum charities to say that asylum seekers were bundled into vans with no social distancing and transported to these hotels—not quality hotels by any manner of means. In some of these hotels, the food provided has been mouldy and unfit for consumption, and in some it is culturally inappropriate, to the extent that around 20 asylum seekers are currently on hunger strike.

Asylum seekers have contacted my office to say that, due to the food provided, they have been unwell. That is not acceptable. It is so bad that charities have had no other choice than to step in and provide food. I can confirm, as a trustee of the Feeding Britain charity, that it has agreed to contribute to the provision of meals that are of sufficient quality and cultural appropriateness for families. I should add that 300-plus people uprooted from their serviced apartment accommodation, on arrival in the hotels, had all financial support cut off, which is not something that was required by asylum support. However, the Government and the Department chose to do that, and people are suffering every day. How would we feel when we leave this room today—how would any of us feel—if we were told that we had no money at all?

There is no social distancing and health concerns are too often ignored or met with a dismissive attitude. Claims made in ministerial correspondence that organisations such as the Red Cross and the Scottish Refugee Council have inspected the site and raised no concerns are denied by those organisations. As the Red Cross put it,

“I have confirmed with our operational staff that the offer of a visit to hotel accommodation was not taken up by our staff due to public health guidelines advising against all non-essential travel, this however may change as we transition out of lock down”.

The Scottish Refugee Council said:

“We declined the first invite to a hotel for lockdown public health reasons. We accepted the second invite to visit one of seven hotels in use, which we did, but we said to Mears before then, during it and after that visit, that there is not much we can meaningfully say on conditions and how people feel, on the basis of one short visit to one location. Mears accepted this was the case.”

It is the case that the decision to place asylum seekers into hotels results in those individuals losing that state financial support. The argument that this is not a cost-cutting exercise just does not wash, and sadly, there has been one tragic death.

Can the Minister confirm whether, on what date and to whom in Glasgow City Council Mears gave notice of the plan, with effect from 27 March, to move those 300-plus asylum seekers who were already on section 98 support and who were in serviced apartments in the city? Did Mears not give advance notice to the council in that regard?

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The case to which my hon. Friend has referred was in my constituency. A young man called Adnan passed away at the start of May in temporary and inappropriate hotel accommodation with insufficient mental health support. Does my hon. Friend agree that the conditions that vulnerable people are expected to live in are entirely

inappropriate, and does he share my concern at the reports from the Glasgow No Evictions Campaign of two further people in temporary hotel accommodation who were refused medical assistance over the weekend by staff at the hotel and Mears staff?

Chris Stephens: I am aware of those claims, and I would say to my hon. Friend that the Home Office must immediately intervene and establish the facts in that regard. If people need medical care, they should get medical care. Indeed, the Minister's letter to Councillor Jennifer Layden outlines that there is supposed to be immediate medical care for those asylum seekers who are in hotels.

A further question to the Minister relates to deaths that take place in asylum accommodation. Will he set out what steps his Department takes in relation to a death in asylum accommodation? I understand that he may not be able to talk about the current case, but can he signpost me to the policy that the Home Office follows in these situations? Lastly, can he tell me when hotel detentions will end and when asylum seekers will be returned to suitable accommodation?

In closing, I can tell the Minister that Glasgow is a political village. People know when someone is not telling the truth or the full facts. They know when someone is trying to pull the wool over their eyes. A number of things in his correspondence to the council are simply not the case. In Glasgow, asylum seekers are our neighbours and friends. They are part of the community. Any move to detain them in hotels or to evict them from their accommodation will be met with the same resistance that led to the rent strikes led by the great Mary Barbour, and the same resistance shown by the great Glasgow Girls. All we ask is that our neighbours, our fellow Glaswegians, are treated with respect, because that is what they deserve.

7.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing this evening's Adjournment debate. Let me start by putting on record my agreement with the remarks he made at the very beginning of his speech in relation to the disturbances and the violence—the counter-demonstrations—in the city of Glasgow. Violent protest of any kind is abhorrent. People have the right to peaceful protest, and I join him—and, I am sure, everybody in the House—in condemning the acts of violence to which he referred.

Let me start by laying out the United Kingdom's generosity in welcoming people who are granted asylum and, indeed, people who claim asylum. Last year, the calendar year 2019, there were about 35,000 claims of asylum, which was one of the highest figures in Europe—not the highest, but one of the highest—and last year we granted about 20,000 asylum grants and other forms of protection, so more than half those claims were granted. At the same time, we welcomed 3,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—the highest number of any country in Europe. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware, although he did not mention it in his speech, that just last week or the week before, we announced a significant funding increase to local authorities to support looking after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. We increased the support by

£17 million from about £218 million to £235 million a year. At the same time, we increased the care leaver grant for those people who were UASC but are now part of the post-UASC care leaver cohort, to £240 per care leaver per week, which was an increase of between 20% and 60%, depending on which local authority we are talking about.

Of course, at the same time as we offer that support to asylum seekers, we have the largest—or certainly the second largest—overseas aid budget in Europe. We are the only G7 economy to spend 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid, around £13 billion or £14 billion per year. We are doing a great deal to help people not just to come to the UK, but who are at risk overseas.

David Linden: I am sorry but the Minister is talking absolute crap—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Please withdraw that.

David Linden: I withdraw the word “crap”, but the Minister is talking absolute nonsense. He talks about how welcoming the UK is. They are the same UK Government that had “Go Home” vans going round communities, and the hostile environment. I suggest that he cuts the talk about DFID, which has been abolished this week, and focuses on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

Chris Philp: I will certainly come on to that point, but no amount of huffing and puffing can disguise the fact that we are the only G7 country meeting the 0.7% of GNI commitment. No huffing and puffing will disguise the fact that we gave 20,000 grants of asylum and protection last year.

David Linden indicated dissent.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman can shake his head all he likes, but those are the facts. They are facts that evidence the compassion with which the United Kingdom deals with those very vulnerable people. He can shake his head, and he can fold his arms, but those are the facts.

Let me come on to some of the questions that have been raised. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West spoke at some length about the asylum support rate, but he did not talk about everything that is provided in addition to the cash sum of money, which was increased by 5%, well above the rate of inflation. The cohort concerned get free accommodation. All utility bills are paid for, council tax is paid for, free health care is provided under the NHS, and any children get free education. The method for calculating the cash support rate was tested in court some years ago and found to be lawful. The amount of money is essentially calculated by a formula which has been endorsed by the Court of Appeal. When Members talk about asylum support, I urge them to keep in mind all those other things—the free accommodation, the utility bills being paid, the council tax being paid, NHS healthcare and free education.

The covid situation that the country has been facing is thankfully now easing, but it has of course been a very serious public health crisis. We took the decision on 27 March to suspend the policy of the cessation of support. That is where an asylum seeker's claim is

[Chris Philp]

decided, either positively or negatively, and we ask them to—with notice, of course—leave the supported accommodation estate. Clearly, if they have had a positive decision, they are entitled to find work or to universal credit. If they have a housing problem, obviously they are entitled to all the support that any of our constituents would be entitled to in the ordinary course of events. Clearly, they cannot continue to be supported in asylum accommodation indefinitely as they are essentially members of society like the rest of us who live their lives, just like all of us and our constituents do.

In the event they get a negative decision, the expectation is that they return—

Stuart C. McDonald: That was a very welcome decision, and I think it was based on advice from Public Health England. Can the Minister say categorically that Public Health England has been consulted on the decision to go back to cessation of support and evictions, and will he publish that advice as well as the earlier advice?

Chris Philp: I was just about to come to that point. When the decision was taken on 27 March to suspend the cessation of support policy—I am grateful that Opposition Members welcomed that move—it was announced as being effective until the end of June. To be clear, no eviction notices have been issued. We are going through the process of thinking carefully about how we transition back to a more normal state of affairs as the coronavirus epidemic abates, and we are doing that in a thoughtful and considered way. We are thinking carefully about all the angles, and we will talk to the relevant authorities, including local government, and take public health advice seriously. This matter is being considered and thought about carefully, and we will proceed in a careful way that gives proper attention to the various considerations. As I hope Members will have seen from our decision, we are determined to be responsible and careful in the way we handle this issue, and I believe our conduct has reflected that.

Let me say a word about the implications of our decision. Although we suspended the cessation policy, we still have intake because people are still claiming asylum. Either they present as cases under section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, or they make fresh claims for asylum. Those claims are not at the level they were before coronavirus, but the level is still quite high. The number of people who are being accommodated in asylum support is going up a lot. Indeed, in the past 10 weeks, it has risen by about 4,000—a significant number. We are working night and day to find accommodation for those extra 4,000 people, and the numbers are going up on a weekly basis. Members will understand that trying to find extra emergency accommodation is difficult, particularly in the middle of a pandemic, but we have done it. We have risen to the challenge, and I thank local authorities, and Home Office officials, for their tremendous work in finding those 4,000 extra places at short notice and in difficult circumstances.

Some questions were asked specifically about the city of Glasgow, which is well represented in the Chamber this evening. As the hon. Member for Glasgow South

West said, a decision was taken in late March in relation to 321—he said 300—people who were in temporary serviced apartments. For a variety of reasons, it was decided that those apartments were not appropriate in the context of the coronavirus epidemic—they were not safe to stay in, and as a consequence, people were moved into hotel accommodation. Let me be clear that that is a temporary measure and is categorically not permanent. As soon as circumstances allow, if those people are still receiving asylum support, they will be returned to the sort of accommodation they were in previously.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned cash savings. Over the past 10 weeks, the additional cost of accommodating those extra 4,000 people has run into tens of millions of pounds, and possibly more than that. I assure him that no cost saving is being made anywhere in that part of the Home Office budget. The hotels provide three meals a day that meet dietary requirements. In terms of cultural sensitivity, Korans and prayer mats are provided, and during Ramadan, late evening and early morning food is provided for those who observe it.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned connectivity. Each room has a TV and, critically, wi-fi, and 24-hour reception staff are available, as are translation services and staggered meal times to cater for social distancing. There is full access to the building for cleaning and repairs. Laundry facilities are available on site; there is space for NHS staff and medical consultation, and full provision of things such as towels, soaps, sanitiser, bed linen, toiletries, and feminine hygiene products—all those things are provided. If any areas require further attention, the hon. Gentleman is welcome to write to me and I will happily address those matters.

Chris Stephens *rose*—

Chris Philp: I have only a minute left, but I will take a quick intervention from the hon. Gentleman who secured the debate.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister commit to meet Glasgow MPs, because there are major discrepancies between what he is saying, and what we are being told? I would be obliged if he met us.

Chris Philp: Of course—I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to discuss any specific concerns. It would be helpful if he wrote to me in advance to lay those concerns out in writing, so that I could come with answers, rather than reply off the cuff. If he wrote to me first, I would be happy subsequently to meet him and go through his specific concerns.

This country takes its responsibilities very seriously. As I said, we granted 20,000 asylum and protection orders last year, and we have one of the biggest overseas aid budgets in the world. We can be proud of our record, and I am happy to stand here and defend it this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth)	Jim McMahon
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green)	Chris Elmore
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting)	Peter Kyle
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud)	Stuart Andrew
Hannah Bardell (Livingston)	Patrick Grady
Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree)	Kim Johnson
Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Beckett (Derby South)	Clive Efford
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley)	Stuart Andrew
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East)	Chris Elmore
Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South)	Patrick Grady
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber)	Patrick Grady
Bob Blackman (Harrow East)	Stuart Andrew
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North)	Patrick Grady
Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)	Patrick Grady
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire)	Stuart Andrew
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith)	Owen Thompson
James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham)	Chris Elmore
Richard Burgon (Leeds East)	Zarah Sultana
Dawn Butler (Brent Central)	Chris Elmore
Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby)	Chris Elmore
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow)	Owen Thompson
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton)	Alex Norris
Sir William Cash (Stone)	Leo Docherty
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife)	Patrick Grady
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West)	Owen Thompson
Feryal Clark (Enfield North)	Chris Elmore
Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe)	Stuart Andrew
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire)	Chris Elmore
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde)	Patrick Grady
Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon)	Alex Burghart
Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East)	Patrick Grady
Janet Daby (Lewisham East)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Geraint Davies (Swansea West)	Chris Evans
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden)	Stuart Andrew
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk)	Patrick Grady
Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Rachel Hopkins
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington)	Chris Elmore
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East)	Stuart Andrew
Philip Dunne (Ludlow)	Jeremy Hunt
Colum Eastwood (Foyle)	Conor McGinn
Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central)	Chris Elmore
Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth)	Stuart Andrew
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield)	Stuart Andrew
Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw)	Patrick Grady
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West)	Patrick Grady
Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield)	Chris Elmore
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford)	Chris Elmore
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk)	Theo Clarke
Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough)	Chris Elmore
Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet)	Tracey Crouch
Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central)	Stuart Andrew
Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston)	Chris Elmore
Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham)	Stuart Andrew
Mary Glendon (North Tyneside)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Grant (Glenrothes)	Patrick Grady
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts)	Patrick Grady
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West)	Chris Elmore
Kate Griffiths (Burton)	Aaron Bell
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish)	Chris Elmore
Robert Halfon (Harlow)	Julie Marson
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East)	Chris Elmore
Claire Hanna (Belfast South)	Liz Saville Roberts
Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath)	Patrick Grady
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston)	Chris Elmore
Simon Hoare (North Dorset)	Fay Jones
Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking)	Wes Streeting
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West)	Chris Elmore
Kate Hollern (Blackburn)	Chris Elmore
Adam Holloway (Gravesham)	Stuart Andrew
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border)	Stuart Andrew
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central)	Chris Elmore
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire)	Stuart Andrew
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Jones (Croydon Central)	Chris Elmore
Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton)	Ruth Edwards
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South)	Chris Elmore
Afzal Khal (Manchester, Gorton)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire)	Mr William Wragg
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck)	Kate Osborne
Chris Law (Dundee West)	Owen Thompson
Clive Lewis (Norwich South)	Rosie Duffield
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset)	Stuart Andrew
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale)	Chris Elmore
Mark Logan (Bolton North East)	Stuart Andrew
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster)	Lee Rowley
Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking)	Stuart Andrew
Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian)	Patrick Grady
Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood)	Chris Elmore
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston)	Chris Elmore
Rachael Maskell (York Central)	Chris Elmore
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough)	Chris Elmore
Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South)	Patrick Grady
John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington)	Cat Smith
John Mc Nally (Falkirk)	Patrick Grady
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Menzies (Fylde)	Sir David Amess
Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Mills (Amber Valley)	Stuart Andrew
Navendu Mishra (Stockport)	Kim Johnson
Jessica Morden (Newport East)	Chris Elmore
Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot)	Stuart Andrew
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale)	Stuart Andrew
Grahame Morris (Easington)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
James Murray (Ealing North)	Chris Elmore
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon)	Rebecca Harris
Guy Opperman (Hexham)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Osamor (Edmonton)	Florence Eshalomi
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire)	Owen Thompson
Sarah Owen (Luton North)	Alex Norris
Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich)	Peter Aldous
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central)	Chris Elmore
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East)	Chris Elmore
Christina Rees (Neath)	Chris Elmore
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge)	Chris Elmore
Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston)	Chris Elmore
Rob Roberts (Delyn)	Stuart Andrew
Douglas Ross (Moray)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Seely (Isle of Wight)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall)	Chris Elmore
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield)	Chris Elmore
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East)	Owen Thompson
Alyn Smith (Stirling)	Owen Thompson
Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen)	Robert Courts
Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central)	Chris Elmore
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)	Mr Alistair Carmichael
Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon)	Stuart Andrew
Mel Stride (Central Devon)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside)	Chris Elmore
Richard Thomson (Gordon)	Patrick Grady
Jon Trickett (Hemsworth)	Olivia Blake
Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East)	Chris Elmore
Derek Twigg (Halton)	Chris Elmore
David Warburton (Somerton and Frome)	Stuart Andrew
Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire)	Patrick Grady
Mick Whitley (Birkenhead)	Chris Elmore
Hywel Williams (Arfon)	Ben Lake
Beth Winter (Cynon Valley)	Rachel Hopkins
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire)	Owen Thompson
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford)	Chris Elmore

Deferred Division

HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES

That the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 (S.I. 2020, No. 503), dated 12 May 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 253, Noes 136.

Division No. 56]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allan, Lucy
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, Stuart
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Barker, Paula
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Aaron
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Browne, Anthony
 Bryant, Chris
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Feryal
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarkson, Chris
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Creasy, Stella
 Crouch, Tracey
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daly, James
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Mims
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dromey, Jack
 Duddridge, James
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farry, Stephen
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Furniss, Gill
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Haigh, Louise
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hill, Mike
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Holmes, Paul
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George

Howell, John
 Hunt, Jane
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Kim
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keeley, Barbara
 Khan, Afzal
 Kyle, Peter
 Langan, Robert
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, Clive
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Loughton, Tim
 Lynch, Holly
 Maclean, Rachel
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGinn, Conor
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Merriman, Huw
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Robbie
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Osborne, Kate
 Owen, Sarah
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Philp, Chris
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Saxby, Selaine
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Trott, Laura
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Webb, Suzanne
 Webbe, Claudia
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Wild, James
 Williams, Hywel
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Anderson, Stuart
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan

Baker, Mr Steve
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Blackman, Bob
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bruce, Fiona
 Butler, Rob
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Dr James
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fuller, Richard

Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Tom
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kane, Mike
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kruger, Danny
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lockhart, Carla

Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Mann, Scott
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 Menzies, Mark
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morris, David
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Paisley, Ian
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Rimmer, Ms Marie

Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Shannon, Jim
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob

Question accordingly agreed to.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Written Statements

Wednesday 17 June 2020

CABINET OFFICE

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Cabinet Office has sought a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund of £270,100,000.

The requirement has arisen due to increased costs relating to urgent expenditure, including that relating to the covid-19 response.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £107,100,000 and £163,000,000 of capital has been sought in a main estimate for the Cabinet Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £270,100,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS298]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Negotiations with Australia and New Zealand

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Today, the Government publish their approach to trade negotiations with Australia and New Zealand, as well as providing an update on their approach to accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

New Zealand and Australia rank among our closest friends. We share a language, head of state and a system of common law, and we have a proud shared history. We also have a common set of values. Like the UK, both nations have always stood up for what is right and maintained a fierce belief in the merits of trade openness, the rule of law, international co-operation, and democratic Government.

But what we have never had with either is a free trade agreement. That can change now the UK has left the EU. Our future success as a country depends partly on using our new-found status as an independent trading nation to strengthen ties with old allies beyond Europe. Ambitious, wide-ranging free trade agreements with old friends like Australia and New Zealand are a powerful way for us to do that and make good on the promise of Brexit.

From a purely economic perspective, deals with both countries can help deliver the things that our people care about—better jobs, higher wages, greater choice, and lower prices.

UK businesses traded £21 billion worth of goods and services with Australia and New Zealand combined in 2019. Trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand could increase UK exports to Australia and New Zealand by around £1 billion—with beverages firms, the automotive industry and professional services among those expected to benefit. Opportunities for these agreements include additional access for UK services and investment, removing tariffs and other barriers to trade in goods and the chance to shape the future of digital trade.

An ambitious UK-Australia trade agreement could increase UK GDP by up to £500 million and UK workers' wages by up to £400 million. It can enable small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to export more goods and services to Australia, building on the 13,400 UK SMEs that already exported goods there in 2018.

A cutting-edge agreement with New Zealand could increase UK workers' wages by up to £200 million. New Zealand and the UK also share a particular ambition to work together to promote clean growth through trade—a key contribution to a low-carbon economic recovery.

But perhaps more importantly than the pure economics, both these countries are vital to the UK's future place in the world and our future sovereign capability.

The pandemic has given oxygen to the politics of protectionism across the globe, and to those who advocate closed, statist economies. Trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand are important in helping our country and the world move beyond coronavirus.

Strengthening ties between nations who believe in free trade is a powerful way to defend the principles of open markets and international co-operation, and in doing so show that free trade is still the best way forward for the world after coronavirus.

Strategically, our aim is to place the UK at the centre of a network of modern free trade agreements, turning our country into a global hub for businesses and investors who want to trade in dynamic areas of the world—especially in the Asia-Pacific.

Pivoting towards the Asia-Pacific will help diversify our trade, make our supply chains more resilient and make the UK less vulnerable to political and economic shocks in certain parts of the world. This economic security is important at a time of increased turbulence and uncertainty in the world.

It will also help us forge a leadership position among a network of countries committed to free trade—and strengthen the club of like-minded democracies who share our commitment to advance trade liberalisation, fight protectionism and defend international rules.

Australia and New Zealand are both big players in the Asia-Pacific and share our commitment to free trade. They are also prominent members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—a club of eleven countries representing 13% of global GDP.

The UK had more than £110 billion-worth of trade in 2019 with the 11 countries in the group and we are determined to increase our trade through membership. CPTPP will help us diversify our trade and join a strong, modern trade agreement between countries committed to free and fair trade in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Both Australia and New Zealand support our membership, and free trade agreements with both countries would be an important step towards our eventual accession.

Today, the Department for International Trade is publishing three documents:

UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement: the UK's strategic approach

UK-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement: the UK's strategic approach

An update on the UK's position on accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive

Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

We will be placing copies in the Libraries of both Houses. For Australia and New Zealand, these documents include:

The Government's negotiating objectives for each trade agreement.

A scoping assessment providing a preliminary assessment of the potential long-term economic impacts for each agreement.

The Government's response to the public consultations on each agreement, setting out how these have informed our policy development.

As with our whole trade agreement programme, these agreements need to work for the UK. We have been clear that future agreements with Australia and New Zealand must work for UK consumers, producers and companies. We remain committed to upholding our high environmental,

labour, food safety and animal welfare standards in our trade agreements with these countries. The Government have been clear that when we are negotiating trade agreements, we will protect the national health service. Our objectives reinforce this.

We are engaging with the devolved Administrations, Crown dependencies and overseas territories to ensure that we develop agreements that works for the whole of the UK. The Government are committed to transparency and we will continue to ensure that parliamentarians, businesses, and the range of civil society stakeholders have access to information on our trade negotiations.

Negotiations with Australia and New Zealand will be carried out by video conference, ensuring that talks can progress during the coronavirus pandemic. We will continue to conduct talks remotely until it is safe to conduct talks in person.

[HCWS297]

Petition

Wednesday 17 June 2020

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Village Surgery in Askam, Furness

The petition of residents of Barrow and Furness,

Declares that the general practitioner (GP) provision within the village of Askam in Furness, known as “Parklands Surgery” must remain in operation after the retirement of the village’s only current doctor on 30th June 2020; further that more than 1,500 local patients with limited public and private transport options are able to continue to access a GP easily and conveniently to maintain their personal health and well-being.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to intervene to help provide a new GP to keep Parklands Surgery open and serving local people in Askam in Furness and Ireleth.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Simon Fell, *Official Report*, 22 April 2020; Vol. 675, c. 5P.]

[P002565]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill):

The Government understand that the doctor at Parklands Surgery provided notice of their retirement to the Morecambe Bay Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) in December 2019. Upon receiving the retirement notice the CCG, with the support of NHS England and NHS Improvement, undertook a market testing process to establish any local or national interest in the GP contract if it were to be formally procured. However, the CCG did not receive any completed expressions of interest that met the advertised contract terms. We are aware that the CCG’s Primary Care Commissioning Committee (PCCC) met on 18 February 2020 and reviewed all the information collated by the CCG and local stakeholders and decided that the patient list would be dispersed and that the practice would close.

We have been informed that in late April the CCG received an expression of interest from a local GP looking to apply for a branch surgery within the area of Askam. Both the PCCC and the CCG are supportive of the creation of a branch surgery for Askam and will review any branch surgery application that is received.

We believe that local CCGs are best placed to make decisions on commissioning services for their communities, working with local authorities, stakeholders and local populations to meet people’s needs. Morecambe Bay CCG will work with local practices to ensure the continued care for patients residing in Askam and Ireleth whether this be via a branch surgery or via dispersal to surrounding practices, supported by local transport solutions.

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PETITION

Wednesday 17 June 2020

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Village Surgery in Askam, Furness	3P

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**not later than
Wednesday 24 June 2020**

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