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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
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OFFICIAL REPORT

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Abbreviation	Party/Group
CB	Cross Bench
Con	Conservative
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
GP	Green Party
Ind Lab	Independent Labour
Ind LD	Independent Liberal Democrat
Ind SD	Independent Social Democrat
Ind UU	Independent Ulster Unionist
Lab	Labour
Lab Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
LD Ind	Liberal Democrat Independent
Non-afl	Non-affiliated
PC	Plaid Cymru
UKIP	UK Independence Party
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

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House of Lords

Thursday 11 July 2019

11 am

Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of Chelmsford.

Public Spaces Protection Orders Question

11.07 am

Asked by **Lord Clement-Jones**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the (1) imposition, and (2) operation, of public spaces protection orders.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford) (Con): My Lords, we introduced public spaces protection orders, or PSPOs, through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to enable local councils to tackle anti-social behaviour in public spaces. The Home Office does not centrally collate data on the number issued. Our statutory guidance makes it clear that PSPOs should be used appropriately and proportionately. The effect of the powers is kept under review through a national anti-social behaviour strategic board.

Lord Clement-Jones (LD): My Lords, the Minister was very constructive the last time we discussed these issues and helped to change the statutory guidance on PSPOs. However, they are increasing at a faster rate than ever and continue to target homeless people, with bans on begging and rough sleeping. Will the Government now admit that the statutory guidance has not achieved its intended aim? Is it not now necessary to enforce the guidance properly, give better means of appeal against the imposition of a PSPO, or change the original powers?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: I thank the noble Lord for his kind words. He is absolutely right: following his concerns and those of the noble Lord, Lord Kennedy of Southwark, 18 months ago we published the updated statutory guidance to make it clear that PSPOs should not be used to target people based solely on their being homeless. As I said, they should be used proportionately and appropriately.

The Earl of Clancarty (CB): My Lords, will the Minister admit that the powers that PSPOs give are too great and wide-ranging? Their use can extend to sweeping real concerns, such as rough sleeping, under the carpet, as the noble Lord, Lord Clement-Jones, said, through criminalisation, as more than 50 councils have used those powers, and to restricting personal freedoms, including the right to protest in a public space. Is it not time that PSPOs were scrapped?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: I do not think residents affected by anti-social behaviour would agree with the noble Earl. It is important that these powers are kept

in force, as residents should be able to live their lives without the effects of anti-social behaviour—literally on their doorsteps in some cases.

Lord Paddick (LD): My Lords, I have been in your Lordships' House only for almost six years, but I have lost count of the number of times that we have explained to the Home Office how its legislation as drafted could be misused. The Government then say that they do not intend the legislation to be used in that way. Trusting local authorities or the police to use legislation only in the way intended is no longer good enough. When will the Government incorporate measures into legislation to ensure that it cannot be misused?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: The noble Lord may be referring to the rough sleeping strategy and how the Home Office uses it. The Home Office is not looking to trick rough sleepers into providing their data to be used for enforcement purposes—a criticism that has been made against us. However, we have been working with local authorities and charities to design an information-sharing protocol that protects the rights of vulnerable individuals but also allows for the effective operation of the RSS.

Lord Rosser (Lab): What is needed is not just to stop the inappropriate use of PSPOs but for the Government to change their policy and provide cash-strapped local authorities and other agencies with the resources to bring homelessness—which is not a crime—to an end for good, through personal support, assistance into employment and more genuinely low-cost housing, including social housing to rent. Reference has been made to the fact that the Home Office had to update its guidance at the end of 2017. This now states that PSPOs,

“should not be used to target people based solely on the fact that someone is homeless or rough sleeping”.

Why was this not included in the guidelines from day one? What effective check and redress is there, even now, to ensure that PSPOs are not continuing to be used inappropriately against those who are homeless or rough sleeping? The use in the updated guidelines of the word “solely”, which the Minister herself stressed, looks like a significant potential loophole.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: The noble Lord will recognise that the reasons for rough sleeping are many and complex and the sole fact that someone is homeless is not, in itself, a reason to slap them with a PSPO. On housing, we are investing £9 billion in more affordable homes across the country and have delivered over 400,000 such homes since 2010.

Lord Mackenzie of Framwellgate (Non-Aff): My Lords, anti-social behaviour has taken many forms over the years. In my experience, dealing with it can also take several forms. One of the easiest is to have sufficient police officers on the street to nip it in the bud as it occurs. That always proved valuable in my time. The problem at present is that we do not have the front-line officers with time to deal with it courteously and compassionately.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: Policing is only one aspect of dealing with rough sleeping and homelessness, which are different things. The noble Lord is absolutely right that we need police on the streets, hence my right honourable friend the Home Secretary's ambition to have far more of them. The rough sleeping initiative has allocated £46 million this year to 246 areas. This has funded an estimated additional 750 staff and more than 2,600 bed spaces across England.

Lord Pannick (CB): My Lords, the Minister said in answer to the noble Lord, Lord Clement-Jones, that the Home Office keeps these powers under review. Can she explain how that is being done, given that she also said in answer to the noble Lord that no central records are kept of when these powers are used and for what purposes?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: On keeping things under review, of course the Government keep all legislation under review. While we do not hold that data centrally, local authorities hold the data. How effectively legislation works is played out in the effect of the legislation in question.

NHS Dentistry Services

Question

11.15 am

Asked by **Baroness Gardner of Parkes**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the availability of National Health Service dentistry services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford) (Con): My Lords, nationally, access to NHS dentistry remains high, with 22 million adults and 7 million children seen by a dentist in the 24 and 12-month periods ending 31 December 2018 respectively. However, we know that there are areas of difficulty and more work remains to be done. NHS England, in its role as commissioner, is responsible for commissioning NHS dental services to meet local need and is actively looking into dental access issues.

Baroness Gardner of Parkes (Con): That is rather a disappointing Answer, although it certainly ties in with my experience: it was declared in Manchester that no children could have operations done under general anaesthetic because all slots were taken for the clearance of baby teeth. When I saw that, I wrote to the Mayor of Manchester, who has great experience in the field of health from when he was in the House of Commons. I did not even get an acknowledgement, so after a time I wrote again, saying that perhaps my letter never reached him so I was resending it, but to this day I still have not had an acknowledgement. The press reports get worse and worse about the shortage of these possibilities.

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford: I am very sorry to hear of my noble friend's experience with the Mayor of Manchester. Children's oral health is now better than it has ever been, with more than 75% of five year-olds in England being decay-free, which we welcome. However, the number of children requiring tooth extraction remains a concern. It fell slightly between 2016 and 2017-18, which we welcome; however, we recognise that there is much more to do. That is why the NHS outcomes framework is working to ensure that we perform better, with much work being done to target improved oral health of young people, with the Starting Well core framework and Starting Well pilots in the 13 areas of greatest deprivation.

Baroness Thornton (Lab): My Lords, in Portsmouth there are 20,000 patients without a dentist, due to the closure of three practices. In Cornwall, 22,000 people are on the waiting list, having to wait an average of 529 days before they get an NHS dentist. The noble Baroness is quite right that there are some serious problems to address here about access to NHS dentists. I should like to know exactly how those areas in desperate need, such as Portsmouth, will be tackled. Secondly, how many of the babies, children and young people included in those numbers currently have no dental care whatever?

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford: As I said in my previous answer, children's oral health is better than it has ever been. This is not to say that there is any complacency or acceptance of where we are. We recognise that while access has significantly improved, there are still areas where NHS England needs to do more to meet local need. NHS England is responsible for helping patients who cannot find a local dentist. Those in that situation should contact NHS England's customer contact centre for assistance. Things that are being done to improve this include the introduction of new nationally flexible commissioning, which can help national commissioners commission a wider range of services from dental practices, and the testing of a new, reformed dental contract, which we think will make the profession more attractive for new dentists.

Baroness Benjamin (LD): My Lords, patients' dental fees in England have been increasing at an unprecedented rate. These charges are discouraging patients from seeking treatment; they are made to think twice before treatment. Delayed treatment means that they end up seeking free help for dental pain from their GPs and the local A&E, piling huge pressures on other parts of the NHS. Will the Government take urgent action and start proper investment in NHS dentistry to end these extortionate dental fee increases?

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford: The noble Baroness raises an important point. Patient charges are an important contribution to the overall costs of the NHS, and they were driven by some really difficult financial circumstances in the NHS, but she is right that it is critical that no one be deterred from seeking care by the cost. As part of this year's uplift, the Government and the department have committed to

looking further at evidence as to whether patients are being adversely impacted so that this can be taken into account in next year's—and any future—decisions.

The Countess of Mar (CB): My Lords, the Care Quality Commission recently published a pretty damning report on dental care for people in residential care and nursing homes; most of these people do not have access to a dentist. What are the Government doing to ensure that people in residential or nursing home care get regular dental treatment?

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford: My friend the noble Countess, Lady Mar, raises a vital area. Overall care for those in care homes, whether healthcare, mental health care or dental care, must be provided in a suitable manner. This is being considered in the social care Green Paper.

Lord Tomlinson (Lab): My Lords, I declare an interest as a former chairman of the British Fluoridation Society. Does the Minister agree that prevention is much better than cure, and that you can prevent the need for dentists through a substantial increase in the use of fluoride in our water supplies? Is she satisfied with the progress being made on fluoridation of water? If not, what plans does she have to encourage it?

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford: The noble Lord is quite right: prevention is always better than cure. That is why the programme for oral health improvement in both the NHS long-term plan and the dental contract being tested focuses on a more preventive approach to oral care. Water fluoridation is obviously a very effective way of improving oral health, particularly for children. According to the 2012 Act, it must be a local decision supported by Public Health England in the lead. We want to see more decisions. PHE's guidance on delivering better oral health sets out clear expectations on this, but there are also other ways in which fluoride can get to children. One is through fluoride in toothpaste, which is now at effective concentrations; the other is that all dentists are expected to deliver fluoride to teeth directly, at clinically appropriate intervals, to all children in their care.

Lord Clark of Windermere (Lab): Is it true that more than a million people were unable to get a dentist under the health service last year?

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford: I do not have that figure in my briefing pack, but I am very happy to write to the noble Lord to confirm or deny whether that is the case.

Royal Navy: Frigates

Question

11.23 am

Asked by **Lord West of Spithead**

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether the number of frigates in commission available for operations will fall below 13 in any year before 2026.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Earl Howe)(Con): My Lords, the Government remain committed to a surface fleet of at least 19 frigates and destroyers. The Royal Navy will have the ships it requires to fulfil its defence and policy commitments. All ships rotate through planned operating cycles involving maintenance, training, deployment, leave and capability upgrades.

Lord West of Spithead (Lab): I thank the Minister for his Answer. As he well knows, there are 13 frigates. I was in the yard at Devonport a few days ago, and five of the Type 23s were there. That is not unusual—one was in deep refit and four were coming back from operations and preparing. It effectively means that this great maritime nation of ours has eight frigates available for operations, one of which is being used in the Gulf at the moment. The nearest major warship to that one is on the other side of Suez, which I find rather worrying. We are planning to order the Type 31e. I cannot see how we will be able to get the first of those ships in commission, having done its first-of-class trials, before 2024. Yet the first of the Type 23s, the "Argyll", pays off aged 34—it has a planned life of 25 years—in 2023. Is it possible, as a matter of urgency, for the MoD to look at the speeding up of the build rate of the Type 26 frigates? Then we can ensure that we are getting frigates in place, because we have too few as a nation. It makes us less secure and means that wars are more likely. It is really important to move forward.

Earl Howe: My Lords, I take very seriously the noble Lord's concerns on this issue. As I have said on earlier occasions, we want the first Type 31e in 2023, with five ships delivered by the end of 2028; that is to replace the five Type 23 general purpose frigates. As he knows, the Type 31e is being procured through competition between UK shipyards. We will not have the result of the competition until the end of this year, so until then, it will not be possible to make predictions about whether the delivery date that we have charged industry with is definitely deliverable—but we hope that it is.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem (LD): My Lords, since the noble Lord raised the question of the Type 31e, I remind the Minister that when it was first promoted, it was described by some as a cheap frigate—a description which appears increasingly inept, to use the word of the moment. Originally, the price was to be £250 million. Do the Government now accept that a figure of £350 million is much more realistic, and that such a figure will require additional funds from an already overstretched budget and will make the obtaining of the promised export orders much more difficult to achieve?

Earl Howe: My Lords, I do not agree. As I said, we want the first ship in 2023, with five ships delivered at the end of 2028, and we are still setting industry the target of an average production cost of £250 million per ship. All the information I have had says that that is still realistic.

The Duke of Montrose (Con): My Lords, I would like to back up the noble Lord, Lord West, in his question on how effective our present fleet can be. As noble Lords will have seen, the frigate now in action in the Persian Gulf goes by the name of “Montrose”, and I have been fortunate enough to have contact with all the captains since it was launched. It has done duty chasing pirates in the Gulf of Arabia, protecting shipping in the China seas and now in the Gulf. I understand that the present arrangements are for quite a long spell in that situation. Do we have enough of these very effective vessels to carry out the duties that ensure our security?

Earl Howe: As I am sure my noble friend would expect, we keep our fleet deployments under constant review to adapt to evolving security situations around the world. That is the case with the current situation in the Gulf. Having said that, the recent actions of HMS “Montrose” demonstrate that we have the right assets in the right places. I stress that our priority now is to reduce tensions in the region.

Lord Tunnicliffe (Lab): My Lords, can I build on that point? Does that incident in which HMS “Montrose” was involved indicate the probability that more frigates will have to be deployed in the Gulf and, if so, what tasks elsewhere will be left uncovered?

Earl Howe: My Lords, I understand why the noble Lord should ask that question, but it is hypothetical. At the moment, we think we have the right assets in the right places but, as I said, we keep our deployments and our tasking under review.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab Co-op): My Lords, with no disrespect to my excellent, gallant and noble friend, is it not the case that we now have two admirals for every ship we have serving? Is it not about time we did some trimming of the admirals?

Lord West of Spithead: Noted!

Earl Howe: My Lords, the Navy has already reduced the number of senior officers across the piece, including its admirals. We believe we have an appropriate number of senior officers to take charge of the various responsibilities, not all of which directly relate to ships of the fleet.

Lord James of Blackheath (Con): My Lords, I am admonished that I should not ask a question which could cause a Minister to answer in a way that contains secret information. However, in view of the ambiguity of the noble Earl’s Answer to the Question, perhaps I may ask this: will the Royal Navy continue to control those 13 frigates in future, or are the Government subject to some private arrangement under which they intend to transfer the Army, the Navy and the Air Force to the control of a central European defence force as soon as we have reached a Brexit solution—a resolution or a remain?

Earl Howe: My Lords, the Government will never give up our sovereign control of our Armed Forces. I can give my noble friend that absolute assurance. If he found any ambiguity in my Answer, I am sorry, but, as he knows, it is not uncommon to have planned, temporary, small fluctuations in overall numbers when transitioning from any class of ship or submarine to another.

Gulf of Oman Question

11.30 am

Asked by **Lord Bates**

To ask Her Majesty’s Government what steps they are taking with international partners to de-escalate tensions in the Gulf of Oman.

Baroness Goldie (Con): My Lords, we remain concerned by heightened tensions in the Gulf of Oman. We continue to call for de-escalation on all sides and have long made clear our concern about Iran’s destabilising regional activity. Unintended escalation would not be in any party’s interest. The UK maintains a long-standing maritime presence in the Gulf. We are continuously monitoring the security situation there and are committed to maintaining freedom of navigation in accordance with international law.

Lord Bates (Con): I am grateful for my noble friend’s Answer and partly reassured by it, but with ongoing conflicts in Yemen and Syria and the ground still tinder dry in Afghanistan and Iraq, does my noble friend agree that the prospect of a military confrontation with Iran has potentially catastrophic consequences? On Friday 21 June we understand that the United States was 10 minutes away from launching multiple military strikes against Iranian targets. On 24 June the Foreign Secretary warned of an accidental war between Iran and the United States. Overnight, we have seen the provocation of the attempted seizure of a British tanker going through the Straits. Will my noble friend reassure us that every effort is being made, despite all the provocations and distractions, to seek a peaceful, diplomatic and political solution to this crisis?

Baroness Goldie: My noble friend is absolutely correct in his analysis that this is a situation of uncertainty and fragility. Profoundly undesirable would be any action which precipitated unintended consequences or heightened instability. I reassure my noble friend that we are in regular contact with the United States and other international partners, and our priority remains finding diplomatic solutions to de-escalate the tensions in the region.

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab): My Lords, is this not a classic situation where the three Ds of diplomacy, defence and development need to work together? We need our Government to ensure that there is collective responsibility and working together. The noble Earl said that we will never give up sovereignty over our defence forces—but we work in co-operation with our

allies all the time to ensure the security of this nation. So how are we working with our European allies to maintain the agreement with Iran so that it does not break up and that we have enough ships to ensure that that diplomacy is secure? Will we have joined-up government from the new Prime Minister?

Baroness Goldie: I can speak for the current Administration. The noble Lord makes three important points. First, evidence confirms that we work together and collaboratively. We work with our intelligence services and, as the overnight incident displayed, we are ready to do our best to protect British shipping interests in that area. We engage in active diplomacy, not just with global partners but directly with Iran. Indeed, my right honourable friend Dr Murrison visited Iran at the end of June. Importantly, we take a view in conjunction with our partners under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The noble Lord is quite right: we need to conjoin all this endeavour. We believe that the comprehensive plan of action is the best way forward and we want to support it, but we have been consistently clear that our commitment to that plan depends on full compliance by Iran. We are urgently considering next steps under the terms of that plan in close co-ordination with our international partners, but I reassure the noble Lord that there is genuine discussion at this end not only across departments but with our global partners.

Baroness Northover (LD): My Lords, as the noble Baroness hinted, this situation has escalated since the US pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal. Does this not illustrate why we need unvarnished reports from our ambassador in Washington? What extra preparations are being made to protect major British interests and British citizens in the region if the situation escalates further?

Baroness Goldie: In a sense, I reprise what I said to the noble Lord, Lord Collins. We are actively engaged diplomatically in the region, where we have UK interests. As the overnight incident illustrated, we have naval capacity, which came to the aid of the British tanker. That is to be applauded and we should praise the crew of HMS “Montrose”, which assisted in a very effective and satisfactory manner. As my noble friend Lord Bates said, we are anxious to ensure that we do everything we can to de-escalate tensions. That is certainly the role of the United Kingdom Government, and we are unrelenting in our efforts to achieve that objective not just through our diplomatic endeavours but in conjunction with our global partners.

Lord Dykes (CB): My Lords, will the Government bear in mind that the erratic and immature President in charge of the United States presides over a defence budget that is 10 times the size of Russia’s, and that Russia’s defence budget is now smaller than France’s? Will she heed the wise advice of the noble Lord, Lord Bates, and make sure that we keep tabs on the process to ensure that peace prevails?

Baroness Goldie: That is exactly what the United Kingdom Government are engaged in. As I have illustrated, we engage in that programme in various ways.

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): My Lords, I cannot help wondering whether it was such a good idea for us to raid the Iranian oil tanker in Gibraltar in the first place. Obviously, we want to stop oil getting to Assad—although probably he can get all the oil he wants from the Russians—but are we not supposed to be on the same side as the Iranians on the question of nuclear proliferation and control? Can we have a firm assurance that we did this not just on the say-so of Washington but on our own initiative?

Baroness Goldie: Let me assure my noble friend. First, we did this at the request of the Government of Gibraltar, to assist with a sanctions operation. Action was taken because of where the oil was going—to a sanctioned Syrian entity, as a body of evidence attested—not because of where it came from. The vessel was boarded and detained in British Gibraltar territorial waters and we were pleased to assist the Government of Gibraltar in acceding to their request.

Business of the House

Motion on Standing Orders

11.38 am

Moved by Lord Taylor of Holbeach

That Standing Order 46 (*No two stages of a Bill to be taken on one day*) be dispensed with on Tuesday 16 July to allow the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 3) Bill to be taken through its remaining stages that day.

Motion agreed.

Business of the House

Motion on Standing Orders

11.38 am

Moved by Lord Taylor of Holbeach

That Standing Orders 46 (*No two stages of a Bill to be taken on one day*) and 48 (*Amendments on Third Reading*) be dispensed with on Wednesday 17 July to allow the Report stage and Third Reading of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill to be taken on that day and to allow manuscript amendments to be tabled and moved on Third Reading.

Motion agreed.

Business of the House

Timing of Debates

11.38 am

Moved by Lord Taylor of Holbeach

That the debate on the motion in the name of Baroness Neville-Rolfe set down for today shall be limited to two hours and that in the name of Lord Elton to three hours.

Motion agreed.

UK's Ambassador to the USA: Resignation Statement

11.39 am

Baroness Goldie (Con): My Lords, with the leave of the House, I shall now repeat the Answer, given in the other place this morning by my right honourable friend Sir Alan Duncan, to an Urgent Question with reference to the United Kingdom's ambassador in the United States:

“Mr Speaker, it was with deep regret that yesterday the Government accepted the resignation of Her Majesty's Ambassador to Washington, Sir Kim Darroch.

Over a distinguished 42-year career, Sir Kim served his country with the utmost dedication and distinction. He brought dispassionate insight and directness to his role. It is an outrage that a selection of his very professional reports back to London should have been leaked.

Quite rightly, Sir Kim received the full support of the Prime Minister and the entire Cabinet. In an act of selfless duty, Sir Kim made the decision to resign in order to relieve the pressure on his family and colleagues and to protect the United Kingdom-United States relationship.

The Government profoundly regret that this episode has led Sir Kim to decide to resign. The tributes that have been paid to him from across both Houses, and from so many other corners of this country and others, have been fitting and rightly deserved”.

11.40 am

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab): My Lords, I think we all share dismay at the circumstances that led to the resignation of Sir Kim, who resigned simply for doing his job. As Tom Tugendhat said in the other place this morning, it is absolutely essential that we all stand up for those we send abroad. It is deeply shameful that Boris Johnson was unable to do that, despite the six opportunities he had on Tuesday. Nevertheless, in the other place this morning Alan Duncan said that we will appoint a new ambassador in the usual and proper way. I—and, I am sure, many in this House—believe that speed is of the essence to restore confidence in our Diplomatic Service. I hope the Minister will be able to confirm today that we will appoint in a proper, professional and speedy way a replacement who is a professional diplomat, so that we can restore confidence in our Diplomatic Service.

Baroness Goldie: The noble Lord's last point is extremely important. It is absolutely vital that our Diplomatic Service be conducted with integrity, and Sir Kim was an exemplar of that. The noble Lord will be aware that there are procedures for the appointment of ambassadors. The next ambassador will be appointed in the usual way by the Prime Minister, on the Foreign Secretary's recommendation and with the approval of Her Majesty the Queen.

Baroness Northover (LD): My Lords, I welcome the Statement from the noble Baroness. This situation is indeed very shocking. Can the Minister make it crystal

clear that no incoming Conservative or other Administration should ever sacrifice our diplomats when bullied by a host country? I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Collins. Can the Minister assure us that as we face, as we just discussed, escalating tensions in the Middle East—worsened by US actions—we will move immediately to appoint a new ambassador in Washington who has the necessary deep and long experience as a diplomat? It can never be the case that our ambassador somehow has to sign up to the political position of a host country.

Baroness Goldie: Let me be crystal clear: it is for the United Kingdom to select our ambassador to any diplomatic appointment. There is a process for appointing a successor to Sir Kim Darroch, which will inevitably have to be worked out in some detail. That is currently happening. I am unable to give any more specific information at this time.

Lord Jay of Ewelme (CB): My Lords, I worked with Kim Darroch for many years, in many different capacities, under many different Prime Ministers from Lady Thatcher onwards, and I have the very highest regard for his integrity and diplomatic skills. I regret his resignation; I am not in the least surprised that those who worked for him regret it as well. I pay tribute to him for the work he has done. Can the Minister give us an absolute assurance that this Government—I know she will have no difficulty doing so for this Government—and, as far as she is able, the next Prime Minister and the next Government, will remain committed to the political independence and impartiality of the Diplomatic Service and the Home Civil Service?

Baroness Goldie: I thank the noble Lord, who speaks with a special experience of these matters. Democracy requires elected politicians and Governments, and Governments cannot operate without competent, professional and independent civil servants. That is axiomatic for any Government in any part of the world to operate effectively and well. I share the noble Lord's sentiments that that independence and professionalism must be respected. He is correct in the tributes he pays, and I thank him for them; I am sure that they are shared across the House. Any Government will understand the merit of observing the virtues of an independent, competent diplomatic service and would want to do everything to uphold them.

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): My Lords, as the President of the United States added a few gratuitous and personal remarks about our Prime Minister, should we not stand back and tell him to go and relax and play a game of golf? His aides often reveal that his grumbles and irritations are short-lived, and he tends to forget after a day or two what is worrying him, or he has a new worry. In these circumstances, clever diplomacy might suggest that, if we wait a while, things will cool down and we could consider reappointing an excellent ambassador to the United States called Sir Kim Darroch.

Baroness Goldie: My noble friend speaks with great wisdom. I am not sure that I am qualified to be an adviser or a counsellor to the President of the United States of America. We have a long-standing and strong relationship with the United States that transcends

Prime Ministers and Presidents. That relationship is fundamentally strong and important. It is manifest in various successful collaborations, co-ordinations and partnerships in which we have engaged. I am certain that the Governments of both the United Kingdom and the United States will want to do everything possible to sustain that important and strong relationship.

Lord Davies of Stamford (Lab): My Lords, the Government should not have accepted Sir Kim's resignation and if they had any moral fibre they would not have done so. From now on, all ambassadorial communications will inevitably to some degree be self-censored to make sure that, in the event of a leak, the career of the ambassador concerned does not come to a rapid halt, and the Government will therefore no longer be in receipt of the uninhibited frank advice that is essential to good policy-making. Does the Minister agree that this is a bad day for British diplomacy and a shameful day for the country?

Baroness Goldie: We have to be sensitive to the wishes of Sir Kim Darroch. We profoundly regret the position in which he was put—the position in which he found himself—but we have to respect his personal wishes in relation to that situation. There is no question of important and sensitive diplomatic communications being censored or moderated lest they might be intercepted and cause embarrassment. If we are not to have a diplomatic service which can be blunt, honest and frank with the Government so that they have the best possible information available before they make important decisions—either in relation to policy or in response to situations of conflict—then we have to question what the point is of a diplomatic service. That service has to be there, it has to be supported, it has to operate independently and we have to respect and dignify the incumbents who do such important work for us.

Baroness Meyer (Con): My Lords, this is a sad episode but we should not rush to replace Sir Kim. A chargé d'affaires is perfectly capable of being in charge during the summer months. We need to concentrate on catching the culprit and on how we can keep classified documents confidential. We should reflect coolly and calmly on how to handle a relationship with the United States and President Trump. Does the Minister agree that, in the meantime, we should not let this episode become ensnared in British politics?

Baroness Goldie: I cannot comment further on the arrangements for the appointment of a successor; I have already indicated what they are. My noble friend asked a number of questions. It is vital that the inquiry lifts the drains to find out who was responsible for this completely unacceptable conduct. It is also right that if the miscreant is identified and found, appropriate proceedings should follow.

Lord Butler of Brockwell (CB): My Lords, with some regret I express my support for the question asked by the noble Baroness, Lady Meyer. There is a convention that when there is a prospect of a change of government, Governments do not take major decisions.

There is a good reason for that, which is that the incoming Government should have full confidence in the person who is appointed. Is it not necessary that this convention should apply in this case?

Baroness Goldie: I cannot add to what I have already said. The process is laid down, and I have no further information on that.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem (LD): My Lords, is not Sir Kim the only person to end with any credit in this matter? The person who leaked the details, the President and the overweening ambition of Mr Boris Johnson are very happy reminders of just how noble the decision of Sir Kim Darroch has been.

Baroness Goldie: I think we are unanimous in our respect for and support of Sir Kim Darroch, but I return to the very wise point made by my noble friend Lord Howell: regardless of Prime Ministers or Presidents, our relationship with the United States is enduring. It is of long-standing character; it is important; it is firm; it is robust. I am absolutely certain that the Governments of both countries will want to do everything they can to preserve it.

Economic Environment: Growth and Jobs

Motion to Take Note

11.52 am

Moved by Baroness Neville-Rolfe

That this House takes note of the case for creating an environment which encourages (1) business growth, and (2) job creation, especially in relation to the tax system.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Con): My Lords, I am honoured and delighted to be leading this debate at such an important time for our country. Of course, most of our thoughts are on the next 100 days, which will make a huge difference to our future and the 66 million people and 5.7 million businesses on these islands, but whatever happens to Brexit, the success of business is important to everyone whether, say, they sit in the NHS in Salisbury or in a retirement home in Scarborough. This is because business produces the wealth on which we all depend.

I would like to reflect more deeply on this point. There are many excellent things about being appointed to the House of Lords, especially the chance to scrutinise legislation in a way that is not practicable in the House of Commons. However, I have to say that I have been disappointed by our failure to understand commercial interests and their importance to wealth creation and to the UK's position in the world. However, I am comforted by the fact that, although no one is guiltless on this matter, attitudes in the Conservative Party are somewhat better than they are elsewhere. We should not underestimate the significance of a culture where enterprise is valued.

The same attitude seems to permeate society at large where too much attention is given to dividing up the cake and to regulating in ways that reduce it than to ensuring that it increases. Growth was only 0.3% in the three months to May, despite annual population

[BARONESS NEVILLE-ROLFE]

growth of 0.6%, and output per hour, the key measure of productivity, is now at best flatlining. Against this challenging background, I will explore some of the drivers of growth and what is getting in the way. A key question is whether our tax system helps the economy to grow in both absolute and relative terms. Does it help with our international competitiveness at a time when we will need to trade more broadly? Are we encouraging the magic of digital growth and taxing it fairly?

Before starting my main themes, I should like to thank the Library staff, who, as always, have been unfailingly helpful in assisting me to prepare for this debate.

I turn, first, to certainty. Businesses need to know where the country is going, and at present capital is being held on balance sheets rather than invested. Ask almost any CEO and they will say that US and other firms are holding back from investment. In March, many sought a delayed Brexit as they did not want a no-deal scenario, but I fear that we are now reaching a stage where delay in reaching a conclusion on Brexit is itself possibly the greatest negative factor affecting the economy. Businesses also fear the chaos and extreme socialism of the present Labour leadership. For all those reasons, the economy, hitherto resilient, particularly on employment, is now slowing.

On fiscal responsibility, there is an arms race of new ideas for taxation among both Conservative leaders and the Labour Party. Unfortunately, the necessary lodestone of fiscal responsibility is missing. We must not now put at risk all the good work that we have done in reducing the deficit created by the financial crisis. The national debt is still far too high, at £1.8 trillion, and it costs us £37.5 billion a year—money that could be put to better use.

The tax system is also creaking under the weight of its own complexity. Because I believe in taxing broadly and thinly, I think that we should keep VAT. However, there are hundreds of complications that have taken the entire tax code up to 10 million words—an estimate from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland, where I am off to after this debate. That is double what it was in 2009, according to the *Telegraph*. With a simpler approach, we could have avoided some embarrassments. I refer, for example, to Making Tax Digital, to those trading with the EU finding it so difficult to get the tax codes that they need to export post Brexit, and to the wretched loan charge fiasco.

On regulatory burdens, the complexity of the tax system, when allied with a confusing and growing regulatory system in sector after sector, leads to the dampening of business growth, whatever the underlying strength of the economy. It is no coincidence that labour productivity has been so poor since the crash in areas such as financial services and energy, where there has been so much new regulation. Noble Lords should beware new uncoded, complex regulation in new areas if we are to retain international competitiveness.

I turn to education and digital education. Having studied what drives growth for so long, both at Tesco and as a Minister—like my noble friend Lord Henley—at the business department, and later at the Treasury, I

am convinced that the most important driver of long-term efficiency and productivity is education. I welcome many of the Government's reforms, including Teach First, and the improvement in standards, especially, for example, in London primaries. However, the schools are too full because the impact of immigration was not provided for under our short-term accounting system.

We are not preparing properly for the future. The apprenticeship levy was meant to herald the sort of vocational education that I have seen operate well in Germany and Austria. However, as was apparent when reading between the polite lines of last Thursday's debate—which, sadly, I missed—it is a mess. It is not business led as it should be, and the levy in some cases has become simply yet another tax charge on the medium and large businesses that supply most of our quality jobs. Many fine businesses take the view that they are putting in much more than they gain. The apprenticeship levy needs to be turbocharged and simplified, and I await the Government's review, which I welcome, with some trepidation.

Even more seriously, we are not preparing properly for the digital revolution, which will destroy some jobs as automation and AI take off. This must be balanced by a vast investment in digital skills in schools, alongside literacy and maths, and in higher education, apprenticeships and on-the-job training; otherwise, growth will bring jobs losses, not the job creation that we all seek.

Infrastructure is not for today's debate but I support the Government's infrastructure fund, which is another productivity driver. We just need to get on with building the roads, digital networks, housing and rail facilities in the Government's plans. More competence is as important as more money.

I must refer to the Taylor review of working practices, to which my noble friend the Minister very helpfully drew my attention when we met earlier in the week. This analyses how to improve working practices to the advantage of all. I was particularly struck by section 4, on management-employee relations, where the objective is that workers are engaged and heard, which I know is so important. On the same theme—I refer to my business interests as listed on the register—I am a director of Capita plc, which has recently appointed two employee directors to the board; having met the individuals concerned, I am very hopeful that they will make a strong contribution to the success of the company.

I now turn explicitly to the tax system and must say how much I look forward to today's contributions on the specifics. I have already criticised tax complexity—which is possibly top of my list, because it is a slow killer that people do not notice—but I would like to highlight some specific areas where the structure of tax, especially for business, needs to be looked at.

As a former retailer, as everybody knows, I know that retail, the heart of thousands of towns and villages across the country, is disproportionately affected by business rates. According to the British Retail Consortium, the industry constitutes 5% of the economy but pays 10% of business taxes and 25% of business rates. Moreover, the Treasury requires a fixed amount in

business rates every year. This is no longer a sensible or viable policy; the take needs to be reduced. Also, the present system of transitional relief is unfair. Month after month, we see the bigger shops failing and taking with them many small shops. This week's figures bring the problem home: in the three months to June, non-food instore sales fell by 4.1%, like for like, while online retail sales, excluding food, grew by 3.3%.

I support the digital services tax in principle, but it should be higher and the proceeds should be used to offset business rates and help the desperate situation on the high street. Rates should be frozen with no upward adjustment until the vibrancy of our towns and cities is restored or the business taxation system reformed.

It is clear that the property market is slowing and that the recent increases in stamp duty have discouraged people from moving whenever it can be avoided—especially at the top end, where the level reaches 12%. This has had a deleterious effect on the movement of labour, which is vital to our growth. Stamp duty must be reformed, especially with a view to encouraging mobility and empty nesters trading down to release family homes. It is not just a matter of concern at the lower end, which leadership candidates have highlighted.

The Government should be congratulated on what they have done for small businesses on rates and their proposals to give the Small Business Commissioner more teeth. They have also established the British Business Bank, which is now five years old and the subject of an inquiry in the other place. My own view is that this bank needs to increase in scale and remit and that it can help smaller businesses enormously, not only in London but especially outside it.

However, the tax environment remains a struggle for millions of small businesses and, as your Lordships' Economics Affairs Committee report *Making Tax Digital for VAT: Treating Small Businesses Fairly* highlighted, the change to digital returns has created great difficulties for some small businesses. The work I have done with business across the country also suggests that the complexity of the tax, national insurance and auto-enrolment pension systems—which I support—taken together are made much worse by the inadequacy of free advice from HMRC and others.

If we are to flourish in a world that is growing faster than us, we need to have more regard to international competitiveness. Some of this Government's reforms to corporation and other taxes have been good and have reduced the incentive for offshoring. The reduction in corporation tax from 28% to 19% was George Osborne's best move and has even increased revenues thanks to the magic of the Laffer curve. It will fall to 17% in 2020, which is a further boost to responsible, tax-paying businesses. Likewise, there is a good case for increasing thresholds for the higher marginal income tax rates, because it will encourage enterprise.

I am also a fan of a taxation and accounting system which supports our huge service sector, our invisible exports and intellectual property; these are all areas in which Britain is strong. I know how much BEIS has done to increase R&D funding in this country, but the

tax system has also been supportive. UK-registered firms have claimed R&D tax credits worth £3.5 billion and 1,025 companies have saved £943 million in corporation tax from the patent box.

With such myriad taxes and so much complexity, I have barely scraped the surface of this important subject. However, I hope I have helped to make the case for a more informed and supportive attitude to business. While I know it is not my noble friend's direct responsibility, I hope he agrees that the structure of business taxes needs to be looked at by the new leadership and that there is a case for change.

The Chancellor has already announced a welcome digital services tax on the larger digital players to help redress the unfairness of the current system, but it needs to increase quickly and be used to ease the burden of rates on the high street. It cannot be right that Amazon paid £4.6 million in UK tax in 2017 and the beloved Marks & Spencer paid £98.3 million.

Finally, we must support a culture of enterprise. If we do this, we are not only taking the right moral stance but we are bound to boost the economy further. The choice is not between lower taxes for business and more wealth for the public. Lower taxes, carefully crafted, will encourage growth to the benefit of all.

12.07 pm

Lord Haskel (Lab): My Lords, my experience is of building up a business from small beginnings. That was some time ago, and the business environment was very much as the noble Baroness described it. But things are changing.

This was brought home to me when, early in January this year, I was shown a letter from the chief executive of BlackRock, perhaps the world's largest investor. It was a letter addressed to chief executives saying that companies needed to do more than make profits. He said that they must make a positive contribution to society and he planned to hold them to account. Companies needed to show that they had a purpose, not just high-minded mission statements. How do we achieve these social ends, as well as being efficient, productive, progressive and technologically advanced? We achieve this by government and business working together to move in this direction.

For instance, we played an important part in preparing the UN agenda for sustainable development and we are committed to achieving its goals, which include a commitment to tackling injustice and inequality, particularly in employment. We have declared a climate emergency and signed up to environmental standards. The noble Baroness mentioned education. Several universities have now opened business and society departments. The Government have committed themselves to a civil society programme, using public procurement to create social value and public good. This is our modern business environment and it will become even more so as the next generation takes over.

However, it is still widely accepted by some that tax discourages economic activity, and that tax cuts will raise revenue. There is absolutely no empirical evidence for this. Indeed, recent analysis of business growth and investment in the UK economy seems to show

[LORD HASKEL]

that, as a result of tax cuts, large corporations are investing more money in dividends and share buy-backs than in sustainable business growth. This is reflected in our stagnant productivity.

It has been widely reported that, as the noble Baroness mentioned, the large digital companies pay a pittance in UK tax because they profit from favourable cross-border tax arrangements. I am grateful to UKCloud, a cloud-hosting company, for its briefing. It says that by 2020, Amazon Web Services will have captured some three-quarters of the total public sector cloud market. It has the advantage of paying significantly less tax as a percentage of its revenue than UK-based companies. UKCloud also tells me that the forthcoming digital service tax will not go far enough to combat this tax advantage. By awarding contracts to such companies, the Government give tacit approval to such tax practices and, by consolidating the market power in the hands of a small number of large providers, reduce the opportunity for others to enter the market. We all know the dangers of that; we have seen them over the last year.

This overall reliance by the Government on big suppliers helps explain the reported rise in business becoming concentrated in fewer, larger hands. It is much easier to scale up an intangible digital business, because once you have written the software, there is little more direct investment or employment as required. This is opposite to most other businesses, and part of the digital effect which the noble Baroness spoke of. This concentration is certainly not the kind of business environment that we should be seeking. It is to help deal with this, and to introduce a fairer form of bidding for government contracts, that the British Standards Institution has now introduced BS 95009. I make no apology for raising this once again in your Lordships' House.

I remind the Minister again that with this standard, firms of all sizes can demonstrate their competence and suitability. It simplifies the process because, by achieving this standard, firms will have demonstrated their credentials across a whole range of criteria and their ability to carry out good practice. As well as reducing concentration, it is entirely in keeping with the Government's stated civil society programme and the UN sustainable development goals target, to both of which the Government are committed. Will the Government now support this initiative?

To borrow a phrase from *Tomorrow's Company*, the economy requires stewardship. That is the kind of environment that we must see—a way of doing business with a focus on human purposes; to see things long term, and to look after the wealth creation system, so that we can pass it on to our successors in better condition—an environment that rewards everybody fairly, proportionately and sustainably. The Government can have an immediate effect by influencing the rules and incentives that they lay down and the behaviour they encourage. This is the kind of business environment that we are now seeking, and which the next generation wants to see. Will the Government help create it?

12.14 pm

Lord St John of Bletso (CB): My Lords, I join in thanking the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, for introducing this topical and timely debate. I shall focus my comments on promoting job creation and business growth in the digital ecosystem. The industrial strategy made provision for substantial investment in digital infrastructure, as well as investment in talent and skills. My observations are less about the tax system, save for the tax incentives to invest in digital entrepreneurship through EIS and SEIS.

Last year I was fortunate to be a member of the ad hoc Select Committee on AI, ably chaired by the noble Lord, Lord Clement-Jones, in which we did a deep dive into both the benefits and the threats of AI. I am tempted to talk more about medtech, infotech, proptech and digitech, but in my limited time I will focus on the importance to our economy of fintech, a sector where the UK is arguably the global leader. Fintech is essentially a combination of financial services with innovation, with a multitude of benefits and savings. The UK fintech ecosystem has all the key elements for a world-leading environment where the industry can thrive with start-ups, entrepreneurs and technological innovation in abundance.

However, I must stress that this is not a time for complacency. As the noble Baroness mentioned in her introductory comments, the digital revolution has provided disruptive technology solutions to age-old as well as brand new problems, from efficiency and reliability to transparency and usability. It also poses a potential threat of massive job losses.

It is a sobering reality that there are currently 1.3 million unbanked working adults in the United Kingdom. Moreover, 16 million people in the UK have less than £100 in their savings account. Some 10% of households are still without access to the internet, and 30% of people over 65 have never used a computer. Fintech holds the key to unlocking and tackling financial inclusion, and it is a sector that places entrepreneurship at its heart. I entirely agree with the noble Baroness that we need to establish a culture of enterprise.

Start-ups are the lifeblood of the sector and are driving the digital economy forward. Banking the unbanked, highlighting affordable credit solutions and providing SME loans all combine to deliver the future that we all deserve. At a time when investors have less appetite for high risk, the tax incentives of EIS and SEIS for start-ups have been essential to the sustainability of many fintech businesses. Last year the United Kingdom had its best year ever in terms of fintech investment, with over £3 billion invested from private equity and VC investments alone. This puts the UK third in the sector, behind only China and the US. London has the world's highest concentration of 64,000 financial and professional services firms. There are just over 1,600 fintech firms in the UK—a figure that is destined to double by 2030.

Key to the success of fintech in the UK are our progressive regulatory frameworks, enabling challenger banks, remittance providers and fintech pioneers to lay their foundations and rapidly scale up. There have as a result been several unicorns such as Revolut,

Monzo and GoCardless. While there is a lot to be positive about in the fintech ecosystem, the future of Brexit will invariably pose a major threat to open borders and the international talent pool that is vital to the success of fintech in the UK. Immigration policy questions will continue to loom large in the light of Brexit uncertainty, and it is thus all the more important to grow the talent pipeline with a greater range of diverse talent at home. Can the Minister give assurances that there will be more provision for tier 1 exceptional talent visas to help retain and fill the demand for skilled labour?

I mention the challenge of diversity because at present, only 12% of senior executives in the UK fintech sector are female. We need policies that drive the recruitment of diverse talent, both to tackle the gender imbalance and to have a workforce with other skills backgrounds. I entirely agree with the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, that education is pivotal. I welcome the introduction of fintech courses, apprenticeships and sponsored work placements to strengthen the fintech talent pool, as well as the Fintech for Schools campaign, which educates young people in how to use fintech.

In conclusion, the UK, and particularly London, has built an incredible financial services community that, positioned correctly, can withstand techno-economic headwinds. But this is not a time for complacency; we need to focus our energies on collaboration rather than competition.

12.20 pm

Lord Leigh of Hurley (Con): My Lords, I too congratulate my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe on securing this debate. As President Ronald Reagan once said, you cannot be for big government, big taxes and big bureaucracy and still be for the little guy. It is exactly because we on this side of the House are for the little guy that our approach to business growth and tax is what it is.

As your Lordships discussed recently in an employment debate that I had the honour to lead, we know that the current low levels of tax are effective. Since 2010 our economy has grown by 18% and there are 1.2 million more businesses, with unemployment down by over 1 million in the same period. In fact, the UK unemployment rate is, at 3.8%, at its lowest since October 1974. We have 32.7 million people aged over 16 in employment, which again is a record since records began in 1971. As there are more people in work today than ever before and unemployment is at a record low, this means fewer workless households. Worklessness is the number one cause of poverty. No, it is not austerity or Brexit; it is households where there are no earners. That is what jobs do for households and why these numbers, as a direct result of the economic policies of this Government, should give us cheer.

We know that every Labour Government have left office with worse employment figures than they inherited from their Conservative predecessor; one has to ask why. Other than perhaps simple competence, one answer must be the levels of taxation. Let us look closely at some impacts of taxation. Our starting point should be that this is not the Government's money, so it is not a question of tax giveaways; it is the people's money.

When a Government taxes they should tread extremely carefully; if we damage job creation, the bill comes right back to us through the benefits system.

This Government have been trending in the low-tax direction for some time now and the job statistics back this up. Labour has gone on record as wanting to increase taxation, not least by withdrawing what it calls loopholes and which everyone else sees as highly successful incentives to encourage new businesses to start and entrepreneurs to succeed. One jests but, to take a good example, entrepreneur's relief has been specifically targeted by Labour. The latest HMRC figures show that it had 40,000 claimants last year, costing some £2.4 billion. I say "costing", but that is to completely misunderstand the purpose and nature of this and other reliefs. Labour and others will claim that it is simply to benefit the rich, but it is of course available only to entrepreneurs such as me and the noble Lord, Lord Haskel.

To fully declare my interests, I started a business employing one person with my own money; eventually, when we had 45 employees, I took advantage of that relief. Like other entrepreneurs, I would like to do that again some day as I am prepared to take that risk, but not if my capital gain would be taxed at the same level as the salary I could otherwise obtain. Take that relief away and entrepreneurs like me will choose to start businesses in other jurisdictions more favourable to entrepreneurs.

Likewise, as we have heard, starting up businesses is central to our long-term success. The current EIS and SEIS schemes are excellent but too restrictive. Those restrictions come mainly from the EU, which regards these schemes as state aid. Can my noble friend the Minister assure the House that once we are out of the EU, he and his colleagues will look at these restrictions to streamline them, as this will lead to a dramatic uptick in new businesses?

As tax rates have been kept to modest rates, the total tax take has gone up from just over £400 billion in 2010 to £623 billion last year, so the economy flourishes in such circumstances.

I shall pick up the point of my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe about the high street, which we all know has been hard hit. Retail has changed beyond recognition. Many online platforms, such as Amazon, eBay and, more recently, Alibaba have facilitated an avalanche of low-cost, often dangerous, non-compliant imports and, more concerningly for us, wide abuse of the VAT system. Welcome measures have been adopted to date, but they do not go far enough. Despite the powers given to HMRC to take action, there are platforms such as Amazon where Chinese sellers with no VAT number sell products. Earlier this week, I was given the details of a Chinese company with no VAT number, despite HMRC saying that is not possible. This company was reported to Amazon in early June, yet is still openly trading with no VAT number. There are many others I could cite, so the current measures are not working.

This is obviously why the US, Australia, India and some European countries are now imposing the duty of collecting VAT on those platforms, correctly labelling them facilitators. Every month, a US state introduces a new marketplace facilitator tax, and the tax take

[LORD LEIGH OF HURLEY]

goes up because Amazon and eBay are in the best place to collect that tax. This approach should be adopted in the UK if UK online retailers, let alone the high street, are to survive the huge and rapid changes in the retail landscape that would otherwise lead to massive job losses. Only the introduction of new, specific, targeted legislation will create an environment in which this new retail model allows the high street to survive.

But this criticism pales in comparison to that which I level at some commentators and some members of the party opposite, whose entire approach to taxation would do nothing to encourage either business growth or job creation. It would achieve the reverse. As we know, the shadow Chancellor described corporations as the real enemy. “Corporation” is a convenient pejorative; he is really describing employers and job creators. It is now Labour Party policy to raise corporation tax by seven percentage points. Economic commentators reckon that will cost 160,000 jobs. I ask: if these taxes hurt the little guy—and they will—whose side is Labour really on? The Opposition are fond of saying that they are for the many and not the few but, as far as I can see, unless they are referring to the many government quangos they want to start, the beneficiaries of these disastrous policies would not be UK jobs.

Frankly, I find some of the ideas emanating from the left petrifying. In the recent book *People Get Ready! Preparing for a Corbyn Government*, Christine Berry and Joe Guinan, who are well known to be close to Mr McDonnell, advocate capital controls, the nationalisation of private pensions and the banks, and the replacement of the Governor of the Bank of England and his senior staff, together with some Permanent Secretaries, with people more sympathetic to the current Labour leader’s views. There is a real risk that the Labour Party will be run by those who do not believe in a capitalist system. They believe that businesses and the economy should be run purely to maximise jobs, and that the return on capital should not be the determiner of the investment.

Fortunately, all Members of this House, I hope, know that this will lead to fewer jobs, more poverty, less tax revenue and poor infrastructure. Thankfully, this Government have remembered another of President Reagan’s mantras, “whenever we lower the tax rates, our entire nation is better off”. This is truly a policy for the many and not the few, and one to which I am glad the Government continue to subscribe.

12.28 pm

Viscount Chandos (Lab): My Lords, I am full of admiration for the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, for her bravery in introducing this subject at this point in the Government’s management of the Brexit process and the ingenuity of her remarks in attempting to draw the House’s attention away from it. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the register of interests, in particular my involvement in a number of small companies. This debate cannot be Brexit-free, but at least should be Brexit-lite.

The noble Baroness referred to the inevitable focus on Brexit over the next 100 days. Whether we leave the EU on 31 October or not, it is not 100 days. It may be 1,000 days, or 10,000, while the future trading arrangements with the EU are agreed. The uncertainty and confusion over Brexit overshadow everything. They have united the CBI and the TUC; they are to be welcomed in some ways but regretted in others.

The Government were unprepared for a no vote in the referendum and for the triggering of Article 50. We are now faced with the leadership contenders in a race to the bottom, competing to establish their macho credentials for contemplating leaving without a deal. As the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, acknowledged, even when Brexit is resolved, other issues are as important as tax if not more so. The more vibrant and vigorous a market is, the firmer regulation needs to be to address monopolistic and oligopolistic tendencies and to protect competition and the consumer. Other issues are education and training, migration and visa policy, and infrastructure.

Tax policy to encourage business growth and job creation is therefore a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a successful economy. As with regulation, a balance has to be struck between supporting business and fairness for all taxpayers and individuals. As the leadership race for the Conservative Party unfolds, I guess it is between the entrepreneur and the other candidate—I am not sure what he is; a comedian, a chameleon? One advocates a cut in corporation tax to 12.5%, even though, despite what other noble Lords have suggested, there is no firm evidence that the reduction from 28% to 19% has been beneficial to the economy. The other candidate advocates raising the threshold for higher rate income tax from £50,000 to £80,000. Whoever becomes leader of the party will perhaps, or presumably, become Prime Minister. Should the unwritten constitution not require that when the leader of the governing party changes, there is a vote of confidence—another confirmatory vote—in the House as a matter of course?

In contrast to the Conservative Party leadership candidates, in this debate I will concentrate my remarks about tax on the position of small businesses. The noble Lord, Lord Leigh, said that these Benches are not interested in, or supportive of, “the little guy”. When this House debated the report on RBS’s treatment of small businesses through the Global Restructuring Group, a couple of weeks ago, I was struck that there was no speaker from the Back Benches opposite. I love small businesses and start-ups and have worked with them for many years, as my entry in the register shows. I have worked with many different entrepreneurs, some of them even more successful than the Foreign Secretary, and some unsuccessful. I disagree with the noble Lord, Lord Leigh: the one common theme in my dealings with those entrepreneurs is that I have never seen any sign that tax ranks in the first five, or 10, considerations in their decision to start a business, to build it, and to do so in this country.

I finish by urging, as I have in previous speeches in this House, that the Government—the next Government or maybe the one after; it is too late for this Government—conduct a thorough review of the cost benefit of the myriad tax breaks for small businesses. I

am hugely supportive of small businesses, as I have said, but if you aggregate the tax breaks of business property relief under inheritance tax, EIS, VCT and entrepreneurs' relief, it is running at £10 billion of transactions per year, at a cost to the Exchequer of around £3 billion per annum. Do we get value, do small businesses even get value, from those reliefs?

12.35 pm

Lord Cavendish of Furness (Con): My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Viscount, and I may comment on some of his remarks in due course. We are indebted to my noble friend for securing this debate and for the compelling speech with which she introduced it. She covered much of what I might have wanted to say with greater insights than I can offer.

I have two matters by way of introduction: since I intend to identify what I regard as the obstacles to business growth, and in doing so venture some criticism of the Government, I say to my noble friend the Minister, who is also a fellow Cumbrian, that I acknowledge the many good things that the Government have done. Not least, they have gone a long way to bringing under control the public finances, which had reached such a terrifyingly bad state of affairs. I echo other noble Lords in congratulating them on their moves in regard to education. Secondly, in the matter of declaring a personal interest, I refer noble Lords to my entry in the register of interests. However, having checked with the *Companion*, I think that on this occasion I am required to be more a little specific. Accordingly, I declare personal interests through my family's business in south Cumbria, consisting of farming, forestry, mineral extraction, aggregates, housebuilding, leisure and National Hunt horseracing.

My noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe has great experience and standing in the business world, whereas the cohort to which I belong is the SME sector. I also talk regularly with SME friends and neighbours, especially where they are engaged in the field of high-tech. There is strong evidence of a worrying decline in business confidence, and I think it is widespread. Not only has investment in small firms fallen for four consecutive quarters, but 72% of businesses in the sector have no plans for capital investment in the months ahead. I do not think the prospect of leaving the EU in itself is the cause of these trends; in fact, many seem to welcome it. Innovative entrepreneurs tell me that they are not even greatly exercised by the thought of leaving on WTO terms. There are, however, two Brexit-related issues that do have a bearing, in addition to the one mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord St John. First, there can be no doubt that the interminable process has inflicted serious damage on business prospects. Secondly, the avoidable collapse of net migration from the EU from 189,000 to 74,000 has resulted in difficulties in accessing suitably skilled staff in certain parts of the country. The figures speak for themselves—one in five small employers rely on staff from the EU.

There are in this country 5.7 million small businesses; that is over 96% of the total. Between them, they generate £2 trillion, or 52% of all private sector turnover. I am led to believe that they contribute handsomely to the Exchequer, but I have been unable to locate the

figure—perhaps the Minister might help me when he comes to reply. The sector employs 16.3 million people, or 60% of all private sector employment. About 5% of them export to the EU; many of them do not export at all. Some 96% of businesses employ fewer than 10 people.

The SME sector is in trouble, and the Government appear to be blind to its problems and deaf to its appeals. The obstacles to success encountered by this sector are numerous, but I am especially struck by three figures: between 2016 and 2017, the proportion of SMEs that found the burden of rates and taxation was a barrier to success rose from 36% to 41%—the noble Viscount, Lord Chandos, and I might have a discussion about that, because it seems to conflict with his view; in the case of skills shortages, the proportion rose from 30% to 37%; and regulation and red tape as a serious inhibitor of growth went from 42% to 46% in the same period.

On this last point, it is complete nonsense for noble Lords on the Benches opposite to suggest, as they often do, that we want a bonfire of regulations. We want to keep regulation to a reasonable minimum; we want it to be simple and proportionate. To that extent, we are probably in agreement with the noble Viscount. I would welcome recognition from the Government that the imposition of regulation always falls disproportionately on the SME sector, a fact that large companies exploit when lobbying in Brussels so as to disadvantage their smaller competitors.

I appreciate that, taken individually, the enterprises we run are utterly insignificant. However, collectively, it is surely the case that the sector as a whole is by magnitudes the most important in the country, outside perhaps that of financial services. It should hardly need saying that among those in this group are literally all the big players of the future. The Minister will rightly point to small business relief and rural rates relief. However, qualification for those depends more on property values and service provision—for example, a rural post office—than actually providing sustainable employment in the rural community.

In our family business, we find that the margins are generally squeezed to the point that we are postponing and cancelling agreed investment. This is for the first time in half a century. This little incident illustrates my point: as a consequence of one of our recent mineral activities, we inadvertently created a new environment for the great crested newt, which lost no time in adopting it. We then proposed to undertake additional works, to the detriment of the newt's habitat, and were quite rightly and by law required to rehouse this charming amphibian and do so under expert supervision. The newt was duly found an alternative home. I tell this story to point out that the cost of this came to £150,000 and led directly to the abandonment of a very substantial investment and the creation of about 15 permanent jobs. It is a question of proportionality.

The problem is largely cultural; by degrees, an official class has developed a hostility to those it is meant to serve. This is particularly in evidence among planners, quangos and various agencies possessed of doubtful lines of accountability. The Government can and should do more to address the problems of

[LORD CAVENDISH OF FURNESS]

productivity, public sector procurement—where SMEs are still very largely excluded—technical training and of course business rates.

Those who nourish our nation's prosperity and on such a scale, as do a number of my neighbours in Cumbria, deserve better. I ask the Government to rethink their attitude to the sector, renew their efforts to understand its troubles and cherish a little all those millions of men and women on whom our future and prosperity depend.

12.43 pm

Baroness Fairhead (Con): My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe on raising this important issue and thank her for her many contributions to UK business over her impressive career.

In terms of being a good place for business, we perform well internationally. We are number 9 out of 190 countries and, as my noble friend Lord Leigh of Hurley said, our unemployment rate is at its lowest since 1974, and employment is increasing. A lot of this success is due to initiatives by government, and by government and businesses together, of which we should all be proud. Just recently, the industrial strategy, with its £37 billion for productivity investment, support for R&D and sector deals, is creating real excitement. It is now supported by the export strategy and the productivity plan led by Sir Charlie Mayfield, which is giving practical checklists to SMEs.

We need to be balanced in our criticism, but that is not to say that there is not more to be done. I will concentrate on access to finance, with a particular focus on SMEs and scale-ups, because they are most keenly affected. It is worth calling out the success of two government schemes: the enterprise investment scheme and the seed enterprise investment scheme, which were begun a couple of decades ago. My noble friend Lord Flight, through his chairmanship of the association, has helped to ensure the strong and continued government commitment, including its endorsement as part of the patient capital review. As regards enhancement, SMEs want to applaud the continuity but also welcome ongoing efforts to simplify the process.

The British Business Bank has been another important addition. It now has a range of programmes, including the Start Up Loans Company, having backed over 50,000 companies, with an average loan size of £6,500. In fact, HMT has just boosted its funding by an extra £2.5 billion as a result of the patient capital review, and that is to be welcomed.

Yet challenges remain. They are particularly acute for high-growth, innovative companies that are seeking to gain access to long-term financing. While the UK has a lot of sources of financing, we are still some way behind the US in terms of the depth of our markets. First, therefore, it is important that, as we leave the EU, we replace the European Investment fund post EU exit—I will return to that message.

Secondly, there is a need to spread access to growth capital across all regions of the UK. As my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe referred to, London and the south-east receive the lion's share of equity investment in SMEs, despite high-growth companies being much

more broadly spread across the country. The British Business Bank has established regional funds with the northern powerhouse, the Midlands Engine, and with the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Investment Fund, but they too rely on European funding. It is therefore important to understand how the proposed UK shared prosperity fund would replace this European funding to allow further regional access to finance funding in the future.

Thirdly, we need to improve access to information for growing companies so that they can better negotiate what remains a complex landscape of financial choices. Again, the British Business Bank launched a national finance hub with online information, better signposting and better referral processes. However, it is important that this is co-ordinated nationally and controlled through the LEPs and growth hubs.

A final area of access to finance that I would like to highlight is our export credit agency, UK Export Finance. That is a key pillar of our UK export strategy from last year. Evidence shows that companies which export are statistically more profitable, employ more people with higher skills levels, are more innovative and endure longer. UKEF is 100 years old, but it is considered today as the best in its class by its export finance agency credit agency peers. During my time as a Minister, it was described to me as, variously, “the game-changer in exporting”, as well as “our best kept secret”. The DIT and UKEF have clearly embraced this challenge to improve awareness, partnering with high-street banks to make access easier, but the success of this agency means that competitors are chasing at our heels. In particular, a number of countries, such as France and Malaysia are providing support in that critical early stage of exporting where you are exploring and investigating and beginning opportunities. One suggestion, therefore, is to look at our programme, to build on the trade access programme, which is currently relatively small, and both increase the funding available and extend the range of areas that can be covered.

Scale-ups is an area of rich opportunity. Although the UK comes third in the OECD rankings as a great place to start a business, when it comes to growing a business we fall to 13th, and these scale-ups really matter. According to the ScaleUp Institute, these 37,000 companies generated £1.3 trillion of turnover to the UK economy. They create three times as many jobs per week as the FTSE 100, they are 42% more productive than their sector peers and they are more likely to export. The challenges that they have faced for many years are well articulated. These challenges predate Brexit and within our power as a country to solve. We have a Scale-Up Taskforce and a Minister to champion them. However, the tax landscape and finding the right finance are important factors, and this is where outstanding questions remain about post-EU exit funding. Notably, of the 219 programmes mapped by the institute, one in three is currently co-funded by the ERDF and scale-up initiatives have substantial support from the EU. We need to avoid a scale-up void when we leave the EU.

Finally, I shall touch on the annual investment allowance. In its 2019 survey, the British Chambers of Commerce found that more than a third of its companies

are planning to use the allowance in the next two years. The allowance is valued, but the BCC suggests two improvements: expanding it to include investment in people and removing disincentives.

I ask my noble friend for reassurance on these matters regarding funding to ensure that we build on the progress that we have made in recent years.

12.50 pm

Lord Popat (Con): My Lords, I must start by drawing attention to my entry in the register of interests, as I provide advisory services to a business, and to my role as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Uganda and Rwanda. I also thank my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe for introducing this debate. Many years ago, I made my maiden speech in a debate about the economy and the need to be more business-friendly. We have come a long way from where we were, but there is still more that we can and should do.

We should start by putting Britain's economic performance in context. For three years, Britain has become synonymous with one word and one event: Brexit. Our departure has played out like a soap opera that the whole world has watched with increasing despair. Almost every day, news bulletins have been filled with Brexit updates, to the exclusion of almost every other event. This has resulted in one of the most important national stories flying under the radar: that the British economy continues to outperform all expectation.

At a time of considerable global uncertainty, with a potential US-China trade war, many leading economies slowing and protectionism rearing its ugly head again, Britain has continued to grow above expectation. The UK economy grew by 0.3% in the three months leading up to May. The economy has now grown by more than 17% since 2010.

Nowhere is this underreported miracle more obvious than in the UK labour market. At 3.9%, unemployment is down to the lowest level the UK has seen since the 1970s, with a record high of 32.7 million people in employment—up by nearly half a million in the past year and by 3.67 million since 2010. This has worked across the board, with a record high number of women in employment, 1 million more disabled people in work since 2013 and nearly half a million fewer young people out of work.

This is a great triumph for this Government, who reformed the welfare system and created a friendly environment for businesses when taking office in 2010. What is striking is that 80% of the 3 million or so new jobs are full-time and wages are rising at a higher rate.

Investment in the UK is also booming. Recent OECD figures revealed that Britain was the most popular country in Europe for foreign direct investment, with almost double the amount invested in Germany. Ernst & Young recently revealed that Britain was now the world's most attractive economy for mergers and acquisitions, with £305 billion-worth of transactions in 2018.

The Government can also be proud of their decisions on tax and spending matters. Government borrowing is now down to its lowest level in 17 years and is

currently at about £24.7 billion. That is a long way down from the £150 billion it reached in 2010. In part, borrowing is coming down because tax receipts are going up. Last year saw a record amount paid by individuals to the Exchequer, with nearly £623 billion paid in personal taxes—up £29 billion on the year before. This proves that good, old-fashioned Conservative policies work: being business-friendly and keeping taxes low has helped to power our economy.

Yet major areas still cry out for reform. Our planning system remains a significant barrier to businesses looking to invest and grow. Britain also has a considerable problem with productivity. An often-stated statistic is that it takes French and German workers four days to produce what Brits do in five. We need more investment in new machinery to improve productivity; too often, firms are totally reliant on cheap labour to do the work, rather than investing in technology, which is expensive in the beginning but more than pays for itself in the long run.

My noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe mentioned infrastructure, which includes road, rail and, perhaps most important of all, our aviation capacity. I can think of no other leading country in the world that would take so long to build one extra runway in its capital city; we are decades behind where we need to be when it comes to our airports. When I compare us to Asian and African economies, I am embarrassed by how slowly Heathrow's additional runway is going. Flights are our bridge to other countries. If we are to be an outward-looking nation post Brexit, speeding that up would help.

Of course, our economy faces many other challenges, including the time it takes to do CRB checks or open a bank account, which can be as long as six weeks. Then, there is the problem of VAT registration, despite the fact that the UK is ranked about ninth for ease of doing business. We need to improve in all these areas to encourage inward investment.

I want to focus on the tax system for a moment. We should be looking to make our tax system as appealing and competitive as possible, particularly for small businesses. Britain is one of the only countries in the world where companies have to pay a tax to employ people. I understand the logic behind employees paying tax, but an employer having to pay national insurance contributions to employ them is too much. There is also a strong argument for scrapping corporation tax and replacing it with a 1% tax on turnover, with the first £250,000 exempt. This would be a massive boost to small businesses and would make Britain one of the most competitive places in the world to do business. It would also help to solve the conundrum that the Treasury faces of how to capture large organisations such as Amazon and Google that have a high turnover in the UK but pay very little tax. What those companies do is not illegal, but it is unfair to many of their competitors; this would help to level the playing field.

12.58 pm

Baroness O'Cathain (Con): My Lords, I was delighted to see my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe's name on the Order Paper. I knew that I would learn so much

[BARONESS O'CATHAIN]

from her, as I did for many years when we were both at Tesco—although she was working hard and I was only on the board.

I was looking forward to the debate; I certainly have not been disappointed. Of course, we need to be aware that not everything is as we want it to be; in certain areas of taxation, it takes an awful lot of time to find out the right way to go. I am the daughter of a Revenue commissioner, so I should know something about it; it is probably the worst thing I deal with in business. Above all, we need to pull together on this particularly tricky aspect of our business and political lives.

I fear that we work in a rarefied atmosphere and are very much out of touch with certain groups of people in diverse areas. We tend to think the legislation we produce is flawless. We certainly need to do an awful lot more post-legislative scrutiny, and I hope that will happen in the next few months.

We have had an excellent debate, and the only thing I add to all that has been said is that we need to have much more confidence in ourselves. We are reading awful headlines in every newspaper, even those we think we can rely on—including the *Financial Times*.

Baroness Falkner of Margravine (LD): Given the House's keenness to hear the important things that the noble Baroness, Lady O'Cathain, is saying, I wonder whether she might actually address the House. It is very hard to pick up her voice when she is looking backwards.

Baroness O'Cathain: I am really very sorry and contrite. The fact is that I tend to face that way; do not forget that there are quite a lot of Members behind me too.

Right, where was I? I was saying that we needed to be confident. I recommend that people really take a grip of the terrific opportunity we have now, with great education and universities, huge investment in R&D and—I hear on Radio 4—apparently new medical developments every week. The people who can help us drive this are those graduating now. There should be some way of garnering together these people—the 18, 19 and 20 year-olds—and saying, “Be here; here is the best place to be. Give us the benefit of your investigations and studies”.

I do not want to say much else. I finish with a saying from Warren Buffett: “When everyone is buying, I am selling”. I am buying Britain at the moment.

1.02 pm

Lord Suri (Con): My Lords, I start by thanking my noble friend for securing the time for this debate. The tax system is a tricky thing. A former Chancellor of the Exchequer once described changing tax rates or introducing new taxes as pulling a piece of string tied on to five levers, with no guarantee of which would move or at what time. But we can look at the picture as a whole and note some long-term trends that point to where we could do better.

When I first came to this country, the tax burden ran at close to 40%. Lady Thatcher, formerly of this and the other place, got that down to 32%. But since that excellent progress was first made, the burden has been allowed to creep up, quietly but consistently. The TaxPayers' Alliance has calculated that the tax burden is as high this fiscal year as in 1969-70. Put bluntly, we are paying more than ever in tax and struggling to eke enough out of existing taxes to reach our goals in matters such as infrastructure, the health service or social care.

But we can fix these issues by taking a proactive approach to reordering taxation. Take corporation tax, which is charged on profits. Out of profits, we pay workers for their labour and suppliers for their goods. Out of profits comes the reinvestment that drives productivity. Even if profits are put away in a bank, they are recirculated by lending. Profits drive growth, investment and lending. I am of course glad that corporation taxes have dropped steadily under this Government, but I would like to see them fall far more steeply. Lower corporation tax has actually boosted the tax take considerably. Will the Minister reiterate the Government's commitment to further lower corporation tax and keep our rate at the lowest in the G7?

We should not shy away from radical solutions, either. The UK has struggled with weak productivity growth over the past decade, and the key to boosting productivity is boosting investment. It has long been recognised as a matter of sound accountancy that ongoing expenses should be deductible. But for investments that run through the long term, such as new plants, buildings or machines, companies can only deduct on a fractional basis. Because investments run down over the years, and inflation and interest charges reduce the value of assets, companies can recover at best a fraction of their investment, and almost never all of it. This matters, since investment in the long term is discouraged, as companies see it as a long-term cost. Full expensing is a tweak to the system. It allows companies to deduct those investments straightaway. This matters a great deal, as it provides a substantial incentive to invest, rather than hold back and spend one's money or available loans elsewhere.

A 2017 study by Eric Ohrn looked at the difference between states in the USA that allowed full expensing and those that did not. Those that did increased investment by 17.5% and grew wages by 2.5%. Five years thereafter, the states that allowed full expensing had 10.5% higher productivity than those that did not. Full expensing would also allow the Government to pick asset classes to encourage, which may be useful as part of the industrial strategy. Will the Minister consider reviewing the evidence in favour of full expensing?

1.07 pm

Baroness Kramer (LD): My Lords, I begin by picking up the issues raised by the noble Viscount, Lord Chandos, who made it clear that we cannot talk about anything to do with the economy without a real awareness of Brexit. It sets the framework; I know we do not want to focus on it today, but it is worth a comment or two here. Many people are acting as though uncertainty is something that exists until we decide to leave, and at

that point uncertainty ends. As the noble Viscount said, we are then locked into five to seven years of future uncertainty. It becomes the fundamental of the British economy, and all we can be sure of in leaving is that British businesses will have less access to EU markets; the complex supply networks that are the foundation of the British economy will gradually erode, because that is the logic of the disengagement and separation; and British businesses will have to build their future from economies of scale in a domestic market of 65 million people, not 500 million. I could go on, but that is the context.

The noble Lord, Lord Papat, the noble Baroness, Lady O’Cathain, and others said that we are looking at a robust and healthy economy. Public services in this country are desperately underfunded. Many, particularly at local government level, are in crisis. This is repeated in almost every sector, including the police, prisons, schools, the health service and social care.

There are more than 14 million people still in poverty, with inequality at its widest since the 1980s. We talk about full employment, but real wages are still 3% below those in 2008. We have now normalised in-work poverty, a serious feature that we have to tackle. For many people, their employment feels precarious as they know that their employers are trying to work out what the future of their business will be.

Growth is geographically unbalanced. In recent years, foreign direct investment in the UK has plummeted. In 2018 it was one-third of what it was in 2016. When people talk about us receiving more foreign investment than any other area, I wonder whether they have looked at the value of the pound. Assets in the UK are at fire-sale value and, even with that, there is a decline in foreign investment.

I share the concerns of the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, about productivity. Our recent growth numbers are, frankly, awful. It is not a situation in which we can be complacent because we risk being ineffective in driving the economy forward.

The issue raised by the noble Lord, Lord Haskel, goes to the heart of economic growth for the future. Times have changed. Big businesses, good businesses and the smaller entrepreneurial businesses no longer take a traditional view of their role in society. Many recognise that it is now time for a new social contract between business and society; that social justice matters; that their relationship with their customers, workforce and communities must be a positive and different one; and the necessity of tackling climate change. We are entering a different and new world, which has to be redefined and can no longer be classified in terms of profitability. This will lead to a different notion of what is a successful business and how it grows. Fairness becomes a fundamental and underlying principle. I use the word “fairness” because I shall move on to address some of the issues raised.

Before I do so, however, I must step back and say that businesses also recognise both the opportunities and dangers of the fourth industrial revolution. The noble Lord, Lord St John of Bletso, referred to this. If we are to continue with research and development and

science, and if we are to develop the skilled workforce we need, it will mean a revolution in how our businesses operate.

We have in place many of the right things to drive the economy forward, but we have them in miniature. I join others in praising the British Business Bank—it is perfect, but so small when compared with the challenge it is trying to deal with that it cannot make material change. It will take a change in thinking in this country to put into the British Business Bank the scale of resource and finance it will need for the future, especially as it will have to replace both the European Investment Bank and the European Investment Fund if we decide to leave.

Again, the industrial strategy has good policies, but in limited areas and on a limited scale. We are not undertaking the infrastructure challenge; we are not delivering the broadband we need; and we are not making the necessary changes in the rail and transport infrastructures. These are massive projects and will need substantial amounts of money behind them and a real drive to make them effective. It is the same with skills. Surely we all recognise now that life-long learning will be essential but comes with a heavy bill attached.

When I hear people talking about tax cutting as the key mechanism for driving the economy forward, I realise that we have to put a cross through virtually all the measures that we need to sustain and take forward our economy. I can think of nothing worse than tax cutting at this point in time. I ask those who think that cutting taxes will lead to a huge increase in the tax yield to go back and look in detail at the past few years. The rise in the tax yield has come because business has rebounded from a severe financial crash in 2007-08, not because taxes have been cut.

Unfortunately, part of the money has come in because business has been holding back on investment, as we have discussed. The work done by the IFS in looking at Jeremy Hunt’s proposal that we should cut corporation tax to 12.5% makes a nonsense of any suggestion that that kind of tax cut repays itself. If we are to repair public services and drive the economy forward, we certainly cannot afford to do any of that.

I have listened to many noble Lords who talk regularly to businesses. I do not find businesses asking for tax cuts. They ask for all kinds of long-term support, but I have never heard a request for tax cuts from any major business.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: What about business rates?

Baroness Kramer: The noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, is being kind to me in raising the issue of business rates because, as she knows, my party supports a policy of abolishing them—they are part of a Victorian past—and replacing them with a commercial landowner levy. I do not want to try the patience of the House in the time allocated by taking noble Lords through the details, but it is one of the crucial ways forward. It gives businesses every incentive to grow because the tax is on the underlying land value, not on the additional value that they create by future investment. It also helps the regional distribution of businesses. I suspect

[BARONESS KRAMER]

we have found another supporter for that policy in the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, and I appreciate that.

I agree with the noble Baroness that we have to tackle the issue of digital taxes. I am not sure whether I support the French proposal, announced today, of a 3% tax on digital revenues but it would be interesting to look at that issue because something has to be done, rather than just talking about it. I am concerned that the US is now considering that this would be an opportunity to retaliate against any European country that sought to tax digital companies more seriously. I hope any future Administration here would have the backbone to stand up to the Trumpian “America first”, which would make fair taxes impossible.

I believe in fiscal responsibility and investment. The old notion that you either support business or the ordinary people in the workforce is nonsensical. We are in a modern era where everyone must pull together. That is accentuated further by the fourth industrial revolution, and I hope we will begin to think about that new era rather than lock ourselves into the past.

1.18 pm

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara (Lab): My Lords, I declare an interest that my wife is a senior construction lawyer working on large infrastructure projects and my three children are, amazingly, involved in financial engineering, especially SME work; that may have an impact on this debate.

I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, for securing this interesting debate. I agree with her that it is refreshing to have an opportunity to stand back from the day-to-day cut and thrust—or, at least, it should be—and talk about deeper policies and issues in principle, but somehow we have missed the opportunity of the slacker time we have in Parliament at the moment to do that. She has stepped up to the plate and I respect her for that. I also echo what the noble Baroness, Lady Fairhead, said about her contribution to British business and the way in which it has informed her debate and the discussion today.

It has been a high-quality debate but it has done more to reveal the complexity of the issues that we are trying to address—the interrelation between growth, productivity, investment and taxation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the unsatisfactory position in which we find ourselves in approaching, taxing and regulating the new digital economy and the fourth industrial revolution. It would take more than just a two-hour debate to get us further down this track, but we should start somewhere. We always need to take a first step in every journey, and we have covered a lot of ground here, which could provide some information for further work.

The context we should deal with was raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Kramer, in relation to the economy. Although it may, on a superficial level, look good, with lots of people in employment and a lot of the indicators going up, that was from a very low base and the reality is that at the lower end of the income spectrum many people are struggling to make ends meet and are not doing well out of the growth in the economy that there is.

Like my noble friends Lord Haskel and Lord Chandos, both of whose speeches opened up new light on these issues, I want to press the Minister on matters which are currently under consideration, and I hope to get some responses from him. I shall make five points. First, there should be no doubt that my party supports a market economy. We were the party that brought in the strong competition environment in the early 2000s which was the basis of much of the growth in the economy that we enjoy today. The Government have a duty to act in the stewardship role referred to by my noble friend Lord Haskel, and where there are asymmetries of information, monopolies, oligopolies or public interest concern—whether that is defence, security or the media—there is a need to create fair markets. For example, payday lenders is an area where the Government had to act because of pressure by politicians.

We need to see the Government take a position which is based on principle and reflects forward what we are trying to achieve as a country. We have before us two good opportunities for this. There is a proposal from the noble Lord, Lord Tyrie, to reform the CMA in favour of a stronger balance towards consumer interest. His recent letter to the Secretary of State was interesting as it posed this not simply as a consumer interest matter but as a way in which the CMA could modernise its activities, sharpen its approach to the imbalances and injustices it sees in the market and work forward in a way which would allow it to pack a much bigger punch in terms of the penalties it could apply. I am a little unclear about where that has got to in government circles and I would be grateful if the Minister could give us some information about that when he responds.

It seems to me that a lot of the issues we have raised today need a strong regulatory component. I am not arguing that regulation is good in itself. Indeed, rather like the noble Lord, Lord Cavendish, I am not in favour of a bonfire of regulations but of good regulation and better regulation—a phrase often used by the noble Baroness when she was a Minister. It is that regulation that has to be enforced, or it is worth nothing. The CMA is a key element of that. A shift away from a fair market model to a consumer interest model should set in train considerable changes to the way in which we operate. I would be grateful if the Minister could bring some information to us on this.

The second piece of work that is also the subject of discussions and debate between the reviewer—in this case, Sir John Kingman—and the Government is how we might reform statutory audits, particularly for public interest entities, or PIEs. That may not seem entirely relevant, but stronger identification of for whom audits are carried out and the responsibilities that will fall from a new regulator, which is likely to have higher standards and enforce bigger changes in the regulatory environment, will have an impact on business and the future of our economy. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm where we are on that.

That leads into another, slightly smaller point, but one I shall inject into this debate. There is a focus in a lot of regulatory work in government on PIEs and less interest in how SMEs do. This point was raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Fairhead. We need to think very

carefully about the role of SMEs in our economy, and I do not think overreliance on Stock Exchange rules and the way in which mergers and acquisitions and other forms of change of ownership take place through the Stock Exchange is of much benefit of SMEs. Indeed, it might be at the expense of SMEs. Much more work about the Small Business Commissioner and attempts to make sure that SMEs get a greater amount of procurement would do more in this area than any amount of regulatory activity. I hope the Government will have some plans for that that they can share with us.

The points made by noble Lords during the debate about the wider context of infrastructure work and the need for more focus on education and better educational standards, particularly in technical areas and apprenticeships, are vital to this, but the point made by noble Lord, Lord St John of Bletso, about visas and the need to make sure that we get a flow of good-quality people who can take forward investment opportunities and work in new companies is important, particularly in the context of Brexit.

We need to think again about the way tax impacts, particularly on the SME sector. This is a theme running through what I am saying. Business rates were mentioned by several noble Lords. I think the time has come for them to be an issue. The important point that has not been made is that it is interesting that the business rate element is now one of the biggest features of local government financing. That has a danger of steering the way in which we think about rates in relation to the original purpose, which was to make sure that businesses contributed to local services. If rates are being used because other money is not available, that may lead to a suboptimal solution. I would be grateful if the Minister could respond on this.

Stamp duty and VAT are also issues which need to be thought about more in the context of SMEs. I was particularly interested in the question about investment reliefs. I spent a lot of time in an earlier career trying to get EIS and VCT to work for the area I was working in, which was the film industry. I was constantly frustrated by the very narrow rules and the difficulty of trying to make anybody in the Inland Revenue realise that investment in film was not just a lovey-dovey thing but was a real thing with real returns, if you get it right, but they would not change the system, and I sympathise entirely with the points made there.

In the time we have left before Brexit, we should think a little more about the impact that tariffs and duties might have on our economy. They have virtually gone from discussions about tax-raising issues because they are no longer part of our everyday experience, but if we are to leave without a Brexit deal—or even with a deal that will involve, at some stage, responsibility for our own trade—we will have to raise the question of what tariffs and duties we will set. That is not to say that they will be good, because to a large extent they may involve extra costs for consumers who are already hard pressed, but they are a source of interesting revenue. Even on the Government's current interim proposal, which would need to change after consultation, there are substantial tariffs in certain areas where the Government have seen fit to protect certain industries.

If that is the model, it opens the door for further consideration. Will the Minister explain what work is being done on that?

This has been a good debate. I have resisted the temptation to do knockabout on politics, but I am happy to talk about that later outside the Chamber if the noble Lord wishes to do so. I have strong views on this. A lot of these issues are to do with what we as a society think about fair tax. What is a fair tax? That is a question I tried to raise when I was working in a think tank a few years ago. I got some interesting responses when I did some detailed work on this. Indeed, we summarised it in a pamphlet which was subsequently published. The first instinct is always to think about income tax, not the wider tax base. For those on the right, it is a relatively straightforward question. They broadly say that taxes should always be proportionate. There is no debate about that; that is what they come up with. Those on the left tend towards an acceptance that that is the right approach, but they would like to see redistribution as part of it. I wonder whether taxation needs a bit more thinking about in terms of that element. Redistributive taxation is always aggressively attacked by the right. That is not necessary if it is done properly and fairly. The most interesting response—I will end with this—was from the Inland Revenue. When asked a direct question, a senior official, who will not be named, said to me that a fair tax was two things at the same time. First, it was invisible—in other words, people paid it without knowing they were paying it—and, secondly, it was hugely proportionate in terms of bringing cash in. The two examples he gave were insurance premium tax—everybody has to have insurance and therefore if you charge them a little bit more on the top they do not really notice it and it brings in loads of money—and air passenger duty. Again, people who have to fly will pay it; it is a relatively small proportion but it brings in lots of money. Those are fair taxes. I leave noble Lords to think about that.

1.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Henley) (Con): My Lords, I will not follow the noble Lord on that point but I will pick up on his opening remarks, in which, in paying tribute to my noble friend for getting this debate together, he said that it reveals the complexity of the issues. I make that point because it would be rash of me to try to answer every single point that has been made. On some of the more detailed points, it might be helpful if I write to noble Lords. However, the idea that a subject of this sort could be wound up in a 20-minute speech defies belief.

Having said that, like the noble Lord, Lord Stevenson, I offer my congratulations to my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe on bringing forward this debate. It has been a very useful process to go through. She has attracted a very distinguished cast of speakers, all of whom have a great deal of experience in the world of business and beyond. One is my noble friend Lady O'Cathain, a fellow director of Tesco. I do not know whether we now refer to "buy one, get one free" but to have two in this debate is a great success.

[LORD HENLEY]

I was deeply heartened by the comments of my noble friend Lady O’Cathain about the need for, and importance of, confidence in this field. I echo what she said and remind the House and the country about our successes in education. She mentioned the successes of our universities and the number of top, world-class universities in this country. The part of the industrial strategy with which I am most familiar is the one that deals with life sciences, and I look at the expertise in our universities up and down the country and at the small start-ups in science and technology that spin out from them. I appreciate that concerns have been expressed about those start-ups scaling up to big businesses, but that is happening in some cases. However, that area has had enormous success, as we constantly need to be reminded.

I am constrained in what I can say to my noble friends and others in this debate. The obvious constraints have been referred to, including that of timing, in that it looks as though we will have a new Prime Minister and possibly a new Chancellor and other new Ministers in the next few weeks. There is obviously also the constraint on a House of Lords Minister in BEIS when it comes to suggestions about reducing taxes. My noble friends Lord Popat and Lord Suri both said that they would like to see a major reduction in corporation tax. My noble friend Lord Popat looked at the removal of employers’ national insurance contributions—a tax on employing people. I would love to stand here as Chancellor, possibly sipping my whisky, and say, “That will be done”, but noble Lords know that that is not possible. However, I assure both my noble friends and others who made remarks of that sort that these matters will be passed on to the appropriate Ministers at the appropriate time.

The noble Lord, Lord Stevenson, emphasised the wide-ranging nature of this debate and the fact that we have covered issues relating to immigration and visas, Treasury matters, BEIS matters and the importance of education and training, planning and infrastructure. We have ranged wide, but it is important to go back to the fundamentals as set out by my noble friend. She said that businesses produce the wealth on which we depend. They are fundamental to our prosperity and to the industrial strategy, and I am very grateful for everything that my noble friend Lady Fairhead said about that. It prioritises facilitating the conditions for businesses to flourish. The tax framework can also be a powerful enabler for business in the growth and creation of good jobs.

A point made again and again—I will repeat it to remind the noble Baroness, Lady Kramer, although she accepted it—was that businesses pay the taxes that fund our public services. Public services are important but they need funding. Businesses also create the solutions to meet consumer needs. They bring prosperity and livelihoods to local communities up and down the country. I am grateful to my noble friend Lord Popat for emphasising that unemployment is at a record low in the UK. That is down to businesses doing what they do best: creating jobs and bringing prosperity to our country. I remind the House that not only is unemployment at a record low but employment among

men and women, disabled people and others—the figures were quoted by my noble friend Lord Popat—is at a record high.

Businesses are the engine of our economy. The industrial strategy is precisely about backing businesses so that they can help to boost productivity—I will have a little more to say about productivity problems later—and create high-quality, well-paid jobs throughout the United Kingdom, with appropriate investment in skills, industries and infrastructure. To put it another way, the industrial strategy is how we are creating an economy that works for everyone: businesses and people who are highly innovative, highly skilled and of high quality, supported by low and stable taxation and smart regulation.

Our aim, as has been made clear by my right honourable friend the Secretary of State, is to make the United Kingdom the best place to start and grow a business. A number of noble Lords quoted the figures to show how we are rated in that respect. We are starting from a good base. Our business environment is internationally recognised as first class, robust and reliable. The World Bank and the OECD consistently rate the UK as being among the best places in the world for business.

Our stable, predictable and competitive tax regime and the strength of our legal, competition and regulatory systems have made the United Kingdom one of the world’s foremost financial centres and the home to some of the biggest and most respected businesses. International investors choose the UK because they know that our business environment is a fair and dependable foundation for growth and prosperity.

However, I understand that there are concerns about the tax framework, and my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe focused on that. As she put it, it is creaking under the weight of its complexity, with a doubling of the size of the tax code since 2009. We are committed to seeking a balance between a tax system that is easy to comply with and one that prevents avoidance and evasion. Since 2010, we have established the Office of Tax Simplification, as well as an independent advisory office in the Treasury. It offers valuable advice on ways of simplifying the tax system, which the Chancellor takes into account.

The framework is an important lever in any economic strategy. Our low-tax system, I believe, generates the incentive for firms to invest, start up, grow, hire new employees and provide benefits to their community and shareholders. I believe also that low corporation tax increases the returns that companies receive on their investments, allowing them to increase investment, lower prices, hire staff and increase wages. I say to the noble Viscount, Lord Chandos, and the noble Baroness, Lady Kramer, that reducing corporation tax has—as my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe made clear—increased the take. She cited the Laffer curve. Where the curve ends is a matter for judgment, but certainly that has had an effect. We believe that getting tax right is very important. It is about creating wealth across the country while striking the right balance. It is not about big or small businesses paying nothing and reaping rewards. I say to my noble friend Lord Leigh at this point that,

when we leave the EU, we will obviously have even greater freedom to look at things as he suggested, and those opportunities should be taken up.

I accept all the points made by my noble friend Lord Cavendish about small businesses, and by all noble Lords about rates; we have to look very carefully at levels of taxation, how they work and how we get it right to ensure a degree of fairness between different businesses. A number of noble Lords talked about competition between the high street retail sector and the online sector and the need to make this fair. We want a system that provides funding and allows businesses to flourish. Businesses will then benefit from the Government's investments in infrastructure and the standards of education to which I referred. We need to ensure that businesses are paying their fair share, helping to improve the wider public perception of tax equity and building a sense that we are all contributing to our shared prosperity.

I will say a little about innovation and regulation, which were rightly raised by the noble Viscount, Lord Chandos, my noble friend Lord Cavendish, the noble Lord, Lord Stevenson, and the noble Baroness, Lady Kramer. We are in a changing world. When I speak outside the House on the subject of regulation, I often start with the example of how we got it wrong 150 years or so ago with the introduction of the automobile, when we put a man with a red flag in front of the car. It was obviously not the brightest way of getting the automobile working and did not help particularly with safety—it may be that the Liberal Democrats have a new policy and would like to have a man walking in front of a car with a red flag to reduce emissions, but that is another matter.

Getting regulation right for the new world that we live in—for the fourth industrial revolution—will be crucial. That is why we launched our White Paper on regulation for the fourth industrial revolution—I hope that noble Lords will read it—which sets out the reforms needed to ensure an agile and flexible approach to regulation to embrace the technological changes that we face. The changes are moving very fast and will be difficult to predict. Our new approach to regulation will, I hope, support business to innovate and invest in the UK and give people faster access to new products and services that can transform their lives.

I always wish to give an optimistic, positive view of the state of the economy, but it is also right, as my right honourable friend made clear when he introduced the industrial strategy some 18 months ago, that we “fess up”, as it were, to the weaknesses as we see them. I am grateful to my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe for underlining the fact that we have a problem with low business productivity. We have some of the most productive businesses in the world—we do have successes—but we also have a long tail of less productive businesses across a broad range of sectors, all over the United Kingdom. Our review of business productivity showed that firm management matters enormously and that, on average, our managers are less proficient than those in comparable economies. United Kingdom businesses do not always adopt best-practice management techniques and technologies. The reasons are as varied as our businesses, but there is strong evidence that

businesses do not always know what is possible, how to find help, or how new technology can benefit them. Again, we believe that the industrial strategy has addressed this and will continue to do so as we work through it.

As I said at the beginning, I want to cover a number of other issues, but I am not sure that I will be able to deal with all of them. However, I will say a quick word about the apprenticeship levy, which was raised by my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe. We need, now and in the future, to ensure that we have the right skills in the system. Our ambition is to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeships to enable businesses to meet their skills need. We are monitoring the impact of the levy and will continue to work with employers on how it can be spent effectively and flexibly. In the last Budget, as noble Lords will remember, the Chancellor announced changes to ensure that it works for business, and we will continue to keep that under review.

Finally, I turn quickly to a point made by the noble Lord, Lord St. John of Bletso, about the need for diversity in entrepreneurship. I refer him to the recent review conducted by Alison Rose, who shed renewed light on the barriers faced by women starting and growing a business and identified ways to unblock untapped talent. We are committed to increasing the number of female entrepreneurs by 50% by 2030. We also want to foster that spirit of entrepreneurship; we have launched a young entrepreneurs review led by the Prince's Trust, which will continue into the autumn of 2019.

I believe that we are at a crucial point in our history. It is true that our business community is living through a moment of uncertainty—but all eras are uncertain. We should be aware that there are opportunities ahead; the business environment frameworks developed through the industrial strategy will put us in a good position to continue to support business growth and job creation, supported by our fair, predictable and stable tax system.

Once again, I thank my noble friend for offering the House the chance to debate this matter.

1.49 pm

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: My Lords, this has been an excellent and good-humoured debate, which is frankly long overdue. I thank all noble Lords from across the House for their thoughtful contributions at this critical time. I will send them, elegantly edited by our friends in *Hansard*, to the two aspirant Prime Ministers, with one of my beautiful blue ribbons. As my noble friend the Minister said, business pays the taxes that pay for the public services we all value—a key insight for the next 100 days.

Motion agreed.

Social Media

Question for Short Debate

1.49 pm

Asked by The Lord Bishop of St Albans

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the Church of England's social media community guidelines, published on 1 July, and what steps they are taking to promote positive social media behaviour.

The Lord Bishop of St Albans: My Lords, the Church of England's digital guidelines are an attempt to encourage constructive engagement across all national social media accounts run by the Church and the two Archbishops. The digital charter is a voluntary addition aimed at fostering a positive atmosphere online. To date, the two prongs of the campaign have been signed by individuals, charities, groups, schools and churches, representing thousands of people. These are not simply some guidelines or suggestions for people involved in the Church of England, but rather, based on universal principles of truth and respect for others, they are a call to action for all people, whether Christian, of other faiths or of no faith at all.

As parliamentarians, we are united by a passion for free speech and robust discussion. For some, however, the rough and tumble of online debate has degenerated into the use of unpalatable and sometimes unacceptable rhetoric. Like many of us here, I enjoy vigorous online discussion. I like talking and debating with people who think differently from me, and just sometimes, I hope they might appreciate my input as well. It seems that one of the things I am always doing is learning from people who have different perspectives. Sometimes, this banter can descend into light-hearted name-calling. Members of this place may not be familiar with the nickname given to me by the gambling industry. For my campaigning to protect victims of problem gambling, I am, I am told, known as the bookie-bashing Bishop of St Albans. I take it all in good stead. Indeed, I have been called much worse things in the past.

This jostling online is not the sort of thing that these guidelines attempt to address or curb. They in no way aim to reduce debate or curb free speech in our country. Indeed, we would like more of it. The problem is that, due to the relative anonymity of sitting at home behind a computer screen or using a smartphone in private, far away from the people with whom we are communicating, it is all too easy to use abusive or offensive language that we probably would not use if we were talking to someone face-to-face.

I suggest that this is especially true for those who occupy public roles. Like your Lordships, I know many Members of Parliament and Peers who experience regular abuse, attacks and verbal assault. The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Newcastle captured the sense of coarsening public debate when she said:

"It cannot be right that carrying a panic alarm is now a necessity for some MPs and that constituency offices and homes are considered as places of risk for them".—[*Official Report*, 25/3/19; col. 1635.]

The horror of Jo Cox's murder three years ago left us all with an inspirational legacy to pick up and run with. Her maiden speech, highlighting unity and togetherness beyond partisan distinction, is something nurtured by these online guidelines.

The call to "disagree well" after the European referendum goes to the core of these guidelines. The two Archbishops who endorsed this project urged us to "apply our values" when we engage in "robust disagreements". As the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Oxford highlighted last month, Jesus taught us that, "Blessed are the peacemakers", and thus our online presence should seek to,

"reconcile those of different views with imagination and good humour".

That call to disagree well builds on Christians who came together online in 2016 to create Love Your Neighbour and Movements of Love, formed in response to post-Brexit discord. Following Jo Cox's death, I think all of us remain in shock at online behaviour which tragically spills out in the non-virtual world. Trolls are occasionally now guiding society's behaviour online, in some cases pushing an abusive and exclusionary attitude to fellow social media users.

Society's vulnerable and young are facing the consequences of this dominance. Nine in 10 five to 15 year-olds are online, and as a nation we spend on average 24 hours a week on screens. Almost 70% of us say we are concerned about harmful online content. As the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Gloucester said:

"Research conducted ... in 2016 found that more than 80% of the teenagers surveyed had seen or heard online hate about a specific group".—[*Official Report*, 11/1/18; col. 376.]

Nevertheless, the dominance of this hate narrative online is not inevitable. The most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury was right when he said:

"Each time we interact online we have the opportunity either to add to currents of cynicism and abuse or to choose instead to share light and grace".

These guidelines provide a codification of that choice between cynicism and positivity online. I would encourage all individuals and groups to commit to playing their part in making social media a more welcoming place. Indeed, I hope that many Members of your Lordships' House will sign up to the charter, which can be found on the Church of England website.

Obviously, the internet provides a space of unimaginable energy, linking people from every background and allowing a diversification of views previously thought unthinkable. We do not want to lose that great asset. The Church, like many others, has grasped the benefits of social media. Campaigns such as Follow the Star during Advent reached nearly 8 million British people. Similar levels of reach were achieved in our subsequent Lent, Easter and Pentecost campaigns. We are very grateful for this online presence.

No matter the many benefits offered, academic Dr Bex Lewis is quite right when she states:

"The distance and anonymity created between people when they communicate online can help shed inhibitions in a way that is often blamed for abusive behaviour".

The cloak of anonymity can often lead to outrageous abuse. I welcome the efforts of Her Majesty's Government with their online harms White Paper. Alongside the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Oxford, I submitted a response to this during the consultation period.

It is not just the anonymity which is the problem; it is also the instantaneous nature of communication. As a young priest, I was always taught that when you are angry because somebody has wound you up, the best thing to do is sit down, write an absolutely stonking letter and leave it overnight. Then, the next morning, you write something more temperate which is more likely to enable proper communication. The problem is that online it is so easy to just respond immediately without very much thought.

As I highlighted in this Chamber, the ambition to make us the safest place in the world to be online and aims to curb bullying, insulting, intimidating and humiliating behaviours are admirable. Yet I also told the Minister that any regulator would never be a “silver bullet” to online problems because these complications are societal in nature. That need to address these complications is felt strongly. As a Church, these guidelines function simply as a contribution to the life of the nation, and the response, met without cynicism but with genuine appreciation, shows they are wanted. When these guidelines were launched on Facebook, the livestream was seen by 168,000 people, and when the Diocese of Oxford shared a further eight points of online behavioural guidance, it was the most popular post it has ever shared.

This is simply the beginning of a discussion, started by those of us on these Benches, but taken up by communities outside Parliament, outside Anglicanism and hopefully into the wider world. I share them in the hope that they will enable us to think more broadly about the whole range of issues. I look forward to contributions from noble Lords on this important subject, as we seek to keep the online world open in a way that allows it to contribute positively.

1.59 pm

Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen (Con): I thank the right reverend Prelate for initiating this debate. I read with interest the Church of England’s first ever social media guidelines, which encourage positive engagement across social media accounts run by the Church of England; encourage others to sign up to a voluntary digital charter and to foster a more positive atmosphere online; and hope for people of other faiths or none to use the principles of truth, kindness, welcome, inspiration and togetherness when they use social media. Of course, we all want to live in a world of tolerance, both on and offline, and should strive to do so, but that must not stop us engaging to prevent real social injustices. As the right reverend Prelate mentioned, debates should be vigorous and fearless. Human rights violations and so on need to be challenged. We must not hold back for fear of appearing intolerant.

As in the offline world, there is an important place online for rigorous debate and disagreement. There are already strong laws in place, and we should be mindful that if those laws have not been broken, yet material deemed offensive is removed, it does not then become a form of censorship.

I sit on the Communications Committee, and a recently published report from that committee, *Regulating in a Digital World*, was debated in this Chamber a couple of weeks ago. The committee took the view that a principle-based approach was the best way forward, and we came up with 10 principles. I shall not list them all now—noble Lords can read them in the report, but please, do not all rush now to get your copy. Two of these principles—parity and education and awareness-raising—fit well with what the Church of England is seeking to achieve.

The continual mantra is that there should be equivalent outcomes online and offline. We should all be mindful of our behaviour in the digital world. The focus should

be on behaviour. We all have responsibilities in how we behave towards one another. It rests with society to come together to stand up for our common principles, whether face to face or in the digital world. Self-regulation is clearly not enough to right the wrongs. I look forward to the Minister enlightening us on the department’s plans for further regulation; there is no doubt that society needs to step up to the challenge and show that it will not tolerate irresponsible online behaviour.

As we all know, more often than not good behaviour needs to be taught, and therefore learned. That is where education comes in. It is vital that we start educating children about social media. Digital literacy should be the fourth pillar of a child’s education, alongside reading, writing and mathematics. Children require guidance to report and not share inappropriate behaviour, as they are encouraged to do in day-to-day life, in the home or the playground. Parents and those safeguarding children have a vital role to play in educating children about online behaviours, but parents require the tools to do this. Many parents lack the knowledge and confidence, so there is a requirement for more guidance that is easily accessible and clear, allowing parents to help their children to live responsibly when using social media.

All of us have a role to play in how we act online; to set an example of right and wrong; to advise, teach and support those who get it wrong; and to implement the law where it is broken. The most reverend Primate the Archbishop of York made a good point at the launch, which the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of St Albans also mentioned: sometimes it is good to just stop and think. The most reverend Primate said that it is perhaps about stopping, counting to 10 and asking whether a spiteful statement on social media will change a situation for the better. We can all reflect on that, and would it not be a good start if some—no names mentioned—counted to 10 forwards, then stopped and counted to 10 backwards, before tweeting at all times of the day and night?

2.04 pm

Lord McNally (LD): My Lords, I have never tweeted—it is far too dangerous—but I know what the noble Baroness is talking about. My declaration is that I am a resident of St Albans. I am not an Anglican, but I and all the citizens of St Albans enjoy the benefits of our wonderful abbey, and the ecumenical approach of Bishop Alan and our dean, Jeffrey John, to making that abbey available to all faiths and none with a wonderful programme of outreach.

I very much welcomed the launch of these social media community guidelines by the Church of England, and the digital charter. If I may tread on the right reverend Prelate’s territory, reading it, I did not think it was original. It could be summed up as telling us that when using social media, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. I was talking to a fellow Peer involved in this, who was rather depressed that such good intentions were all too late. The trolls, the bullies, the paedophiles, the groomers, the fantasists, the conspiracy peddlers and the political extremists of all shades have already polluted the waters and debased

[LORD McNALLY]

the standards of what was originally a magnificent, free good. I agree with the noble Baroness, Lady Chisholm, that there is a need for us to stand up for free speech and the rights of individuals affected by that kind of behaviour.

I do not believe that the internet is beyond regulation or the rule of law. I also agree with the noble Baroness that nor is it a one-way street. I have mentioned how impressed I was when, answering a Question about young people's mental health, the Minister pointed out that, yes, trolling, abuse and bullying were causing young people great stress, but often it was on the internet that they found the solution or the way forward in their distress, so it not a one-way street. I welcome the Government's attempts to achieve cross-party agreement on internet regulation: how much should be statutory and how much voluntary, who should be the regulators and what powers should they have?

As the Minister knows, I believe that many of these matters could be dealt with by a pre-legislative scrutiny committee of both Houses, but there are issues that need urgent "this day" action, and could and should be dealt with now, in advance of the main legislation. I hope that the noble Baroness, Lady Kidron, and my noble friend Lady Grender will address these later in the debate. In the meantime, Ofcom, the Information Commissioner's Office and the Electoral Commission should be charged with doing the groundwork for the regulator that this legislation will create. All three bodies have proved robust but, in the case of the Electoral Commission, underpowered.

Again, I chime with the noble Baroness, Lady Chisholm, in saying that Ofcom should promote digital literacy as a fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths. As the line between print and online becomes increasingly blurred, the big internet companies—the FANGs—should see Impress as a possible independent regulator. The GDPR has shown that it is possible to achieve international standards. We should aim for a kind of Geneva convention against internet harm. We must also beware of slippage. The Government have shown good intentions, but we are two weeks away from a new Administration. The FANGs are powerful lobbyists. We will see where their priorities lie if we attempt to bring in regulation that really works.

Let me end with a quote from the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, on whose committee I served in 2003, before the Communications Bill. We decided not to try regulating the internet as it came upon us, but the noble Lord said in his evidence:

"Our citizens can only be protected from online harm if the political system upon which society rests is itself rigorously safeguarded".

That is why this call to arms we are involved in makes the Church's document so timely. I am grateful to the right reverend Prelate for providing the opportunity to discuss these matters today.

2.09 pm

The Lord Bishop of Chelmsford: My Lords, I too thank my dear brother, the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of St Albans, for securing this short debate.

Although I will not reveal to the House the various nicknames that I have accrued over the years—not without my lawyer present—I will admit that I was not very well behaved at school. At the boys' secondary modern school in Essex that I attended, expectations were staggeringly low and it was easy to meet them. I happily dozed, dreamed and truanted my way through what we used to call the fifth form, and I did not do very well in the O-levels that followed. Shocked by the realisation that work, and not very interesting work at that, was my only option, and because the boys' school did not really have a sixth form, I enrolled in the girls' school next door and my life changed. A school is only as good as its teachers, whatever you call it. At that school, the expectations were high and, as a result, my attitude, behaviour, commitment and, indeed, results changed.

If there are no expectations, if bad behaviour has no consequence, then we create a culture rather like the one that we currently have on most of the internet and especially on social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, and below the line—not a place to go—on so many online articles: rudeness, prejudice, uninformed ignorance, hatred of minorities and much worse. Cruelty, harassment and grooming can go unchallenged and even undetected, and no one seems prepared to take responsibility. Young people learn how to self-harm. Everyone has to be Instagram ready. Casual abuse that would not be tolerated anywhere else is considered normal. And instead of changing it, instead of saying that it should not be this way, we teach our children resilience, as if somehow homophobic, racist or sexist bullying was inevitable. It is not, which is why the civilised and civilising aspiration of this charter offers hope by raising the expectation of how we behave and how we are treated online.

Some will scoff and polish their put-downs: "The Church of England says it's nice to be nice to each other. How nice. But what difference will it make?" Actually, quite a lot. I learned how to treat others well not because of my innate goodness—that is the secular ethical fallacy—but because of a culture of high expectations in family, school, community and church, as well as scouts, guides, trade unions, you name it. Many organisations have high expectations about what is right and acceptable. It was these bodies that helped me to tame those other instincts that dwell alongside that which is good: envy, avarice, vengeance, vanity, hubris, violence and greed. They are within us all. I am a moral maze, and I need help and guidance to become more than where my unchecked instincts may take me if I am left alone. Alongside all the tremendous goods that the digital age brings us, there is online a terrible isolation as I rant and rage from the privacy of my own phone, no longer seeing the humanity of the person who has simply become the object of my scorn—although of course once I have clicked "Accept", everyone is looking at me.

The charter is just the beginning; it sets a standard that will help us all be the best we can be. But the internet itself, especially those who profit most from the monopolies that we have allowed to develop, also needs to be designed by agreed ethical principles, such as the 10 principles that the noble Baroness,

Lady Chisholm, has alluded to in the Select Committee report, *Regulating in a Digital World*, and then regulated fairly and fearlessly by a new body, such as a digital authority, with powers to oversee all this work. Have the Government considered this far-reaching proposal again, as it was, if not dismissed, certainly not taken up in their original response to that report?

I welcome the Government's decision to establish a statutory duty of care on internet providers to take responsibility for the safety of their users, because self-regulation is not working. Moderation processes are unacceptably opaque and slow. As with any other public space or public organisation, there must be expectations of behaviour that we all sign up to.

The charter represents a big step forward. It is good that the Church of England has been able to take a lead in this way, but that is only half the job. It addresses what each one of us can do individually to moderate our own behaviour and raise expectations. Drawing on the report, *Regulating in a Digital World*, whose far-reaching ethical vision has still not been fully embraced, I call upon the Government to do the other half.

2.16 pm

Baroness Kidron (CB): I thank the right reverend Prelate for tabling today's debate and draw the attention of the House to my interests as set out in the register. I very much welcome the Church of England's social media guidelines. They have great force in their simplicity and generosity of spirit, and clearly outline our responsibilities to conduct our online interactions respectfully and honestly. I will focus my contribution on how they might be applied to the social media companies themselves.

For example, the first guideline is:

"Be safe. The safety of children, young people and vulnerable adults must be maintained".

Far from taking reasonable steps to maintain the safety of children or to support their emotional and social development, social media companies refuse to even recognise the global consensus that a child is a person under the age of 18 as codified by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Tick a box and a child of 13 can gain access to an environment that routinely exposes them to adult risks and deprives them of the rights that we have fought for decades to establish. Furthermore, minimum age limits are routinely bypassed and poorly enforced, a fact freely admitted by both Snap and Facebook when they appeared before Parliament in recent months. This leaves children of all ages unprotected through many of their most vulnerable years. For children to be safe online, social media companies first have to provide a safe environment.

A similar scenario unfolds when you consider the guideline:

"Be honest. Don't mislead people about who you are".

The spread of misinformation and disinformation polarises debate, impacts on elections, drives the rise in intolerance and fuels spurious health claims and conspiracy theories. This is an area of considerable attention for legislators around the globe but, while

much is said about those who create the misinformation, it is important to note that the platforms are not neutral bystanders. In an attention economy where clicks mean money, and the longer that someone stays online the more you maximise your opportunity to serve them an ad or learn something about them that you can sell later, the spread of the extraordinary, the extreme or the loud is not an unintended consequence of your service; it becomes central to its purpose.

Being honest is not only about information but about the nature of the service itself. When we walk into a tea room, a cinema, a pub or a strip club, we understand the opportunities and risks that those environments offer and are given nuanced indicators about their suitability for ourselves or our children. Social media companies, by contrast, parade as tea rooms but behave like strip clubs. A simple answer would be greater honesty about what the nature of the service holds.

This leads me quite neatly to the guidance to,

"Follow the rules. Abide by the terms and conditions".

Terms and conditions should enable users to decide whether a service is offering them an environment that will treat them fairly. They are, by any measure, a contract between user and platform; it is therefore unacceptable that these published rules are so opaque, so asymmetrical in the distribution of rights and responsibilities, so interminably long—and then so inconsistently and poorly upheld by the platforms themselves.

This failure to follow the rules is not without consequence. Noble Lords will remember the case of Molly Russell, who took her own life in 2017 after viewing and being auto-recommended graphic self-harm and suicide content. The spokesperson for one of the platforms responsible, Pinterest, said:

"Our existing self-harm policy already does not allow for anything that promotes self-harm. However, we know a policy isn't enough. What we do is more important than what we say".

Indeed, and while that tragedy has been widely and bravely publicised by Molly's father, it is neither the only tragedy nor the only failure. Failure is built into the system. The responsibility for upholding terms and conditions must be a two-way street. I warmly welcome the Government's proposal in the online harms White Paper:

"The regulator will assess how effectively these terms are enforced as part of any regulatory action",

and I welcome the Information Commissioner's similar commitment in the recently published age-appropriate design code.

Let me finish with this. On Monday, 22 children came to the House to see me and offer their thoughts on a 5Rights data literacy workshop that they had been doing for some months. Their observations can be usefully summed up by the fifth of the Church's guidelines:

"Take responsibility. You are accountable for the things you do".

These children and young people categorically understood their responsibilities, but they powerfully and explicitly expressed the requirement for the platforms to meet theirs too. It is for the platforms to make their services

[BARONESS KIDRON]

safe and respectful, for government to put in place the unavoidable requirement that they do so, and for the rest of us to keep speaking up until it is done. With that in mind, I commend the right reverend Prelate for his tireless work to that end and ask the Minister to reassure the House that the promises made to children and parents by the outgoing Executive will be implemented by the incoming Executive.

2.22 pm

Baroness Greder (LD): My Lords, I congratulate the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of St Albans on securing this debate, and the Church of England on the publication of its guidelines. For me, as a person of no faith, their inclusion of people like me—and indeed of other faiths—is also welcome.

I note that there are nine codes in total and five principles. While we were on the artificial intelligence Select Committee, the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Oxford spoke of having 10 laws for AI. This resulted in a very amusing *Guardian* version of the 10 commandments for robots, the 10th being:

“Thou shalt remember that we can always unplug you if you get too uppity”.

Unfortunately, these words were not quite so effective when I tested them out on a teenager on an X-Box, who was about to win a game on Fortnite Battle Royale. In the end, the AI Select Committee managed to get it down to five principles that we published as part of our report in April 2018, subtitled *Ready, Willing and Able*. Understanding and establishing principles and codes for future generations in a world where the tech giants overshadow Governments in size, scale and reach is not only important; it is vital.

In spite of the car crash that is Brexit, I believe the UK remains in a strong position to lead on ethics and these guidelines are a useful contribution to that debate. In the same way that the UK led the way on the ethical debates around in vitro fertilization, the new online harms White Paper is a significant step forward in an area where the UK can lead. The statement by the Osaka G20 trade and economy Ministers, with the annexe on AI principles drawn from the OECD, shows that international agreement on the ethical issues in this area is possible.

The Minister will be aware that we on these Benches support the White Paper and have said so in our submission, with qualifications and comments. We agree that social media companies should have a new statutory duty of care to their users, above all to children and young people. As ever, I salute the work of the noble Baroness, Lady Kidron, who has tirelessly campaigned for the right to childhood. As she described, leaving it to the big tech firms to deliver on a voluntary basis is not working and is no longer an option. We support the Government's adherence to the principle of regulating on a basis of risk and believe that Parliament and government have a clear role in defining the duty of care, with the chosen regulator settling the final form of the code.

We on these Benches believe that that regulator should be Ofcom. In our view, Ofcom has the necessary experience of producing codes and walking that tightrope

between freedom of expression and duty of care. It also has the experience of working with other regulators. We believe that Ofcom should be set the task early of working on those draft codes, as children have waited long enough for this protection to be a reality for them. But we also recognise that the complexity of this issue would be best served by pre-legislative scrutiny and believe the Communications Act 2003 to be an excellent model. I am not saying that simply because my noble friend Lord McNally played such a significant role in that process. We also believe that an earlier Bill setting up the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation as a regulatory advisory body in this field is important.

The right reverend Prelate posed an excellent question to the Government in his Motion: what steps are they taking,

“to promote positive social media behaviour”?

In a world where a President of the United States takes to Twitter to slate our Prime Minister, this feels like a surreal question to ask right now but is definitely one that should be asked. I look forward to hearing the Minister's answers on it. I have only one other question for him to answer today, so I really hope that he will be able to respond to it in his summation. I am sure he agrees that schools need to educate children about how to use, and question, social media with the kindness and respect that the Church of England suggests. To achieve that, digital literacy, advice and support for children and parents are essential, as the noble Baroness, Lady Chisholm, described. It is good that there is now some evidence from Ofcom that children are learning to think more critically about the websites they visit, and that they recall being taught how to use the internet safely.

However, what of the generation that has been abandoned to the Wild West of the internet? What additional support can be given while we deliberate here about the best forms of legislation? I will be more specific. A year ago, to comply with GDPR, social media sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Pinterest, Instagram and others raised their age restrictions from 13 to 16. What happens to that cohort of children who are left behind, many of whom—according to Ofcom—were underage on social media already? Do parents have to inform on them and their mates, or close down the networks where they talk with each other about homework that is due? What advice does the Minister have for those parents? I ask only that he agree to look at this very specific issue—the children left behind by the ban as it was introduced—and if he would undertake to write to me, I would be very grateful.

Social media should and can be a place of truth, kindness, welcome, inspiration and togetherness. The Church of England's principles for the use of social media should be commended for their optimistic goals. As the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Chelmsford put it, we should be allowed to raise our expectations. These are goals which all of us should try to adopt.

2.28 pm

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port (Lab): My Lords, this has been such an interesting debate. At the heart of the online harms White Paper, there is a declared

statutory duty of care; it is at the heart of the thinking and outworking of the principles contained within that White Paper.

This is such a week for us to have this debate. Reference has been made to events in Washington, which show the way in which the online facilities can be used. My worry is that such extravagant, Wild West uses of the technology are rapidly becoming normal. The normalising of such uses worries me. It plays well with something the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Chelmsford said about the moral maze. There is within all of us that which can be appealed to by good and by what is not good. We should take note of that.

Some Members of our Benches have felt the need to resign the Whip. I heard about the amount of abuse one of them received in one week via these same social media. To have this debate in the context of happenings of that kind adds a dimension to the thinking required of us.

There was a great event in our home over the weekend. For the first time, my middle son entrusted his son to my wife and me. It is amazing how our three children think we are novices in the art of bringing up children. We brought them up, but we had to pass all kinds of tests before Thomas was allowed to come home to us. What a remarkable young man he has turned out to be: “May I leave the table, grandpa? Can I help wash up the dishes? You do not need to come and help me in the bathroom; I will call when I need you”. He was exemplary. It proves that a good upbringing with good teaching at home can achieve all kinds of things. I happen to know that that child was quite wilful when he was younger. All three of my children were. I know that a lot of parenting is about harnessing the energy that can express itself harmfully, and somehow using that same energy for outcomes that are altogether more beneficial. That is where we are at home—a little domestic story with which to begin.

I believe that human nature is much more malign than the Church of England seems to think, but Methodists have always had a more severe doctrine of humanity than the Church of England does. Natural optimism does not come to us, because we have to fight against the establishment for our basic rights. It is scriptural too that all men are sinners,

“and fall short of the glory of God”.

I can give noble Lords the biblical references if they want. Yes, I know it is Romans.

Addressing questions of behaviour and ethics requires us to take an appropriate view of the nature of humanity and that inbuilt insecurity that drives us to want more, to master more, to achieve more and, sometimes, all of that at any expense. The internet is a tool for that basic instinct of human nature that, left untrammelled, can be dangerous for society. I fear the worst. This statutory duty of care is to be safe, respectful, kind, honest and take responsibility. Why did the Church of England stop at nine when, biblically, it should be 10? We heard the 10 commandments mentioned, and the noble Lord, Lord McNally, provided what might be a 10th: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. I prefer the negative form of that golden rule: do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you. It is a more honest place to start for human

natures that, by their biological conditioning and the insecurity that comes from that, want more and to master more. That, like my grandson Thomas, somehow must be educated and channelled. We need to turn the “Titanic”—perhaps that is an unfortunate example; I should say the tanker—in midstream. It has travelled a long way and will take a lot of curbing.

I chime with the noble Baroness, Lady Kidron, who said that, as well as applying rules to human nature, we should think of how to turn them back on the platforms that provide them with the tools that they also need to know how to handle. I am 15 seconds short of the time, and all I can say is that a statutory duty of care requires us to identify our neighbour and do our best to help them, as well as us, to do better.

2.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Lord Ashton of Hyde) (Con): My Lords, I have greatly enjoyed this debate and am grateful to the right reverend Prelate. I would not dream of calling him by his nickname, although I can say that he is not the only one—after a debate on algorithms, my daughter was pleased to tell me that I was called “Lord of the Nerds” on social media—but I am grateful to him.

In our view, the Church of England’s social media guidelines are a commendable example of the steps individual institutions can take to help support online users to have more positive conversations. That also applies to the users themselves. We welcome the guidelines. As the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Chelmsford said, the expectations they imply encourage us to be the best we can. We all know that the digital world plays an ever-increasing role in all aspects of life. We agree with the Church of England that it is important that people apply the same common sense, kindness and sound judgment when they are online that they would use in face-to-face encounters. These precepts are not unhelpful in face-to-face encounters anyway.

The transformation of our lives to the online world also comes with risks. We have seen countless stories about the impact the internet is having on our politics, institutions and individual users. It is clear that something needs to change. That is why the Government are taking action to help shape an internet that is open and vibrant and encourages innovation but, importantly, also protects its users from harm. The Government believe the Church of England’s social media guidelines are well aligned with the plans we recently outlined in our online harms White Paper. I thank the right reverend Prelate and other noble Lords for welcoming it and the contributions they made to the consultation. It also aligns well with the 10 principles of the House of Lords Communications Committee, which were mentioned by my noble friend Lady Chisholm.

The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Chelmsford asked about the digital authority. I commented on that at the end of my speech in the debate on that report. The Government will address that in our response to the consultation that has just ended. There were 2,000 replies, which we are going through at the moment. However, I made the slight warning that we are also conscious of the need for urgent action. Changing the

[LORD ASHTON OF HYDE]

whole regulatory landscape may be a step too far at this time, but we are considering it. That is illustrated by how, instead of a digital authority, the noble Baroness, Lady Grender, recommends Ofcom. There are issues to consider, but we agree that the overall regulatory landscape will have to be looked at in due course. We will come back to that.

Many noble Lords will be familiar with the White Paper, which sets out our plans to make the UK the safest place in the world to go online. In answer to the children who came to see the noble Baroness, Lady Kidron, we will establish a new duty of care on companies for their users, overseen by an independent regulator, so they will no longer be able to say that they do not have responsibility for their actions. The regulator will have the power to take effective action against companies that breach their regulatory requirements. Expectations of companies will be outlined in codes of practice from the regulator.

Between April and July, there was a public consultation on the White Paper proposals. In addition to the responses that I mentioned, we conducted over 100 meetings with stakeholders and international partners. We will use all these contributions to inform our work on online safety. We intend to publish our response to the White Paper consultation by the end of the year and to introduce legislation as soon as possible thereafter.

However, we are conscious of doing what we can sooner, so we are also taking action now, which the noble Lord, Lord McNally, mentioned. In addition to the social media code of practice published alongside the White Paper, the Secretary of State recently announced that the Government will produce a draft code of practice on child online safety. We are also developing guidance about the use of technology to ensure that children are protected from inappropriate content online. These will both be published before the regulatory framework is in place.

The Church of England community guidelines set out the importance of behaving with kindness and respect. We agree that users, as well as tech companies, have a role in creating a positive online environment. The Government are developing an online media literacy strategy to ensure a co-ordinated approach to online media literacy education and awareness for children, young people and adults, but users must also be held to account when their behaviour falls short of the standards we would expect offline. It is, therefore, essential that our legal framework is fit for purpose in an increasingly online world. The Government have asked the Law Commission to complete a second phase of its review of abusive and offensive communications online. The commission will make recommendations about options for legal reform of current communications offences. The project is expected to report in the early part of 2021.

Truthfulness is another of the central principles of the Church of England's community guidelines. The Government recognise the risks of disinformation and

are committed to reducing the potential impact in the UK. The White Paper includes provisions for protecting the public from online disinformation. We will expect platforms to take proportionate and proactive measures to help their users understand the nature and reliability of information they find online. Platforms should take steps to minimise the likelihood of misleading and harmful disinformation going viral and increase the accessibility of trustworthy and varied news content. These measures focus on protecting users from harm by ensuring that there are good processes in place; it is not about judging what is true or not but having sensible precautions which make it harder for disinformation to spread.

The noble Baroness, Lady Grender, asked two questions. In answer to the first, I will develop what I said about action now. We do understand that, to protect children, we need to get on with it. I mentioned the social media code of practice, which sets out principles that companies should follow to tackle online bullying. We have also funded the UK Safer Internet Centre to develop cyberbullying guidance. That provides, via an online safety toolkit, advice for schools on understanding, preventing and responding to cyberbullying. Digital literacy is already taught but, to support young people further, we have been working closely with the Department for Education on the relationships and sex education guidance. That covers how to develop positive, respectful relationships, how to recognise risks, harmful content and contact and how to report them. Positive, respectful relationships relate absolutely to the Church of England guidelines that we are talking about today.

I mentioned the new online media strategy, the online safety guidance and guidance on how to use technology to keep children safe. We know that there is more to do. We are doing quite a lot now but are committed to developing these important aspects. For example, the noble Baroness, Lady Kidron, talked about terms and conditions. We will now expect online companies to develop age-appropriate terms and conditions that people can understand, and a complaints procedure that will work quickly. Ultimately, these will be enforced by significant penalties, on which we are consulting.

The second question was about the 13 to 16 year-olds who are left behind by the GDPR. We applied a derogation in the Bill, but I will check the exact details and write to the noble Baroness.

I again thank the right reverend Prelate and the Church of England for their community guidelines and digital charter and emphasise how aligned we are on some of the fundamental issues. We will continue to engage with the Church of England as this work progresses. I am grateful to all noble Lords for their thoughtful contributions. This is an opportunity to lead the way and work with others globally. Through this work we will protect citizens, increase public trust in new technologies and create the best possible basis on which the digital economy and society can thrive.

Religious Persecution

Motion to Take Note

2.45 pm

Moved by Lord Elton

That this House takes note of the extent of persecution of people of faith in this century.

Lord Elton (Con): My Lords, I cannot possibly do justice to this vast subject; I doubt that anybody could. However, together we may arrive at useful conclusions and certainly spread useful information. The Motion draws attention to the scale of what is going on. To dispose of an outline of that straightaway, I quote the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, who said that,

“a large share of the world’s population in 2016—83%—lived in countries with high or very high religious restrictions (up from 79% in 2015)”.

He immediately qualified that by saying that,

“these restrictions ... do not necessarily affect the religious groups and citizens of these countries equally, as certain groups or individuals ... may be targeted more frequently by these policies and actions than others. Thus, the actual proportion of the world’s population that is affected by high levels of religious restrictions may be considerably lower than 85%”.

That is not in itself reassuring, because we are still left with a very large number, so I looked for something more exact.

Before I go further, I should declare an interest, as all noble Lords are supposed to do at the beginning of their speeches. My principal interest in this is that I am a Christian believer. I undertake to try not to make this an occasion to plead a special cause for my faith. The important aspect of this is that it relates to all faiths. We are all in the same rather small and leaky boat.

When he commissioned the Bishop of Truro, the Foreign Secretary said:

“I was deeply disturbed to learn that 215 million Christians faced persecution in 2018, according to a study by the campaign group Open Doors. Christians faced harassment in 144 countries in 2016, according to the Pew Research Centre, compared with 128 in 2015”.

The numbers are enormous, and going up. Open Doors, a respectable organisation which specifically monitors Christian persecution around the world, has put this more dramatically and estimates that, on average, 345 Christians are killed every month for faith-related issues.

The Truro report is an impressive piece of work. It convincingly estimates that 80% of all religious-based persecution affects Christians. I repeat that I do not wish to bias what is said. This does not mean that their plight should monopolise our attention, because the other 20% is still a vast number. Persecution is a shared burden, so I turned to a supposedly neutral source: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Every year it publishes its *Human Relations and Democracy Report*: the latest was in 2018. Chapter 5 contains a priority list of 27 countries for human rights, up from 19 in 2015. Most of these have FoRB; I should explain that the shorthand for what we are discussing

is “freedom of religion or belief”. That term is not mentioned in the Motion but it is definitely what one has to have, as we shall see later.

I remind noble Lords of something that is not often enough brought to our notice but which is a hidden driver of this sort of atrocity. We all know about flight or fight as an instinctive human reaction but, to decide between flight and fight, you have to decide between “us” and “them”. The awkward thing about that is that it is instinctive: we tend to feel safe among people like us, preferably people we know. When we are among others, the “them”, we are not safe; when we are with “us”, we are. That powerful instinct is very handy for dictators, unscrupulous politicians and scurrilous criminals, as it is very easy to whip up a feeling of “they are other” about anyone who has an obvious marker.

One obvious marker is the faith of the quarry, if I may call them that. Too often they are people of faith but when they are persecuted they are almost always in a minority. That gives them two sorts of difference: first, to the others, “they are not us”; and secondly, “They are not so important. There are less of them, but they are a threat”. That is the background and it seems to me that “them or us” is a cry that has gone up over centuries—thus Margaret Thatcher’s cry in her urgent response to a suggested promotion of a particular person to an important post, “Yes, but is he one of us?” That same question has been asked in thousands of languages over tens of thousands of years within the human race.

As I say, persecuted faiths are almost always in a minority and easily identified, but there are often other dimensions of difference. Those few Rohingya who still exist in Myanmar, for instance, are not only Muslims among the Buddhist majority, they are also Indo-Aryans among a Bamar majority: they are an ethnic as well as a religious minority. Another dimension, crucial in the rare examples of persecution where the majority/minority nexus is contingent to but not part of the problem, is at the interface between the predominantly Muslim north and the predominantly Christian south of what used to be simply Sudan—the area that divides them. The Christians are settled there and are arable farmers and horticulturalists. Their persecutors are nomadic, and are graziers and drovers. Hence we get the awful pillaging that goes on along that corridor, and it can be argued that it is entirely religiously motivated—if we are told that it is not, then why are the churches always burned down?—or one can say that it is entirely due to the pressing needs of feeding families. The fact is that it is never simple. What we need to make sense of this, and possibly to cast a little faint light by which to proceed further, is a core definition in a meaningful political and historical context.

I cannot believe that I have been going for nine minutes, but if it is true I have not got much longer—noble Lords probably think I have been going on much longer already.

We are looking at a truly global phenomenon, affecting the quality and even the continuation of the lives of millions of people. The definitive statement of human rights was made by the United Nations in 1948

[LORD ELTON]

in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and it is the nearest thing we have to an agreed statement by the human race about what it wants its future to be. To resile from it would be a huge betrayal of hope, and of generations of effort. That is a fitting context, and the directly relevant part is Article 18, which states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”.

One of the most poignant and least often cited examples of persecution is what has happened to the Ahmadiyya people in Pakistan. This is not on the horrifying scale of the Rohingya but there are 5 million of them in a population of 197 million—a significant minority. The founder of Pakistan, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, issuing his call to the faithful of his persuasion, gave the strongest reassurance possible to those of other faith:

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state”.

That was in 1947. In 1974, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto amended the constitution with the effect that Ahmadis were from that point non-Muslim for all legal purposes. In 1984 the President, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, issued Ordinance XX, by which an Ahmadi could get three years in prison, a fine or the death penalty for calling himself Muslim, for calling his faith Muslim, for calling his place of worship a mosque, for uttering the call to prayer which we hear coming from minarets in thousands of cities, for preaching, or even for using the greeting “Peace be on you” in Arabic or “posing as a Muslim”. The closure of mosques, defacement of graves and memorials, and charges of blasphemy and killings followed.

Other faiths are caught up in this—

Lord Garel-Jones (Con): I know the whole House will be extremely grateful to the noble Lord for raising the important matter of religious persecution. Has it occurred to him that very frequently religious persecution happens when one religion opposes another, and consequently that religious faith can be one of the principal causes of religious persecution?

Lord Elton: I am absolutely with the noble Lord; he has just got there quicker than me—another sign of impatience in the audience. It is more complicated than that because a lot of persecution, as I have just demonstrated, is between people of the same faith. That is a challenge to us all. However, there is something we can do in our own community, first of all, because the atrocities that affect the Ahmadis also affect, on a far greater scale, the Christians in Pakistan. It is a mystery to me why we continue to pour in huge sums of money in aid without raising any concern about something which is part of the Foreign Office brief. I look to the noble Lord, Lord Alton, to speak on this: he is well practised but not all noble Lords may have heard him do so.

I welcome the submission of the Truro report, which burst amazingly on to the scene just a couple of days ago. It is admirable, but its terms of reference are too narrow. It is concerned with only the Christian faith. We are here to try to redress that balance—to show that, as Christians, we believe and see that we are all involved in this together, and that the death of someone of another faith is as much a violation of God’s peace as the death of one of ours. That was the substance of the submissions of the Cardinal Archbishop and the most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Bishop of Truro on his call for evidence.

Maybe the World Council of Churches can do something on this but, however much we are strengthened by recognising and acting on community and seeking to change those already caught up in this vile problem, that is simply to clip the growth at the top of the tree. We need to tackle the roots. If only we had some central non-religious body that could instigate and foster programmes to address young people in all countries and of all creeds and draw them away from traditions of discrimination that are buoyed up by the “us and them” instinct, whether they are exploited by politicians, clerics or simply criminals. If only. Well, we have one: the Commonwealth. It has already started working to make community, the shared good of the nations, a reality and not a dream. I am being looked at.

Lord Brookman (Lab): The noble Lord is well over time.

Lord Elton: Yes. Do not forget that the Commonwealth comprises 2.4 billion people, which is one-third of the world’s population. Somewhere I will try to get an opportunity to say the rest of my praise for what it is doing; I commend it to my friend the right reverend Prelate and to your Lordships, in pursuit of true peace.

3.01 pm

Lord Anderson of Swansea (Lab): My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord on his initiative and his timing, coinciding as this debate does with the publication of the final report of the Bishop of Truro.

Your Lordships’ House is blessed with the presence of a number of champions of persecuted minorities. Some I see here: the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, the noble Lord, Lord Alton, and the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, who chairs the all-party group which produced that valuable report last year. In addition, my noble friend Lord Collins has been a persistent voice for persecuted minorities, just as the Ministers—the noble Baroness, Lady Anelay, and the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad—have shown real zeal for the subject. We in the UK are fortunate to have the benefit of a large number of NGOs active in this field: CSW, Open Doors, Barnabas Fund, Aid to the Church in Need and Release International. All are ever ready to brief parliamentarians.

Appropriately, the bishop called the Government’s performance, like the curate’s egg, good in part. Last week’s debate on the human rights record of Pakistan and possible conditionality of our aid revealed that the Government, by failing to provide refuge in the

UK for Mrs Bibi, acted in a cowardly way, probably because of fear of extremists in this country. Another negative example is the Government's record on resettling Christian refugees from Syria. The figures for the first quarter of last year were released last July, only in response to an FoI request from the Barnabas Fund and an order from the Information Commissioner's Office threatening the Government with contempt of court proceedings.

Of the 1,112 Syrian refugees resettled in that first quarter, there were no Christians and no Yazidis. All were Muslims. This appears to be evidence of government discrimination. Christians are specifically targeted by jihadists. The Home Office has refused to publish further figures in response to Parliamentary Questions, allegedly to protect the privacy of those being resettled and to support their recovery—surely weasel words designed to mask the reality of a failure of policy.

The Government rely on the UNHCR to select candidates, but Christians and other vulnerable groups such as the Yazidis fear taking shelter in UNHCR camps because of religiously motivated violence. Other countries, including Australia and Belgium, have no such problems and rely in part on charitable institutions and churches for candidates.

The Government's response is surely shameful, as if they are uncomfortable about assisting Christians because of political correctness or colonial guilt. This should also be seen in the context of the refusal of visas for three bishops from the region and the Government's failure to accept visa applications from the Nineveh Plains, where Christians are increasingly subject to ethnic cleansing. Can we expect a change of policy? Figures show that Christians are the most persecuted minority in the world; Muslims are the second, but much of their discrimination is Muslim on Muslim.

I offer a few random reflections. First, there are many relevant international conventions, including the universal declaration. The problem is not declaration, but implementation. As Pope Benedict XVI told members of the diplomatic corps in 2011,

“it seems unnecessary to point out that an abstract proclamation of religious freedom is insufficient”.

The Commonwealth is hardly a shining exemplar, in spite of brave declarations from Harare onwards. The Open Doors 2019 world watch list has 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian: nine are Commonwealth members, including Brunei, with its record on the gays, and the Maldives, which is reapplying for membership. We hear little of this in parliamentary debates on the Commonwealth and should be more honest about Commonwealth failures in this field. Five of the seven focus countries in the bishop's report are in the Commonwealth.

Secondly, tolerance should begin at home. If our representations abroad are to be taken seriously, we should be strong on Islamophobia; otherwise, this will blunt our pressure on cases such as that of Mrs Bibi and the blasphemy laws. Equally, if we turn a blind eye to anti-Semitism at home, including in our student unions, we will be less credible abroad. I hope our political leaders will heed this. We should listen carefully to the Jewish community and publicise more of its massive contribution to our national life.

My third reflection is about UK performance. It is clear that there has been some improvement in the Foreign Office since I joined it in 1960. The bishop's welcome survey actually shows huge discrepancies in the performance of missions abroad, some simply because of the zeal or otherwise of individuals. What plans do the Government have to follow up the recommendations? There should be a more serious effort at mainstreaming, training and improving liaison with NGOs. The bishop's survey showed the FCO's response to be “patchy and inconsistent”.

The US provides the gold standard and we should be ready to learn from it. For example, the US is bolder on Saudi Arabia, where citizens are not entitled to hold Christian meetings even in the privacy of their own homes. I recall that in the past our embassy there did not even hold Christmas services. Has that changed? The Emiratis, to be fair, are more enlightened. The temptation is always to be strong on the weak and weak on the strong. We should not hold back from criticising the treatment of Uighurs in China, but quiet diplomacy may produce more of an effect there, as I found when I was a member of the human rights mission to China initiated in 1992 by John Major and wonderfully led by the late Geoffrey Howe.

I have two final, speedy observations. There is a danger of being picked off for sanctions if one works alone, as happened to Denmark with *The Satanic Verses*. It is far better to work with allies to cover one's back. Our weight is likely to be diminished if we do not remain part of the European Union but become a mere lobbyist of it.

Finally, if we feel the need to refresh our commitment to religious freedom, we need go no further than room 52 at the British Museum and gaze in wonder at the Cyrus Cylinder, created in 539 BC—a true symbol of tolerance and freedom, which some view as the first charter of human rights in liberating the Jewish minority from its Babylonian captivity. This is an example for today's Iran and for the growing anti-Semitic movements in our Europe today.

3.10 pm

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, the noble Lord, Lord Elton, has provided the House with this perfectly timed debate, coming as it does in the week in which the independent report to the Foreign Secretary concluded that the persecution of 250 million Christians comprises the,

“most shocking abuses of human rights in the modern era”.

Many others, believers and non-believers, suffer too. Jeremy Hunt is to be congratulated for commissioning the report, and Bishop Mounstephen, Bishop of Truro, and his admirable team on producing such robust, evidence-based findings. I was particularly struck that the Truro report highlights the failure to declare as a genocide the murder of Christians and Yazidis in Iraq and Syria, and it goes on to forensically analyse, country by country, the UK's response.

Departmental institutional weaknesses notwithstanding, like the noble Lord, Lord Anderson, I place on record my admiration for the work of the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, in tirelessly championing Article 18 commitments to freedom of

[LORD ALTON OF LIVERPOOL]
religion or belief and the new United Nations day on religious freedom, which is being commemorated in your Lordships' House on 23 July.

In recommendations 15 to 19 and 21, the report spells out why all government departments need to collaborate in prioritising this issue, and they should note that both Jeremy Hunt and Boris Johnson have said that they will act on the report's recommendations. However, the report has sent half an unfinished message on one fundamental issue: genocide.

Over the last 19 years, on 300 separate occasions I have referred to genocide prevention and prosecution, beginning in 2000, after seeing first hand what the Burmese military had done in Karen state. In 2000, it was the Christian Karen. Today it is the Muslim Rohingya and Christian Kachin. From Burma to North Korea and Darfur, from China's Uighur Muslims to Nigeria's beleaguered Christians, from Pakistan's Hindu, Christian, Ahmadi and Kalash minorities to Syria and Iraq's Yazidis and Christians, the story is the same. Ignore discrimination and tolerate persecution and crimes against humanity, and genocide is never very far behind.

In 1915 a slow-burn genocide, still unrecognised by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for political reasons, took the lives of 1.5 million Armenian Christians. Hitler took the world's indifference to the slaughter of the Armenians as a signal that he could butcher Jews, disabled people, gypsies, homosexuals, Roma and non-compliant religious minorities, famously saying:

"Who now remembers the Armenians?"

As the Truro report notes, just over a century ago, Christians constituted 20% of the Middle East's population. Today it is below 5%. It began with the Armenians but it did not end there. A student of those events, the Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin, 49 of whose relatives were murdered in the Holocaust, coined the word genocide, and the United Kingdom signed up to the genocide convention which he helped develop, and which requires us to prevent, protect and punish.

As the Truro report reminds us, the killing begins when we ignore the "canary in the mine"; it emboldens the perpetrators into believing that we are too weak or too disinterested to ever hold them to account. It is a green light to the world's tyrants, lawless militias, totalitarian regimes and hate-filled ideologues, who despise difference and believe that minorities are a curse, not a blessing.

The beginning of 2014 saw the commencement of a new wave of mass beheadings of "infidels". People were thrown from high buildings, prisoners burned in metal cages, women raped and homes looted. These atrocities then intensified in their number and scope. On 3 August 2014, ISIS attacked Sinjar, killing thousands of Yazidis, abducting thousands of women and girls, and forcing the rest to flee. This attack on the Yazidis was followed by subsequent mass atrocities in the Nineveh Plains, where Christians were forced to flee or die. ISIS was responsible for murder, enslavement, deportation, the forcible transfer of populations, exploitation, abuse, abductions of women and children, forced marriage and enforced disappearances. Christian

homes and shops were looted after being daubed in Arabic with the letter N, for Nazarene. Churches were destroyed.

In every sense, these atrocities perpetrated against religious minorities are crimes against humanity and genocide, but to date, the UK Government have still failed to name these crimes for what they are. The Truro report notes that although the House of Commons, the United States Administration, the European Parliament and many other parliaments have said that these events,

"constitute a genocide according to the established UN criteria, this has not been recognized by the UK Government".

None the less, says the Truro report,

"the evidence from Syria certainly suggests that the UK government should examine its historic unwillingness to deal with the issue of genocide determination and be prepared to make a *prima facie* assessment as to whether genocide has been committed, whilst still safeguarding its long-held principle that the ultimate determination must be legal not political".

This is a fundamental question. It is why I have argued that there needs to be a judicial mechanism free of political interference. The FCO should act at least on the recommendation to examine this "historic unwillingness". I hope that the Minister, whom I questioned about this during Oral Questions yesterday, will give us some assurance that that will happen. After all, this is the crime above all crimes, and the FCO should separate itself from genocide determination and put in place independent legal mechanisms that work.

In 2017, through Resolution 2379, the UK successfully persuaded the Security Council to collect evidence of these appalling crimes and of the mass graves. The FCO deserves credit for that. But the Security Council has failed to establish a mechanism to create ad hoc tribunals to try those responsible. We should now work with our allies—if necessary outside the Security Council—to create such a mechanism. What is the point of collecting evidence if we do not do anything about it? The alternative is to allow mass murderers to grow old, unpunished.

I will give one other example from the Truro report. I co-chair the All-Party Parliamentary Group for North Korea. The report says that the DPRK,

"has consistently registered for the past 18 years as the most dangerous country in the world for Christians".

This echoes the 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry, which concluded that Christians have been singled out for especially brutal treatment and that this is,

"a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world".

It says that the regime,

"considers the spread of Christianity a particularly severe threat", and that what is happening resembles,

"the horrors of camps that totalitarian States established during the twentieth century".

It concludes that no official or institution is held accountable, because "impunity reigns".

That UN report said that there should be a referral to the International Criminal Court. Five years later, through fear of vetoes, nothing has happened. Those

North Koreans are among the suffering people highlighted in the Truro report. If the persecution of 250 million people can be truly described as,

“the most shocking abuses of human rights in the modern era”, the test for us will now be: what are we going to do about it?

3.18 pm

Baroness Berridge (Con): My Lords, I too thank my noble friend Lord Elton for the timing of this debate, a few days after the review into the persecution of Christians. I appreciate that this debate is about the persecution of all on the basis of their faith or belief, but I will focus on the review. I declare my interests as a practising Anglican and as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group.

It is most welcome that the majority of the 22 recommendations in the report focus on freedom of religion or belief. Only six specifically mention Christians, and the majority of the recommendations have been raised repeatedly in your Lordships’ House and in the other place. I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary initiated this review, as it has raised awareness of the scale of the persecution of Christians. I too put on record my thanks to numerous individual Ministers who have sought to raise FoRB over many years: my noble friends Lord Bates and Lady Warsi, Alistair Burt, and of course my noble friend Lord Ahmad. I also thank the right reverend Bishop of Truro for his industry and good intentions, having worked to such a tight timescale.

I welcome the new research in the review on what diplomatic posts know about FoRB, their use of the toolkit and whether they are taking action on behalf of Christians who are persecuted. There is also a good recommendation on the need for research and accurate data, as well as religious literacy training, which has been raised by numerous parliamentary colleagues.

However, the priority for any report or work in this area is to review the effects it will have on those who are already being persecuted and are at risk. What might seem like a good idea in London might have very different outcomes for vulnerable communities in, say, Pakistan, especially when messages travel globally in a nanosecond on a smart phone.

I have read all 136 pages of the report, but I cannot find the evidence or analysis to support recommendation 3:

“Name the phenomenon of Christian discrimination and persecution and undertake work to identify its particular character alongside similar definitions for other religions, to better inform and develop tailored FCO policies to address these”.

There is a recommendation at page 137 to,

“commission further research into the particular features of this phenomenon. This should specifically, include the naming of the phenomenon”.

Despite 40 pages of footnotes, there is no indication of where that recommendation came from.

I have never heard anyone in your Lordships’ House suggest that this is a role for the UK Government—and I have heard many suggestions. One must be very careful of the perception that could be created by a Church of England bishop recommending to a Foreign Secretary that they take charge of coming up with a definition of Christian persecution. The Foreign Secretary

used a word that has been introduced to the vocabulary, Christianophobia. Even if that is possible to define, is it wise for the UK Government to do it? The danger is that this word may refer to the religion, not the people—a criticism similarly made of the word “Islamophobia”. In this situation, where the religion and the overwhelming majority of adherents share the same root word, we need to be very careful.

As I said in your Lordships’ House when talking about anti-Semitism, we need to be very clear about the distinction between hating or criticising a faith’s tenets and hating people. The latter is the issue we are dealing with, and the report itself makes the mistake in recommendation 3 by referring to the,

“particular character alongside similar definitions for other religions”.

Article 18 protects people, not religions. Anti-Semitism is defined by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and, of course, means Semite people. It is worth noting that both Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are being defined by the communities. Who authors a definition does matter. For instance, if anti-Semitism were to be defined by the Israeli Government, it would muddy the issue and potentially put Jews at greater risk.

It is an incontrovertible fact that one risk factor to Christian communities in the MENA region, south Asia and other areas is that they are seen as following a Western religion, are foreigners, are not loyal subjects or are a leftover from Empire times. Where is the evidence in the review that this recommendation will benefit persecuted Christians? Where is the risk analysis to ensure that we do not make the situation worse? Which Church leaders in persecuted communities did the review speak to? Which leaders in India, Pakistan or Iraq said, “I tell you what is a good idea and will help us here”? Were they asked? Did the review speak to the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, a UK academic?

While we should not ignore Christian persecution due to leftover guilt, we still need to be aware of the risk factor to vulnerable communities of association of Christianity with the West and its foreign policy. Given the lack of any evidence or analysis in the review, will Her Majesty’s Government consider removing, or asking the bishop to remove, this recommendation before it gains more energy? Will they at least risk-check it with the UN special rapporteur? Will my noble friend please do that urgently, because the United States of America is holding a freedom of religion or belief ministerial symposium next week, and one danger currently for FoRB is the alignment with American priorities, which are perceived to be more about persecution of Christians than freedom of religion or belief?

The review has set a hare running, and I hope I do not see a tweet next week about the United States joining the efforts of the United Kingdom Government to define Christian persecution. We just do not know what impact that would have for persecuted Christians. My view is that if the term needs defining, it is for the World Council of Churches and the Vatican to do so.

I am troubled to see in the review such a recommendation without evidence or analysis, which could pose further risk to Christians. I should be

[BARONESS BERRIDGE]

grateful if my noble friend ensured that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Cabinet Office review what support and training should be given to the chair of any inquiry who has never conducted an inquiry before, has not had the opportunity to learn about Whitehall from being in your Lordships' House and is new to the subject area, to ensure that the taxpayer-funded secretariat has the necessary expertise to assist. In particular, when time pressures mean that taxpayer-funded appointments are made without advertising, how are departments ensuring that equality and diversity requirements are still adhered to?

Reviews and inquiries come in all shapes and sizes and are an important part of how our government works. The response to the judge-led-only inquiry into the Grenfell tragedy means that the world of who the public have confidence in is changing. I note that Lord Justice Leveson was wise enough to have six panel members to assist him. I regret that this report was conducted only by Christians; I hope your Lordships agree that to believe in freedom of religion or belief, you do not need to have a particular faith tradition. I hope that the religious literacy training in the Foreign Office and in DfID will mean that the speed-dial will carry them first, for global issues, to the Catholics, rather than anywhere else.

3.26 pm

Lord Taverne (LD): My Lords, that was a most interesting speech, and it certainly makes me want to look again at some of the recommendations. I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Elton, on tabling this debate, because an extremely important issue is involved. To declare an interest, I speak as a humanist and, as such, I care as passionately about the persecution of religious minorities as of non-faith groups. I care equally passionately about the right of freedom of religion or belief to be realised by all. Therefore, I welcome the general tendency of the review, which shines a light on the persecution faced by humanists and the non-religious as well as faith groups.

I mention in passing that Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, said at a humanist conference:

“Humanists are attacked as viciously and brutally as any other groups. In many countries around the world, it is illegal to be non-religious or humanist. There are places where leaving the state religion is punishable by a prison sentence or death and also where those who express their non-religious or humanist beliefs can be deemed to have committed a crime of blasphemy and again face the death penalty”.

I therefore trust that the Minister will reassure us that the Government will implement the review's recommendations as inclusively for the non-religious as for the religious. Further, given the persecution faced by the non-religious around the world, I ask the Minister to commit to establish a similar review into the persecution faced by the non-religious.

The crucial principle is tolerance and the issue is democracy. Both are relevant to this debate. The turning point in the history of civilisation was the Enlightenment, when the authority of the Church was dethroned as the arbiter of truth, evidence was installed instead, and science taught us that in our search for truth we

should have due regard to uncertainty. It was memorably summed up by John Locke—not himself a humanist but a man of faith—who argued that the rights of the individual and of minorities and the rule of law were central principles of democracy. Let me quote one of my favourite passages in political philosophy from one of his books. The print is very small, so I shall have to read it carefully. He said that,

“it would, methinks, become all men to maintain peace, and the common offices of humanity, and friendship, in the diversity of opinions; since we cannot reasonably ... embrace ours, with a blind resignation to an authority which the understanding of man acknowledges not ... For where is the man”—

this is key—

“that has incontestable evidence of the truth of all that he holds, or of the falsehood of all he condemns; or can say that he has examined to the bottom all his own or other men's opinions?”

The Enlightenment promoted tolerance, which is absolutely essential to democracy. Locke was a founding father of parliamentary democracy. I am sorry to say that today's Parliament has almost uncritically abandoned the philosophy of Locke and Burke in favour of the pernicious doctrine of Rousseau: the will of the people must always prevail. MPs have become delegates, not representatives, and now feel that they must vote as instructed by their party or, above all, as instructed by the will of the people in the referendum held more than three years ago. They no longer believe, as Burke argued so eloquently, that they should use their own judgment after hearing the evidence and argument. Many also clearly believe that party unity matters more than the welfare of the country.

As I said, that is not irrelevant to the debate. Our likely next Prime Minister is prepared to consider proroguing Parliament and denying MPs a vote to ensure that the will of the people prevails. Papers such as the *Daily Mail* denounce judges who dare to ignore the referendum verdict as “enemies of the people”. Please note: in Pakistan, for not dissimilar local reasons, a mob claiming to represent the true religion denounced a court ruling that Asia Bibi should not be condemned to death, forcing her to flee for her life to Canada. The will of the people and the dictatorship of the majority can be just as big a threat to individual and minority rights and faith as those who preach religious intolerance or populist autocrats such as Hitler, Mussolini or Erdoğan—all disciples of Rousseau. We in Britain should not be careless about how we treat democracy.

3.32 pm

Lord Green of Deddington (CB): My Lords, I also congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Elton, on securing the debate. I declare an interest as a former trustee of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which for 30 years has been doing sterling work advocating on behalf of persecuted Christians.

This is a huge and important subject. We certainly need to raise awareness of the suffering of Christians and those of other faiths throughout the world for doing nothing more than belonging to a faith community and expressing that faith in words and actions. Indeed, it is frequently humbling to read of the courage that so many of them display in such difficult circumstances.

I will focus on Christians because, according to the Pew Research Center, which has been mentioned, they face more religious restrictions than any other religious group. According to the International Society for Human Rights, they are the victims of 80% of acts of religious discrimination, despite accounting for only 30% of the global population. What can be done? Like other noble Lords, I start by commending the Foreign Secretary's firm and courageous speech in launching the independent review led by the Bishop of Truro. Of course, I accept that the persecution of people of other faiths is no less important.

I will stick to two aspects of which I have direct personal experience: the Foreign Office and Syria. I looked through the bishop's very thorough report, published just a few days ago. It was certainly tactfully written but it confirmed my suspicions that, all too often, Foreign Office officials have simply been going through the motions when dealing with religious persecution, including the persecution of Christians. I agree with the recommendation that religious literacy should be an integral part of induction training. Religion is enormously important in understanding the many foreign societies on which such officials will have to report in the future; they should start by understanding the ins and outs, and the massive importance of religion for so many people.

Many of the report's recommendations provide a helpful framework. However, I make a plea for some realism. That would include the recognition that no Government welcome what they regard as interference in their internal affairs. Some depend on religious supporters to retain their power and some have only limited capability to deal with low-level harassment, yet others have judicial systems based in religion, such as in the Islamic world. Realism would also have to accept that our diplomatic posts are there to promote and defend British interests and that, especially nowadays, they have very few UK-based staff. That said, you can make the argument that religious persecution is contrary to our interests, but you must have a hierarchy in the work that you ask your posts to do.

This serious and thorough investigation deserves to be commended and, so far as is possible, put into practice. I endorse the remark of the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, that Church and religious leaders in foreign countries should be consulted; they know how to find their way around the many difficulties that they and their people face. Before we leap into action in some distant country, we should know that we have consulted them and understand what they are dealing with.

Lastly, I turn to the report's chapter on Syria. I declare another interest as a board member of the British Syrian Society. The report makes incredibly dismal reading for someone who has a great deal of respect and affection for the Syrian people, whatever their religion or sect. It rightly focuses on Islamic extremists as the perpetrators of what amounts to genocide against Christians, as the noble Lord, Lord Alton, mentioned. Fortunately, the report does not fall into the absurd error of accusing the regime of discriminating against Christians. Quite the contrary—the Alawites, themselves a minority of only about 10%, have

long looked to the Christian community for support, or at least acquiescence. That continues to be the case. None the less, as we know, hundreds of thousands of Christians have been forced to leave Syria as a result of the conflict. The British Government are to be warmly commended for the massive amounts of aid that they provided to the UNHCR to provide for the basic needs of these refugees. The Government do not receive the credit they deserve for this considerable expenditure, not even in this House.

I have one criticism of the Government; here I strongly support the remarks of the noble Lord, Lord Anderson of Swansea. Taking only refugees recommended by the UNHCR has the effect of discriminating against Christians, for whom it is unsafe to live in refugee camps, including those in south-east Europe. Indeed, the report acknowledges that. Let us be frank: this policy smacks of political correctness. It is high time that it changed and I hope we will hear an appropriate response from the Minister.

3.38 pm

Lord Bhatia (Non-Aff): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Elton, for initiating this timely debate on the persecution of people of faith in this century.

There are a number of national and international treaties on this subject; I will not repeat them because the noble Lord has already referred to them. Despite that, these treaties continue to be violated.

When I was introduced to the House of Lords, I took my oath with a Holy Koran and quietly started with the word "Bismillah", meaning, "In the name of Allah, most beneficent and most merciful". I have never differentiated between faiths. As a Muslim, my closest friends have been Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jews and those of no faith. The Holy Koran, in surah 2, says: "The Apostle believeth in what hath been revealed to him from the Lord, as do the men of faith. Each one of them believeth in God, His angels, His books and His apostles. 'We make no distinction (they say) between one or another of His apostles'".

As an ex-trustee of Oxfam, I met another trustee, Ansel Harris, and we became very good friends; our children and spouses became good friend as well. We travelled together to Israel, India and the Middle East. We learnt about the practice of each other's faiths and shared each other's jokes and stories. Ansel and his wife Lea were to attend my introduction to the House of Lords—but Ansel had another appointment, with his maker.

I attended the funeral and saw very little difference between Muslim and Jewish rituals. A few weeks later, there was a memorial service in Hampstead Town Hall. I was asked to speak and made my speech. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was present, and after a few days he wrote an article in the *Times*. I have deposited the full article in the Library, but will quote a few sentences:

"At the memorial service recently, one of the speakers was Lord Bhatia, whom he had come to know through his work for Oxfam. It was clear from the tone of his tribute that the two men shared a moral vision and had been close friends ...

[LORD BHATIA]

What held them together, one a passionate Jew, the other a no less committed Muslim? The short answer is that they cared for something larger than their respective faith communities ... When they saw disease, poverty and despair, they didn't stop to ask who was suffering; they acted.

They knew that tears are a universal language, and help a universal command. They saw faith not as a secluded castle but as a window onto a wider world. They saw God's image in the face of a stranger, and heard His call in the cry of a starving child.

Does faith make us great or does it make us small? On this question, much of the future of our world depends. Jews, Christians and Muslims can live together in friendship, so long as we never forget those things that transcend religious differences – of which human suffering is one.

When we focus, not on ourselves, but on those who need help, our separate journeys converge and we become joint builders of a more gracious world".

To conclude, whenever someone attacks Christians, I feel that they have attacked my faith. This is my contribution to this important debate. The world will be a better place if attacks on any faith are dealt with by the full force of the law. These attacks on faith are made by a small number of people who, in the name of their faiths or for political or personal gain, attack other faiths.

3.43 pm

Lord Farmer (Con): My Lords, I too join in congratulating my noble friend Lord Elton on securing this important debate. We have not focused on persecution on the grounds of faith in this House for several years, although obviously it has often arisen when discussing other business.

I also welcome the Foreign Secretary's perspicacity in commissioning the Bishop of Truro to review his department's work on persecuted Christians. My remarks employ the Bishop's working definition of persecution: namely,

"discriminatory treatment where that treatment is accompanied by actual or perceived threats of violence or other forced coercion". I agree with him that establishing a standard definition will help several different departments of government.

While the Foreign Office is self-evidently not the responsible department for domestic policy, the implication is that other government departments—which are—need to have regard to equalities protection enshrined in legislation when considering how British Christians and their beliefs are treated. Can my noble friend the Minister report if and how other departments plan to respond to the Bishop's findings?

It is a truism in our value system that persecution on the basis of anyone's faith or religion should always be unreservedly decried, not least because, however nonsensical or even potentially offensive these may appear to non-believers, they provide meaning and belonging—deemed by social scientists to be two of their most important functions. Deeply held religious views are essential to a believer's identity, their sense of who they really are. Australian sociologist Professor Hans Mol made identity the key concept in his definition of religion as the "sacralization of identity". By way of example, those who have accepted Jesus Christ have, through him, been adopted as sons of God. This bestows a weighty, indeed sacred, sense of identity. So an attack that goes beyond mere criticism—part and parcel of freedom of speech—and threatens or delivers

real harm is actually a profound attack on the inner core of each adherent, not just on their livelihood or safety.

Leafing through the Bishop of Truro's accounts of atrocities and judicial oppression is a sobering, chilling process, and he provides a much-needed wake-up call. I could have concentrated on any one of his focus countries today. However, I feel compelled instead to talk about how Christian brothers and sisters are treated in our own country. Indeed, I would gently challenge his justification for the focus on Christianity, which emphasises that,

"today the Christian faith is primarily a phenomenon of the global south - and ... therefore ... of the global poor",

rather than,

"primarily an expression of white western privilege. If it were we could afford to ignore it - perhaps".

This "perhaps" is an important caveat because, if the persecution of Christians in the West, and more specifically in our own country, could be ignored on the basis that they live in a relatively privileged society, this is distinctly at odds with how we treat other minorities. As Jeremy Hunt said this week, this country,

"has always been a beacon for freedom and tolerance".

We cannot call out intolerance abroad if we continue to tolerate intolerance towards Christians on our own shores.

Mr Hunt also pledged to develop a term for anti-Christian hatred equivalent to "Islamophobia" and "anti-Semitism", as we heard from my noble friend Lady Berridge. The term "Christophobia", suggested by various religious leaders, is popularly considered to have been coined in 2003 by law professor JHH Weiler, himself an Orthodox Jew. Weiler challenged wider Europe's fixation with what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor refers to as "exclusive humanism"—humanism determined to exclude transcendent reference points from cultural, social and political life.

A striking example of how this played out was in 2004 when the Catholic convictions of Professor Rocco Buttiglione were deemed by European parliamentarians to disqualify him from high office in the European Commission. Despite his sworn commitment, backed by a lifetime of work, to uphold and defend the legitimate civil rights of all, his convictions—not any actions—were held to be in direct contradiction of European law. Yet the deepest roots of European law and culture do not rest in the soil of the Enlightenment but further back in Europe's Christian history.

Perhaps this is an inconvenient truth, but a civilisation cannot selectively jettison aspects of its developmental trajectory. I could give many examples but have only time to mention a couple. The Christian doctrines of incarnation and redemption taught European man his own dignity and a proper respect for individuality. The Christian idea of vocation—each person's unique role—is an important precursor to the western idea of individualism. Democratic notions of tolerance, dialogue and persuasion are foundational to the free-will relationship Christianity offers with a creator God. Of course, this has not always been perfectly followed, but historical coercive practices have been rightly disavowed as offences against true doctrine.

A similar day of realisation also needs to come for the adherents of intolerant and coercive liberalism, who judge politicians such as Tim Farron unfit to lead political parties unless they renounce their beliefs on various aspects of morality. Pope Francis has described how Christians in the West face a form of polite persecution that,

“takes away ... their freedom, as well as their right to conscientious objection”.

There are many politicians, academics and others who have been stalled in their careers because they vocally, yet politely, resisted the dictatorship of orthodoxy and have been crushed under the weight of confected opprobrium. Even the established Church has to restrain itself from attempting to coerce conformity to liberal societal values on believers who disagree with these on grounds of conscience, not contrariness or cruelty.

All Christians are called to represent faithfully the image of God. The self-giving “*imago Dei*” was, lest we forget, the inspiration behind the societally transforming movements to end slavery, establish probation and other professions to further human flourishing and drive much philanthropic endeavour in the 19th century. The overthrow of Communism in the 20th century owed much to many eastern bloc Christians, such as the Lutheran pastor in Timisoara, Romania—a clear example. If we airbrush out these aspects of our recent history, disavow the very roots of our social order and, more brutally, bind and gag contemporary Christians who dare not conform with current orthodoxies, we shall have no moral authority when challenging other countries and we shall all be the poorer for it.

3.51 pm

Lord Carey of Clifton (CB): My Lords, I too am grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Elton, for introducing the debate and doing it so well. I also thank the noble Lord, Lord Farmer, and the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, for their excellent addresses.

I want to take a broader approach. It is often claimed that war between the religions is the cause of so much unrest and violence in the world. That is certainly not my experience. Six weeks ago I attended a conference in Tokyo, where I had the privilege of sharing in the G20 Interfaith Forum which met just before the G20 summit. Some 200 delegates were there with 4,000 participants. There were faith leaders from many organisations, including the World Faiths Development Dialogue, which I co-founded and chair, the United Nations Interagency Task Force and Faith Council, the Joint Learning Initiative, the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, the Parliament of World Religions, and Religions for Peace.

The aim of the conference was not to settle scores between the religions but to share and participate in a common commitment to the world and to the securing of the sustainable development goals set by the United Nations. My experience over many years, starting when I was an 18 year-old in the Royal Air Force doing my national service in Iraq in the 1950s, is that there is compelling evidence that people of faith and good will have much in common and have lived in harmony for hundreds of years. I echo what my noble

friend Lord Bhatia said about Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Middle East. Just two days ago a Christian man, who was having lunch with me here, told me of a mosque in Madaba, Jordan, which is called “Christ Jesus, Son of God, Mary”. What a remarkable statement of some shared belief.

It is a fact that mainstream religions recognise religious diversity and differences and have co-operated in fostering intrafaith and interfaith religious harmony and dialogue. There is increasing recognition that all religions should enhance mutual understanding and empathy through dialogue. “Harmony without uniformity” is a phrase often used in religious discussions as we learn to respect each other and jointly serve our communities. There is agreement that the use of religion for political purposes should be opposed and that religious extremism should be vehemently rejected. This is not to say that ideological differences do not exist between, say, Islam and the West, Islam and Christianity. They do exist, but on the whole mainstream faiths are not at war.

However, let me lay before your Lordships three destabilising facts that we must face. The first is that part of the picture is the worrying rise of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Those of us of an older generation will remember the repression of religion behind the Iron Curtain, but just as notable is the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, or indeed the Karen Christians in the same country, the widespread crackdown on house churches by President Xi’s regime and the campaign against Muslims, who have reportedly been forced to eat pork and whose families have been separated. Such is the degree of internment and re-education in the province of Xinjiang that it is estimated that some 1.5 million ethnic Uighurs and other Muslim minorities are being held. Some have called this,

“the largest attempt at cultural annihilation of the 21st Century”.

It is horrifying and yet, according to Jonah Goldberg in the *National Review*, the United States Government, so vociferous about trade wars with China, are completely silent about human rights. We are grateful that the United Kingdom Government have been less reticent.

A second aspect of this century’s renewed persecution of people of faith is nationalism. It is the way in which political movements often co-opt faith as a marker of national identity, and in turn they exclude or scapegoat minorities. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and even atheism have all been wrongly used in this way. There are worrying signs, for example, that even in the world’s largest and most successful south Asian democracy, India, Muslim and Christian minorities are living in anxiety as Hindu nationalism creates an atmosphere of hostility and leads to many increasing incidents of persecution. In Pakistan, Christians making up less than 2% of the population are regularly persecuted and live in fear for their lives. If we think that all this has to do with “them over there”, we have only to think of anti-Semitism lurking in every aspect of western life and infiltrating our political parties. We should not be complacent.

The third aspect is the failure of the West. Other speakers have already drawn attention to this. On one level there is a failure of the West, until very recently,

[LORD CAREY OF CLIFTON]

to notice that there is a problem. This is partly due to increasing religious illiteracy in western democracies. The contribution of Bishop Mounstephen's recent report on freedom of religion and belief is an important aspect of the awareness raising that is needed. I hope that the House will eventually debate that report.

To take one region, the Middle East and North Africa, I regret to say that our foreign policy mistakes have contributed greatly to the near extinction of Christianity in some countries. In places where sizeable Christian communities have flourished for centuries, including Syria and Iraq—I echo what the noble Lord, Lord Green, said—Christians have been subjected to a savage genocide. They have had either to flee or be killed, and a tiny minority live in fear for their lives.

My time is up, and I regret that I cannot add to what I have said. In conclusion, the strength, resilience and significant presence of religious communities on the ground throughout the world indicate that they have huge potential in fighting prejudice and extremism. It would be a grave mistake to ignore a potential ally in our war against extremism.

4 pm

Baroness Stroud (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lord Elton for securing this important debate. It is particularly timely, given the publication of the Bishop of Truro's independent review. We are privileged to be able to stand here today and say that religious freedom is a fundamental building block for the prosperity of this nation, having been fought for throughout our history. Contrary to what some may believe, religious freedom is not a minor issue, and religion plays a significant part in our world today.

Around the world, almost 85% of people identify with a religious faith. Demographically, over the next century the world is likely to become more religious, not less. Between 2015 and 2060, the world's inhabitants are expected to increase by 32%, but the Muslim population is forecast to grow by 70% and the number of Christians is also forecast to outstrip overall population growth rates. Having the freedom to express faith does, and will, continue to matter to the majority of people.

However, it is estimated that around a third of the world's population suffers from some form of religious persecution, with Christians, as we have heard, the most persecuted group of all. It is easy to think of the persecution of Christians as something from the medieval age, relegated to history, but the reality of religious persecution is that it is a very modern phenomenon. As we have heard, Open Doors UK has estimated that, on average, each month 345 Christians are killed for faith-related reasons. Research from earlier this year shows that approximately 245 million Christians living across 50 countries face the most extreme persecution and are at severe risk just for following their faith.

This persecution is increasing in severity and has spread at a significant rate. According to the Pew Research Center, Christians were targeted in 144 countries in 2016, an increase from 125 countries the previous year. According to Open Doors UK, in the past five

years the number of countries classified as having "extreme" persecution has risen from one—North Korea—to 11. Yemen, Iran, India and Syria, among others, are now included in the most dangerous places to be a Christian. This has not just happened as a social phenomenon; it is accompanied generally by an increase in government restrictions on religious freedom.

The Legatum Prosperity Index, in which I declare an interest, shows a reduction over the past decade in the number of people reporting freedom of religion and belief being effectively guaranteed in 65 countries. Even then, this does not fully capture the deterioration of rights for many groups targeted in countries such as China and Myanmar, as we have heard. Generally, in the past decade personal freedoms have marginally improved around the world—for example, tolerance of immigrants or the LGBT community has risen globally—which makes the concurrent significant decline in religious freedom particularly concerning.

Even in the UK, although we generally think of ourselves as a tolerant society, perceived freedoms, as we heard from my noble friend Lord Farmer, have been reducing in the past decade. According to the Pew Research Center's social hostilities index, which captures the degree to which social hostilities with religious motivation are present, the UK has seen a significant increase in hostilities over the past 10 years. The UK now ranks just below Algeria and Turkey for social hostilities towards religion. This is not to say that those of faith in the UK are persecuted, but that we should be careful that we are not undermining personal freedoms at home and that we continue to be vigilant as we create a genuinely tolerant society.

Generally, in the UK today there is a high level of religious illiteracy, as we have heard in this debate. This has led to many situations where religious belief is misunderstood and a move towards the assumption that religious belief should be a private activity, whereas our unique history as a nation clearly demonstrates the weaving of faith through the public square. Will my noble friend the Minister say how the UK Government will work to reverse this rise in religiously motivated social hostilities in the UK?

For a country to truly prosper, religious freedom is paramount. Societies that foster strong civil rights and freedoms tend to enjoy increased levels of satisfaction among their citizens. A study undertaken by researchers at Georgetown University and Brigham Young University in 2014 found that countries with low religious restrictions and hostilities are twice as likely to be strongly innovative. Generally, a country benefits from higher levels of national income when its citizens' personal liberties are protected and when it welcomes the social diversity that stimulates innovation. According to the Human Freedom Index, countries in the top quartile of freedom enjoy a significantly higher average per capita income—more than three times higher than those in the bottom quartile. Religious hostilities and restrictions create a climate that can drive away local and foreign investment and hamper the development of a nation. According to data from the Pew Research Center, there is a clear correlation between government restrictions on religious freedom and education and health outcomes.

This would not be a debate on religious persecution were we not to raise the subject of Nigeria. We have to ask ourselves: are we being sufficiently vigilant? Systemic, targeted violence against Christians, perpetrated by Boko Haram, arguably meets the UN definition of genocide. In 2018, over 3,700 people were killed for reasons directly related to their faith—more than anywhere else in the world—and another 200,000 are at risk of being killed. Historically, given that the denotation of genocide is a judicial matter to be decided at an international level, the UK Government have opted not to term this situation thus. However, given the content of the Bishop of Truro's report, and the growing body of evidence that Boko Haram's activities in Nigeria meet the criteria for genocide, can the Minister say whether the UK Government believe this to be genocide and, if not, what would need to happen before they categorised it as such and took the appropriate action?

Given the importance of this issue, the focus that the Government have chosen to give to freedom of religion and belief under the leadership of the Secretary of State is to be applauded. I thank my noble friend for seeking this debate and look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

4.08 pm

The Lord Bishop of Chelmsford: My Lords, I too am grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Elton, for this opportunity to examine the extent of persecution of people of faith. I will not repeat the heart-breaking stories of the terrible atrocities that besmirch our world, but they are of course the day-to-day reality for so many people of faith. I thank the noble Lord, Lord Alton, and others for telling those stories—they need to be heard.

The diocese I serve as Bishop of Chelmsford covers east London and Essex and contains some of the most diverse and rapidly changing communities in our land. Here, faith leaders and grassroots worshippers from all religions are engaged in some of the most humbling and encouraging initiatives to hold fast to that most irreducible of godly virtues: peace. Although east London is often a place where bridges are built, sadly, it is also too often an arena where the backwash from religious intolerance, persecution and strife from around the world is felt. We are a global village, but sadly we are also a global playground where much cruelty and intolerance go unchecked.

Your Lordships may be familiar with the work of Brian Grim and Roger Finke and their thesis *The Price of Freedom Denied*. They have analysed annual reports published by the United States State Department and observe that worldwide religious persecution, defined here as physical abuse or displacement from homes because of religion, is “pervasive and pernicious”. Of 143 countries analysed, 86% have documented cases of religious persecution, spanning every region of the globe and every faith community. Grim and Finke conclude that religious freedom is a key ingredient to peace, stability and prosperity. Therefore, when Her Majesty's Government defend and promote freedom of religion and belief, they build peace.

I commend the recommendations of the report commissioned by the Foreign Secretary into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's support for persecuted Christians, published on Monday this week. We on this Bench welcome the report. We congratulate the Foreign Secretary on launching the review and the Bishop of Truro on producing such a comprehensive report in such a short timeframe.

It is encouraging that several of the recommendations in the final report mirror those set out in the joint submission by the Church of England and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. I am encouraged that the review has grounded its analysis and recommendations in a human rights framework, in a way that will benefit all those who suffer bias, discrimination, societal hostility or violence as a result of their religion or belief.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has made significant progress in recent years in the way that it addresses these matters, and should be congratulated on doing so, but this report and its recommendations set out areas where further steps can be taken to improve its focus and engagement and make the necessary step change. Bearing in mind the very helpful observations of the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, I hope that subsequent steps will not get bogged down in endless debates on the definition of the phenomenon of Christian discrimination and persecution.

As the most reverend Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster recognised in their letter to the review,

“our Christian sisters and brothers face persecution of an intensity and extent unprecedented in many centuries”.

We do not need a definition to know that this persecution is real and ongoing. Our focus now should be on how we arrive at interventions that can end this predicament. This will take time, but it also takes commitment.

In taking this forward, the Government should be assured that they will of course find a very willing partner not only in the Church of England and other Christian Churches but in other faith communities. I know from the work I do in east London with the leaders of those communities that we stand together in wanting to make progress on this, because these freedoms of religion and belief need cherishing and protecting. The societal benefits of this will be felt not just in those places where the terrible persecution of Christians and others is a daily reality but in east London, in this country and right across the world.

As some of your Lordships will know, this year is the 800th anniversary of one of the greatest events in Christian-Muslim dialogue. It happened during the Fifth Crusade, at the Siege of Damietta. St Francis of Assisi, with a single companion, crossed the battle-lines at terrible personal risk. He did this 800 years ago to seek out the godly and devout Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, who was known for his tolerance of Christian minorities in Egypt. He did it for one purpose: to seek peace. He sought to build a different sort of world, one where we respect each other's beliefs and work together for the greater good. I hope this debate and these reports will lead to the same determination. I nearly said “amen” at the end; that is how bishops end talks, so forgive me.

4.15 pm

Lord Sheikh (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lord Elton for introducing this important and timely debate. Religious persecution has, unfortunately, been a recurring theme in societies throughout history. Historically, people of faith have been targets for persecution and discriminatory practices.

Although the title of this debate refers to the extent of persecution in this century, I will first touch on an event which occurred in the 20th century but which has had a lasting impact. When discussing religious persecution, I must draw upon the horrors of the Holocaust. This was the state-sponsored killing of 6 million people of the Jewish faith. We must not allow anything like this ever to happen again. I fully support the setting up of a Holocaust memorial and learning centre in Victoria Tower Gardens.

I have previously spoken in your Lordships' House about the abhorrence of anti-Semitism. The fact that anti-Semitism is still prevalent in many societies is a great cause for concern. It suggests that there remains more work to be done in educating communities about historical injustices that must never be repeated. I was disturbed to learn that the Equality and Human Rights Commission felt it necessary to launch a formal investigation into reports of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Any such behaviour in a political party is totally unacceptable. Something is not quite right in the Labour Party if three Members of your Lordships' House have recently resigned from it. The party must take remedial action immediately.

In December 2018, I led a debate in your Lordships' house on Islamophobia in the UK. Shortage of time means that I cannot go into the details here. I simply ask the Minister whether the Government now accept the definition of Islamophobia proposed by the APPG on British Muslims, to ensure that we can make meaningful change for Muslims in the UK.

The Balkan wars of the 1990s were driven by nationalism and culminated in the enforced deportation and senseless bloodshed of civilians, and the destruction of religious sites such as the 16th century Ferhadija mosque in Bosnia. This week is the UK's Srebrenica memorial week, and we should always remember the Srebrenica massacre. We can draw parallels between past events in the Balkans and the present situation in Myanmar. The Rohingya have been brutally persecuted in Myanmar and driven out of their homes in Rakhine State. The Burmese army has led a pogrom against the Rohingya, and has been accused of raping, torturing and killing citizens while systematically burning Rohingya villages. This has led to the displacement of more than 1 million citizens. The United Nations Human Rights Council has referred to the treatment of the Rohingya as genocide. I would be grateful if the Minister informed your Lordships' House whether Her Majesty's Government would support efforts by the UN Security Council to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court.

I have spoken in your Lordships' House and elsewhere against the persecution of minorities. Most recently, I spoke in a debate in the Moses Room regarding the rights of minorities, in particular of Christians in

Pakistan. What are we doing to provide assistance to Pakistan to improve the position of minorities in that country?

Unfortunately, some people have hateful ideologies and discriminate against anyone who is different from them in any way. The plight of the Uighurs in China has worsened, with estimates of the number who have been detained without trial in so-called vocational and educational training camps varying from several hundred thousand to more than 1 million citizens. What representations have the Government made, alongside international partners, to the Chinese authorities in this regard? Christians in China have been subjected to harassment and intimidation by the authorities, and there has been interference with where and how they can worship.

The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Truro detailed in his recent report the extent of the increased discrimination against the Chinese Christian community, and commented on discrimination against Christians in several other countries. What steps are the Government proposing to take to implement the recommendations made by the right reverend Prelate?

I wholeheartedly support the efforts and investments made by the Government to defend the right to religious freedom. I also welcome the fact that the UN General Assembly has recently adopted a resolution for an international day commemorating the victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief. It is vital that we parliamentarians show leadership, stand in solidarity against all types of faith-based discrimination and adopt a societal philosophy that an attack on one group is an attack on us all.

I end with a famous poem by Pastor Martin Niemöller:

"First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me".

There is a powerful message in this poem.

4.23 pm

Baroness Cox (CB): My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Elton, on initiating this timely debate and on his comprehensive opening speech. As other noble Lords have highlighted the disturbing scale of persecution in our world today, I will focus on those suffering from persecution whom I have met, and seek to be a voice for them. Time allows me to highlight only three often neglected situations: the persecution of Muslims in parts of Sudan, Christians in northern and central Nigeria, and those in Thailand who have had to flee for their lives from the application of sharia law in Pakistan. It is with a heavy heart that I report the findings from my visits, especially because those who endure such suffering are largely unreached by the world's major aid organisations and off the radar screen of international media.

I visited Sudan over 30 times during the war waged between 1989 and 2005 by President al-Bashir and witnessed the scale of brutality inflicted on the Sudanese

people, while the United Kingdom Government allowed the regime to continue its genocidal policies with impunity. Despite al-Bashir's removal, severe human rights violations continue across the country. The recent massacres in Khartoum received some publicity, but attacks on people elsewhere are largely unreported.

For example, in Blue Nile state the Government of Sudan's army targets indigenous, courageous Muslims who oppose the Islamist regime in Khartoum. On a recent visit to Wadaka, in Blue Nile, we met 9,000 Muslims who had had to flee the fighting. They were scavenging grass and roots with no nutritional value. One lady told me: "We lost everything. On the journey, some people were injured", while the regime, she said, "took all our cattle. We fled without anything. When we came here, there was nobody to help us". It is a policy of my small NGO, the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, or HART, to reach such people who are trapped in these situations. As we were the only NGO in that region, we made an emergency appeal and obtained £50,000 for food aid. That may not sound much but £27 will feed a family of seven for three months until the rainy season comes, so we were able to save many lives and bring hope to people suffering severe persecution. I hope that the Minister will be able to offer some reassurance as to how the United Kingdom will contribute to the international community's duty to provide for and protect civilians dying from persecution by their own Governments, such as the Muslims in Blue Nile.

In Nigeria, the 12 northern states and Plateau state have suffered for many years from religious persecution. Thousands of Christians and many Muslims who defy the ideologically motivated Boko Haram and Islamist Fulanis have been killed. Hundreds of churches and some mosques have been burnt. The motives behind the growing wave of attacks by Islamist Fulani militants have been widely debated, but the Bishop of Truro's very good report devotes nine pages to analysing the Fulani insurgency and claims that,

"targeted violence against Christian communities in the context of worship suggests that religion plays a key part".

Before most of the attacks in Plateau, Benue, Taraba, southern Kaduna and Bauchi states, the Fulani sent a warning signal via a note or phone call—in accordance with the rules of jihad—to tell the villagers that an attack is imminent. During many of these attacks, the Fulani are reported to have shouted "Allahu Akbar", "Destroy the infidels", and "Wipe out the infidels". I have visited many of the worst affected areas and seen the tragedies of death and destruction. I have stood in the ruins of the house of a Christian pastor, where he was martyred.

One survivor told me: "The Fulani militants took my brother, his wife and all their six children. They tied and slaughtered them like animals. My sister was raped, and her wrists cut off before she was shot through the heart". A lady from a neighbouring village shared a similar story. She said: "The Fulani were hacking and killing people, making sure that those that were shot were finished off. They wore red to conceal blood ... on their clothes as they butchered their victims". In every village, the message from local people is the same: "Please, please help us! The Fulani

are coming. We are not safe in our own homes". Yet time and again, our Government have ignored their cry for help.

As the noble Baroness, Lady Stroud, highlighted, our Government have shown a reluctance to acknowledge the scale of suffering endured by Christians there. Ministers refer to the Fulani attacks as a consequence of population growth, land and water disputes or tit-for-tat clashes between farmers and herders. This does not reflect the reality on the ground, which has been identified by leading people within Nigeria as genocide. Can I urge the Minister to revisit Her Majesty's Government's characterisation of this violence? There are many complex issues but blatant religious persecution cannot be explained by desertification or poverty. Fulani militants are engaged in a strategic land-grabbing policy, motivated by an extremist Islamist ideology and equipped with sophisticated weaponry, which has led to thousands of Christians being massacred and to the permanent displacement of hundreds of Christian communities in recent years. These are examples of situations where Her Majesty's Government seem to be wilfully faith-blind. If they remain blind to ideological aspects of persecution, they will be ineffective—a point emphasised on pages 123 and 124 of the Bishop of Truro's report.

Finally, in Pakistan, Christian and Hindu girls are frequently abducted, forced into marriage and to change their religion. Ahmadi Muslims are also targeted because of their beliefs. They suffer violence, murder and attacks on their mosques, businesses and properties. Some have been forced to seek asylum in Thailand. I met some of the families who had escaped to Bangkok. I wept with those who have endured horrendous suffering. One man was kidnapped by a mob in Pakistan for being an apostate. The mob shackled him with metal chains and attempted to amputate his leg. He eventually escaped with his wife to Thailand, but his relatives in Pakistan are still in danger. He told me, weeping: "Even last week my brother and my 16 month-old nephew were taken captive. They grabbed the baby, repeatedly smashed him into a wall and demanded to know my whereabouts".

It is the privilege of my small NGO, HART, to be with our partners suffering from ignored persecutions. We always return humbled and inspired by their courage, resilience, faith and dignity. Across the world, many people are targeted because of their faith. We must no longer deny the reality of the cause of their suffering. I conclude with one of the conclusions from the Bishop of Truro's report:

"The danger confronting policy makers is to begin to think that to prioritise FoRB—
freedom of religion or belief—

"presents too great a risk and consequently to prioritise other areas. To do so, however, would be to renege on commitments to minority communities and to allow the continuation with impunity of the most shocking abuses of human rights in the modern era ... To give Freedom of Religion or Belief the Priority it deserves within a broader human rights framework would simply be to enable the FCO to do its job better".

4.31 pm

Baroness Eaton (Con): My Lords, I add my thanks to my noble friend Lord Elton for initiating this interesting debate. Persecutions of Christians is a growing problem

[BARONESS EATON]

around the world, according to the Henry Jackson research fellow Dr Rakib Ehsan and Dr Matthew Rees of Open Doors UK. This is a worrying situation, also highlighted by the Bishop of Truro's independent review, many others who have researched this area and the many noble Lords who have spoken on this subject.

Yet the persecution of Christian minorities has become a marginalised issue in much of the western world. An example of this is the underwhelming response to the persecution of Christians, juxtaposed with the reaction to attacks on Muslims by far-right terrorists. After the Christchurch attack, there was unequivocal condemnation, expressions of solidarity with the global Islamic community and clear identification of the perpetrator. After the Easter Sunday suicide bombings in Sri Lanka, there was a much more muted response, avoidance of clear identification of the ideology of the perpetrators and the rebranding of Christians as Easter worshippers.

Western metropolitan liberal politicians, who have adopted identity politics domestically, view Christians through this lens as white and privileged. This leaves western liberal elites, who seemingly celebrate the decline of Judeo-Christian norms, unsure how to approach cases of religious persecution affecting Christians across the world. Followers of Christianity across the world are becoming increasingly demoralised over the lack of urgency shown by western politicians over global persecution of Christian minorities.

There seems to be a view that government departments, such as the Home Office and Foreign Office, are uncomfortable with religion in general and Christianity specifically. This is probably best described as a lack of religious literacy, which has already been mentioned by others. Another big issue is that no one is aware that Christians exist in large parts of the world—for example, the Middle East and Egypt—which have low levels of persecution. There is a degree of political cynicism: politicians loudly condemn the persecution of Muslims in Myanmar, but not Islamist-led attacks on Christians in Myanmar.

Academic historian and *Telegraph* columnist Dr Tim Stanley speaks of the example of the Nineveh plains, where the persecuted Christian minority has lived since the first century. Iranian-supported Shia militia are persecuting the Christian community. Under Islamic State, these Christians had a choice of leaving, converting or dying, with churches being turned into torture chambers. The Shia militia are now making life incredibly difficult for these Christians, who want to rebuild their lives. The Christian community suffers from various types of persecution: economic, where people are encouraged not to trade with Christians; religious and cultural cleansing, where Shiite heroes' portraits are displayed in front of Christian monuments and the Islamic call to prayer is blasted from megaphones directed at the Christian parts of the town; and ethnic cleansing, where Christians are encouraged to leave but unverified restrictions on British visas and changes to USA immigration systems make things difficult, according to local sources. According to the Open Doors world watch list, three major trends have shaped persecution against Christians this year. First, authoritarian states are clamping down and using

legal regulations to control religion. Secondly, ultra-nationalists are depicting Christians as "alien" or "western" and trying to drive them out. Thirdly, radical Islam has moved from the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa.

I am sure all noble Lords were delighted when, in July 2018, my noble friend Lord Ahmad was appointed the Prime Minister's special envoy on freedom of religion or belief, and compliment him on the work he has been doing. This and the commissioning of the Bishop of Truro's report show that Her Majesty's Government are taking steps to address the worrying global increase in persecution. Governments cannot interfere in the governance of other nations, but can DfID be more specific about the terms on which aid is given to countries where persecution takes place? Does it know the ethnic breakdown of the populations that benefit from aid programmes? Can restrictions be put in place where it is known that Christian groups are discriminated against? Can Her Majesty's Government identify Christianity in certain countries as a vulnerability that we should favourably factor in when considering visa applications? There are suggestions that the Home Office is not accepting Christian visa applications from Syria. Will my noble friend investigate this? DfID provides financial aid to countries such as Nigeria and Pakistan. Should we not couple aid with expecting better domestic behaviour? Red Wednesday is the day for commemorating the world's persecuted Christians. Could we, collectively, do much more to raise awareness of that day?

The most important liberal democratic value is the right to practise religion, free from harassment, discrimination and persecution. The United Kingdom should protect and promote that principle relentlessly across the world, irrespective of religious background.

4.38 pm

Baroness Smith of Newnham (LD): My Lords—

Baroness Flather (CB): Look at your list.

Baroness Smith of Newnham: I apologise profoundly.

Baroness Flather: My Lords, it is a privilege to follow my noble friend Lady Cox. It is mind-boggling how much she has done, and is doing, and how much she knows. We should all listen to her with interest and see how we can help her.

I was born in Lahore, which is now in Pakistan but was then part of united India. I was born a Hindu but grew up close to a family of Muslims; it felt like one big family. We never thought about religion. We all did what we wanted to do. My mother, who was a very old-fashioned Hindu, did not mind when I went to the imambara—they were Shia—the place of worship where the lady went. So I went with her and there was no question of, "Why are you going there, what are you doing?". It was a really amazing thing.

The other thing was that my great-grandfather was a very respected person in Lahore. Even now, people in Lahore call him the father of Lahore. So we had a wonderful life, but we became refugees after Pakistan happened, because Hindus really could not stay there, there was so much killing and so on, so we had to

leave. It is awful to think that people just left their homes and went. As we have heard from other speakers, people just left everything. We also left everything: our home, our belongings, everything. But I cannot complain, because we were not in the same situation as many other people—we were better off—and things improved anyway.

That is enough about me, except that when I learned about the Holocaust I became a non-believer. I thought, if 6 million people, who prayed and were good people, had no response, I am not going to waste my time. I have never thought about changing, because when you rely on yourself you do better than relying on God. It is perhaps heretical to say that; I do not know if that still follows. I really believe that if you say to yourself, “I am responsible for myself”, it is quite strengthening and it makes you free as well. That is my personal story.

I have been thinking about all sorts of discrimination and the nasty things that happen to people. One of the worst things is faith to faith—the same faith and people being persecuted. We know about the Shia and the Sunnis, and countries that are Shia and Sunni and ready to fight one another. That is faith to faith, which is also appalling. Then there are also smaller groups of the faith who are treated like that. We have heard about the Ahmadiyyas, but noble Lords may not know—maybe I am not supposed to say—that the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad, is Ahmadiyya. Why is he here? Why is he sitting here as a Minister? Because he is of the Ahmadiyya tradition, which believes in education and participation. It would be good if everyone who came here, especially Muslims, believed in that. Ahmadiyyas believe in it, but everyone who comes to live in a country should believe in it. I believed in it. I was very lucky, I got a good education, but if you do not put yourself to do something in the country, why would you expect that everybody should fall over themselves to help you?

There is a real reluctance by the less educated Muslims to do anything to become any part of this country, and they never will. Some European countries have become much stricter; for example, Denmark says, “We will cut your benefits if you don’t learn Danish”. Everybody living in this country should be forced to learn English, because that is the only way they will participate in anything; otherwise, you are deaf and dumb. That is what is happening to so many people living in this country. We are just so soft, we never say to anybody, “You must do this”. Why should women cover their faces? It is not in the Koran, actually: the Koran does not say you have to cover your face. A headscarf is fine, but we ought to be able to see people’s faces. We ought to stop this sort of thing, because we are going the wrong way round—the other way round.

There is one last thing I want to bring up. My noble friend Lord Alton spoke very passionately. He is a very fine speaker; his voice rings through the Chamber. He has knowledge as well, but there is one thing he is not good on: he does not care about how women feel. I heard him yesterday—he cannot interrupt me now. They are not a minority but a huge number of people

who are discriminated against by their own faiths. We should not forget that. Women have never been supported by their faith.

My noble friend Lord Singh said that the Sikh religion supports women. I agree with him; the Sikh religion is wonderful and supports women. But Sikhs do not. Somebody once asked me, “Does Hinduism discriminate against women?”, and I replied, “No, Hindus do”. You can have something in your faith and not follow it. Most people do not even properly know what is in their faith. Women have suffered, and, if you think about it, they are the great carriers of faith and religion; they are the ones who care; they are the ones who go to the temple; they really do believe, but they are treated appallingly by the men. While we are talking about discrimination, we also ought to keep in mind discrimination against women.

I mean, what did Asia Bibi do? She drank from a well, and was told that she was not allowed to. That is just amazing. She got five years in prison, and we did not take her. I want to make this a real point—I am ashamed that we did not take her. On that note, remember the women.

4.46 pm

Lord Singh of Wimbledon (CB): My Lords, I too thank the noble Lord, Lord Elton, for tabling this important debate and allowing us to hear my noble friend Lady Flather’s robust common sense, much of which I agree with.

The Bishop of Truro’s report on the worldwide persecution of Christians makes for disturbing reading, as does the persecution of Muslim and Hindu minorities in Sri Lanka, Muslims in Myanmar and Yazidis in the Middle East. I could go on. The question arises: why are religions, which are all about justice and fairness in society, suffering so much persecution all over the world?

Mobs who kill and maim fellow citizens do not do so after a detailed study of the actual beliefs and teachings of those they wish to harm, but because of a latent ingrained fear of difference that is all too easily exploited by unscrupulous religious and political leaders. There seems to be a law of human behaviour which I will call Indarjit’s law: when two or more people find enough in common to call themselves “us”, they will immediately look around for a “them” to look down on to strengthen their sense of common identity. We see this in a less harmful form in the behaviour of football fans. In the 1930s, Hitler exploited latent fear and envy against the Jewish minority to blame it for all the country’s economic and social ills. It carried him to political power.

In India, at the start of 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi saw her Congress Party trailing in the opinion polls and heading for defeat in the autumn elections. A child of the 1930s, she blamed India’s less than 2% minority for all of India’s social and political ills. This led to the brutal killing of thousands of Sikh men, women and children throughout the country. At the end of the year her Congress Party secured a record landslide victory. The rise to power of Narendra Modi, India’s current Prime Minister, was widely attributed to his association with majority bigotry, which led to

[LORD SINGH OF WIMBLEDON]

the killing of thousands of Muslims. For several years he was *persona non grata*, in this country as well as in the United States. But political power all too easily leads to wider political acceptance.

Sadly, considerations of trade frequently override human rights. In 1984, I asked the then Home Secretary, who I knew well, “Why do the British Government not speak up against the persecution of Sikhs in India?”. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “Indarjit, it’s very difficult—we’re walking on a tightrope. We’ve already lost one important contract”. A Minister of Trade in David Cameron’s Government said, “When we talk trade with China, we should not talk about human rights”. In this House, we have had numerous questions on the abuse of political and religious power by countries in the Middle East, yet we are always softer on Saudi Arabia, perhaps the greater abuser, because, let us be frank, it is a major customer for our arms exports.

This brings me to the abuse of religious freedom in the name of religion. We are all aware of the conflict between Shias and Sunnis in the Middle East. Small theological differences are magnified by irreligious religious leaders, and used to appeal to majority bigotry, leading to the murder of thousands of innocents and a huge refugee crisis. Russia, Britain, America and other powers jump in to take one side or another, adding to the suffering and the flood of refugees.

Religions, which bear the brunt of the suffering, also have the key to reducing conflict, if, instead of focusing on supposed superiority and difference, they emphasise common aspirations and beliefs. This year is the 550th anniversary of the birth of Guru Nanak. In a message highly relevant to today’s times, he taught that the one God of us all was not in the least bit interested in our different religious labels but in what we do to work for a more harmonious and peaceful life. He taught that our different religions were simply different paths up a mountain towards an understanding of God. The paths are not mutually exclusive but frequently merge to highlight common imperatives that can defeat bigotry and fanaticism. That is the direction in which we have to move for greater peace and harmony.

4.52 pm

Baroness Smith of Newnham: My Lords, this time standing up at the right time, I must start by apologising to the noble Baroness, Lady Flather. I was so sure that the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, was the penultimate speaker before the gap that I did not turn over the page.

I thank the noble Lord, Lord Elton, for bringing this debate this afternoon. As so many noble Lords have said, it is a very timely debate, and in many ways it is profoundly shocking. We have heard from so many noble Lords of cases of religious persecution, and obviously the particular timing comes alongside the Bishop of Truro’s report, but other themes could have been explored in even more detail this afternoon.

Some noble Lords declared an interest of one sort or another, so I thought that I ought to declare an interest as a Roman Catholic and as a member of the

APPG on Christians in Parliament, which began an inquiry on the position of Christians in the United Kingdom. As far as I know, there has not yet been a report from that inquiry, because so much evidence was taken that the chairman of the group has not yet arisen from the thousands of submissions.

One point about religious literacy came very close to home on Ash Wednesday. As a cradle Catholic, who went to a Catholic school where all my friends were Catholic, my Brownie pack was Catholic—essentially, as a small child I did not know people other than fellow Catholics—I was used on Ash Wednesday to having ashes put on my forehead, and nobody ever asked me what they were. When I became a school governor in a non-religious school in Cambridge, I was a little surprised to turn up to a governors’ meeting and be told by the headmistress, “You’ve got a dirty mark on your forehead”. Over the years, I became a little more used to that. This year, we had votes on Ash Wednesday, and several MPs and Members of your Lordships’ House came to mass at 6 o’clock where we had ashes imposed. When we came to vote, some of us, like the noble Lord, Lord Alton, thought, “We don’t want to demonstrate that we are wearing ashes, because it seems to go against Christ’s teaching that if you are fasting, do not wear sackcloth and ashes”. I wondered about taking my ashes off. I did not. People kept saying, “What’s that?”. I spent quite a long time explaining to people the concept of wearing ashes, and the noble Lord, Lord Alton, and I talked about it afterwards and discussed whether it was the right or wrong thing. It was very clear that the idea of wearing ashes—which is something that Catholics just do—is something that even fellow Christians find somewhat strange. Even within a Christian country with an established Christian Church, there are things that divide us but divide us in a way that can be easily explained.

As the noble Lord, Lord Elton, made clear in opening the debate two and a half hours ago, freedom of religion or belief is a human right enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, yet we have heard this evening just how many countries face religious persecution across the globe. The statistics are absolutely shocking. It is not just in parts of the world where we are used to seeing terrorist attacks. It is not just in the Middle East, where IS has been so prevalent and the fate of Christians and Yazidis has been so clear. It is in Africa, in Nigeria, as the noble Baroness, Lady Stroud, said—a country which is part of the Commonwealth. That is not a genocide led by the Government; it is in a part of Nigeria, but it is a very significant phenomenon. As several noble Lords have said, in some cases Christianity is portrayed as something western and part of the western elite, but vast parts of Nigeria are Christian, and other parts are not. Those people should be able to live in toleration.

My noble friend Lord Taverne talked about tolerance, which is one of the things that we need to refind in the dialogue of faith. It should not be about us and them—though, as various noble Lords, including the noble Lord, Lord Sheikh, said, it can be about us and them, and that needs to be overcome. If we want to stop persecution, we need to find ways to bring together

the common strands of our faiths rather than talk about the differences. As the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Carey, said, in many ways the common strands of the major faiths are very similar in what they teach, so that persecution should not exist.

Various noble Lords have touched on the situation in the United Kingdom, where we pride ourselves on our tolerance and human rights and think that there should not be discrimination on the grounds of a whole range of things, including religion or belief. However, as the noble Lord, Lord Farmer, pointed out, and as evidence we took in the Christians in Parliament APPG inquiry showed, there are Christians in this country who feel that their jobs are very difficult to fulfil because their faith puts them at odds with the norms of this country. If we are a liberal country and a liberal democracy, we need to find ways to ensure that people can live out their faith or absence of faith equally. At times, that is difficult.

Of course, Christians in this country are not persecuted. I hope that Jews and Muslims are not persecuted in this country either, but anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are clearly on the rise. As the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, said, getting into definitions is not helpful but if, even in this country, there is a rise in opposition to people of faith, that is something about which we should not be complacent.

The Bishop of Truro's report was commissioned by the current Foreign Secretary. I hope that the Minister can assure us in her response that whoever is Foreign Secretary or Prime Minister after 24 July will feel equally inspired to say, "We need to ensure that the UK is willing to stand up and be counted against persecution on the grounds of faith".

Before noble Lords start looking at the clock, I should say that the Government Whip told me that there had been a mistake and that I am allowed 10 minutes—like the Government Front Bench—so I have another two minutes left.

I want to touch on an underlying concept in discussions about persecution in so many parts of the world, and that is genocide. In Myanmar, in Nigeria and in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, there are activities that look like genocide, where an ordinary person looking at the definition of genocide would say, "We think that this is a genocide". Yet Her Majesty's Government, like many western Governments, have been reluctant to call things genocide and take them to the UN Security Council, perhaps on the grounds that there may be disagreement or that countries such as China might say that we should not interfere in other countries. Clearly, we should not interfere in other countries, but there are also international laws that say that, when something is a genocide, it is appropriate to act. Are Her Majesty's Government willing to raise some of these issues with the UN Security Council?

Finally, there has been a lot of discussion about DfID and whether it could look more at the contracts that it lets. If the Government and the Foreign Office believe that genocide is happening and that people are being persecuted for their faith in various countries, will the Minister undertake to talk to the Home Office to make sure that there is adequate religious literacy

there when asylum cases are brought forward? It is vital that all parts of Her Majesty's Government speak with one voice on this issue.

5.02 pm

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab): My Lords, for the record and for the benefit of my party's leader, I am not sitting on the Government Benches; I am of course speaking from the Opposition Benches. I too thank the noble Lord, Lord Elton, for initiating this vital debate. Like the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, I am a proud member of the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Why do I, as a humanist and a gay man who has been subjected to religious bigotry—and whose community is subjected to religious bigotry throughout the world—support freedom of religious belief? The harsh reality is that, in today's world, countries that do not respect religious freedom or the right to no belief invariably do not respect other basic human rights. That is a vital point. As the noble Lord, Lord Singh, said, the persecution of Christians often goes hand in hand with the persecution of other religious groups. He mentioned India, for instance, where the rise of Hindu nationalism affects millions of Muslims, Sikhs and Christians.

I very much welcome the Government's initiatives to put this issue centre stage globally. The 2016 FCO conference, convened to share ideas and to extend and defend the right to freedom of religion, was certainly a great success; we had participants from 38 countries.

I welcome the recognition given to the important role that freedom of religious belief can play in tackling extremism and promoting democracy. That is why we committed in our 2017 election manifesto to the appointment of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, an individual who would ensure that the defence of religious freedom was mainstreamed throughout the work of every government department. Of course, in June 2018 the Prime Minister appointed the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, as Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief. I think all noble Lords recognise his hard work in delivering this agenda.

I share the concerns expressed by many human rights groups and other groups about how the Government will ensure that they maintain the momentum on freedom of religion or belief. Of course, the Bishop of Truro's report was commissioned by the Foreign Secretary last December to review whether the Government could do more to address the persecution of Christians worldwide. We have heard reference to the Open Doors 2019 report on the persecution of Christians, which found that it was both more widespread and more serious. As noble Lords have referred to, of the 50 countries listed in the report, 40 are places where Christians experience very high or extreme levels of persecution. In 2014 only 22 of the countries in the report were given that rating, so something is getting worse.

Earlier this week the bishop's report was published. I certainly accept its conclusion that Christians are the "most persecuted" religious group in the world and

[LORD COLLINS OF HIGHBURY]

that we must act to address this. But in doing so we must recognise what the bishop said about Christian persecution having,

“multiple drivers and as such it deserves special attention. More specifically it is certainly not limited to Islamic-majority contexts. So this review is *not* a stalking horse for the Islamophobic far-right”—

which we saw marching outside Parliament this afternoon—and does not,

“give the Islamophobic right a stick to beat Islam with”.

It is really important to make that point.

The noble Lord, Lord Sheikh, referred to the terrible events in Srebrenica. Today is the anniversary of that dreadful massacre, in which over 8,500 Bosnians—young men and boys—were murdered by people who professed to be of the Christian faith. After I asked a question of the Minister yesterday, the noble Lord, Lord Bourne, responded to me in writing this morning and updated me on his department’s support for Remembering Srebrenica, a charity that has been funded by the department since 2013. I mention that because of that charity’s work in organising 800 commemorative events across the UK to mark the 24th anniversary. It will both honour the victims and foster stronger community relations in Britain. It is through education about those horrendous events that we will really change opinions.

I very much welcome the bishop’s report, its important findings and most of its recommendations. However, like the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, I too have concerns and I hope that the Government will look at it in depth. I read in the *Guardian* that Jeremy Hunt said at the press launch that he would enact all the recommendations if he became Prime Minister. In case that does not happen, I would be grateful if the Minister indicated when she expects the Government to give a formal response to the recommendations and how they will be adopted and implemented.

I too welcome the intervention of the noble Lord, Lord Taverne, and the excellent idea to conduct a review into the plight facing the non-religious. I hope the Minister will commit to conducting a similar review, given the scale of the plight faced by the non-religious and humanists around the world. It would go a long way towards guaranteeing the right to freedom of religion or belief for all. It would also ensure that the Government’s position as a global leader and champion of freedom of religion or belief around the world will be maintained.

One measure to hold different nations to account over their human rights and FoRB violations is to include human rights clauses in trade agreements that the UK will be required to renegotiate. Certainly, EU trade policy is increasingly incorporating human rights considerations into these matters, so can the Minister give an assurance today that the FCO’s important work on human rights and FoRB can be mainstreamed throughout the new trade agreements? Noble Lords have referred to China, which is often put up as the huge hope in terms of trade, but we have heard from the noble Lord, Lord Alton, and others about the appalling continued mass detention of Uighur Muslims in west China simply for practising their religion. It

looks like they are in concentration camps—and we have seen those before. I hope the Minister will tell us more. We have also seen non-approved Christian churches being closed in China and their members arrested. Can the Minister tell the House exactly what we are doing to raise these issues with the Chinese authorities?

Freedom of religious belief is not simply a matter for Governments, as many noble Lords have alluded to during the debate. We need to hear all the voices advocating respect and tolerance, and that is why interfaith groups and interfaith work is so essential. I hope the Minister will be able to reassure us about the projects the Government have supported to promote that—including the use of the Magna Carta fund—detail what we are doing and ensure that it is ongoing.

5.13 pm

Baroness Goldie (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lord Elton for tabling this debate and all noble Lords for their thoughtful, perceptive and passionate contributions. My noble friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon was keen to respond to this debate but he is currently chairing a session on this very issue as part of the first ever media freedom conference in London. I know you will all feel diminished by his absence but I shall do my best as his understudy to deal with the important points that have been raised.

Persecution of people on the basis of their faith or belief or because they have no faith at all is unfortunately a phenomenon, a malaise, as old as faith itself. Invariably, it is born of ignorance, fear and a failure to appreciate our common humanity. It is the practice of intolerance. The noble Lord, Lord Taverne, is right to point out that tolerance is at the heart of respect for common humanity, whether that comprises people who have a faith or who have none. My noble friend Lady Stroud rightly stressed the need for tolerance, including on our own doorstep here in the UK, a sentiment echoed by both the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, and the noble Lord, Lord Collins.

It is deeply concerning that in the 21st century, religious intolerance still blights the lives of millions of people around the world, affecting people of all faiths and beliefs on every continent. This year alone, we have seen attacks on individuals, religious symbols or places of worship in countries as varied as the United States, Burkina Faso, the Philippines, New Zealand, France and here in the UK. No one is immune. Indeed, the scale of the problem was eloquently referred to by my noble friends Lord Elton and Lady Stroud, the noble Lords, Lord Bhatia and Lord Sheikh, and the noble Baroness, Lady Cox. The noble Lord, Lord Singh, pertinently and helpfully pointed out that at the heart of all faiths should be love and mutual respect. That takes us back to the point about common humanity. The noble Lord was quite right to remind of us of that. It is certainly something worth reflecting on.

In the first two decades of this century, minority communities in the Middle East, including Christians, have visibly decreased in size, as people have been forced to flee their homeland for fear of persecution at the hands of Daesh. The noble Lord, Lord Alton, raised that issue and also the atrocities in Iraq. We support the investigation of alleged crimes and the

preservation of evidence so that perpetrators can be brought to justice. Without first ascertaining the evidence and preserving it, there is no process which can follow, so it is an extremely important part of the sequence of events.

Some noble Lords mentioned that in China, Uighur Muslims are suffering extreme levels of harassment, discrimination and persecution by the state, while Baha'is are prosecuted for their faith in Yemen and Jehovah's Witnesses are criminalised in Russia. The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Chelmsford spoke very powerfully about this aspect of global intolerance. Those are all shocking examples of the ways in which people of faith are singled out, marginalised and discriminated against.

It would be easy to extrapolate from these examples that persecution is on the rise in this century. Indeed, I think that might have been the apprehension of a number of your Lordships, but I urge a note of caution. While there is no doubt that millions around the world continue to suffer discrimination on grounds of their faith—I shall give some examples in a moment of the UK's work to tackle the issue—our understanding of the extent of persecution of people of faith is limited by the lack of data on religious minorities globally. That is a material gap in our knowledge and a serious deficiency regarding the extent of what we are dealing with. The UK is trying to tackle this head-on, including through our support for the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development and a pilot project to develop a methodology for tracking data on religious minorities.

Noble Lords will know that the Minister for Human Rights, my noble friend Lord Ahmad, as a person of faith and the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, believes passionately that the freedom to choose, change and practise your religion, or to have no religion at all, is a universal human right that should be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere. I particularly thank the noble Lords, Lord Anderson and Lord Alton, for their tributes to my noble friend, who has brought energy and focus to the debate. He has been involved in extensive advocacy of the rights of Christian communities and other persecuted minorities around the world. He has enjoyed success—in Pakistan, for example, on specific cases and issues—and he is building a constructive relationship with Pakistan's Human Rights Minister. I think it was the noble Lord, Lord Sheikh, and my noble friend Lord Elton who raised the issue of Pakistan. I think the noble Lord, Lord Sheikh, wanted to know what we are doing about the treatment of minority communities. My noble friend Lord Ahmad discussed concerns about freedom of religion or belief and the protection of members of minority religious communities during his visit in February. My noble friend Lord Elton asked about aid. We endeavour to ensure that UK aid to Pakistan targets the poorest in Pakistan, and we have robust controls to ensure that it reaches the intended beneficiaries.

My right honourable friend the Prime Minister has also shown personal leadership on the issue of freedom of religion or belief, and a commitment not only to promote respect for diverse faiths and beliefs here in

the UK but to take action to confront the worrying levels of persecution around the world. In the context of the UK, I say to the noble Baroness, Lady Smith: wear your ashes with pride as a badge of your faith and belief and your observance of that faith.

I am proud of the action that the UK has taken, and continues to take, to promote interfaith understanding, to combat intolerance and to support those who have suffered discrimination or persecution. Our approach recognises that religiously motivated attacks and atrocities often—although of course not exclusively—occur in and around conflict. The noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Carey of Clifton, also mentioned the influence of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes on religious persecution. That is an influence that we can all identify with.

That is why, in addition to our work specifically focused on promoting freedom of religion or belief, we dedicate significant resources to preventing conflict and securing accountability and justice for survivors, in areas as diverse as women, peace and security, girls' education, children and armed conflict, and preventing sexual violence. We also provide significant funding to support communities. I suggest that a common theme of human rights runs through all those activities. The noble Lord, Lord Collins, correctly pointed out the importance of this debate in the context of human rights and the importance of human rights in the context of this debate.

In Iraq, as a number of noble Lords observed, we have spent over a quarter of a billion pounds supporting people who have fled their homes on account of Daesh's persecution. We have also committed £1 million to support the investigative team that is now collecting evidence of Daesh crimes in Iraq—an important point noted by the noble Lord, Lord Alton.

In Nigeria, religion is one of many factors contributing to the ongoing intercommunal violence. We are exploring how we can work with the Nigerian Government to promote interfaith relationships and find enduring solutions to these disputes. The noble Baroness, Lady Cox, spoke movingly about the deeply troubling situation in that country.

The noble Lord, Lord Anderson of Swansea, raised the important issue of collaboration. We work at a multilateral level with like-minded partners and at international institutions to defend freedom of religion or belief. For example, following the appalling atrocities committed against the Muslim Rohingya community in Myanmar, the UK has led the international response, including through our role as penholder at the United Nations Security Council. We continue to press for accountability and justice, and for the safe return of the Rohingya to their homes in Myanmar. At the Human Rights Council earlier this year, we publicly called out countries that are failing to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief for all their citizens.

I could give many more examples to illustrate UK action to champion freedom of religion or belief through our posts overseas—from private lobbying on individual cases to our community-level programme work—but we know that there is always more we can do. That is why my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary last year ordered an independent review into Foreign

[BARONESS GOLDIE]

and Commonwealth Office support for persecuted Christians. As your Lordships know, that report has now been published, and I think that it was referred to by every contributor to the debate.

I noted in particular the comments made by my noble friend Lady Berridge. She clearly issued a caveat about the whole issue of definitions, and that was echoed by the noble Lords, Lord Green of Deddington and Lord Collins, the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Chelmsford and the noble Baroness, Lady Smith. I hear those concerns and certainly undertake to relay them to the department.

Many of your Lordships wanted to know when there would be a response to the report. I can confirm that we are working across government to agree a formal collective response as soon as possible. Noble Lords will be aware that a number of the recommendations reach beyond the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and involve other departments. I am pleased to say that not only the Foreign Secretary welcomed the report very warmly; the other contender for the position of Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, also welcomed the review and said he would always prioritise protecting religious freedoms and standing up for those facing persecution.

We will consider this hard-hitting report in depth. We will look at its recommendations carefully and, in doing so, see how they can be applied to our work in support of all faiths and beliefs. This is not a task that government can achieve alone, which is why we will continue to work closely with faith organisations, NGOs, civil society and parliamentarians to break down barriers, build bridges between communities and promote respect for our common humanity. This was a sentiment eloquently expressed by the noble Lord, Lord Bhatia, and by the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Carey of Clifton, in a thoughtful and optimistic contribution.

I have a number of points to try to deal with. If I omit to cover anything raised, I undertake to write. My noble friends Lord Elton and Lord Farmer raised the issue of persecution and its definition. The Government define persecution as,

“an act that is sufficiently serious by its nature and repetition as to constitute a severe violation of basic human rights”.

That definition is set out in UK domestic law in the Refugee or Person in Need of International Protection (Qualification) Regulations 2006.

I thank the noble Lord, Lord Green of Deddington, for recognising the UK’s contribution in relation to Syria. This was also the subject of comment from a number of other contributors. In conjunction with the noble Lord, Lord Anderson of Swansea, the noble Lord, Lord Green raised the issue of the help that we provide through the United Nations Refugee Agency, which has undertaken particular efforts to encourage other religions to register; this may well be reflected in more evidence of persons of faith becoming part of the resettlement programme.

Lord Green of Deddington: I realise that the Minister may be about to answer the point, but the reason there are no Christian refugees accepted is because they are not safe in the refugee camps. Is she about to deal with that?

Baroness Goldie: I must confess that that is not what I was about to deal with, but I have noted the point; I undertake to obtain more information and write to the noble Lord. He also raised the question of the training of Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff, as did my noble friend Lady Eaton. We have been extending training in the FCO on the influence of faith on foreign policy, commissioning the LSE Faith Centre to deliver a training course on religious literacy and introducing a series of regular seminars. We have also developed a toolkit on FoRB with top legal and academic FoRB experts, to support FCO human rights desk officers as they promote this human right in practice and combat violations of it.

The noble Lords, Lord Alton and Lord Sheikh, my noble friend Lady Stroud and the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Newnham, raised the issue of genocide. I can say—there is nothing new about this—that it is a long-standing policy of the British Government that any judgment on whether war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide have occurred is a matter for judicial decision after consideration of all the available evidence, rather than a decision for Governments or non-judicial bodies. The Government feel that this approach provides a clear, impartial, and independent measure of whether genocide has occurred.

My noble friend Lady Stroud asked how the Government are going to reverse levels of social hostility in the United Kingdom. I note my noble friend’s concerns; this is a domestic matter but I undertake to relay her concern to the relevant departments, which are probably the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The noble Lord, Lord Sheikh, raised the issue of anti-Semitism in this country. I reassure him that the Government are committed to combating anti-Semitism both internationally and domestically. At an event at the United Nations General Assembly last September, my noble friend Lord Ahmad reaffirmed the UK’s commitment to education and dialogue to combat the scourge of anti-Semitism in all its forms. The UK also recently took part in an informal meeting of the General Assembly on combating anti-Semitism.

The noble Lord, Lord Sheikh, also raised the issue of a definition of Islamophobia. The Government agree that there needs to be a formal definition. It is vital that we get this right and that any definition reflects the experiences of those who have experienced anti-Muslim hatred. That is why the Government will be appointing two advisers to drive this process and make recommendations on a definition.

The noble Baroness, Lady Cox, raised the issue of what the UK Government have been doing in relation to the desperate situation in Nigeria. I reassure her that we have made clear to the Nigerian authorities at the highest levels the importance of protecting civilians, including ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights for all Nigerians.

I think it was my noble friend Lady Eaton who raised DfID and how we provide aid. We use partnership principles to ensure that where the UK provides budget support directly to Governments, it does so only when we are satisfied that they share our commitments including on respecting the full range of human rights.

In fact, the majority of UK development assistance is provided through non-governmental organisations or multilateral agencies, rather than directly to Governments.

My noble friend Lady Eaton also raised the issue of asylum. Regrettably, that is somewhat outwith my responsibility, as it is a Home Office responsibility, but I will look at *Hansard* and if there is anything I can relay to the Home Office, I will do so. In that context, the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, raised the matter of training. It is an interesting point and I shall ensure that that is also relayed.

The noble Lords, Lord Sheikh and Lord Collins, raised the terrible events of Srebrenica. The noble Lord, Lord Collins, emphasised the importance of education. I totally agree with him. Education is a certain means of ensuring that what previous and current generations were and are aware of never escapes the knowledge and awareness of subsequent generations.

The noble Lord, Lord Collins, also asked what the UK is doing in relation to the Uighur Muslims. We have raised our concerns on a number of occasions and the Foreign Secretary specifically raised our concerns about the region with the Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, during his last visit to China. The UK also spoke about Xinjiang during our Item 4 national statement at the June 2019 United Nations Human Rights Council.

I am running out of time, but if noble Lords will indulge me, I think I can deal with one or two more points. I am sure your Lordships will be mightily relieved to hear that I am approaching a conclusion. When the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, visited Al-Azhar in Egypt earlier this year, he said:

“When people are attacked, physically, verbally or on social media, because of their race, religion or ethnicity, all of society is diminished”.

He concluded:

“To live in a world of peace, we must nurture mutual understanding and invest in making diversity a success”.

As members of a successful, vibrant, multifaith, multi-ethnic society, we know that diversity makes us stronger, not weaker. We know that society as a whole can fulfil its potential only when every individual is truly free, including to practise their religion within the law. Armed with this knowledge, the UK will continue to champion the message of mutual

understanding, respect and strength in diversity, at home and abroad. I thank your Lordships for a fascinating and very instructive debate.

5.33 pm

Lord Elton: My Lords, I add my thanks to everybody who has spoken, both those whom I pressed to join and those who volunteered. I am glad to see them all and to hear and learn so much. I am sorry only that my noble friend Lord Ahmad is not here to receive the credit he is due. I had wished to say, and will say, that the report that we have all been discussing is sprinkled with congratulatory and supportive comments about his role in the world.

One answer that I wish to hear followed through is to the question raised by the noble Lord, Lord Green of Deddington, about the filter between the refugees and their safety in this country. The rather disastrous conditions in the refugee camps leave them with a hurdle they cannot climb in order to get here.

I take on board my noble friend's strictures about the dangers of definition. We need to listen very seriously. We must not be narrow or point at one slot. A definition is a good definition when it says what is wrong, not when it says who is wrong.

I do not want to go on, because I have been flashed at once already. I will just conclude by saying that I am delighted that the response will be cross-governmental; that is crucial. I recognise an elephant in the room—mentioned only once—which is the way a humanitarian approach to life is inhibited by our commercial interests. That is very serious. We in our faith recognise that our Lord taught us and showed that helping those who need it is expensive and can cost lives. We must be ready to accept some burdens in support of others who are infinitely worse off than we are.

Eventually, peace comes from compromise and conversation, and the example of St Francis of Assisi at the siege of Damietta, and his determination to get through to Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, is an example to us all.

I thank all noble Lords from the bottom of my heart. I knew I was inadequate to this task, but you have ensured that the task has been done nevertheless. I beg to move.

Motion agreed.

House adjourned at 5.37 pm.

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