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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 19 April 2017

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

FAVERSHAM OYSTER FISHERY COMPANY BILL [*LORDS*]
Bill, as amended, considered.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Scotland's Contribution to the UK

1. **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of Scotland to the future of the UK. [909641]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): As the Prime Minister has said,

“at the heart of the United Kingdom is the unity of our people: a unity of interests, outlook and principles. This transcends politics and institutions, the constitution and the economy. It is about the values we share”

and our “solidarity”. I will never stop making the passionate and positive case for our United Kingdom, and I look forward to having the opportunity to do so during the forthcoming general election.

Antoinette Sandbach: With the Defence Secretary confirming a £1.7 billion investment in Scottish military bases, does my right hon. Friend agree that Scotland plays a crucial role in defending my constituents in Eddisbury and those throughout the whole United Kingdom from growing threats at sea, in the air and on land, and that the divisive policies of the nationalists threaten that crucial role?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend—Scotland is on the frontline of defending the United Kingdom from growing threats at sea, in the air and on land. It is the home to essential defence capabilities, and our commitment to the future of defence in Scotland is underlined by increasing investment in better infrastructure for our armed forces, which is helping them to keep the whole of the United Kingdom safe.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Given that in the last quarter the Scottish economy contracted by 0.2%, is it not about time we got off the independence

referendum—and, indeed, the general election—merry-go-round, and got the Prime Minister and the First Minister to concentrate on what is important, which is the economy of Scotland?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman would have a lot more credibility in making that statement if he was not standing on the ticket of a leader who has said that he has no problem with another independence referendum and who clearly would do a deal with the Scottish National party to get the keys of No. 10.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that Scotland's membership of the single market of the United Kingdom is more important to Scotland than its membership of the single market of the European Union?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend is correct. It is absolutely right to highlight the fact that the market for Scottish goods and services in the rest of the United Kingdom is four times greater than that market in the EU. The UK is the vital Union for Scotland.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): In the last few years, Iceland and Ireland have leapfrogged the UK in terms of growth and deficit reduction, and they have always had a higher GDP per capita over the last 10 years. Norway's oil fund is now \$920 billion, having grown by \$105 billion from \$815 billion. The equivalent figures for the UK are zero, zero and zero. Does the Secretary of State not agree that Scotland could be as good as tiny Iceland, as good as Ireland and even as good as Norway with our independence? What is he scared of for Scotland?

David Mundell: I well remember when the SNP advocated the “arc of prosperity” for Ireland, Scotland and Iceland. I very much doubt that the people of Scotland would want to endure the pain that the people of both Iceland and Ireland have endured to ensure that their economies are back on a stable footing.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Perhaps all of us on this side of the House can agree that Scotland's greatest contribution has been to show that there is actually an alternative to the destructive policies of this UK Tory Government. It is worth remembering that in Scotland we have free prescriptions, free eye tests, free childcare and free university tuition. We have scrapped bridge tolls, reopened railways and invested in infrastructure, and we are building more council houses than any UK nation. That is what the SNP has delivered in government in Scotland. Does the Secretary of State not agree that that stands in marked contrast to the Tories' mismanagement and destruction of public services south of the border?

David Mundell: What I see in my constituency is falling educational standards, with Scotland's once-proud education system having the lowest international ratings ever. What I see is my constituents experiencing increasing waiting times for the health service and having to deal with inadequate infrastructure. I do not believe that the SNP Government in Scotland are focusing on the day job. They are focusing on their obsession—independence.

Angus Robertson: Quotes about doing the day job when the Government are calling an early general election are a bit cynical. Let us rest on a neutral observer, not a Tory party research officer. What about the director of the Institute of Health and Society, who said:

“Scotland is in a much stronger position than England with respect to both health and social care”?

He went on to say:

“The problem is at the moment that the English government is not committed to a national health service”.

Is not that another example of the fact that the real alternative to the Tory UK Government is the progressive policies of the SNP?

David Mundell: Absolutely not, and I look forward to debating these subjects over the next six weeks. The right hon. Gentleman was very careful not to mention education standards in Scotland, which the latest international figures demonstrate are the lowest ever on record. That is not a proud record of the Scottish Government. I look forward to holding them to account over the next six weeks.

Joint Ministerial Committee

2. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Joint Ministerial Committee in ensuring that the needs of all regions and nations of the UK are taken into account in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [909642]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): In our negotiations with the EU, we will be seeking the best deal for all parts of the UK. The Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) was established to facilitate engagement between the UK Government and devolved Administrations, and has had regular substantive and constructive discussions.

Chris Elmore: If the Secretary of State is so keen on and supportive of the JMC, why did the Government vote against putting it on a statutory footing for Brexit negotiations during the passage of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017? Secondly, when was the last time a positive idea—I am sure that there have been many from the devolved Administrations—was taken on board to form part of the Brexit negotiations to improve the exit from the EU for the devolved nations?

David Mundell: We have been very clear about “Scotland’s Place in Europe”, the Scottish Government’s contribution to the discussions. There have also been constructive contributions from the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. They have set out many things that formed part of the White Paper and the Prime Minister’s speech. They will be part of the discussions as we negotiate our exit from the EU.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The role of the machinery of government in helping to hold together the United Kingdom is an important issue. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a priority for the new Government should be to take a long, hard look at developing new ways of working between Ministers and civil servants across the devolved Administrations to strengthen our United Kingdom?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, who has considerable experience. Despite what we hear at Question Time and in the media, the UK Government and the devolved Administrations are able to work together very closely and constructively on a range of issues. That is the element that we should support and promote.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister told the Scottish Parliament that “now is not the time”

when it wanted to let Scotland decide its own future and relationship with Europe, but now is the time for a screeching U-turn and this opportunistic general election. Does the Secretary of State therefore also believe that it is time for the Scottish people to reject the UK Government’s austerity obsession, their assault on the poor, the obnoxious rape clause, and their desire to drive Scotland over the cliff edge of their hard Brexit?

David Mundell: I acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman is an expert on screeching, but the Prime Minister’s proposal to have a general election in six weeks’ time, to ensure certainty, clarity and security for the period of the Brexit negotiations, is different from a proposal to have a disruptive referendum campaign during the period of those negotiations.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Common commercial policies for the UK to pursue as we leave the EU, for example in animal health and food safety, are as essential to Scotland as they are to Somerset. How can the JMC help to ensure that they will be adopted?

David Mundell: I would certainly hope that the JMC(EN) will be involved in the discussion on the repatriation of important powers from the EU to the Scottish Parliament and the other devolved Administrations. I recognise more than anyone how important it is to have common animal welfare arrangements, as the main livestock market for my constituency is a mile south of the Scottish border in England.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Scotland voted to remain in the EU and the single market, but the Scottish Government’s paper that would have kept Scotland in the single market and the UK was roundly ignored by a Tory UK Government intent on pursuing a reckless hard Brexit. Will the Secretary of State tell us what personal action he took to convince the Prime Minister to take account of the views of the people of Scotland, and can he provide an explanation for why he failed?

David Mundell: I have been clear that “Scotland’s Place in Europe” did play an important part in the Government’s thinking—[*Interruption.*] Just so that the hecklers on the Opposition Benches are clear, the Government formally responded to the Scottish Government in relation to “Scotland’s Place in Europe”. Surprisingly, the Scottish Government asked us not to publish our response.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): In the Secretary of State’s assessment of the effectiveness of the Joint Ministerial Committee, did he share my conclusion that it would be

much more effective if all parties were focused on building a strong UK after Brexit, not separatist agendas?

David Mundell: As we head into unprecedented peacetime negotiations with the EU, it is vital that all parts of the United Kingdom pull together to take a Team UK approach. By doing so, we will get the best possible deal for Scotland and the whole UK.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): The JMC is supposed to be the platform through which the devolved Administrations have their voices not just heard but responded to. The Secretary of State paints a rosy picture, but he is not listening to those voices. Northern Ireland voices are not being heard at the moment, because they are not allowed to attend. From what we have heard this morning, the Scots are saying clearly that their voice is being ignored. The Welsh feel, at best, less than impressed. Will the Government give this body the teeth it needs, put it on a statutory footing and let it do its job properly?

David Mundell: The purpose of the JMC is to bring together the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, and to work together to formulate our position as we go forward in the negotiations. I very much regret the fact that the Northern Ireland Executive have not been able to be politically present in recent times—we all want that situation to be brought to a conclusion—but the meetings have been robust and, I believe, certainly in terms of the actions that have flowed from them, constructive.

Tax

4. **Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con):** What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on their new tax powers. [909644]

8. **Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con):** What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on their new tax powers. [909648]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The UK and Scottish Governments continue to engage closely on the devolution of new tax powers. The Scottish Government are now responsible for setting the rates and thresholds of income tax. It is of course incumbent on them to use their powers to make Scotland an attractive place to live and work.

Chris Davies: Now that the Scottish Government have unprecedented power to shape the economy of Scotland, will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on the Scottish National party to start delivering jobs and economic growth in Scotland, rather than focusing on a second independence referendum? [*Interruption.*]

David Mundell: The shouts from Opposition Members just highlight the complacency of the SNP in relation to the Scottish economy, which contracted by 2% in the fourth quarter of 2016 while the UK economy grew by 0.7%. No Scot can be proud of that comparison.

Mr Jayawardena: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is terrible that middle earners in Scotland are being penalised £400 this year by the Scottish Government,

and by up to £1,400 by 2020-21, compared with England, where we have higher tax thresholds to help hard-working families?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that point. I might not like the plans to make Scotland the most taxed part of the United Kingdom, but I acknowledge that that is a matter for the Scottish Government. They will have to account for their taxation policies, and the forthcoming general election will no doubt highlight these issues.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The average band D council tax bill in Scotland is almost £400 lower than it is in England. Will the Secretary of State's discussions consider how local authorities in England can learn from Scotland's successes in providing local and national services while maintaining the lowest council tax rate in the UK?

David Mundell: The hon. Lady may have spoken to the SNP press office, but she certainly has not spoken to councils throughout Scotland, which are uniform in their negativity in respect of the Scottish Government's approach to local government funding.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): As a last act of kindness, and while he still has his seat and his position, will the Secretary of State address the closure of the Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs office in my constituency, which threatens 1,000 job losses and a move to Edinburgh? A cross-party group of politicians, including members of his own party, has written to him, but he has ignored that. As his swansong, will he come to Livingston and save those jobs?

David Mundell: As the hon. Lady knows, I have set out clearly, in correspondence with all who have been in touch with me, the rationale for the move and the changes in the arrangements for HMRC. Many of those changes were called for by Members on both sides of the House on the grounds of efficiency and effectiveness, but obviously no Members like to see significant changes in employment patterns in their constituencies, and I commend the hon. Lady for the way in which she has pursued the issue.

Leaving the EU: Private Sector

5. **Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con):** What discussions he has had with Scottish businesses on opportunities for the private sector after the UK leaves the EU. [909645]

7. **Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con):** What discussions he has had with Scottish businesses on opportunities for the private sector after the UK leaves the EU. [909647]

The Minister for Trade and Investment (Greg Hands): The UK Government's plan for Britain is intended to help businesses throughout the United Kingdom to trade beyond Europe, and to make Britain a leading advocate for free trade all over the world. Scotland Office Ministers have held more than 70 meetings with businesses across Scotland since last summer's referendum, and only last month my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State for International Trade was in Glasgow to meet innovative Scottish businesses that are trading with the world.

Dr Davies: What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to support international trade and investment in the devolved nations?

Greg Hands: We in the Department for International Trade are clear about the fact that ours is a Department for the whole United Kingdom. All our services are accessible to companies in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, including the GREAT campaign and its portal GREAT.gov.uk, and the Tradeshow Access Programme. In recent months, there have been major announcements about more overseas investment in all parts of the UK.

Mrs Murray: Will my right hon. Friend tell us his view of the damage that would be caused to Scottish business if Scotland left the United Kingdom?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. If Scotland were to leave the UK, the potential damage to Scottish business and Scottish trade would be huge. The Scottish Government's own figures show that 64% of goods and services leaving Scotland go to the UK, whereas only 15% go to the rest of the EU. That is £49.8 billion versus £12.3 billion.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): What assessment has the Minister made of Scotland's contribution to the EU single market?

Greg Hands: I think the hon. Gentleman is missing the point. The point, surely, is the centrality and importance of the UK single market as we go forward from here. I will give the House the figures again: £49.8 billion goes to the rest of the UK; only £12.3 billion goes to the EU. It is clear that the Union that matters most is the United Kingdom.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Secretary of State has said previously that he supports the European single market and that being part of the single market is clearly the best possible deal for Scotland. Will he tell his constituents whether he will now stand on a manifesto to take Scotland out of that single market?

Greg Hands: The Prime Minister and the whole Government are absolutely clear about the fact that our objective is to secure a comprehensive free trade agreement with the European Union as we leave the EU. That will be in the best interests of all parts of the UK, including Scotland.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the opportunities for increasing whisky exports across the world as part of a free trade agreement once we leave the European Union? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman was asking about whisky exports; let us hear the Minister.

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Whisky is a vital part of our export mix: whisky exports reached £3.999 billion in 2016—a big increase—and whisky has been at the heart of quite a few of our trade missions. Notably, when the Secretary of State for International Trade, the Prime Minister and I visited India in November, we took with us the Scotch Whisky Association, and we have seen big increases in exports to India.

Mr Speaker: It is useful to have a bit of information, I find.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Former Prime Minister David Cameron promised he would not resign if he lost the EU referendum; he reneged on that promise within hours. The current Prime Minister said on seven occasions that she would not call an early election; she reneged on that promise yesterday. Will the Minister, answering on behalf of the Secretary of State, give him the chance to break the mould and renew the commitment given to this House on at least three occasions that whatever support is put in place for businesses in the north-east like Nissan will be put in place for Scotland?

Greg Hands: We have been absolutely clear that our support for Nissan and the rest of the automotive sector will be enduring. That is the most important point, and I am sure it will be an important point in the general election campaign. I look forward to the Conservatives being competitive in the north-east in this coming general election, and we look forward to taking the fight to the official Opposition there.

Mr Anderson: The question was whether the Secretary of State will renew the promise given to Scotland that it would have the same deal, and, if he will, will he tell the people in the oil and gas supply chain, given the report from Robert Gordon University which last week found that Brexit would cost them £200 million, that that money will be sorted and they will be looked after in the same way as Nissan—or will he ignore that and break another promise?

Greg Hands: I am certainly glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised the question of oil and gas in Scotland: I know that he and I will agree that what would be most disastrous for the Scottish economy, including the oil and gas sector, would be Scottish separation, leading to an overnight budget deficit of around 9% of GDP. That would be a disaster.

UK Single Market

6. **David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of the UK single market to Scotland. [909646]

9. **Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of the UK single market to Scotland. [909649]

10. **Stuart Andrew** (Pudsey) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of the UK single market to Scotland. [909650]

11. **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of the UK single market to Scotland. [909651]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Sales from Scotland to the rest of the UK are now worth nearly £50 billion, an increase of over 70% since 2002 and four times the value of exports from Scotland to the EU. There is no doubt that the United Kingdom is the vital Union for Scotland.

David Warburton: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best deal for Scotland is to stay part of the United Kingdom and to work with the UK Government to do all it can to support a new free trade agreement with the EU?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

Mr Nigel Evans: The International Monetary Fund predicted dire consequences for the UK economy if we voted Brexit, yet it upgraded our growth yesterday, for the second time in three months, to 2%. Much of the confidence about the growth in the UK economy is deserved under the leadership of our Prime Minister. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when people look to buy British, as a quality marque “made in Scotland” is very important?

David Mundell: Yes.

Stuart Andrew: My constituency has a long and proud tradition of textile companies, many of which trade with all parts of the United Kingdom. How will those companies be helped by Scotland leaving the hugely successful UK single market?

David Mundell: Obviously, they will not, because, as my hon. Friend will know, in 2015 Scotland exported £49.8 billion to the rest of the UK, four times more than exports to the EU and three times greater than sales to the rest of the world.

Alberto Costa: The benefits to Scotland of full access to the UK market are clear. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Scottish representation in this Parliament must focus on what benefits the whole of the UK single market?

David Mundell: Absolutely. That is why I can confirm to my hon. Friend that when Ruth Davidson and the Scottish Conservatives go into the general election, it will be on the basis of keeping Scotland at the heart of our United Kingdom.

12. [909652] **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Seventy-five per cent. of Canada’s exports go to the US, whereas only 63% of Scotland’s exports go to the rest of the UK. Canada is a successful, independent country. Does the Secretary of State agree that neighbouring countries can have close trading relations while still maintaining their sovereignty?

David Mundell: Of course countries can have close trading relationships, but Scotland benefits from being part of the United Kingdom because there are no barriers to trade, and there is freedom of movement

between Scotland and the rest of the UK. That is good for Scottish business and the hon. Lady should support it.

15. [909655] **Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): The value of Scottish exports of food and drink has doubled in the past 10 years, to £5.5 billion in 2016. This week, the chief executive of Scotland Food and Drink, James Withers, said that he was afraid that the consequences of leaving the European Union without a trade deal would result in tariffs. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the Scottish food and drink sector will not have to deal with such a situation?

David Mundell: From my discussions with the Scottish food and drink industry, I understand that its greatest concern is that the Scottish National party would seek to drag Scotland out of the United Kingdom.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State stand by his comments last year, when he said:

“My role is to ensure Scotland gets the best possible deal and that deal involves clearly being part of the single market”?

Will he be honest with his constituents in a few weeks’ time? Will they be voting for an MP who supports being in the single market, or for one who wants to go along with a damaging hard Brexit, whatever the cost to families and businesses in his constituency?

David Mundell: When I contest my constituency in the next general election, I look forward to knowing exactly what the SNP position is on the EU. Is it for taking Scotland back into the EU, or is it not? I hope we will find out in the next six weeks.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Tories’ strategy worked a treat against the Liberal Democrats in the south-west of England at the last election. Will the Secretary of State be urging his colleagues to export that strategy to Scotland in the coming election?

David Mundell: Ruth Davidson has already made it absolutely clear that her stance in the forthcoming general election will be to stand up for Scotland’s membership of the United Kingdom and against a divisive second independence referendum.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [909674] **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 19 April.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that Members across the House will wish to join me in offering our condolences to the families and friends of Andreea Christie, who died following the London attack, and of Chris Bevington, who was among those killed in the terrorist attack in Sweden. Our thoughts are also with the family and friends of Hannah Bladon, who was murdered in Jerusalem last week.

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

Alberto Costa: I would also like to join the Prime Minister in offering the condolences of the people of South Leicestershire and myself to the families of those individuals.

Strong countries need strong economies. Strong countries need strong defences. Strong countries need strong leaders. As the nation prepares to go to the polls, who else in this House, apart from my right hon. Friend, can provide the leadership that is needed at this time?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are three things that a country needs: a strong economy, strong defence, and strong, stable leadership. That is what our plans for Brexit and our plans for a stronger Britain will deliver. That is what the Conservative party will be offering at this election, and we will be out there fighting for every vote. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) would bankrupt our economy and weaken our defences and is simply not fit to lead.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I concur with the condolences that the Prime Minister just sent to the families of the three people who so sadly and needlessly died. It is important that we recognise that as a cross-party proposal today, and I thank the Prime Minister for it.

We welcome the general election, but this is a Prime Minister who promised that there would not be one—a Prime Minister who cannot be trusted. She says that it is about leadership, yet she refuses to defend her record in television debates. It is not hard to see why. The Prime Minister says that we have a stronger economy, yet she cannot explain why people's wages are lower today than they were 10 years ago or why more households are in debt. Six million people are earning less than the living wage, child poverty is up, and pensioner poverty is up. Why are so many people getting poorer?

The Prime Minister: I point out to the right hon. Gentleman that I have been answering his questions and debating these matters every Wednesday that Parliament has been sitting since I became Prime Minister. I will be taking out to the country in this campaign a proud record of a Conservative Government: a stronger economy, with the deficit nearly two thirds down, a tax cut for 30 million people, with 4 million people taken out of income tax altogether, record levels of employment, and £1,250 more a year for pensioners. That is a record we can proud of.

Jeremy Corbyn: If the Prime Minister is so proud of her record, why will she not debate it? Wages are falling and more children are in poverty. Page 28 of the Tories' last manifesto said:

“We will work to eliminate child poverty”.

They only eliminated the child poverty target, not child poverty. In 2010, they promised to eradicate the deficit by 2015. In 2015, they promised to eradicate the deficit by 2020. Austerity has failed, so does the Prime Minister know by which year the deficit will now be eradicated?

The Prime Minister: I know that it has taken the right hon. Gentleman a little time to get the hang of Prime Minister's questions, but he stands up week in, week out and asks me questions and I respond to those questions. With a stronger—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Leader of the Opposition must be heard, and the Prime Minister must be heard.

The Prime Minister: We have a stronger economy, with the deficit two thirds down, but people will have a real choice at this election. They will have a choice between a Conservative Government who have shown that we can build a stronger economy and a Labour party with an economic policy that would bankrupt this country. What voters know is that under Labour it is ordinary working people who pay the price of the Labour party. They pay it with their taxes, they pay it with their jobs, and they pay it with their children's futures.

Jeremy Corbyn: Only this year the new Chancellor pledged to eradicate the deficit by 2022. I admire Tory consistency: it is always five years in the future. Another Tory broken promise.

The Prime Minister leads a Government who have increased national debt by £700 billion, more than every Labour Government in history put together. Debt has risen every year they have been in office. We know their economic plan was long term. Does she want to tell us how far into the long term it will be before we get the debt falling?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman stands up and talks about debt. This is a Labour party that will be going into the election pledged to borrow an extra £500 billion. What does that mean for ordinary working people? Well, I will tell him what it means. We know what Labour's plans would entail because we have been told by the former Labour shadow Chancellor. He said that if Labour were in power,

“you'd have to double income tax, double National Insurance, double council tax and you'd have to double VAT as well.”

That is Labour's plan for the economy.

Jeremy Corbyn: All her Government have delivered is more debt and less funding for schools and hospitals. Schools funding is being cut for the first time in a generation. The Prime Minister is cutting £3 billion a year from school budgets by 2020. She says that the Government have created a stronger economy, so why are there tax giveaways to the richest corporations while our children's schools are starved of the resources they need to educate our children for the future?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about levels of funding for schools and the NHS. There are record levels of funding going into schools and record levels of funding going into the NHS, but let us just talk about schools. It is not just a question of funding; it is actually a question of the quality of education provided in schools. Some 1.8 million more children are in good or outstanding schools under this Conservative Government, which is 1.8 million more children with a better chance for their future. What

would Labour give us? It would be the same old one-size-fits-all, local authority-run schools: “No choice, good or bad, trust your luck.” We do not trust to luck, and we will not trust the Labour party. We will provide a good school place for every child.

Jeremy Corbyn: Many parents taking their children back to school for the summer term will receive a letter begging for funds to buy books and fund the school. The Conservative manifesto promised

“the amount of money following your child into school will be protected.”

It is not. It is another Tory broken promise.

For the first time in its history, NHS funding per patient will fall this year. The NHS has been put into an all-year-round crisis by this Government. Why are more people waiting in pain, with millions of elderly people not getting the care and dignity they deserve?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of our record on the NHS. We saw more doctors, more nurses, more midwives, more general practitioners and more people being treated in our national health service last year than ever before, with record levels of funding going into our national health service. We can only do that with a strong economy. What do we know we would get from the Labour party? Bankruptcy and chaos.

Jeremy Corbyn: That is a very good reason for why we should have a debate about it, because it is another Tory broken promise. A broken promise of the Tory manifesto, which said that they would continue to “spend more on the NHS, in real terms”.

Say that to those waiting in A&E departments and to those who cannot leave hospital because social care is not available.

Is it not the truth that, over the last seven years, the Tories have broken every promise on living standards, the deficit, debt, the national health service and school funding? Why should anyone believe a word they say over the next seven weeks?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that I will be out campaigning and taking to voters the message of not only the record of this Conservative Government, but, crucially, of our plans to make Brexit a success and to build a stronger Britain for the future. Every vote for the Conservatives will make it harder for those who want to stop me getting the job done. Every vote for the Conservatives will make me stronger when I negotiate for Britain with the European Union. And every vote for the Conservatives will mean we can stick to our plan for a stronger Britain and take the right long-term decisions for a more secure future for this country.

Q2. [909675] **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): For years I have been campaigning for fairer funding in Wiltshire schools. Will the Prime Minister please reaffirm her commitment to this and to a review of the pupil premium to encompass other forms of key disadvantage, such as being a young carer, having mental health problems and dealing with bereavement? In this way, we can create a country that will work for everyone.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and I know she has campaigned long and hard in her constituency and worked hard for her constituents on this and other issues. We want to ensure that young people, irrespective of their background, have the opportunity to make the most of their talents, and the point of our reforms is to try to end the postcode lottery in school funding and to support our plan for a fairer society, where success is based on merit and not on privilege. She refers to the pupil premium, and that is of course worth £2.5 billion a year. It is an important part of our policy because it gives schools extra support for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, but I think it is right that schools are best placed to prioritise the needs of their pupils and can use their funding to ensure that they are supporting any pupil facing disadvantage, financial or otherwise.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I join in the condolences extended by the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour party?

The tone and content of democratic debates, including in a general election, are very important to all of us, so does the Prime Minister agree that political opponents are not “saboteurs”, and that all elected mainstream parties and parliamentarians have a mandate and that that should be respected?

The Prime Minister: In this House and in this Parliament it is right that we have proper debate and scrutiny of proposals put forward by the Government, and that arguments on both sides of the House are rightly challenged and those discussions take place. But I say to the right hon. Gentleman that what the British people—what the people of the United Kingdom—voted for last year was for the UK to leave the European Union. We have set that process in motion; there is no turning back. It is clear from statements made by the Scottish nationalists and others that they want to use this House to try to frustrate that process. I will be asking the British people for a mandate to complete Brexit and to make a success of it.

Angus Robertson: It is disappointing that the Prime Minister did not take the opportunity to condemn intemperate language in describing other democratic politicians as—[*Interruption.*] There is heckling from the Government side, and I think the Prime Minister should take the opportunity to underline something that we should all agree on: that describing people in the way we have seen them described in some daily newspapers by some leading politicians is not acceptable.

Most people know that the reason we are having a general election is because of the woeful state of the Labour party. If the Prime Minister is so confident that her hard Brexit, pro-austerity, anti-immigration case is right, she should debate it with Opposition leaders during the campaign. We look forward to the straight fight between the Scottish National party and the Tories. Will the Prime Minister tell the people why she is running scared of a televised debate with Nicola Sturgeon?

The Prime Minister: First, may I say to the right hon. Gentleman that one of the crucial things we have in this country that underpins our democracy is a free press? I believe that is important and I believe that people in this Chamber should stand up for the freedom of the press.

As to the TV debates, I can assure him that I will be out there campaigning in every part of the United Kingdom, taking out there our proud record of a Conservative Government who have delivered for every part of the United Kingdom.

I might also suggest to the Scottish nationalists that now is the time for them to put aside—*[Interruption.]* Wait for it: now is the time for them to put aside their tunnel vision on independence and actually explain to the Scottish people why the SNP Government are not putting as much money into the health service as they have been given from the UK, they are not exercising the powers they have been given and Scottish education is getting worse. It is time they got back to the day job.

Q4. [909677] **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): I too welcome the announcement from the Prime Minister yesterday, and I look forward to the general election and to taking my positive message to my constituents in Cheadle in June. Over the past two years, I have pressed for first-class transport infrastructure for Cheadle, and this week I launched my transport survey so my constituents can have their say on what is needed to keep Cheadle moving and be at the heart of the northern powerhouse. Does my right hon. Friend agree that residents in Cheadle need to vote Conservative on 8 June to ensure that we get continued investment in transport and infrastructure, not only in Cheadle but across the north-west?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on that point. I know she has been working very hard for her constituents in Cheadle on transport and other issues. Of course, it is under this Government that the Department for Transport is investing £290 million to improve transport links to Manchester airport through Cheadle, and £2.1 million has been committed to improving walking and cycling routes around the Cheadle Hulme district centre. That is why the choice is so clear. As my hon. Friend says, if she wants to see that funding for infrastructure, we need a strong economy, which only the Conservatives can deliver.

Q3. [909676] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Because of the Prime Minister's changes to education funding, every school in the country will face real-terms cuts. Manchester will be hit harder than anywhere outside London—*[Interruption.]* It's true. Chorlton High School and Parris Wood High School in my constituency will each lose the equivalent of more than 30 teachers. I ask the Prime Minister the same question a headteacher asked me: what would she cut to balance the books and from what subjects would she choose to sack teachers?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, record levels of funding are going into our schools. Everybody across this House has recognised for many years that the current funding formula is not fair across the country, and it is necessary for us to look for a fairer funding formula. We have consulted on that and will obviously be responding to that consultation. As the hon. Gentleman faces up to the election, I note that last year he failed to back—he opposed—the leader of his party. If the hon. Gentleman was not willing to support him as leader of his party then, why should his voters support him as leader of the country?

Q6. [909679] **David Mackintosh** (Northampton South) (Con): The only way to fund crucial infrastructure is with a strong economy. To that end, does my right hon. Friend agree that the St James Mill link road in Northampton would help with traffic flow in the town and unlock development in the enterprise zone? Will the next Conservative Government continue to support me, as the MP, in backing the scheme?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to have a strong economy if we are to be able to fund that crucial infrastructure. That is why, since 2015, we have increased our annual investment in economic infrastructure by almost 60% to £22 billion per year by 2021, including £2.6 billion for improvements in transport projects. I am happy to see the link road proposal being put forward by his local enterprise partnership; it will improve access to business and unlock development in the area. My hon. Friend has worked hard to see it happen, and I am sure he will continue to campaign on issues like that which matter so much to his constituents.

Q5. [909678] **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Recent changes to housing benefit entitlement for 18 to 21-year-olds will affect 195 young people in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. The Government are constantly challenging young people to train and leave benefits for the world of work, but homelessness charities such as Llamau are concerned that the changes will be a major barrier to learning and training for youngsters who do not have a safe and secure environment at home. Does the Prime Minister agree that we should be doing everything we can to help young people in the job market, including by offering financial support for housing? Will she pledge to strengthen the guidelines so that no more young people risk falling through the net and ending up on the streets?

The Prime Minister: The principle behind the changing of housing benefit is the right one, which is to say that it is only fair that people are not able to make decisions when they are on benefit that they would not be able to make if they are actually in work. However, it is right that we ensure that those young people who have a particular difficulty with staying at home are supported through the system, which is why significant exemptions are in place. We recognise that need and have taken it on board.

Mr Speaker: The next question is a closed question.

Kettering

Q8. [909681] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If she will visit Kettering constituency.

The Prime Minister: I would be happy to visit the Kettering constituency in the future if my diary allows. In fact, I suspect that I will be visiting quite a few constituencies across the country in the next few weeks.

Mr Hollobone: Life for ordinary working families is harder than many people at Westminster realise: "You have a job, but not necessarily job security. You are just about managing, but you are worried about the cost of living and getting your kids into a good school. You are

doing your best, and a Conservative Government will do all it can to make sure that you have more control over your life.” These were the inspiring words of the Prime Minister when she took office last July. Will she come to Kettering, Britain’s most average town, and repeat these, her core beliefs? If she does so, I know she will be warmly and widely acclaimed as the Prime Minister this country needs for the next five years.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight ordinary working families who do rely on the Government to provide stability and certainty for them, and that is what this Conservative Government have done. Looking at what we have done, we see that we have supported jobs through significant new investment in skills, we have invested in public services such as childcare and the NHS, and we have enhanced consumer protections. I am happy to repeat the words that I said outside Downing Street on 13 July last year, but it is Conservatives in government who have delivered strong and stable leadership, and that is the message I will be taking out to the country during this election.

Engagements

Q7. [909680] **Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister support the people of Darlington who oppose the downgrading of their A&E and maternity services? They want an answer they can trust, Prime Minister. Is it yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The proposals for the configuration of health services in local areas is a matter that is being determined by local commissions in the best interests of services in the local area.

I am interested that the hon. Lady refers to the views of her constituents in Darlington. She has said of the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of her party:

“My constituents in Darlington have made it clear to me that they cannot support the Labour party under your leadership.”

How can they possibly support him as leader of the country?

Q9. [909682] **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): May I welcome the fact that, because the Conservatives have managed the economy so well, there is record school funding this year? East Sussex, for example, has some of the best performing schools in the country, and they are set to receive an increase of 3%. However, in Lewes, in my constituency, many of my small rural primary schools are set to see a reduction. Will the Prime Minister guarantee that she will look at the issue of rural primary school funding so that we can even out the distribution of money?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the record levels of funding that are going into schools. It is also the case, as I said earlier, that over the years there has been a general acceptance across this House that the current system of funding is not fair in certain parts of the country. That is why we want to end that postcode lottery and look at a system that is fairer and more up to date and that will support our plan for a society where progress is based on merit and not on privilege. I am very happy to look at her concerns. I recognise that small rural schools have particular

issues, and I am happy to look at them to ensure that we get the funding formula right and that we can spread the money as fairly as possible.

Q13. [909686] **Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Every school in Hyndburn is facing a massive budget cut. Why is a child in Hyndburn worth less than a child in Tory heartlands in the south?

The Prime Minister: Currently, significant sums of money are going to children in certain schools, sometimes double the amount going to a child in another school. We need to find a fairer system. We have consulted on that system and we will be responding to that consultation.

I note what the hon. Gentleman has said about the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of his party. He said:

“He’s not fit to rule. The public see this is a man who doesn’t take responsibility seriously and that he can’t take the party forward other than in a divisive way.”

If he cannot take the party forward, how can he hope to take the country forward?

Q10. [909683] **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): Small businesses provide the lion’s share of jobs in Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly. The difficulties of attracting credit, rising operational costs and red tape make running a small business an increasingly difficult task. What can my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister do to help small businesses so that they can continue to be the engine of rural economies like West Cornwall’s?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that small businesses are the engine of the economy. I know that he has been a champion of small businesses in his constituency. He recognises that if we are to ensure that we can create those jobs, we have to encourage small businesses. That is why in the Budget my right hon. Friend the Chancellor provided £435 million to support businesses in England facing the steepest business rate increases, why we will cut business rates by nearly £9 billion over the next five years, and why we have listened to small businesses and given more than 3 million of them an extra year to prepare for Making Tax Digital. I recognise the importance of small businesses in Cornwall, and I look forward to visiting in the next few weeks and being able to talk my hon. Friend and others about the importance of small businesses in the county.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I join the Prime Minister in the expressions of condolence that she led earlier.

This election can change the direction of our country, from the consequences of a potential hard Brexit outside the single market to the future of our NHS and social care, our schools and our environment. The British public deserve to hear the party leaders set out their plans and debate them publicly, but the Prime Minister has refused to take part in televised leaders debates. Back in 1992, when she and I were both candidates, we debated publicly, forcefully and amicably. Indeed, she called out the then incumbent for not showing up for some of those debates. Why will she not debate those issues publicly now? What is she scared of?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will be debating these issues publicly across the country, as will every single member of the Conservative team. We will be taking out there the proud record of a Conservative Government, but, more than that, we will be taking our plans for the future of this country, for making Brexit a success and delivering a stronger Britain. He talks about the possibility of changing the future of this country. What do we know that the leader of the Labour party, the leader of the Liberal Democrats and the leader of the Scottish nationalists have in common? Corbyn, Farron and Sturgeon want to unite together to divide our country, and we will not let them do it.

Q11. [909684] **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): The Government wish to pursue a national industrial strategy. Cumbria has some specific strengths, such as tourism, agriculture and nuclear, but it also has some weaknesses. Will the Prime Minister agree that any industrial strategy in the next Parliament must take into account regional and sub-regional factors, and will she be receptive to a Cumbrian industrial strategy that works within a national one?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend points to a very important part of our plans for a stronger Britain for the future, which is the modern industrial strategy that we are developing, because we want an economy that works for everyone, delivers good, high-skilled, high-paid jobs and creates conditions for competitive world-leading businesses to prosper here in the United Kingdom. But he is right to say that as we look at that industrial strategy we also need to look at particular factors in particular parts of the country. He has long been a champion not just for Carlisle but for Cumbria. I recognise the need, as does the Business Department, to tailor the industrial strategy according to the needs of particular areas of the country.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister yesterday said that she was calling a general election because Parliament was blocking Brexit, but three quarters of MPs and two thirds of the Lords voted for article 50, so that is not true, is it? A month ago, she told her official spokesman to rule out an early general election, and that was not true either, was it? She wants us to believe that she is a woman of her word. Isn't the truth that we cannot believe a single word she says? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is rather over-excited. The question has been heard. The answer will be heard.

The Prime Minister: This House and this Parliament voted to trigger article 50, but the Labour party made it clear that it was thinking of voting against the final deal, the Scottish nationalists have said that they will vote against the legislation necessary to leave the European Union, the Liberal Democrats say that they are going to grind government to a standstill, and the House of Lords has threatened to stop us every inch of the way. I think it is right now to ask the British people to put their trust in me and the Conservative party to deliver on their vote last year—a Brexit plan that will make a success for this country and deliver a stronger, fairer, global Britain in the future.

Q12. [909685] **Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I have seen rats and fly-tipping as a result of bins not having been emptied for up to three weeks across Lib Dem-run Sutton following a shambolic change to refuse collections. [*Interruption.*] When bin collections get into the national headlines, you know something has gone wrong. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in accepting greater delegated powers, elected councillors must consult residents properly, plan major changes carefully and take full responsibility as accountable representatives when things go wrong?

The Prime Minister: I do not know why there are howls of derision from the Opposition Benches, because my hon. Friend raises an important point about an issue that actually matters to people up and down the country. It is our goal to reduce littering and litter in England to ensure that our high streets, villages and parks are the cleanest and most pleasant places that they can be. We have published the first ever national litter strategy for England, and we are supporting comprehensive and frequent bin collections. But what my hon. Friend says the Liberal Democrat-run Sutton Council is doing shows not only that the Liberal Democrats charge the highest council taxes, which we already knew, but that under the Liberal Democrats you pay more and get less.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister join the Scottish Government, North Ayrshire Council and all Ayrshire local authorities by today pledging to support the Ayrshire growth deal, which requires £350 million of targeted investment to regenerate Ayrshire and improve the lives and prospects of all its people?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, we have already shown our commitment to growth deals in Scotland with the deals that have already been agreed. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has met the Scottish Government to discuss the growth deal for Ayrshire. We are in discussions about that deal, but we have shown our commitment through the deals that have already been struck—for example, for Aberdeen.

Q14. [909687] **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): As part of Southend's celebrations as the alternative city of culture, stilt walkers will walk non-stop from Southend to No. 10 Downing Street on the morning of Monday 1 May to raise money for the Music Man Project to help people with learning difficulties, and for a charity for child refugees. Will my right hon. Friend arrange, on the morning of Tuesday 2 May, for someone on her behalf to receive the stilt walkers and accept from Southend's town crier the proclamation that in this, the 125th anniversary of the founding of the borough, Southend be declared a city?

The Prime Minister: When I first heard about the stilt walkers, I thought it sounded a bit of a tall order, but I am sure they will be making great strides as they approach Downing Street. I am pleased to hear what my hon. Friend says about the Southend celebrations, but also about the efforts that are being made to raise funds for very, very important causes. We will certainly look very carefully at what can be done in Downing Street when the stilt walkers arrive.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give a guarantee that no Tory MP who is under investigation by the police and the legal authorities over election expenses in the last general election will be a candidate in this election? If she will not accept that, this is the most squalid election campaign that has happened in my lifetime.

The Prime Minister: I stand by all the Conservative MPs who are in this House and who will be out there standing again, campaigning for a Conservative Government who will give a brighter and better future for this country.

Q15. [909688] **Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): I am proud that my party in government has ensured that in this country we fulfil our commitment to NATO to spend 2% of GDP on defence and our commitment to the UN to spend 0.7% of GNI on overseas aid. Will my right hon. Friend please commit the future Conservative Government to do the same?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Obviously we have committed to meet our NATO pledge of 2% of GDP being spent on defence every year of this decade. We are delivering on that. We have got a £36 billion defence budget that will rise to almost £40 billion by 2020-21—the biggest in Europe and second

largest in NATO. We are meeting our UN commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on overseas development assistance. I can assure him that we remain committed, as a Conservative party, to ensuring the defence and security of this country and to working for a stronger world.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Schools in Cheshire West and Chester were already underfunded by about £400 per pupil on average before the new national fair funding formula came in, and now every school in Chester is cutting staff and raising class sizes. That is how the Government have protected the education budget, so will the Prime Minister explain to the House why the national funding fair formula provides neither fairness nor funding?

The Prime Minister: As I have said in this Chamber before, we need to look at the funding formula. We have published proposals for fair funding, we have consulted on those proposals, and in due course the Government will respond to those proposals.

I was very interested to see the hon. Gentleman being interviewed yesterday and being asked whether he would put a photograph of the Leader of the Opposition on his election literature. Sadly, he said that the only photographs he wanted on his election literature were his own; he was not prepared to support the leader of his own party.

Child Maintenance (Assessment of Parents' Income)

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

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) is greatly encouraged by the interest in his ten-minute rule motion.

12.44 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to equalise the assessment and enforcement of child maintenance arrangements of children of self-employed parents with that of children of other employed parents; and for connected purposes.

I welcome the great interest and attendance of hon. Members for my Bill, but I feel somewhat like the filler in the Prime Minister's sandwich. I guess that hon. Members' attention will be focused on the next motion rather than on my Bill. However, many parents have waited all too long for fair child maintenance for their children, and they will not let a general election get in the way of their campaign. The campaign message at the heart of my Bill, to use the Prime Minister's parlance, is that we need a child maintenance service that works for everyone, not just for a privileged few. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Stop the clock, please. I appreciate the interest in other matters, but the subject matter of the hon. Gentleman's Bill is of very great importance to huge numbers of parents and children around the country. I think it is, to put it mildly, unseemly that while the hon. Gentleman is speaking to his Bill, there are a number of rather animated private conversations taking place, including those being conducted by normally immensely courteous Members of the House. If the House can settle down and listen to the eloquence of the hon. Gentleman, I think we will all be grateful for that.

Mr Burrowes: This is an issue of great importance and interest to the public. It is a cross-party issue, but it has been a Conservative cause since the Thatcher Government recognised the principle that all parents have a continued responsibility to contribute reasonably to their children's upkeep. When parents cannot agree about a child's maintenance, the state steps in to protect the child's interests. It is there for parents who are in need of child maintenance and have nowhere else to turn. As such, it must cater for all children, including those whose parents are self-employed and who have complex financial affairs.

My interest in this issue has arisen from the case of my constituent Elizabeth, who is in attendance today, as well as those of four equally brave and determined women whom my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) refers to as her supermums. Similarly like-minded, brave and determined women will have come to the surgeries of other hon. Members.

Elizabeth, Melissa, Jo-Anne, Sue and Kate have for years relentlessly pursued their cases with the Child Support Agency, and they could write the textbook on how non-resident parents can easily evade the system by claiming self-employment. The ability to challenge

on the grounds of assets or "lifestyle incompatible with earnings" that existed in the CSA system has been removed from the replacement Child Maintenance Service process. Those flaws have led me to introduce this Bill, and they have encouraged my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire and the Select Committee on Work and Pensions to hold an inquiry into the CMS; that inquiry is due to report imminently.

The fact of the matter is that a child whose non-resident parent is self-employed is at risk of being financially disadvantaged in comparison with a child whose non-resident parent is employed. Non-resident self-employed parents are being indulged by the CMS. The Government's defence against the charge of injustice is that closing the loopholes that make possible such child maintenance avoidance is "expensive and time-consuming".

However, the Government do not take such a relaxed attitude towards individuals who avoid paying their benefits or taxes. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has a 56,000-strong tax collecting department with an annual budget of more than £4 billion, but even with that money it fails to get a grip on non-resident parents who hide their income from the CMS by exploiting legal loopholes.

It is welcome that HMRC has beefed up its financial investigations unit to a 50-strong team. It is good that, as the Minister for Welfare Delivery, my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes)—she is here today to listen—told the Work and Pensions Committee, the team has the power to look at bank accounts and tax records and seek clarification when things

"just do not add up".

I do not believe that is good enough, however. Children should not be paying the price for the ongoing injustice of unpaid child maintenance. Unpaid maintenance is estimated to total £52.5 million, which means that more than half of eligible children do not receive anything at all. Elizabeth's son should not be paying the £40,000 price—that is what he is owed for more than six years of child maintenance—simply because his father has a clever accountant who can help to hide his assets in non-income-bearing accounts, businesses and property.

That maintenance liability would not have been uncovered without Elizabeth's determination in taking the case through to tribunal hearings under the old CSA system and in relying on the old rule, which allowed for an assets variation. The hearings eventually revealed that the other parent had assets to the value of some £800,000 from the sale of various businesses and from inheritance, and found that he could regularly pay CSA maintenance to support their teenage son.

Yet the problem my Bill seeks to resolve is that, under the 2012 CMS scheme, the same parent is held legitimately to have a nil child maintenance liability—it was £40,000, but it is now nil—based largely on gross taxable income figures provided by HMRC. I accept that this model works in the majority of straightforward cases, where a paying parent's sole income is from pay-as-you-earn employment. It works less well where the paying parent takes income in other forms, such as dividend or rental income. It does not work at all where the paying parent's living costs are met from income that does not show up at HMRC—for example, income from ISAs, or from venture capital trust fund dividends. There are also

some non-resident parents who do not support their lifestyle from income at all—they may have substantial assets, such as from capital gains or property transactions, but no apparent income—and such paying parents may have no child maintenance liability at all.

Parents are now left with a limited child maintenance support system that may be cheap and more efficient for simple cases, but for more complex cases is weak and leads to injustice. This injustice is compounded by the 2012 rules, which not only abolished the grounds for challenging assessments, but cut off the avenue for redress through the courts. The Government's response to my constituent Elizabeth was that the

“assets grounds for variation proved difficult to administer...and difficult for our clients to understand.”

However, what has proved difficult for my constituent Elizabeth is to obtain justice for the maintenance of her son, and what is difficult for her to understand is why the state has chosen to prioritise its own administrative convenience above the interests of her child.

The Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into this issue has heard evidence from parents about other non-resident parents whose lifestyles do not match their declared income. The CMS advised them to contact HMRC's fraud hotline, only for them to be left in limbo, because non-resident parents are not committing tax fraud, only avoiding child maintenance, which means that they can hide behind their self-employed status. They have organised their financial affairs in a tax-efficient manner by taking income in forms other than earnings, which are beyond the reach of the CMS. One mother told Mumsnet how the CMS advised her

“to ‘accept’ my £100 pcm payment from my ex as he was self-employed and it was the best I could hope for”.

That was regardless of her evidence that he was capable of paying more because he had a very successful business, multiple properties and, in her words,

“more physical assets than you can imagine.”

Fiona Weir, the chief executive of Gingerbread, which I commend, has said:

“Britain's child maintenance system is contributing to a culture where too many parents think it's optional, rather than obligatory, to pay their child's maintenance.”

It cannot be right—can it?—that a haulier can avoid paying child maintenance because his relevant tax return year removed his liability. Why was that? Because during that year he had bought a truck. The CMS should not allow the financial interests of a truck to come before a child. The state should not be an accessory to child maintenance avoidance. The Government rightly have their eye on the self-employed in wanting to make the tax system work for everyone, and they should include the child maintenance system in that.

My Bill will reform the CMS to correct its current failure to cater for the children of traders, company directors and those with financially complex affairs.

The variation ground previously available in the CSA scheme, whereby a notional income could be assumed where a paying parent's lifestyle was inconsistent with income, should be made available in the new CMS scheme. A new variation ground should be made available in the new scheme whereby a notional income at a fair rate of interest can be assumed from an asset or assets capable of producing a reasonable level of return, where a paying parent has chosen to forgo such income without good reason, bearing in mind their maintenance responsibilities for their children. My Bill will also grant the court jurisdiction where the non-resident parent has assets or a lifestyle inconsistent with income and the CMS is unable to determine, or incapable of determining, the child maintenance and support.

My Bill admittedly comes at the very end of this Parliament, but it may just help to prompt the publication of the Government's spring report setting out the conclusions of the 30-month review into the progress of the CMS and a statement on future policy. Back in 2012, the noble Lord Freud said that

“we will make clear our intentions, including a specific view on the position of the poorest parents.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 February 2012; Vol. 735, c. 778.]

No doubt that will include the impact on poor families of the £20 fee from which my Bill would seek to exempt them. Gingerbread, which has led the campaign on behalf of single-parent families, has found that child maintenance can lift a fifth of parents on low incomes out of poverty. The lack of child maintenance should be seen as another burning injustice for the Government to tackle.

Given the next motion, I appreciate that this Bill is probably the least likely ever to become law during its parliamentary Session. Some may think, “Well, what's the point? Sit down, and let's get on with the general election motion.” As my hon. Friends who are supporting the Bill know, however, there is every point in highlighting—on behalf of our constituents and, more importantly, their children—the unfairness of the present child maintenance system. If you will indulge me, Mr Speaker, let me make a bid for this issue to be in the Conservative manifesto, and let me make an early and most public bid for its inclusion in the next Queen's speech. Either way, I look forward to the return of a Conservative Government who will deliver social justice with an improved and fairer child maintenance system for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Mr David Burrowes, Heidi Allen, Suella Fernandes, Antoinette Sandbach, Mrs Cheryl Gillan, Dame Caroline Spelman, Stephen McPartland, Dr Tania Mathias, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Nusrat Ghani, Nigel Adams and Kit Malthouse present the Bill.

Mr David Burrowes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 May, and to be printed (Bill 169).

Early Parliamentary General Election

12.57 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I beg to move,

That there shall be an early parliamentary general election.

I rise to speak to the motion on the Order Paper in my name and those of my right hon. Friends. The motion confronts every member of this House with a clear and simple opportunity—a chance to vote for a general election that will secure the strong and stable leadership the country needs to see us through Brexit and beyond. It invites each one of us to do the right thing for Britain and to vote for an election that is in our country's national interest.

My priority when I became Prime Minister was to provide the country with economic certainty, a clear vision and strong leadership after the long and passionately fought referendum campaign. This Government have delivered on those priorities.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In the time-honoured fashion, my right hon. Friend has called this election in what she considers, and I consider, to be the national interest at this moment. It would be a brave man or woman who voted against this motion. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 is therefore seen to be an emperor without clothes—it serves no purpose, and many of us have questioned it for many years. Will the first line of our manifesto be to scrap it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend tries to tempt me down that road. What is clear is that the Fixed-term Parliaments Act gives us an opportunity, notwithstanding the fixed-term element of it, to have elections at another time, but it is of course for this House to vote for such an election. Like him, I think it is very clear that every Member of this House should be voting for this election.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will take one more intervention and then return to my speech.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Prime Minister pledged time and again not to call an early election. In her Easter message, she talked greatly of her Christian values, so will she explain why she has such a loose and complicated relationship with telling the truth?

The Prime Minister *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister is perfectly well able to fend for herself, but what the hon. Gentleman has said is a breach of order and I must ask him to withdraw it. He is versatile in the use of language—he used to pen articles for newspapers; he is a journalist—so withdraw, man, and use some other formulation if you must. At the very least, however, withdraw it.

Paul Farrelly: I am very happy to withdraw and reformulate what I said. Why does the Prime Minister have such a complicated and loose relationship with giving the country a clear indication of her intentions?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Gentleman that yesterday I gave the country a very clear indication of my intentions. If he has a little patience, he will hear the reasons why I did that.

As I was saying, the Government have delivered on the priorities that I set out last year. Despite predictions of immediate financial and economic danger, since the referendum we have seen consumer confidence remain high, record numbers of jobs and economic growth that has exceeded all expectations. At the same time, we have delivered on the mandate we were handed by the referendum result by triggering article 50 before the end of March, as we pledged to do. As a result, Britain is leaving the EU and there can be no turning back.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Does it not take some brass neck to call a general election when you are facing allegations of buying the last one?

The Prime Minister: That intervention was not worthy of the hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister just clarify for us whether she supports fixed-term Parliaments?

The Prime Minister: We have a Fixed-term Parliaments Act that enables us to have fixed-term Parliaments. I believe that at this point in time, it is right for us to have this debate and this vote in this House, and I believe that it is right for Members of this House to vote—I shall explain why—for us to have a general election at this stage.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will not take any further interventions for a while. This is a limited-time debate and hon. Members wish to make their contributions.

Today we face a new question: how best to secure the stability and certainty we need over the long term in order to get the right deal for Britain in the Brexit negotiations and make the most of the opportunities ahead. I have come to the conclusion that the answer to that question is to hold a general election now in this window of opportunity before the negotiations begin.

I believe it is in Britain's national interest to hold an election now. A general election is the best way to strengthen Britain's hand in the negotiations ahead. Securing the right deal for Britain is my priority and I am confident that we have the plan to do it. We have set out our ambition: a deep and special partnership between a strong and successful European Union and a United Kingdom that is free to chart its own way in the world. That means we will regain control of our own money, our own laws and our own borders, and we will be free to strike trade deals with old friends and new partners all around the world.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. I can understand that she wants to give the House the opportunity to determine whether there should be an election, but if the House determines that now is the time, why is it that the Prime Minister stands in the face of the Scottish

Parliament and the Scottish Government, which have voted for a referendum on Scotland's future? If it is right that the people here have a voice and a vote on the future of this country, why should not the Scottish people be given a vote as well?

The Prime Minister: Now is the time for a general election because it will strengthen our hand in the negotiations on Brexit. Now is not the time for a second Scottish independence referendum because it would weaken our hand in the negotiations on Brexit. Strength and unity with the Conservatives; division and weakness with the Scottish nationalists.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: I will just make a little more progress.

I believe that our plan for Brexit delivers on the will of the British people. It is the right approach for Britain and it will deliver a more secure future for our country and a better deal for all our people. But it is clear that other parties in this House have a different view about the right future for our country, while Members of the other place have vowed to fight the Government every step of the way.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): In the referendum, the people of Rossendale and Darwen gave my right hon. Friend and the Government a mandate to exercise article 50. She has done that and we are now grateful to have the opportunity to strengthen the Prime Minister's hand so that she can go out there and get the best possible deal for people who live in Rossendale and Darwen, manufacturers in Rossendale and Darwen, and every family in Rossendale and Darwen.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should be united in this Parliament in wanting to get the best possible deal not just for the country as a whole, but for everybody across the whole of this country. I commend him for the work that he has done in Rossendale and Darwen to support his constituents on this matter.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I will give way to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), and then I will make progress.

Andy Burnham: I can see how it suits the Prime Minister's purposes to make this election all about Brexit, but does she accept the possibility that it may just become a referendum on her brutal cuts, which have left older people without care, schools sending begging letters to parents and a record number of homeless people on the streets of Greater Manchester?

The Prime Minister: Of course when we come into the general election campaign, people will look at a wide range of issues. They will look at the fact that pensioners are £1,250 a year better off because of the actions of the Conservative Government. They will look at the fact that 1.8 million more children are in good or outstanding schools. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about impact on the economy, I suggest he

searches his memory for the time he spent as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, when Labour were trashing the economy of this country and leading us to virtual bankruptcy.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: No, I am going to make some progress.

I have set out the divisions that have become clear on this issue. They can and will be used against us, weakening our hand in the negotiations to come, and we must not let that happen. I believe that at this moment of enormous national significance, there should be unity here in Westminster, not division. That is why it is the right and responsible thing for all of us here today to vote for a general election, to make our respective cases to the country, and then to respect the result and the mandate it provides to give Britain the strongest possible hand in the negotiations to come.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In the last election, the Conservatives made a manifesto commitment to stay in the single market. Will the Prime Minister withdraw that commitment from the new manifesto and, if she does, will that not weaken her negotiating position, as well as removing two months from the negotiation window?

The Prime Minister: We gave a commitment in the last manifesto to provide the people of the United Kingdom with a vote on whether or not to leave the European Union. We gave them that vote, with the support of Parliament, and they gave a clear message that they want the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. That is exactly what we are going to do.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I fully support the fact that the Prime Minister needs a stronger hand going into the negotiations as we leave the European Union. Does she not think it perverse that some people who did not want a referendum in the first place now want a second referendum at the very end of the procedure, just in case the British Government do not get a good deal from Brussels? Does she not believe that if we were to have that second referendum, it would deeply weaken her position in the negotiations she will have with the European Union?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in his description of what would happen. Those who say that they want a second referendum would actually be denying the will of the people, because people voted for us to leave the European Union. We are going to go out there and get the best possible deal.

Waiting to hold the next election in 2020, as scheduled, would mean that the negotiations would reach their most difficult and sensitive stage just as an election was looming on the horizon. A general election will provide the country with five years of strong and stable leadership to see us through the negotiations and ensure we are able to go on to make a success of the result. That is crucial. That is the test. It is not solely about how we leave the European Union; it is what we do with the opportunity that Brexit provides that counts.

[The Prime Minister]

Leaving the EU offers us a unique, once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape a brighter future for Britain. We need the leadership provided by a strong and stable Government to seize it: a Government who have a plan for a stronger Britain, a Government with the determination to see it through, and a Government who will take the right long-term decisions to deliver a more secure future for Britain. The Conservative party I lead is determined to be that Government.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister at all concerned that, having tried her best to build a reputation for political integrity both as Home Secretary and Prime Minister, she is now seen, after all the denials that there would be a snap election, simply as a political opportunist?

The Prime Minister: I have not denied the fact that when I came into this role as Prime Minister, I was clear that what the country needed was stability and a Government who would show that they would deliver on the vote people had made in the referendum on leaving the EU. We have provided that over the last nine months. Now it is clear to me that if we are to have the strongest possible hand in the negotiation, we should have an election now. As I have just said, leaving the election to 2020 would mean that we would be coming to the most sensitive and critical part of the negotiations in the run-up to a general election. That would be in nobody's interests.

I have said that the Conservative party I lead is determined to be that Government who have the determination to see through our plan for a stronger Britain. We are determined to provide that leadership, and determined to bring stability to the United Kingdom for the long term. That is what the election will be about: leadership and stability.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister, like me, appreciate decisiveness? Does she agree that voting yes to the motion signifies strength, whereas abstaining is a symbol of weakness?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely: voting yes is a sign of strength, but I would say a little more about abstaining. Anybody who abstains and thinks we should not have a general election is presumably endorsing the record of the Conservative Government, so we are happy both ways.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree with Lord Hill, who was a European Commissioner? When asked by the Foreign Affairs Committee what was the best strategy for negotiation, his response was that we have to come together, because our interlocutors will be watching this place and will exploit any weakness in our political system.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I am grateful to him for reminding us what Lord Hill, with his experience, said. It is important that we come together, that we do not show the divisions that have been suggested in the past, and that we are able to show a strong mandate for a plan for Brexit and for making a success of it.

We are determined to bring stability to the United Kingdom for the long term. That is what this election will be about: leadership and stability. The decision facing the country will be clear. I will be campaigning for strong and stable leadership in the national interest with me as Prime Minister. I will be asking for the public's support to continue to deliver my plan for a stronger Britain, to lead the country through the next five years, and to give the country the certainty and stability that we need.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On the timetable before yesterday, the Prime Minister would have concluded her negotiation by 2019. We would have gone into the general election in 2020, a year later, talking about her deal. That would have given the country an outlook as to what it would be voting for. She is asking the country to strengthen her hand, but does she agree that she is asking the country to vote for a blank cheque?

The Prime Minister: No, I am not asking the country to write a blank cheque. We have been very clear about what we intend in terms of the outcome of the negotiations. I set that out in my Lancaster House speech in January, it has been set out in the White Paper, and it was set out in the letter we submitted to the President of the European Council to trigger article 50.

The choice before the House today is clear. I have made my choice to do something that runs through the veins of my party more than any other. It is a choice to trust the people, so let us vote to do that today; let us lay out our plans for Brexit; let us put forth our plans for the future of this great country; let us put our fate in the hands of the people; and then let the people decide.

1.13 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): We welcome the opportunity of a general election because it gives the British people the chance to vote for a Labour Government who will put the interests of the majority first. The Prime Minister says she has only recently and reluctantly decided to go for a snap election. Just four weeks ago, her spokesperson said

"there isn't going to be an early general election".

How can any voter trust what the Prime Minister says?

Britain is being held back by the Prime Minister's Government. She talks about a strong economy, but the truth is that most people are worse off than they were when the Conservatives came to power seven years ago. The election gives the British people the chance to change direction. This election is about her Government's failure to rebuild the economy and living standards for the majority; it is about the crisis into which her Government have plunged our national health service; and it is about the cuts to our children's schools, which will limit the chances of every child in Britain, 4 million of whom now live in poverty. It is a chance of an alternative to raise living standards. More and more people do not have security in their work or their housing.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab) *rose—*

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Jeremy Corbyn: I give way to my Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent.

Hon. Members: Which one?

Gareth Snell: I try not to take it personally that, having arrived so recently, the Prime Minister is that desperate to get rid of me that she is calling an election.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister, in calling this election, has essentially said that she does not have confidence in her own Government to deliver a Brexit deal for Britain? One way in which she could secure my vote and the votes of my hon. Friends is to table a motion of no confidence in her Government, which I would happily vote for.

Jeremy Corbyn: I congratulate my Friend on his election to the House and on his work. I agree with him: I have no confidence in this Government either.

Robert Flello: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: In the interests of unity in Stoke-on-Trent, what else can I do?

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Don't forget that there are five towns.

Robert Flello: Six.

My right hon. Friend highlighted the fact that the Prime Minister for 12 months dithered over whether she wanted an election, and all the time said that she did not want one, but is not the reality that her mind was focused by the fact that she may well lose some of her Back Benchers if the Crown Prosecution Service has its way?

Jeremy Corbyn: The timing of the election and the role of the CPS is extremely interesting, and it is interesting that the Prime Minister did not mention it in her contribution.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition talks about trust in leaders. What trust can the public put in a leader who has no confidence from his parliamentary colleagues, and who is put in place not by people inside Parliament, but people outside?

Jeremy Corbyn: I was elected leader of my party by 300,000 votes. I do not know how many people voted for the Prime Minister to be leader of her party. I suspect it was none whatsoever.

To the 6 million people working in jobs that pay less than the living wage, I simply say this: it does not have to be like this. Labour believes that every job should pay a wage people can live on, and that every worker should have decent rights at work. To the millions of people who cannot afford a home of their own, or who have spent years waiting for a council home, I say that this is their chance to vote for the home their family deserves. Labour Members believe that a housing policy should provide homes for all, and not investment opportunities for a few. To the millions of small businesses fed up with the red tape of quarterly reporting, hikes in business rates and broken promises on national insurance, I say

that this is their chance to vote for a Government who invest and who support wealth creators, not just the wealth extractors.

The Prime Minister says that she has called the election so that the Government can negotiate Brexit. We had a referendum that established that mandate. Parliament has voted to accept that result. There is no obstacle to the Government negotiating, but instead of getting on with the job, she is painting herself as the prisoner of the Lib Dems, who have apparently threatened to grind government to a standstill. There are nine of them and they managed to vote three different ways on article 50, so it is obviously a very serious threat. The Tories want to use Brexit to turn us into a low-wage tax haven. Labour will use Brexit to invest in every part of this country to create a high-wage, high-skill economy in which everyone shares the rewards.

The Prime Minister says this campaign will be about leadership, so let us have a head-to-head TV debate about the future of our country. Why has she rejected that request? Labour offers a better future. We want richer lives for all, not a country run for the rich.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for—

Mr Speaker: Order. Is the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) giving way? [*Interruption.*] No, he has finished. [*Interruption.*] Order. I have known the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for more than 30 years, since we stood against each other in a student election. He is not going to take it personally, but the right hon. Member for Islington North has finished his speech. [*Interruption.*] If the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford wants to raise a point of order, I will hear it with courtesy.

Mr Francois: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is that it?

Mr Speaker: It is very generous of the right hon. Gentleman to seek to invest me with additional powers, but the question of whether it is "it", as he puts it, is a matter not for me but for the right hon. Member for Islington North, and he has completed his contribution.

1.21 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I accept entirely the logic laid out by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in her statement yesterday in Downing Street. I reached that conclusion somewhat earlier, but I did not believe it was possible to deliver. Indeed, I found myself discombobulated by a reversal in Government policy for the second time in a few weeks, having told the readers of the *Forest Journal* in terms that there was no question of there being an early general election, because it was not in the Prime Minister's gift to deliver it. Because of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, that decision lies with a two-thirds majority of the Members of the House of Commons and, as I told those readers with absolute confidence, turkeys will not vote for Christmas. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on having achieved the impossible and secured the fact that today those turkeys will indeed vote for that.

[Sir Desmond Swayne]

I first reached the opinion that an election was necessary during the passage of the article 50 Bill. Opposition Member after Opposition Member got up to announce their recantation that, notwithstanding having voted to remain, they were now going to abide by the will of their constituents. Yet at every opportunity they cheered to the rafters those few who spoke out to say that they remained with the 48% and believed that, as events unfolded, the 48% would become a majority. They pursued a strategy of desperation: a strategy of “Hang on, something might turn up”, whether that was the long-promised economic shock or whatever. The “hang on” strategy, however, requires an essential ingredient: delay. Delay was the tactic they clearly pursued through their amendments to the Bill and they promised there would be more.

The other place is currently not bound, in respect of the Government’s policy, by the Salisbury convention. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and I were invited to debate in front of a City audience the motion “That the United Kingdom is leaving the EU”. Two highly respected peers—Lord Butler, the former Cabinet Secretary, and Lord Lester, one of our premier human rights lawyers—argued the case that we would not leave the European Union because they were in a position to prevent it and would do so. The policy the Prime Minister announced, of pursuing a general election and securing a mandate in this House and a mandate to bind the other place to the Salisbury convention, is therefore essential.

I am confident that the Prime Minister will achieve that majority, because I am confident that she will be backed by the overwhelming majority of this nation. She will know that last year I voted for every other possible candidate for the leadership of the Tory party. I have to tell her that I have become her greatest fan. As my constituents recognise and tell me continually, she is doing magnificently. May she long continue to do so.

1.26 pm

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): The Prime Minister says that she wants unity and an end to division; she intends to achieve that by crushing opposition, with political opponents described as “saboteurs”. I invited her earlier to distance herself from that, but she was not prepared to do so. This is not a vision or an understanding of mainstream democracy that I share with the Prime Minister.

For months we have heard from the Prime Minister that

“now is not the time”

for the public to vote, that “no one wants it”, and that it is important to

“get on with the day job”.

We have been told that the Prime Minister needs to concentrate all her time on the Brexit negotiations and that nothing should get in the way. In the past 24 hours, however, we have learned that that was all empty rhetoric.

There are two key reasons why there is going to be an early general election. The first is total political expediency—it is about the woeful, unelectable state of the Labour party, and not wanting to repeat the political error that Gordon Brown made. The Prime Minister

wants to receive her own electoral mandate and to crush political opposition in England. The second reason for holding an early general election is that it has finally dawned on the UK Government that the Brexit negotiations are going to be very difficult and the realities of the hard Brexit that the Prime Minister is pursuing have not yet fully dawned on the public. As one commentator wrote today:

“The EU is not going to roll over and give the UK free and ‘frictionless’ access to the internal market. The Prime Minister is cutting and running: getting a vote in before the reality of hard Brexit hits home”.

The Prime Minister might think she can get her way with all this against the Labour party in England, but she will not get away with it in Scotland.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On the subject of hard Brexit, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is incumbent on those who advocate it to set out very clearly their assessment of the impact on jobs of our coming out of the single market and the customs union?

Angus Robertson: In a normal general election campaign, there would be an opportunity to do just that when the party leaders debate issues on the record. There has been an interesting development since this debate began—I notice colleagues looking at their mobile phones—because ITV has confirmed that there will be a leaders debate. I am looking around at a number of the other party leaders in the Chamber. Does the Leader of the Opposition intend to take part in the debate? I suspect that he probably will take part in a television debate as, no doubt, will the leaders of the Liberal Democrats and the Green party. It is unsustainable in the multimedia age of the 21st century to go to the country but not debate with the leaders of the other parties. The notion that the UK Prime Minister might be empty-chaired because she was not prepared to stand up for her arguments is just not sustainable.

Mr Nigel Evans *rose*—

Angus Robertson: Perhaps she would wish that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley might take her place.

Mr Evans: As I said in the House yesterday, I hope that the Prime Minister will go head to head with the leaders of other parties, and the reason is quite simple: she would floor them all.

Angus Robertson: I do not think that the Prime Minister would manage that with Nicola Sturgeon. However, I am surprised by, and welcome, what the hon. Gentleman has to say in encouragement to the Prime Minister. I think that the public deserve a debate—indeed, more than one debate—during the election campaign, and I think that the Prime Minister should have more confidence in herself. She should be prepared to address the country, and to debate the ideas presented by all the different political parties in the United Kingdom. We in Scotland, of course, have already learnt that the Prime Minister is prepared to ignore the mandate and wishes of the Scottish electorate, the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, so why would anyone in Scotland vote for such a dismissive and disrespectful party and Prime Minister?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Angus Robertson: I need to make some progress as time is limited. I will try to take some interventions later.

The Prime Minister promised that she would establish a unified approach with all the devolved Governments—an agreement—before triggering Brexit. She did not: she broke her word. As we have learnt in recent weeks in connection with the appalling rape clause, the one thing that the Scottish Tories do not like talking about is Tory policy, but this election will highlight the dangers posed to Scotland by unfettered Tory Westminster Governments. We live in one of the most unequal countries in the developed world, but the Tories want to make it even more unfair. Experts say that their policies will cause the largest increase in inequality since the days of Margaret Thatcher.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Robertson: I am happy to give way to the leader of the Greens.

Caroline Lucas: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if this election is, as the Prime Minister says, about a more secure future for the country—if it is an election of such national significance—there should be, as a matter of urgency, a change in the law to give Britain's 1.5 million 16 and 17-year-olds a say in what will be very much their future on 8 June?

Angus Robertson: As one who made a maiden speech about enfranchising 16 and 17-year-olds, I totally agree with the hon. Lady. It is, again, unsustainable that young people should be given the vote in some elections and referendums, but denied it in others.

Mr Vara: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the Supreme Court made it abundantly clear—the judges decided unanimously—that issues concerning Brexit negotiations should be determined by this House, which represents the whole United Kingdom, and were not to be decided by any of the devolved institutions. Which bit of that does the right hon. Gentleman have a problem understanding?

Angus Robertson: What I have difficulty understanding is the commitment that the Prime Minister gave when she went to Edinburgh. On the front page of the house journal of the Conservative party, *The Daily Telegraph*, it was stated in terms that the Prime Minister wanted to seek a UK-wide approach and an agreement with the devolved Governments. The hon. Gentleman may wish to rewrite history, but the Prime Minister gave a commitment to reach an agreement, and she did not reach an agreement.

The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 was supposed to stop political parties abusing their position and putting party before country. Today the Tories are going to do just that, and, sadly, the Labour party is going to vote with the Tories and make life easy for them. We on these Benches will not vote with the Tories but, given the reality—the Labour party will be voting with the Tories—there will be a general election, and boy, we look forward to that contest—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr David Morris, you normally have a very emollient manner. You are a very restrained individual, bordering on the cerebral, but you have become rather over-excited. Calm yourself. Take some sort of soothing medicament; it will have a beneficial impact upon you.

Angus Robertson: In Scotland, the general election will be a two-horse race—a straight fight between the SNP and the Tories. Do I think that mainstream Scots, regardless of whether they voted remain or leave, will vote for a hard Tory Brexit? No, I do not. Do I think that most mainstream Scots will vote for more austerity and cuts in public services? No, I do not. Do I think that most Scots will vote for a party that is actively undermining the mandate already given by the voters in a Scottish general election for people in Scotland to determine their future? No, I do not. We on these Benches will work hard for every vote in every seat in Scotland, and we look forward to defeating the Tories in this general election.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. At least 10 Members want to speak and we have less than an hour left. Members can do the arithmetic for themselves. It would be appreciated if each Member would help others by tailoring his or her contribution accordingly.

1.35 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I welcome the courage that the Prime Minister has shown in taking to the public this question: who do they expect to lead the country for the next five years? Having listened to the speech made by the right hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), I can honestly assure them that it will not be him. I think that the public will have to think long and hard, because Brexit is happening.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: No. The debate is time-limited, and I want everyone to have a chance to speak.

This not about us in here; it is about delivering to the British public the future that they deserve. It is about delivering the best possible outcome for this country as we leave the European Union. I know that when the election takes place on 8 June, individual Members may well find themselves in difficulties with their constituencies because of whatever views they have expressed about leadership, but I am proud to be standing behind a Prime Minister who has made it brutally clear that this is about not making gains in this place, but delivering a Brexit that is for the good of the European Union, that is not just for—[*Interruption.*] Well, it is for the good of the European Union as well, because our future relationship with the European Union will be hugely important.

The question that will be posed in our constituencies is this: which of the party leaders who could be Prime Minister should be Prime Minister after the election? That is what we will be asking the country. Does the country believe that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) could lead it? I suspect that a large number of the right hon. Gentleman's Back-Bench

[Mrs Main]

colleagues would say no, and that the businesses in my constituency would say no as well. Does the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—his voting record and attendance in the House, along with those of his colleagues, is generally pretty low; two Liberal Democrats are present today, but none were here to vote on the Budget yesterday—really believe that he can lead the country? I suggest that the answer is no.

I suggest that the British public, when deciding who to vote for on 8 June, will look forward with confidence to a Prime Minister with an increased mandate to take us through the next five years, and I am delighted that she is giving the country this opportunity to examine our record. Since 2010, there has been a 73% drop in youth unemployment in St Albans—[*Interruption.*] I hear the Liberal Democrats again. I have to say that I hear nothing from the third-placed Liberal Democrat who stood as a candidate in my constituency to defend St Albans. It is surprising that the Liberal Democrats should be more interested in campaigning than in running the country.

Our party and our Government have taken a strong stance. As I said, youth unemployment in St Albans has fallen by two thirds since 2010, and there has also been a 76% increase in the number of young people taking up apprenticeships. That is the record that we will be putting to the public. Brexit is happening and we are going to make the best of it. Our Prime Minister should not have to suffer 100 unelected Liberal Democrats in the other place, and nine in this place who rarely turn up, trying to tug her tail.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: No. I am about to finish my speech.

We need to make the future secure for all our young people and all our families. The game-playing in this place does a disservice to the British public. They are probably fed up with having elections anyway, but let us get on with it and get a mandate for our Prime Minister—[*Interruption.*] May I say to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) that the public do not respect the fact that people yell from the Back Benches? She can speak up for her own leader, her own manifesto and her own party, and she can explain why she believes her leader, the right hon. Member for Islington North, is the right person to take the country through the next five years. I do not share her conviction, but she obviously has a lot of confidence in his capabilities.

I know that this Government, who have delivered so much already and have so much more to deliver, will have resonance with the British public when they look at what is on offer from the other parties, which are divided, wrangling, scaremongering and in Brexit denial. This Government will give us the best deal for all our businesses and all our constituencies.

1.40 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This is an appropriate time to be called. I noticed a tweet earlier from David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, whom I am sure we all remember fondly, welcoming the

Prime Minister's decision to call an early election. Given that in one sense the country is in this mess because in calling the referendum David Cameron put party before country, it is hardly surprising that the current Prime Minister should follow him and choose to put party before country once again.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: Give me a moment.

From the moment the Prime Minister took office, she has ignored the closeness of the referendum vote and has pursued the hardest form of Brexit, driving division instead of cohesion. She has ignored the British people, British businesses, the British public sector and the national health service, and now, in another clear act of putting party before country, she has chosen an early election. We must not buy the nonsense that she needs a mandate to deliver Brexit; the Labour party has given her that mandate. She is acting upon the narrow majority of the 2016 referendum.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: Not for the moment.

Let us all be very honest and clear about this: the Prime Minister has chosen this election because she looked across the Dispatch Box and could not resist the temptation of doing the political equivalent of taking candy from a baby, and facing this Labour party in a general election. She expects a coronation, not a contest. That is why the Liberal Democrats relish the challenge of a general election.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Given what the hon. Gentleman says about a coronation, will he rule out a coalition with the Conservatives—yes or no?

Tim Farron: The great problem we face is that the Prime Minister is running on the expectation that there will be no need for any form of coalition with anybody. The Prime Minister has called this general election—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Tell us yes or no.

Tim Farron: In good time.

The Prime Minister has called this general election to take advantage of what she sees as a clear opportunity for a majority of 100 or more.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Yes or no?

Tim Farron: I have responded to the hon. Gentleman's intervention. It is very clear that we are not talking about balanced Parliaments. [*Interruption.*] The Prime Minister takes the view that calling this general election gives her an opportunity to have a 100-seat majority. [*Interruption.*] She takes the view that this gives her an opportunity to drive through not just a hard Brexit, but her agenda to slim down the national health service, to slim down—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The atmosphere in the Chamber is rather disorderly. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) is undertaking an apprenticeship

to become a statesman, but he has several modules and some years to go. He must calm himself. He is listening to a statesman: Mr Farron.

Tim Farron: To answer the heckles from my friend of many years, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), the reality is that we are not looking at the prospect of a balanced Parliament.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Is the answer a yes or a no?

Tim Farron: I have given the hon. Gentleman his answer. The Prime Minister has clearly called this election on the understanding that she can reap swathes of the Labour numbers and give herself a majority that will allow her to deliver not just—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Tim Farron: I will not give way for the time being.

The Prime Minister thinks this will allow her to deliver the hardest form of Brexit, shrink our national health service, undermine the support for our education and, indeed, take us out of the single market.

If people want to avoid a hard Brexit and keep Britain in the single market, and if they want a Britain that has a decent opposition, then only the Liberal Democrats will give them the final say. There is only one route to the Prime Minister losing this general election, and it is a Liberal Democrat route, and I am happy to explain why that might be the case.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Tim Farron: I will not give way now as there is not much time.

Let me move on and explain why the only route through which the Prime Minister could lose her majority is a Liberal Democrat one. Unless my friends and colleagues here on the SNP Benches are about to launch an aggressive foreign policy, they can gain only one seat from the Conservative party, and nobody, not even the Labour party, believes that the Labour party will be gaining seats at this general election, so the only outcome that will not lead to a Conservative majority is the Liberal Democrats' revival and growth in every part of this country.

The Government have already stated that they will not outline their negotiating stance any further than the damp rhetoric we have already heard. We say that that is not good enough. If they will not tell us what they are pursuing, they must instead entrust the people with their say on the final deal. The Prime Minister has already confirmed that she will not do any TV debates, preferring to cower behind the hard-right pages of the Brexit press than stand up and present her case to the British people.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I rise to help the hon. Gentleman. I think he may have misheard my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who asked him a straight question. We have a word in Scotland: feartie. I say to the hon. Gentleman, "Don't be one. Give us a straight answer: will you rule out a coalition with the Tories, yes or no?"

Tim Farron: The outcome of this general election is uncertain, and in the days and weeks to come we will no doubt talk about what will happen—*[Interruption.]* SNP Members are pushing me; they need to be a little patient, and their patience will be rewarded.

Mr Nigel Evans *rose*—

Tim Farron: And so, too, will that of the hon. Gentleman, my constituency near-neighbour.

Mr Evans: I do not think the hon. Gentleman gave a straight answer to that question, so let us try another question. His views will be examined over the next seven weeks. He was asked one question to which he refused to give an answer, so will he do so today: does he think being gay is a sin?

Tim Farron: I do not, and I tell the hon. Gentleman this: I am very proud to have gone through the Aye Lobby in the coalition Government when the Liberal Democrats introduced gay marriage and equal marriage, and, indeed, did not go as far as they should have in recognising transgender rights. There is much more to be done, and if we campaign in this election, as we will, for an open, tolerant, united society, we will need to make sure we are not in any way complacent about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, and not just here, but in other parts of the world, particularly given what is going on in Chechnya at the moment.

Tom Purslove: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I will not, as other Members wish to speak. I am flattered that so many Members wish to know my views. I will put myself up for a leaders debate with the right hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), the Leader of the Opposition and others, even if the Prime Minister does not do so, and people will have more of a chance to scrutinise me then.

Last June's referendum was a vote to start the process and it gave a mandate to the Prime Minister to negotiate Brexit, but it did not give her a mandate to enact any old deal at the end of the process.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I will not.

What the Prime Minister is asking for now is a blank cheque to allow for the British people to have to put up with whatever stitch-up she and the Brussels bureaucrats put together over the next two years. That is not democracy. An election taking place on 8 June will not decide the outcome; it will be about imposing upon the British people a deal that nobody voted for.

So, yes, the Liberal Democrats welcome this opportunity to show the British people that there is another way, and that the values of tolerance, openness and fairness can help build vibrant and successful communities and opportunities across the whole of the United Kingdom and beyond. The Government have made it clear that this is not the Britain they believe in; they have chosen isolation over co-operation, and meanness over fairness. I believe in a better Britain, and that is why we will support this motion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the level of interest, and given that there are only about 37 minutes to go, I am going to impose a three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches with immediate effect.

1.49 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I hope that I can take up less time than that, Mr Speaker.

It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats. I had hoped to hear him rule out coming into a coalition with us, because I can tell him that there is no chance that those on the Conservative Benches would want him in our coalition or in any Government.

Party politics are in full swing today, but really this is a good day for Parliament. This is another slight step towards parliamentary democracy and away from diktat by the Executive. The Prime Minister has not called a general election; it is this House that will decide whether there will be a general election. I do not think for one moment that this election has been called for party political reasons. Previous Governments have decided to go early to the country; they were able to choose to go to the country for reasons of political advantage. This gave great power to the Executive. However, a strange set of circumstances has come about. We have had a change of Prime Minister and a change of all the senior Ministers. We have moved from having a Government who were anti-Brexit to one who are pro-Brexit.

That is why I will cast my vote today in support of the Government motion. It is up to each Member to make their own decision. I believe that this proves that the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 is working—*[Interruption.]* If Members disagree, they can vote against the motion.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman says that Parliament will decide on this question, but the Prime Minister went on television yesterday and staked her reputation across the world by declaring that there would be a general election. If she does not get the support of 422 MPs and a two-thirds majority today, would such a public humiliation mean that she had to resign?

Mr Bone: This illustrates the advantage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. If the House does not agree to a general election, it will not happen and the Government will continue in office. Any Opposition Members who did not want a general election would be very strange creatures indeed. Any Opposition Members who sat on their hands and did not vote would be regarded as impotent Members of Parliament. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will make his mind up and cast his vote one way or the other.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): But does this not demonstrate why the Fixed-term Parliaments Act can never work? No Opposition can sensibly say that they would prefer a Government they oppose to continue in office, rather than having a chance to defeat them. The Act does not therefore fit within our constitution, and it ought to go.

Mr Bone: I rarely disagree with my hon. Friend, but I believe that these events are proof that the Act is working. I believe that we will have the required majority. I understand, Mr Speaker, that if no one objects when the vote is called, and if you decide the matter according to the voices, the motion will be carried without a two-thirds majority being required. That is a strange anomaly, and I hope that someone will shout “No” so that we get a vote. I will not be doing that today, however, because our vote has to follow our voice and I would never dream of doing anything other than that. Despite the party politics, this is a great day for Parliament and a small step forward for parliamentary democracy.

1.53 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I want to address three issues in the short time available to me. First, this election is happening in the midst of political discussions in Northern Ireland about the formation of an Executive. That is unfortunate. I want to make it clear that, as far as our party is concerned, we are responding positively to the Secretary of State’s request for discussions to continue in Northern Ireland. We have made it clear—along with the Social Democratic and Labour party and the Ulster Unionists—that we are ready to form an Executive. We do not believe in setting red lines or preconditions about important matters such as health and education funding and the future of public services in our Province. Those things are far more important than some of the issues that are now said to divide us, so we are ready to get the Executive up and running today, next week or whenever. We do not need prolonged negotiations.

Secondly, on Brexit, Northern Ireland’s position is different from that of the rest of the United Kingdom. That has been made clear in the Government’s paper, which recognises our special circumstances. It is absolutely imperative that Northern Ireland’s voice is heard very strongly. That is why it is such a tragedy that Sinn Féin has walked away from the Executive, collapsed the Assembly and forced us into an unnecessary Assembly election, while boycotting this place and demanding special status, which has been rejected by the Irish Republic, the European Union and even the European Parliament when it set out its negotiating position. Nobody accepts the need for special status, although we agree with the need for special arrangements that recognise Northern Ireland’s special circumstances. It is essential that, in the forthcoming general election, the people of Northern Ireland recognise that they have a clear choice between a party that has walked away and abandoned its responsibilities on a number of fronts and a party that will enter Government in Northern Ireland, that takes its seats here and that contributes and raises its voice to stand up for Northern Ireland.

Finally, this election will provide clarity on the big issue of how this country is to go forward. It will provide clarity on the Union that really matters: the Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Again, the people of Northern Ireland will have a clear choice on that issue. They will have a clear choice on whether to rally round and state firmly that they want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom or to go down the route presented by Sinn Féin, whose Marxist-Leninist concept of a republic has been rejected even by most of those who accept its

nationalism. They reject the party's economic outlook. The only way to support the Union is to rally behind the Democratic Unionist party on 8 June.

1.56 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Prime Minister presents herself, to adapt a phrase from Mr Tony Blair, as a pretty straight sort of a person. She is a former Home Secretary—I am glad to see that the present Home Secretary is in the Chamber today—and she well knows the value of evidence as it is proved. She was initially in favour of leaving the European Union, which was an honest and honourable stance, even if it is one with which I disagree. Then she was in favour of remaining in the EU, although she was something of a shrinking violet in her support for that argument. Now she is again resolute in her determination to leave.

The Prime Minister was also utterly opposed to holding an early general election, saying that it would be a distraction, turning us in on domestic matters when she had important and time-limited international negotiations to conclude. And now, hey-ho, she is equally determined that a general election we must have. She was against the European Union, then for the European Union, then against it again. She was against holding a general election and is now determined to have one. Her record is about as straight as the legendary European Union banana.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said repeatedly today that she wants an early election in order to produce a larger Tory majority. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that she is treating the electorate of the United Kingdom with contempt by assuming that the election will result in a larger Tory majority, and that she is thereby admitting that she has no plan at all for this country if she does not get that result?

Hywel Williams: I have no crystal ball. Unfortunately, however, I can see the disarray in the Labour party, but who knows what the outcome will be?

I am suspicious of the Prime Minister's motives and her reasoning. She says that the general election will enhance her status among the other 27 EU member states, for example, but I cannot see how that can be the case. Her motives are in fact pretty clear and straight. This is not only about the destruction of the Labour party as a credible Opposition for the next decade or so—I am afraid that Labour is doing a pretty effective demolition job on itself without her help—or about raising a challenge to my friends from Scotland, although in this I think her case is already lost. No, this election is about seeing off not her opponents on our side of the House but her enemies behind her. As ever with the Tories, desperate disunity is being papered over while it suits.

Plaid Cymru welcomes the opportunity that this election presents to the people of Wales to change our long-term course away from Labour's leaden Government in Cardiff and away from this hyper-centralised and heedless Government in London, cutting our own path towards economic regeneration and prosperity, social justice, and a proper, confident place for Wales in the world.

2 pm

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): If the Prime Minister had said when she took office that her Government wanted a general election, there would have been less controversy than there is now, but there has been denial at every opportunity. The Prime Minister or those who speak for her denied that there would be a general election. "When is the general election?" they were asked, and the answer, which was quite clear, was "2020." There is no great public demand for a general election. How many Members have received letters and emails in the last few days or weeks clamouring for a general election? Hands up! No, it is clear from Members on the Tory Benches that there has been no such demand.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Winnick: I will not, due to the lack of time. The reason given by the Prime Minister for the general election—Brexit—is a feeble, flimsy excuse that is taking in no one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) said that the Government should not be complacent about getting a large majority. Indeed, hopefully they will not get a large majority. When we consider the harm done to people in need—the disabled, the vulnerable, the low-paid—by this Government with a small majority, just imagine what will happen if there is a large Tory majority. It would be an absolute nightmare for the people we represent and for the millions of people in this country who need the Government to protect them, not harm them, but that protection will not come from a Tory Government with a small or large majority. I was here during the Tory Government of the 1980s and saw the harm that was done to my constituents and so many others.

The motion before us is murky, completely opportunistic, and certainly reflects badly on the Prime Minister. Many people are cynical about politics in this country, and that trend has unfortunately increased, for which perhaps all of us in the political class are responsible. The motion and the coming general election, which is happening purely for opportunistic reasons, will increase that cynical feeling, which is damaging to the democratic process.

2.3 pm

Mr Roger Godsiff (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I, too, will be voting against the motion today, because it is totally unnecessary. I say that as somebody who voted leave on 23 June last year and who has had a grudging respect for how the Prime Minister has conducted herself since she took over. However, her justification for holding a general election is quite frankly disingenuous. To suggest that she needs a mandate to negotiate Brexit is ridiculous. She was given that mandate on 24 June by a majority of the British people, and it is now up to her to carry it out. If she wants to have another election or referendum at the end of the process, so be it, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) said, to justify it now is purely opportunistic.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister says that she needs a larger majority because the business of the House is likely to be disrupted by Opposition parties or by the

[Mr Roger Godsiff]

House of Lords. She ought to look back to what happened when the Wilson Government were in power between 1964 and 1966. He had a majority of four. The Callaghan Government governed for five years in the 1970s without any majority. If she fears what could happen in the House of Lords, she should do exactly what Tories have done in the past and flood the place with her own people to ensure that she gets her way. There is no justification for her argument that she needs a larger majority in order to get business through the House.

To take the arrogant view that the electorate should concentrate purely and simply on one narrow issue is to treat the electorate with contempt. I can speak only for my constituents, but when they consider the issues, they will be asking questions. Why is every school in my constituency losing out under the new funding formula? Why is the city council having to make horrendous cuts? The Government have cut the support grant. Why are waiting times at local hospitals increasing? There are just not enough staff.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): In my hon. Friend's questions about why things are happening in his constituency, will he ask Ministers why my children's school, which is in his constituency, now has classes of 32 children? I do not remember that happening under a Labour Government. Does he agree?

Mr Godsiff: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Under the Labour Government, we had the Building Schools for the Future programme and Sure Start centres. Under this Government, that programme was stopped and Sure Start centres are being closed left, right and centre.

My constituents will ask other questions. Why is it that more and more hard-working families are being forced into the humiliation of having to use food banks? They just do not have enough money at the end of the week to feed and clothe their families. Why are energy consumers paying ever-increasing prices? Utility firms are ripping them off in the sacred name of competition. Why are young people, married and unmarried, unable to acquire proper housing, often having to stay with in-laws and parents? Those views will be echoed throughout the country. There is no justification for this election, and I will certainly oppose it.

2.7 pm

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I support the motion because, as a Government Member said earlier, it seems rather bizarre that the Opposition should say, "We want to keep a Tory Government in power." That just makes no sense. We have to put our case to the British people and see what happens. We have arrived today at a point that I always thought was inevitable. This was bound to happen. I never bought all that guff about "no election". There is a political dynamic at work here that has made this decision almost inevitable.

Mr MacNeil: Given that the hon. Gentleman is going to support the Government motion, is he confident that a Tory Government will not return after the election with two more years in power? What does he think will happen? What is the follow-through on his actions?

Jim Dowd: The follow-through is to do whatever we can to get rid of a Tory Government as soon as we can. That is always the case. It might not work, but that is up to the British people in an election. It is their choice.

In saying why I think this position is inevitable, I want to pay a minor tribute to Mr David Cameron—late of this parish. When the history of this country in the early part of the 21st century comes to be written, he will have probably one of the most prominent roles in it, and it will not be a particularly glorious tribute. Decisions that he took will, over time, damage this country immensely.

I remember serving on the Public Bill Committee on the original European Union (Referendum) Bill, which was known at the time as the "Wharton Bill" after the hon. Member for Stockton South (James Wharton), who picked it up from No. 10. I remember sitting in the Committee one evening and the then Prime Minister David Cameron actually came into, I think, Committee Room 7 or 8 and sat in the Public Gallery simply to pay obeisance to the hard right wingers of the Tory party who were on that Bill Committee. I have never seen or heard of a Prime Minister faced with such ignominy as having to pay obeisance to those to whom he is in thrall. Of course, he gave them the guarantee of an in/out referendum. He did not say, "I am going to renegotiate the terms of our EU membership and then put it to you." He said, "I am going to renegotiate the terms and then have an in/out referendum," and this is the consequence.

Mr Cameron will go down as one of the most damaging Prime Ministers, but prominent none the less. He has not just jeopardised the whole future of the United Kingdom as a trading nation and in our relationship with the European Union; he has jeopardised the future of Scotland as part of the United Kingdom, and people have all kinds of views on that. It was he who granted the referendum that set in train the dynamic that has, frankly, destroyed the Labour party in Scotland and given the Scottish National party the prominent role it enjoys today. He also jeopardised our relationship with the Republic of Ireland and, as the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) mentioned, put at risk the very stability of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

All those things add up, and the damage done will be with us for decades. The people who pay the greatest price, as others have mentioned, will be the young—the next generation, and those who come after. It will permanently damage this country. I will vote for the general election, but it will not change anything. The landscape will essentially remain much the same after the election, and it all follows from the calamitous decision of last June to leave the European Union. I understand the party political reasons for calling the election, and there is a certain amount of sanctimony and hypocrisy here today. Politics is neither science nor art, and it is certainly not religion. People do things for their own political advantage, and every Prime Minister has always done so.

2.11 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I did not intend to speak in this debate, but the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) would not let me intervene to respond to the question he posed. I have, in

fact, received emails from constituents over the past few weeks asking me to encourage the Prime Minister to call a general election and go to the country once again. The hon. Gentleman seemed to imply that nobody in the country was asking for a general election, but some of my constituents were.

When the Prime Minister made her announcement yesterday, I was initially in shock because, like my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), I was boldly telling people that there was no chance of a general election. I was not quite so bold as to put it in the local paper, but I told people both verbally and in emails that I did not believe it would happen. Having listened to the Prime Minister's reasons yesterday, I am happy to say that I have come to a position where I believe it is right for the country that we obtain a new mandate to go into the negotiations to leave the EU and put the Prime Minister, and the others who will be negotiating our terms, in the strongest possible position.

I am happy to stand on the Government's record of delivering for this country. The election is not just about the Brexit negotiations; it is about a Government who have delivered growth, one of the world's best performing economies, record numbers of jobs and great investment in our NHS. I am proud to go to the country and say, "Let us continue with the job we are doing to deliver what our country needs and to continue putting us in the strongest possible position."

Finally, we take nothing for granted, but if the Conservative party is returned to government with a substantially increased majority, will the leader of the Liberal Democrats accept that it is the will of the British people to return the Conservative party with a clear mandate to press on and take us out of the European Union on the grounds that the Prime Minister has set out? Will he then drop his opposition and game playing to thwart the democratic will of the British people?

2.14 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): As someone who believes that the Prime Minister has presented the case for this election on an entirely false premise, I, too, will be voting against the motion. I was not asking for an election last week or the week before; I was arguing that any move to an election in the near future would not help the negotiations in Northern Ireland. My mind has not changed, so why should I pretend that it has?

I will not be gamed or goaded into voting differently by the Prime Minister's actions and stances. She has accused others in this Parliament of playing games. In essence, her argument is that she has no confidence in Parliament. We have this bizarre situation in which, after having a referendum about taking back control and parliamentary sovereignty, the Prime Minister has pronounced that she has no confidence in Parliament. She does not trust the Opposition parties, on which she confers all sorts of exaggerated powers to block and correct. Then, of course, she has her complaints about the House of Lords. If Tory Members are concerned about the House of Lords, they should move to abolish it or to introduce competent, coherent and democratic reform, but they should stop using it as a prop in this argument.

This is also a false premise because the Prime Minister is pretending that she needs an election now so that she has a strong hand in the short term, but we know that what she is really after is a free hand in the longer term. She wants wriggle room on the periods of adjustment, the transitional arrangements and other things on which too many of her colleagues have been too strident.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend appreciate that the nearest parallel to what is happening now in this campaign for an election—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am interested in hearing the hon. Gentleman, but I would like him to face the House.

Mr Skinner: You were busy talking.

Mr Speaker: I was being spoken to by an illustrious member of the Opposition Whips Office, no less, so I would put it rather differently.

Mr Skinner: The nearest parallel is the election of 1974, when the miners were on strike and Ted Heath, the then Prime Minister, decided that the election would be on a very narrow argument about who ran the country. Most general elections are about a lot of things, but that one was about a specific thing. What happened in effect was that the Labour party finished up with the largest number of seats and the Queen asked Ted Heath to try to form a coalition with the Liberals, and the Liberals ran away.

Mark Durkan: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's intervention. While we are making comparisons with the election of 1974, an unforeseen casualty of that election was the Sunningdale agreement. The power-sharing Executive formed in Northern Ireland out of the 1973 Assembly ended up falling as a consequence of the 1974 general election because of what was seen to be the balance of forces.

Of course, this general election has been called without regard to the sensitive ongoing negotiations in Northern Ireland, and it is hard to see how it will not have an impact on those negotiations. First, it will probably colour the parties' attitude to some of the issues we are dealing with, and it will certainly colour their attitude towards each other and their level of trust. Also, the British Government will not be in a position to give undertakings or commitments in the context of those negotiations as *purdah* kicks in, so how will we get any sort of comprehensive agreement in such circumstances?

As someone who worked with might and main for the Good Friday agreement and its implementation, I do not take those issues lightly. I cannot dismiss them. I want to make sure that we fully protect the agreement, which is why I am no saboteur when it comes to anything endorsed by a referendum, least of all what the Irish people endorsed by referendum when they voted for the Good Friday agreement.

I worry about the implications of Brexit for the Good Friday agreement, and I worry that the Government are in denial about the Brexit process having implications for the agreement. Of course, I also recognise that the agreement gives us the machinery to answer many of the questions and challenges for the whole island of Ireland in terms of Brexit. Strand 2 gives us the material

[Mark Durkan]

to ensure that, in future, we can operate on a north-south basis in ways that continue to be supported and funded by the EU. We can treat the island as a common market—a single market—in sector after sector under the auspices of the Good Friday agreement.

We go forward in this election positively, but we have no pretence that the election is necessary or that the Prime Minister is justified in the terms she has used. Nor do we buy the sham fight that the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) is having yet again with Sinn Féin.

2.19 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I believe this is the sort of thing that gets politics a bad name in our country and it is what is leading to the alienation of many of our citizens from the political process. There is only one reason the Prime Minister wants a general election on 8 June: she figures she has a better chance of winning it now than she does in the future. It is therefore the most blatant abuse of the democratic procedure for party political advantage, and as this campaign goes on it will be seen as that.

This election has nothing to do with the country's interests and everything to do with the management of the Conservative party, and I give two clear reasons why that is the case. The Prime Minister has suggested that she needs to have a majority, but she has not won any vote on Brexit over the past year with a majority of fewer than 30, so the majority is already there. She also says that this election will give clarity to the Brexit process, but we on these Benches have been trying for 10 long months to get clarity on the Brexit process, and every question we have asked has been met with silence and with a refusal to say what Brexit does indeed mean. I do not believe for one minute that the Tory party manifesto for 8 June will spell out exactly what the plan for Britain is post-Brexit, so who is kidding who? We will not be any clearer after this election as to what Brexit means than we are right now.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The media are reporting that up to 30 sitting Tory MPs face being prosecuted for electoral fraud and that the Crown Prosecution Service will announce very soon whether it intends to press charges. Does my hon. Friend think that might have anything to do with the Prime Minister's change of heart?

Tommy Sheppard: Yes, I do; I think that is remarkably suspicious. But my concern is that the Prime Minister wants to silence dissent and disagreement in this House and in this country. Therefore, her instincts are not democratic, but authoritarian, and that is a great worry for our country.

May I just turn to the situation in Scotland? There are two reasons why the people of Scotland should be given another choice on their self-government. The first is not because the people who lost the referendum in 2014 do not respect the result, but because the people who won that referendum changed the deal afterwards; the United Kingdom that people voted to be part of in 2014 will no longer be there in the future. The second is that although the Scottish Government took a compromise

position, which neither challenged the Brexit deal nor argued for independence, it was thrown back in our faces. So there is no option now but to offer people in Scotland the opportunity of the choice between a hard, Tory, isolationist Britain or taking control into their own hands. This election is not required as a mandate to have that second referendum, because the Scottish Government already have that mandate, but this will be a judgment, Prime Minister, on your refusal to agree to the wishes of the Scottish Parliament. I would like to ask this in finishing: if the Conservative party loses the general election in Scotland, will you stop blocking the right of the Scottish people to have the choice in the future?

2.23 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate, Mr Speaker. As we all know, Northern Ireland is in a brittle state at the moment. We have no Executive and no Government, and I wonder whether the Prime Minister fully considered what may happen to us. Before the recess, I was given an excellent answer as to our position in the Union, and I was very grateful for it, but I want to get three points across now.

Although the first is not about this election, because we fully support today's motion, I must say that the public in Northern Ireland are fed up to the back teeth with elections. They have had so many and they see no point in another Assembly election. Secondly, people who watched what was going on at Easter may have seen paramilitaries—I believe this was in west Belfast and somewhere else—marching and carrying the European Union flag as if it were their banner. Brexit for us is a very different and brittle world. Ulster Unionists fully support the need to find the right way forward, but this is going to be used by Sinn Féin to try to break up the Union and we need that support. So I ask that in their manifesto the Government look not only at how they deal with Northern Ireland's special status, but at how they ensure we have a workable Government in the future. We need change, which is what the Ulster Unionists have been all about; we need to get back to the central parties running Northern Ireland.

My last point is about making sure that that manifesto looks after our armed forces and our ex-servicemen. Legacy is playing its way out and it is not protecting the people who should be protected for doing their duty. We will support today's motion.

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

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Two colleagues wish to speak. They can help each other.

2.25 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As several hon. Members have pointed out, the Prime Minister heads up a party with a majority gained partly by it cheating in the last general election, and it has been fined by the Electoral Commission as a result. Yet today she had the brass neck to stand there and give a speech all about leadership, so I want to know, what leadership

is the Prime Minister showing on this issue? She refused to answer the questions from the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) and from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) about election cheating and some of her current MPs participating again in this forthcoming general election. What leadership intervention has she made within her party to make sure that this spending cheating does not happen again?

Mrs Main: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Lady must.

Mrs Main: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Twice the hon. Gentleman has accused Members of cheating. There is no proof of cheating and he should withdraw the remarks.

Mr Speaker: I think it is a matter of taste rather than of order, but the hon. Lady has made her point with force and alacrity, and it is on the record. Had the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) concluded his oration?

Alan Brown: I have a bit more—about further non-leadership interventions by the Prime Minister. She consistently said that there would be no general election, but she has now done a massive U-turn. She could not answer why she has changed her mind on the single market. We have heard no evidence as to what this hard Tory Brexit is going to mean and what it would mean compared with Scotland staying in the single market. She has consistently ignored the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, so I ask her to show some real leadership now.

2.26 pm

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swaine) goaded Labour Members over not being turkeys voting for Christmas, but they will be more than turkeys voting for Christmas if they follow the Prime Minister and dance to her tune—they will be turkeys ready to jump into the baking tin. That is exactly what they are doing. The Prime Minister needs 433 MPs to support her today. She has gone on television and told the world that there will be a general election. If Parliament does not back her—if Labour MPs do not dance to her tune—and she does not get the 433, will she resign? The answer on that could change the views of Labour Members as to whether to dance to her tune.

2.27 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Speaker put the Question (Standing Order No. 16(1)).

The House divided: Ayes 522, Noes 13.

Division No. 196]

[2.27 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Afriyie, Adam
Abrahams, Debbie	Aldous, Peter
Adams, Nigel	Ali, Rushanara

Allan, Lucy	Chishti, Rehman
Allen, Mr Graham	Chope, Mr Christopher
Allen, Heidi	Churchill, Jo
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Clark, rh Greg
Amess, Sir David	Cleverly, James
Anderson, Mr David	Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Andrew, Stuart	Coaker, Vernon
Ansell, Caroline	Coffey, Ann
Argar, Edward	Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Ashworth, Jonathan	Collins, Damian
Atkins, Victoria	Colvile, Oliver
Austin, Ian	Cooper, Julie
Bacon, Mr Richard	Cooper, Rosie
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Cooper, rh Yvette
Baker, Mr Steve	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Baldwin, Harriett	Costa, Alberto
Barclay, Stephen	Courts, Robert
Baron, Mr John	Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Coyle, Neil
Barwell, Gavin	Crabb, rh Stephen
Bebb, Guto	Crausby, Sir David
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Creagh, Mary
Benn, rh Hilary	Creasy, Stella
Benyon, rh Richard	Crouch, Tracey
Beresford, Sir Paul	Cruddas, Jon
Berry, Jake	Cryer, John
Berry, James	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Betts, Mr Clive	Danczuk, Simon
Bingham, Andrew	Davies, Byron
Blackman, Bob	Davies, Chris
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Davies, David T. C.
Blackwood, Nicola	Davies, Glyn
Blenkinsop, Tom	Davies, Dr James
Blomfield, Paul	Davies, Mims
Blunt, Crispin	Davies, Philip
Boles, Nick	Davis, rh Mr David
Bone, Mr Peter	De Piero, Gloria
Borwick, Victoria	Debbonaire, Thangam
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Dinenage, Caroline
Brabin, Tracy	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Bradley, rh Karen	Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Brady, Mr Graham	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Brake, rh Tom	Donelan, Michelle
Brazier, Sir Julian	Dorries, Nadine
Brennan, Kevin	Double, Steve
Bridgen, Andrew	Doughty, Stephen
Brine, Steve	Dowd, Jim
Brokenshire, rh James	Dowd, Peter
Brown, Lyn	Dowden, Oliver
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Drax, Richard
Bruce, Fiona	Dromey, Jack
Buck, Ms Karen	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Buckland, Robert	Duddridge, James
Burgon, Richard	Dugher, Michael
Burnham, rh Andy	Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Burns, Conor	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Burns, rh Sir Simon	Dunne, Mr Philip
Burrowes, Mr David	Eagle, Ms Angela
Burt, rh Alistair	Eagle, Maria
Butler, Dawn	Edwards, Jonathan
Byrne, rh Liam	Efford, Clive
Cairns, rh Alun	Elliott, Julie
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Elliott, Tom
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Ellis, Michael
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Ellison, Jane
Carmichael, Neil	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Cartlidge, James	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Cash, Sir William	Elmore, Chris
Caulfield, Maria	Elphicke, Charlie
Chalk, Alex	Esterson, Bill
Champion, Sarah	Eustice, George
Chapman, Jenny	Evans, Chris

Evans, Graham	Heapey, James	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Paisley, Ian
Evans, Mr Nigel	Heaton-Harris, Chris	Lidington, rh Mr David	Parish, Neil
Evennett, rh David	Heaton-Jones, Peter	Lilley, rh Mr Peter	Patel, rh Priti
Fabricant, Michael	Henderson, Gordon	Long Bailey, Rebecca	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Fallon, rh Sir Michael	Hendrick, Mr Mark	Lopresti, Jack	Pawsey, Mark
Farron, Tim	Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Lord, Jonathan	Pearce, Teresa
Fernandes, Suella	Herbert, rh Nick	Loughton, Tim	Penning, rh Mike
Field, rh Frank	Hillier, Meg	Lucas, Caroline	Pennycook, Matthew
Field, rh Mark	Hinds, Damian	Lucas, Ian C.	Penrose, John
Flello, Robert	Hoare, Simon	Mackinlay, Craig	Percy, Andrew
Fletcher, Colleen	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Mackintosh, David	Perkins, Toby
Flint, rh Caroline	Hoey, Kate	Madders, Justin	Perry, Claire
Foster, Kevin	Hollern, Kate	Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Phillips, Jess
Fovargue, Yvonne	Hollingbery, George	Mahmood, Shabana	Phillipson, Bridget
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Hollinrake, Kevin	Main, Mrs Anne	Philp, Chris
Foxcroft, Vicky	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Mak, Mr Alan	Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Holloway, Mr Adam	Malhouse, Kit	Pincher, Christopher
Frazer, Lucy	Hopkins, Kelvin	Mann, Scott	Poulter, Dr Daniel
Freeman, George	Hopkins, Kris	Marsden, Gordon	Pound, Stephen
Freer, Mike	Howarth, rh Mr George	Maskell, Rachael	Pow, Rebecca
Fuller, Richard	Howarth, Sir Gerald	Mathias, Dr Tania	Powell, Lucy
Furniss, Gill	Howell, John	May, rh Mrs Theresa	Prentis, Victoria
Fysh, Marcus	Howlett, Ben	Maynard, Paul	Prisk, Mr Mark
Gale, Sir Roger	Huddleston, Nigel	McCabe, Steve	Pritchard, Mark
Gardiner, Barry	Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	McCartney, Jason	Pugh, John
Garnier, rh Sir Edward	Hurd, Mr Nick	McCartney, Karl	Pursglove, Tom
Garnier, Mark	Jackson, Mr Stewart	McDonagh, Siobhain	Quin, Jeremy
Gauke, rh Mr David	James, Margot	McDonnell, rh John	Quince, Will
Ghani, Nusrat	Jarvis, Dan	McGovern, Alison	Qureshi, Yasmin
Gibb, rh Mr Nick	Javid, rh Sajid	McKinnell, Catherine	Raab, Mr Dominic
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick	Rayner, Angela
Glen, John	Jenkin, Mr Bernard	McMahon, Jim	Redwood, rh John
Glendon, Mary	Jenkyns, Andrea	McPartland, Stephen	Reed, Mr Steve
Goodwill, Mr Robert	Jenrick, Robert	Meale, Sir Alan	Rees, Christina
Gove, rh Michael	Johnson, rh Boris	Mearns, Ian	Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Graham, Richard	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Menzies, Mark	Reeves, Rachel
Grant, Mrs Helen	Johnson, Diana	Mercer, Johnny	Reynolds, Jonathan
Gray, James	Johnson, Gareth	Merriman, Huw	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Grayling, rh Chris	Johnson, Joseph	Metcalfe, Stephen	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Green, Chris	Jones, Andrew	Miliband, rh Edward	Robinson, Gavin
Green, rh Damian	Jones, rh Mr David	Miller, rh Mrs Maria	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Green, Kate	Jones, Gerald	Milling, Amanda	Robinson, Mary
Greening, rh Justine	Jones, Graham	Mills, Nigel	Rosindell, Andrew
Greenwood, Lilian	Jones, Helen	Milton, rh Anne	Rotheram, Steve
Greenwood, Margaret	Jones, Mr Kevan	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Rudd, rh Amber
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Jones, Mr Marcus	Mordaunt, Penny	Rutley, David
Griffith, Nia	Kawczynski, Daniel	Morden, Jessica	Ryan, rh Joan
Griffiths, Andrew	Keeley, Barbara	Morgan, rh Nicky	Sandbach, Antoinette
Gummer, rh Ben	Kendall, Liz	Morris, Anne Marie	Saville Roberts, Liz
Gwynne, Andrew	Kennedy, Seema	Morris, David	Scully, Paul
Gyimah, Mr Sam	Kinahan, Danny	Morris, James	Selous, Andrew
Haigh, Louise	Kinnock, Stephen	Morton, Wendy	Shah, Naz
Halfon, rh Robert	Kirby, Simon	Mowat, David	Shannon, Jim
Hall, Luke	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Mulholland, Greg	Shapps, rh Grant
Hamilton, Fabian	Knight, Julian	Mundell, rh David	Sharma, Alok
Hammond, rh Mr Philip	Kwarteng, Kwasi	Murray, Ian	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Hammond, Stephen	Kyle, Peter	Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Shelbrooke, Alec
Hancock, rh Matt	Lamb, rh Norman	Murrison, Dr Andrew	Sherriff, Paula
Hands, rh Greg	Lammy, rh Mr David	Nandy, Lisa	Shuker, Mr Gavin
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Lancaster, Mark	Neill, Robert	Siddiq, Tulip
Harper, rh Mr Mark	Latham, Pauline	Newton, Sarah	Simpson, David
Harrington, Richard	Lavery, Ian	Nokes, Caroline	Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Harris, Carolyn	Leadsom, rh Andrea	Norman, Jesse	Skidmore, Chris
Harris, Rebecca	Lee, Dr Phillip	Nuttall, Mr David	Slaughter, Andy
Harrison, Trudy	Lefroy, Jeremy	Offord, Dr Matthew	Smeeth, Ruth
Hart, Simon	Leigh, Sir Edward	Olney, Sarah	Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan	Leslie, Charlotte	Onn, Melanie	Smith, Angela
Hayes, Helen	Leslie, Chris	Onwurah, Chi	Smith, Cat
Hayes, rh Mr John	Letwin, rh Sir Oliver	Opperman, Guy	Smith, Chloe
Hayman, Sue	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Osamor, Kate	Smith, Henry
Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Lewis, rh Brandon	Osborne, rh Mr George	Smith, Jeff
Healey, rh John	Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Owen, Albert	Smith, Julian

Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smith, Royston
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Starmer, Keir
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Turner, Karl

Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Tyrrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Watson, Mr Tom
 West, Catherine
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 White, Chris
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Phil
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wilson, Sammy
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Heather Wheeler and
 Jackie Doyle-Price

NOES

Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Farrelly, Paul
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Hermon, Lady
 Lewis, Clive
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair

McGarry, Natalie
 McInnes, Liz
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Stringer, Graham
 Thomson, Michelle

Tellers for the Noes:

Ms Margaret Ritchie and
 Mark Durkan

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That there shall be an early parliamentary general election.

TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Technical and Further Education Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 14 November 2016 (Technical and Further Education Bill (Programme)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement at today's sitting.

(2) The proceedings shall be taken in the following Order: Lords Amendments Nos. 1, 6, 2 to 5 and 7 to 18.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

Question agreed to.

Technical and Further Education Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Speaker: I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendment 1. I also remind the House that certain of the motions relating to the Lords amendments will be certified as relating exclusively to England or to England and Wales, as set out on the selection paper. If the House divides on any certified motion, a double majority will be required for the motion to be passed.

After Clause 1

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS UNDERTAKING APPRENTICESHIPS

2.47 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendment 6, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.

Lords amendments 2 to 5 and 7 to 18.

Robert Halfon: This Bill was introduced to transform the prestige and culture of technical education, providing young people with the skills that they, and our country, need. It provides necessary protection for students should colleges get into financial difficulty, and ensures that the most disadvantaged are able to climb the ladder of opportunity. It left this House after thoughtful scrutiny and, after similar diligence in the other place, I am delighted that it returns for consideration here today.

I ask hon. Members to support the Government on all amendments made to the Bill in the other place except amendments 1 and 6, where we have tabled an amendment in lieu. Amendment 1 impinges on the financial privilege of this House. I urge the House to disagree to that amendment and will ask the Reasons Committee to ascribe financial privilege as the reason.

The amendment, costing more than £200 million per year by financial year 2020-21, would mean that the parents of apprentices aged under 20 would continue to be eligible for child benefit for those young people as if they were in approved education and training. It is an issue in which I have a great interest. Apprenticeships provide a ladder of opportunity, and we should seek to remove obstacles to social mobility wherever we can.

A young person's first full-time job is a big change for them and for their family, and it marks a move into financial independence that should be celebrated. I know that the adjustment can be challenging for the young person learning how to manage a starting wage and new outgoings and for parents who may experience a fall in income from the benefits they previously received for that dependent child. One of the core principles of an apprenticeship is that it is a job, and it is treated accordingly in the benefit system. It is a job that offers high-quality training and that widens opportunities. Moreover, more than 90% of apprentices continue into

another job on completion. Most apprentices are paid above the minimum wage. The 2016 apprenticeship pay survey showed that the average wage for all level 2 and 3 apprentices was £6.70.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Although what the Minister is saying is correct, in that those apprentices will be paid, taking child benefit away from low-income families will be a disincentive for them to take up apprenticeships. Those families will be pressed to stay in education so that they can continue to get child benefit. Is that not the case?

Robert Halfon: The crucial point is that the vast majority of level 2 and 3 apprentices are paid more than £6.30 an hour, and 90% of them go on to jobs or additional education afterwards.

The apprenticeship programme already supports low-income groups. The funding system gives targeted support to the participation of care leavers, and this year we are making £60 million available to training providers to support take-up by individuals from disadvantaged areas. We are committed to ensuring that high-quality apprenticeships are as accessible as possible to people from all backgrounds. We will take forward the Maynard recommendations for people with learning difficulties and our participation target for black and minority ethnic groups.

With regard to the amendment's suggestion of a bursary for care leavers, I understand that some young people have greater challenges to overcome. That is why we are providing £1,000 to employers and training providers when they take on care leavers who are under 25. We will also pay 100% of the cost of training for small employers who employ care leavers. There is scope for apprenticeships to benefit social mobility even more. We are working across Government to use the apprenticeship programme to extend opportunities.

I am grateful to Lord Storey for tabling Lords amendment 6, which introduces a new clause into the Bill to require Ofsted to take into account the quality of the careers offer when conducting standard inspections of further education colleges. I welcome the work that Ofsted has already done to sharpen its approach. Matters relating to careers provision feature in all the graded judgments made by Ofsted when inspecting FE and skills providers. Destination data—published in 16 to 18 performance tables for the first time this year—are also becoming an established part of college accountability. Those are important steps.

I pay tribute to the good work that is already being done throughout the FE sector to prepare students for the workplace. Ofsted's annual report for 2015-16 cites the excellent work of Derby College, which has set up employer academies so that learners benefit throughout their course from a range of activities, including workplace visits, talks from specialist speakers, masterclasses and enterprise activities. However, Ofsted noted in the same report that the quality of information, advice and guidance in FE providers can vary and does not always meet the full range of students' needs. That is why I want us to take this opportunity to go further.

Lords amendment 6 signals our determination to ensure that every FE student has access to good-quality, dedicated careers advice, which I know this House supports. That is vital if we are to tackle the skills gap

and ensure that we make opportunities accessible to everyone. We have proposed some drafting changes to the amendment to ensure that it achieves its intended effect. The amendment makes it clear that in its inspection report Ofsted must comment on the quality of a college's careers provision. I urge hon. Members to accept the amendment. FE colleges are engines of social mobility, and this is our chance to ensure that students from all backgrounds can access the support they need to get on the ladder of opportunity and to benefit from the best skills education and training.

I will now turn to the amendments that the Government are asking the House to accept without any further amendment. The Government support Lords amendment 2, which requires schools to give education and training providers the opportunity to talk directly to pupils about the approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships they offer. I would like to place on the record my significant gratitude to Lord Baker of Dorking for tabling the amendment, and for his unstinting support for the Government's technical education reforms. As I have explained, high-quality careers advice is the first rung on the ladder of opportunity and will play a key part in realising our ambition for high-quality skills education and training. The amendment will strengthen the Bill by ensuring that young people hear much more consistently about the merits of technical education routes and recognise them as worthy career paths. I urge the House to agree to it. I hope that never again when I go around the country will I meet an apprentice who was refused access to the school they were taught in to talk about apprenticeships.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I actually welcome that proposal. We have heard lots of evidence that schools are not allowing FE colleges and apprenticeship providers to access their students and to tell them what the options are post-16. That, of course, is because of the "bums on seats" funding regime for post-16 studies in schools. How are we going to get around the deep-seated culture in schools that prevents careers advisers and others from providing that independent, impartial advice to young people in schools?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman speaks a lot of sense on this issue. Every time I meet an apprentice, wherever I am in the country, I ask them, "Did your school encourage you to do an apprenticeship?" Nine times out of 10, they say that their school taught them nothing about apprenticeships and skills. We have already changed careers advice so that schools have to offer advice that includes apprenticeships and skills. I believe that Lords amendment 2 will make a huge difference, because technical bodies, apprenticeship bodies and university technical colleges will be able to go into schools, and schools will publish policy guidance on this.

I agree that a huge part of this is about cultural change. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State always talks about parity of esteem. Until we ensure that we have parity of esteem between skills and technical education and going to university—that is also a wonderful thing to do—we will not achieve the cultural change that the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Ian Mearns: There is a problem with that, because training providers themselves have a vested interest—just as much as the schools do—in securing those students

for their courses or apprenticeships. Is it not true that we need a much more robust process for the provision of impartial advice and guidance that does not include anyone's vested interests?

Robert Halfon: We are looking at careers guidance in the long term, and at how we can make it more independent and skills-focused. I think that the work of the Careers & Enterprise Company in getting more people to do work experience, along with the money we are investing in these things, will help, but there are no easy answers. There are some great private providers, FE colleges and university technical colleges that I would love to see going into schools. However, I think that this is an important step forward to change the culture and ensure that pupils have the access to learn about apprenticeships and the technical education and skills that they need.

Lords amendment 3 introduces a new clause specifically providing for regulations to be made about the delivery of documents about an insolvent FE body to the registrar, and how those documents are kept and accessed by the public. Essentially, the new clause allows for the proper management of the paperwork of an insolvency procedure for an FE body.

I am pleased that the Government were able to accept amendment 4 in the other place, which deleted the words "if possible" from clause 25(2). The original drafting of subsection (2) was intended to offer reassurance to creditors and the education administrator that the education administration would not continue indefinitely while we waited for the education administrator to achieve the impossible. Instead, it caused concern, both in this House and in the other place, that student protection was in some way lessened. That was not our intention. Having sought the confirmation of lawyers that there was no change to our policy objectives, we were content to delete the words in order to address those concerns.

Lords amendment 5 replaced the original clause in the Bill with a new version in order to fully apply, rather than replicate, the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 to further education bodies in England and Wales. The new version of clause 40—formerly clause 37—still allows the court to disqualify any governors whom it finds liable of wrongdoing from being governors, and now also from being company directors in any part of the UK. It fully prevents disqualified individuals from being able to repeat the mistakes they have made in a different way, potentially at the expense of another FE institution. We have amended the clause to close a potential loophole in the Bill and more fully protect learners at FE institutions from the potential actions of any governor who acts recklessly.

3 pm

The existing CDDA regime is effective as a finely balanced deterrent for company directors. It is rare that directors are found liable, and its existence in insolvency legislation does not inhibit people from choosing to become company directors, but helps to prevent poor financial management. The presence of the CDDA regime causes company directors to reflect carefully on their financial decisions and the potential consequences of acting wrongfully in relation to creditors. We want to ensure the same deterrent effect for college governors. Governors might not appreciate the full consequence of disqualification if they are still able to act as company

directors and could set up a company to run a college. They might be prepared to operate with a greater degree of risk. The amendment ensures that governors of FE bodies are on a par with governors of academies, to whom the CDDA also fully applies.

Lords amendment 7 to clause 47, formerly clause 43, inserts an additional provision, in so far as it relates to section 426 of the Insolvency Act 1986, to the parts of the Bill that extend to all parts of the UK. That does not change the application of the FE insolvency regime only to FE bodies in England and Wales. It ensures co-operation, if necessary, between the courts of the different parts of the United Kingdom in matters regarding insolvent FE bodies. We expect cases where co-operation is needed to be very rare.

I turn to Government amendments 8 to 10. The Bill as introduced allows the Institute for Apprenticeships to share data with Ofsted, Ofqual and the Office for Students, and vice versa. The amendments will enable the Secretary of State to extend the information-sharing gateway to other persons not stated in the Bill. The provision is necessary because the bodies with which the institute will co-operate and share information are expected to change over time. The amendments ensure that the institute can function effectively.

Lords amendments 11 to 18 were prompted by the helpful discussions we had in this House. It was clear then that we shared a common concern to ensure that care leavers receive appropriate help and support should their college become insolvent. Opposition Members, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), were very clear that care leavers are particularly vulnerable. I agree, which is why I undertook to reflect on how we might best support such individuals. I am pleased that we were able to table these amendments to schedules 3 and 4, requiring the education administrator to send a copy of their proposals to the director of children's services at the relevant local authority. That will ensure that the director of children's services is formally notified of a college insolvency and can take appropriate action to provide support for any of their care leavers affected by the proposals.

I ask hon. Members to support the Government on these amendments.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for his considered exposition of the Government's position, particularly regarding the amendments, with which we are not in dispute. I shall say something about Lords amendment 2 after turning to Lords amendment 1. We welcome the Government's changes, particularly those to the technical parts of the Bill. The devil is in the detail, and we do not always get these things right first time around. I am grateful to the Government for reflecting on that.

I particularly take on board what the Minister said about care leavers and local authorities. Without straying outside the narrow confines of today's discussions, may I say that I hope that the recent debates in the House on the Children and Social Work Bill, in which my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) played a strong, positive and constructive part, have been a useful focus for the Minister and his Department in tabling the amendments that he has spoken to today. I am grateful to him for that.

I am also grateful for the widened information sharing in schedule 1. As the Minister knows, I have described the present structure as a bit of an alphabet soup. To strain the analogy, I hope that this change will enable us to fish some of the letters out of the soup and make them work together a little easier than they would otherwise have done.

As the Minister says, the issue in Lords amendment 1 could be regarded as one of financial privilege. I accept that he has great interest in matters of financial support and the rest of it. I hope that he understands that I have never, in any shape or form, and in any of the Committee sittings in which we have debated, disavowed his good intentions and commitment to issues of equality. But, of course, warm words of themselves do not necessarily carry through the projects that we all want to see. When he says that most apprenticeships have benefits, one has to ask about the fate of people who do not get those benefits. He says that this proposal will cost £200 million but, as he said, we are already committing £60 million to training providers, so I am not sure that that is a strong or powerful argument.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: I will give way in a little while. I want to make some progress on the main issue before giving way to the hon. Gentleman.

I am proud of the fact that the noble Lords considered the matter addressed in amendment 1, which I support, in considerable detail. In doing so, they revealed how much further the Government needed to go and, in my view, still need to go. In February, *The Times Educational Supplement* published an eloquent chart that spelled out in graphic detail the current gap in support between students and apprentices. It showed that apprentices have no access to care to learn grants, and that their families have no access to universal credit and council tax credit. Most trenchant and relevant when it comes to amendment 1, they have no access to child benefit.

Amendment 1 would enable families eligible for child benefit to receive it for children aged under 20 who are undertaking apprenticeships. The Opposition understand, as I am sure Government Members do, that it is not simply about the benefit itself, but the doors that that benefit opens to other benefits.

Charlie Elphicke: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's argument, which seems to involve a spending commitment of £200 million. How would he pay for that?

Gordon Marsden: First, we do not recognise that figure of £200 million. Secondly, as I have said, the Government are already committing £60 million to training providers, so I really do not know why the hon. Gentleman is raising the issue of £200 million, which would be aggregated over a period of time.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: No, I will not give way again. The hon. Gentleman has had one go. I want to make progress.

The amendment calls for the Secretary of State to use regulations to make provision to ensure that apprentices are regarded as being involved in approved education or

training. The Government's apprenticeships programme has seen the introduction of the Institute for Apprenticeships and the apprenticeship levy this month, while setting the target of 3 million apprenticeships by 2020. However, many commentators have continued to raise real question marks about the potential quality of those new apprenticeships. It is really important that in reducing the growing skills gap in this country apprentices are not given a raw deal. My noble Friend Lord Watson spelled this out vividly in the House of Lords when he said:

"Why should families suffer as we seek to train young people desperately needed to fill the skills gaps that I mentioned earlier?"—*[Official Report, House of Lords, 27 March 2017; Vol. 782, c. 361.]*

We simply ask that question.

I am well aware—we discussed this in Committee in this place and it was also discussed in the other place—that apprenticeships are not currently classed as approved educational training by the Department for Work and Pensions. That is one of the reasons we have raised this issue so many times. The Minister needs to reflect on the situation of apprentices who live with parents and whose families could lose out by more than £1,000 a year through not being able to access child benefit, and could lose more than £3,200 a year under universal credit. If the Government want to reach this target, it cannot be in anyone's interest for doors to be closed to young people keen to take up and embark on an apprenticeship.

The predecessor Government—perhaps this has not been heard so much under this Government—were very fond of the concept of "nudge" to achieve results, but, as I have said on other occasions, people can be nudged away from things as well as towards them. In some circumstances, parents may prevent young people from taking up apprenticeships because the economic consequences for the family of loss of benefit payments in various forms could be considerable. Their lordships made this point in their debate on 27 February. Baroness Garden noted that

"only 10% of apprenticeships are taken up by young people on free school meals",

adding that

"the loss of child benefit"

was

"a significant penalty."—*[Official Report, House of Lords, 27 February 2017; Vol. 779, c. GC99.]*

Baroness Wolf spoke very strongly when she said, echoing the Minister, that there needs to be genuine parity if the Government want to fulfil a holistic vision.

As I have said, the exclusions printed in *The Times Educational Supplement* justify the anger and disappointment of the National Union of Students and apprenticeship organisations, which feel that they are being treated like second-class citizens. I accept that, as the Minister said, some apprentices are being paid well above the minimum rate, but research has shown that some apprentices earn as little as £3.50 an hour.

Charlie Elphicke: Since the hon. Gentleman is talking about financial matters again, will he return to my earlier intervention when he said that he did recognise the figure of £200 million? How much would his policy cost?

Gordon Marsden: As I say, those issues would be taken forward over a five-year period. The £200 million figure that the Minister quoted has not been recognised, and I do not intend to engage with it any further because no further detail has been given to us on this point.

Charlie Elphicke *rose*—

Gordon Marsden: No, I am sorry, but I am not going to give way again. The hon. Gentleman has had two shouts and he is out. *[Interruption.]* I am going to continue, so he can stop chuntering.

This will inevitably have a negative effect on the family income in circumstances where the household budget is not covered by the earnings in an apprentice's salary, given that the apprentice minimum wage is barely over £3 an hour. The National Society of Apprentices made that point in its submission to the Committee, saying:

"It seems inconsistent that apprentices are continually excluded from definitions of 'approved' learners, when apprenticeships are increasingly assuming their place in the government's holistic view of education and skills".

If apprenticeships are to be seen as a top-tier option, then the benefits should be top tier too. University students receive assistance from a range of sources, from accessing finance to discounted rates on council tax. Apprentices currently do not receive many of those benefits. Their lordships believe, and we agree, that the system must be changed so that both groups are treated equally.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he is approaching these amendments. He mentioned that some apprentices were paid more than the apprentice minimum wage. Is he aware that 82% of apprentices are paid at or above the appropriate level of the national minimum wage or national living wage?

3.15 pm

Gordon Marsden: Those figures come from the Minister's Department, and I am not going to dispute them on this occasion. We are trying to set, in legislation, provisions that will be valid for five, 10 or 15 years. It seems far more appropriate to have a principle under which everybody has equal access. We can trade figures all day about whether this is acceptable or whether it is 10%, 15%, 20% or 25% of apprentices who are not in this position. I do not believe that we should go down this route, and Members of the House of Lords agreed when they passed this amendment.

Shakira Martin, the NUS vice-president for FE, says:

"If apprenticeships are going to be the silver bullet to create a high-skilled economy for the future, the government has to go further than rhetoric and genuinely support apprentices financially to succeed."

In support of this amendment, the Learning and Work Institute has said:

"There are currently participation penalties for low income and disadvantaged young people who take an apprenticeship compared to an academic pathway. This amendment would help towards treating apprentices and students in further and higher education equally in the support and benefits system."

The Government's decision to exclude apprenticeships from the category of approved education or training will serve as a deterrent to young people, particularly

[Gordon Marsden]

those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Together with that, and without any change to the category that apprentices are placed in by the DWP—FE has to accept that, as things stand at the moment—the Government are providing a severe financial disincentive for young people to enter into an apprenticeship as opposed to other routes of education. The National Society of Apprentices agrees.

In the other place, the Minister's colleague, Baroness Buscombe, said that there would be discussions about this issue with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, but that did not happen. The Minister has told me on previous occasions that this needed to be addressed and discussed with other Departments, but that has not happened. This is a Government who are long on rhetoric but short on delivery, and it is young people and their families who are suffering. The Government are now blocking a modest proposal from the House of the Lords to begin to remedy their inability to do joined-up government.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman will know that, as I have mentioned before, we are carrying out a social mobility review of a whole range of issues, from benefits to incentives to providers and employers, to get more apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is entirely wrong to say that we are not doing so, as a significant amount of work is going into these areas.

Gordon Marsden: I am grateful to the Minister. The broader perspective of social mobility is a perfectly reasonable way of going forward. However, to be honest, particularly at a time such as today when we are moving to a general election, I think that most people would be interested in some movement—some jam now rather than a promise of jam possibly in future from the social mobility study. I will come on to talk about other areas where, I am afraid, the Government have moved at, to put it at its kindest, a reasonably glacial pace. That is one of the reasons I am not terribly impressed by the Minister's argument, although, as I say, I understand and appreciate his commitment to trying to do something.

I want to speak in support of the second part of the amendment, which talks about opening benefits to care leavers by opening up access to a bursary that has traditionally been available only to university students. Young people in local authority care who move into higher education can apply for a one-off bursary of £2,000 from their local authority, and the amendment would enable care leavers who take up apprenticeships to access the same financial support.

I remind the Minister of what the Children's Society has said. Every year, around 11,000 young people aged 16 or over leave the care of their local authority and begin the difficult transition out of care and into adulthood—to be fair to him, he recognised that in his opening remarks—and my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields tabled an amendment to the Children and Social Work Bill to provide such a local offer to care leavers. The Government have a golden opportunity to follow up on that by focusing on support that could be provided by the DWP. I am at a loss to understand why the Government are ignoring this possibility. They

could make provision from the apprenticeship levy for local authorities to administer a £2,000 grant to all care leavers.

When care leavers move into independent living they often begin to manage their own budget fully for the first time, and that move may take place earlier for them than for others in their peer group. Remember that a care leaver in year one of an apprenticeship may be, and often is, earning as little as £3.40 an hour before being able to transition to a higher wage in the second year. Evidence from their services and research has revealed how challenging care leavers may find it to manage that budget, because of a lack of financial support and education. As a result, young carers frequently fall into debt and financial difficulty. The Minister really needs to put himself in their shoes. The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson), could tell us all, from his own family's perspective, how vulnerable young people who come from disturbed and difficult family backgrounds can be.

The question remains: why are the Government not prepared to retain this amendment? Fine words are all very well, but you may know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that according to the old Tudor proverb, "Fine words butter no parsnips". Just what are the bureaucratic arguments for doing nothing to support hard-working young people and their families—and, even more so, those who do not have families to support them—to fulfil their hopes of better times via an apprenticeship? We talk about parity of esteem between HE students and apprentices, but some of these young people, because of their circumstances, struggle to have a strong sense of self-esteem.

Why have the Government not moved on this? Once again, why have the consultations with the DWP not taken place? Was the Minister nobbled by No. 10 trustees or by those in his own Department, in the same way as Department for Education Ministers seem to have led us down the garden path of reforms to GCSE resits only to slam the door shut? I say as gently as I can to the Minister that if the Government do not retain the amendment, people will know that the Government's rhetoric has been somewhat hollow, and apprentices and their families will suffer.

I join the Minister in supporting amendment 2, which was carried in the Lords, and I also want to talk about amendment 6. The lack of parity of esteem for apprentices starts at an early age, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) illustrated in his useful and constructive exchange with the Minister, the rhetoric on careers advice still does not match the painful reality that faces many young people.

The reality is that careers advice has been devastated over the last Parliament and since 2010, certainly at a local level, and young people who want to take a vocational and apprenticeship route are in danger of being short-changed again in their careers advice. Despite the work of the Careers & Enterprise Company, which is still in its infancy, support in schools remains poor. Careers England—the trade body for careers advice and guidance—and the Career Development Institute have confirmed to me recently that in their view, nothing has greatly changed. They estimate that only a third of schools can adequately deliver careers advice. Taken alongside the shortage of careers advisers and the fact

that the remaining advisers earn far less than they used to, it adds up to a very difficult position.

That is one of the reasons why last November the co-chairs of the Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), said that the Government had been complacent over careers advice. They said:

“The Government’s lack of action to address failings in careers provision is unacceptable and its response to our report smacks of complacency.”

I know that the Minister challenges that strongly, and I know that he has put on record that the Government are working towards a thorough careers strategy in that respect. But we have to deal with the situation as it is today, not with what it might be under a careers strategy developed by whatever Government are around at the end of the year.

In the survey conducted by the Industry Apprentice Council last year, just 42% of respondents found out about apprenticeships from school or college, and using one’s own initiative remained by far the most common way for a young person to discover apprenticeships. The council also said that there needed to be a change in careers information, advice and guidance because the proportion of respondents who said that theirs had been very poor remained high across the three surveys.

That is why the House of Lords has produced these two quite detailed and comprehensive amendments; those overall issues are not being addressed. Strong careers guidance is critical to promoting apprenticeships in schools. If we are to make a success of the institute, it is crucial that young people are alerted early enough in their school life to the importance and attraction of technical routes. That is one of the things that amendment 2 from the other House, which we supported, makes very clear.

If the Minister does not think that the Lords amendment on careers advice is necessary, perhaps he would like to explain just how and when the Government are going to get a grip on the existing fractured landscape of careers advice revealed by his own Department. Last month—it was not bedtime reading, so I will not be surprised if hon. Members have not read it—the Department for Education published a research report, “An economic evaluation of the National Careers Service”. The report was produced by London Economics, which was originally commissioned by the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to evaluate the impact of the National Careers Service.

The National Careers Service has changed considerably during the five years since it was introduced by the Minister’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). I had the benefit of discussions with him at the time, and he was very clear when it started that the National Careers Service would principally be for the over-24s. That process has changed. I am not necessarily criticising that, but the process has certainly migrated in an unplanned fashion. The National Careers Service website says that anyone aged 13 and over can have access to the data, and that adults aged 19 and over can have access to one-to-one support. The problem is that only 15% to 22% of the customers—again, I am taking statistics from a report that the Government have commissioned—were referred by Jobcentre Plus, while the remainder

were self-referring. Does that not speak volumes about the lack of joined-up government between the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions?

Ian Mearns: In some respects, my hon. Friend is actually being generous to the Government. I do not believe that the careers service as it existed has been decimated; I believe it has been laid waste by the Government’s policy since 2010. We really need to get back to youngsters having independent and impartial advice and guidance on their future career available to them. Without such independence and impartiality, we could unfortunately get back to having those with vested interests giving advice to young people. I remember the late Malcolm Wicks referring to this in the 1990s, when he said that much of the advice given to young people about their future careers was akin to pensions mis-selling because the service was packed with vested interests.

3.30 pm

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend makes a very important and valuable point, as he did earlier to the Minister, and we certainly need to think very hard about those things.

As I have said, the National Careers Service process has migrated substantially, which may not in itself be a bad thing. I genuinely want to know from the Minister what connectivity there is between the National Careers Service and the Careers & Enterprise Company if the coverage starts as early as age 13. I would really like to know what the connectivity is in that process.

The very disappointing fact is that, as the impact report says, researchers were

“unable to identify a positive impact of the National Careers Service on employment or benefit dependency outcomes”.

Arguably, those outcomes are its main purpose. This is another example of why it is essential for the Government to act on the careers strategy, and of why their failure so far to do so makes Lords amendments 2 and 6 so important. With the expansion of apprenticeships and the addition of technical education to the institute, it will be even more important for students and apprentices to have all the information that they need to make informed decisions.

Young people who get the best careers advice in college or schools are more likely to be able to seek out the better apprenticeships. That is why I warmly welcome Lords amendment 2, Lord Baker’s amendment, which had our support and cross-party support. It would ensure that schools have to provide access to advice about apprenticeships. Why does that matter? It matters because, as my hon. Friend has said, knowledge in general is power, and unbiased knowledge is very important indeed. Incidentally, that is also why my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to require schools to give access to their premises to representatives of post-16 education institutions to enable them to provide pupils with advice and guidance.

All of that is why Lords amendment 6 is also important. I am encouraged by the fact that the new chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, to whom I have spoken recently, is sympathetic to Ofsted making a much stronger case for ensuring that apprenticeships rate more highly in the information provided in schools. Incidentally, the Lords have already pointed out that that will require Ofsted to

[Gordon Marsden]

have more resources; my noble Friend Lord Watson pointed that out on Report on 27 March. If we do not get integration between the Careers & Enterprise Company and the National Careers Service, what we ask Ofsted to do will not work. Just what is the Minister's response to these arguments? Why are the National Careers Service and the Careers & Enterprise Company apparently working on different lines? If he does not want to accept Lords amendment 6, what guarantees can he give to this House or to noble Lords that the necessary work will be done?

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I want to speak very briefly on the Government motion to disagree with Lords amendment 6 and Government amendment (a) in lieu, as much as anything else to probe what amendment (a) will achieve. As a preface to that, let me give an impression of what the noble Lord Storey sought to achieve with Lords amendment 6. We have all acknowledged during the course of the debate so far that careers advice is incredibly variable and has been for some considerable time. Lord Storey tried to set in place a mechanism for monitoring careers advice so that we know precisely how good or how bad, and how valuable or useless, it actually is.

In Committee stage in the Lords, Lord Nash described careers advice as always having been "pretty poor". There was, of course, an Ofsted report in 2013 that established that three quarters of schools were not providing effective advice or, as the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) pointed out, impartial advice. It said that the guidance given to schools was not sufficiently explicit, employers were not engaging in many cases and the National Careers Service was not effectively promoted. A key conclusion of the Ofsted report was that schools' advice should be assessed when taking into account general school leadership, or sector leadership in the case of further education—Lords amendment 6 also applies to the FE sector.

I think that the Minister accepts all that, and I know that he has produced a variation on Lords amendment 6. I would like him to satisfy me and the House that it complies with what the Lords intended in their amendment.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) and the shadow Minister for their speeches. I understand that the hon. Member for Southport is stepping down. He is an experienced Member of the House, and I send him every good wish for the future.

To answer the hon. Gentleman we are essentially accepting de facto Lords amendment 6, which was suggested by Lord Storey. We have just made it tighter for legal reasons and, in fact, stronger. Ofsted will now be required to comment on college careers offers in its reports. However, we accept the principle of Lords amendment 6.

I set out earlier the Government's position that the majority of the Lords amendments serve to strengthen the measures in the Bill and ensure their success in practice. I urge hon. Members to accept all the amendments made in the Lords, with the exception of Lords amendment 1. As I explained earlier, that amendment is subject to financial privilege and I ask Members to

reject it on that basis, while noting the work I have set out, which demonstrates our commitment to finding the most effective ways to address barriers and support the disadvantaged into apprenticeships.

The shadow Minister said, in essence, that we should put our money where our mouth is. It is worth remembering that we have 900,000 apprentices at the moment, which is the highest on record, and that 25% of apprentices come from the poorest fifth of areas. The Careers & Enterprise Company has more than 1,300 enterprise advisers going into schools, and they are set to target something like 250,000 students in 75% of the career coldspots in the country. The National Careers Service is there to give careers advice and CV advice, and to provide personal contact either face to face, over the telephone or on the internet. The bodies have different roles.

I ask Members to accept our amendment in lieu of Lords amendment 6, on which many noble Lords spoke. I spoke earlier of the positive activity at Derby College. It is by no means the only college taking active steps to provide high-quality careers advice to students. I have seen incredible work in my own college in Harlow and in Gateshead in the north-east of England. We want to ensure that all young people can access such support, and I ask Members to support that ambition by accepting the amendment in lieu.

Ian Mearns: I know that the Minister is determined and full of good intentions, but good intentions do not provide sound careers advice and guidance to young people who are in the system now. We need to see more urgency from the Government in backing up his decent intentions, to make sure that young people get the impartial advice and guidance they so deeply need as soon as possible.

Robert Halfon: Let me give the hon. Gentleman our intention. Given the financial climate, £90 million is no small sum of money to spend on careers, predominantly with the Careers & Enterprise Company, which has enterprise advisers going into schools. There is £20 million for mentoring services in schools. As I mentioned, enterprise advisers are going up and down the country to coldspots. The National Careers Service alone is getting more than £75 million this year to advise on careers. That is real financial backing for two very important services.

Ian Mearns: I am listening to the Minister. I was a member of the National Careers Service national association board prior to the invention of Connexions. I seem to remember that the national budget for careers at that time was something like £130 million. That was more than 15 years ago. In the current climate, the figures the Minister is talking about are inadequate.

Robert Halfon: Given the financial climate, the £90 million to be spent predominantly with the Careers & Enterprise Company and the £77 million that is going to the National Careers Service this year alone are sizeable sums of money. As I have said, we are developing a careers strategy. Obviously the election is occurring, but I hope very much that we will see careers with much more of a skills focus, and do much more work in schools on mentoring and on work experience.

I have said that the Bill is a Ronseal Bill. It is very much part of our reforms to create an apprenticeships and skills nation and to give millions of young people the ladder of opportunity to get the jobs, security and prosperity that they need. It is a Bill to ensure that technical education is held in the regard it deserves. In the unlikely event of a college insolvency, students will be protected. The measures in the Bill make vital changes to support young people to build the essential skills that our nation needs, and they provide the right support to enable young people to climb that ladder. Many Members on both sides of the House and in the other place have spoken in support of that ambition, and I take this opportunity to thank them for their ongoing commitment to the Bill and for supporting all our young people to reach their potential.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 182.

Division No. 197]

[3.43 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Afriyie, Adam	Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Aldous, Peter	Collins, Damian
Allan, Lucy	Costa, Alberto
Allen, Heidi	Courts, Robert
Amess, Sir David	Crabb, rh Stephen
Andrew, Stuart	Crouch, Tracey
Ansell, Caroline	Davies, Byron
Argar, Edward	Davies, Chris
Atkins, Victoria	Davies, David T. C.
Bacon, Mr Richard	Davies, Glyn
Baker, Mr Steve	Davies, Dr James
Barclay, Stephen	Davies, Mims
Bebb, Guto	Davies, Philip
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Dinenage, Caroline
Benyon, rh Richard	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Beresford, Sir Paul	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Berry, Jake	Donelan, Michelle
Berry, James	Double, Steve
Bingham, Andrew	Dowden, Oliver
Blackman, Bob	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Blackwood, Nicola	Drax, Richard
Blunt, Crispin	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Bone, Mr Peter	Duddridge, James
Borwick, Victoria	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Dunne, Mr Philip
Bradley, rh Karen	Ellis, Michael
Brady, Mr Graham	Ellison, Jane
Brazier, Sir Julian	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Bridgen, Andrew	Elphicke, Charlie
Brine, Steve	Eustice, George
Brokenshire, rh James	Evans, Graham
Bruce, Fiona	Evans, Mr Nigel
Buckland, Robert	Evennett, rh David
Burns, Conor	Fabricant, Michael
Burns, rh Sir Simon	Fernandes, Suella
Burrowes, Mr David	Field, rh Mark
Burt, rh Alistair	Foster, Kevin
Cairns, rh Alun	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Carmichael, Neil	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Cartledge, James	Frazer, Lucy
Cash, Sir William	Freeman, George
Caulfield, Maria	Freer, Mike
Chope, Mr Christopher	Fysh, Marcus
Churchill, Jo	Gale, Sir Roger
Clark, rh Greg	Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Cleverly, James	Garnier, Mark

Gauke, rh Mr David	Lewis, rh Brandon
Ghani, Nusrat	Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Gibb, rh Mr Nick	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl	Lidington, rh Mr David
Glen, John	Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Goodwill, Mr Robert	Lopresti, Jack
Graham, Richard	Lord, Jonathan
Grant, Mrs Helen	Loughton, Tim
Gray, James	Mackinlay, Craig
Grayling, rh Chris	Main, Mrs Anne
Green, Chris	Mak, Mr Alan
Green, rh Damian	Malthouse, Kit
Greening, rh Justine	Mann, Scott
Griffiths, Andrew	Mathias, Dr Tania
Gummer, rh Ben	Maynard, Paul
Gyimah, Mr Sam	McCartney, Karl
Halfon, rh Robert	Menzies, Mark
Hall, Luke	Mercer, Johnny
Hammond, Stephen	Merriman, Huw
Hancock, rh Matt	Metcalfe, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg	Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Harper, rh Mr Mark	Milling, Amanda
Harrington, Richard	Mills, Nigel
Harris, Rebecca	Milton, rh Anne
Hart, Simon	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan	Mordaunt, Penny
Hayes, rh Mr John	Morgan, rh Nicky
Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Morris, Anne Marie
Heapey, James	Morris, David
Heaton-Jones, Peter	Morris, James
Henderson, Gordon	Morton, Wendy
Herbert, rh Nick	Mowat, David
Hinds, Damian	Mundell, rh David
Hoare, Simon	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Hollingbery, George	Murrison, Dr Andrew
Hollinrake, Kevin	Neill, Robert
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Newton, Sarah
Holloway, Mr Adam	Nokes, Caroline
Hopkins, Kris	Norman, Jesse
Howarth, Sir Gerald	Nuttall, Mr David
Howell, John	Offord, Dr Matthew
Howlett, Ben	Opperman, Guy
Huddleston, Nigel	Parish, Neil
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	Patel, rh Priti
Hurd, Mr Nick	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Jackson, Mr Stewart	Pawsey, Mark
James, Margot	Penrose, John
Javid, rh Sajid	Percy, Andrew
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	Perry, Claire
Jenkin, Mr Bernard	Philip, Chris
Jenkyns, Andrea	Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Jenrick, Robert	Poulter, Dr Daniel
Johnson, rh Boris	Pow, Rebecca
Johnson, Dr Caroline	Prentis, Victoria
Johnson, Gareth	Prisk, Mr Mark
Johnson, Joseph	Pritchard, Mark
Jones, Andrew	Pursglove, Tom
Jones, rh Mr David	Quin, Jeremy
Jones, Mr Marcus	Quince, Will
Kawczynski, Daniel	Raab, Mr Dominic
Kennedy, Seema	Redwood, rh John
Kirby, Simon	Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Knight, rh Sir Greg	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Knight, Julian	Robinson, Mary
Lancaster, Mark	Rosindell, Andrew
Latham, Pauline	Rudd, rh Amber
Leadsom, rh Andrea	Rutley, David
Lee, Dr Phillip	Sandbach, Antoinette
Lefroy, Jeremy	Scully, Paul
Leigh, Sir Edward	Selous, Andrew
Leslie, Charlotte	Shapps, rh Grant
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver	Sharma, Alok

Shelbrooke, Alec
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David

Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Chris Heaton-Harris and
Christopher Pincher

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allen, Mr Graham
 Anderson, Mr David
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blenkinsop, Tom
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Lyn
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Burnham, rh Andy
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Jenny
 Coaker, Vernon
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Crausby, Sir David
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 Davies, Geraint

Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Jim
 Dowd, Peter
 Dugher, Michael
 Durkan, Mark
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elliott, Tom
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Ffello, Robert
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Furniss, Gill
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh Mr David

Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Marsden, Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Mulholland, Greg
 Nandy, Lisa
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Owen, Albert
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess

Phillipson, Bridget
 Pound, Stephen
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simpson, David
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jeff Smith and
Vicky Foxcroft

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 6 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 6.

Lords amendments 2 to 5 and 7 to 18 agreed to.

Ordered. That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 1;

That Robert Halfon, Michelle Donelan, Chris Heaton-Harris, Gordon Marsden, Henry Smith and Karl Turner be members of the Committee;

That Robert Halfon be the Chair of the Committee;
That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(*Christopher Pincher.*)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993

3.58 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): I beg to move,

That this House approves, for the purposes of Section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993, the Government's assessment as set out in the Budget Report and Autumn Statement, combined with the Office for Budget Responsibility's Economic and Fiscal Outlook and Fiscal Sustainability Report, which forms the basis of the United Kingdom's Convergence Programme.

The legal requirement to give the European Commission an update of the UK's economic and budgetary position—our convergence programme—means there is a welcome opportunity for a wider economic debate, should we want one. [*Interruption.*] Clearly, since last year's—
[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. If Members leaving the Chamber do so a little more quietly, we can hear the Minister. Thank you.

Mr Gauke: Clearly, since last year's convergence programme debate there has been a momentous change in the UK's relationship with the European Union. The article 50 process is now under way and the United Kingdom is leaving the European Union. There cannot, as some suggest, be any turning back from that. In accordance with the outcome of the referendum, we are leaving the European Union and will make our own decisions, take control of the things that matter to us and seize every opportunity to build a stronger and fairer Britain.

Given our decision to leave, some Members might find it odd that we are debating the UK's convergence programme here today. It is right that we should do so, however, because we continue to exercise our full membership of the European Union until our exit and because to do so is a legal requirement that we must take seriously. I should, however, remind the House that the content of the convergence programme is drawn from the Government's assessment of the UK's economic and budgetary position. This assessment is based on the spring Budget report and the Office for Budget Responsibility's most recent economic and fiscal outlook. It is that content, rather than the convergence programme itself, that requires the approval of the House.

I should also remind the House that although the UK participates in the stability and growth pact, which requires convergence programmes to be submitted, we are required—by virtue of our protocol to the treaty opting out of the euro—only to endeavour to avoid excessive deficits. The UK cannot be subject to any action or sanctions as a result of our participation.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): On that point, would my right hon. Friend like to comment on how much influence he thinks the convergence criteria and the deficit reduction requirements have had on successive UK Governments to drive more austerity and cuts?

Mr Gauke: In the seven years that I have been a Treasury Minister, I have not noticed the convergence programme having an influence on the decisions that

[Mr Gauke]

we have taken. We have taken decisions to reduce the deficit because we believe that that is in the long-term interests of the United Kingdom, rather than because of any requirements under the EU treaties.

Let me provide a brief overview of the information that we will set out in the UK's convergence programme. Members should note that this does not represent new information; rather, it captures the Government's assessment of the UK's medium-term economic and budgetary position, as we set out in the spring Budget. It is fair to say that in March 2017, we were in a better position economically than many had predicted. Growth in the second half of 2016 was stronger than the OBR had anticipated in the autumn statement. In fact, the UK economy grew faster last year than most other advanced major economies, and employment remains at a record high. So, following a period of robust economic growth, record employment and a falling deficit, we sought to safeguard that economic stability in the Budget. That is particularly important as we prepare our country to leave the European Union.

The OBR forecasts that business investment will remain subdued as we begin the period of negotiation with our EU friends and partners, and it continues to judge that, in the medium term, growth will slow due to weaker growth in consumer demand as a consequence of a rise in inflation. Accordingly, putting the public finances in good order will remain vital for the foreseeable future, and all the more so given that the deficit remains too high and that there is a range of potential risks in the global economy. That is why we are getting ourselves into a position of readiness to handle difficulties of any kind that might come our way. Our fiscal rules, which enable us to do that, strike the right balance between reducing the deficit, maintaining flexibility and investing for the long term.

Overall public sector net borrowing as a percentage of GDP is predicted to fall from 3.8% last year to 2.6% this year. This means that we are forecast to meet our 3% stability and growth pact target this year for the first time in almost a decade. Borrowing is forecast to be 2.9% in 2017-18 and then to fall to 1.9% in 2018-19 before reaching 0.7% in 2021-22, which will be its lowest level in two decades. The economic forecasts are broadly unchanged since the autumn, but the OBR has substantially revised down its short-term forecast for public sector net borrowing. As a consequence, we are within sight of bringing to a halt the increase in the national debt as a proportion of GDP. Debt is forecast to peak at 88.8% of GDP in 2017-18, and then to fall in subsequent years.

John Redwood: On that point, it is important to remind the House that £435 billion of the debt is now owned by the state, so the state owes the money to itself, meaning that it is not a debt in any normal sense.

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend is correct about where the debt is owed, but as a country we must none the less be wary of a debt that is high by recent historical standards. It is right that we show determination to set out a plan for how the debt to GDP ratio can be reduced to ensure that the UK is in a more resilient place to absorb the shocks to our economy and to the public finances that occur from time to time.

Beyond our fiscal rules to protect the public purse and prepare our economy, the Budget also set out a wide range of things that this Government will be doing to invest in our future. That includes giving our children the chance to go to a good or outstanding school that sets them up to succeed; helping young people across the country get the skills they need for the high-paid, high-skilled jobs of the future; and investing in cutting-edge technology and innovation, so that Britain continues to be at the forefront of the global technology revolution—three things that will be at the heart of our efforts finally to address the country's long-standing productivity challenges.

The Budget also promised greater support for our social care system, with substantial additional funding so that people get the care they deserve as they grow older. The Budget works to strengthen our public services over the long term, too, in our determination to bring down the deficit and get the UK back to living within its means, and to fund our public services for the long term through a fair and sustainable tax system. The spring Budget, therefore, was one that made the most of the opportunities ahead by laying the foundations of a stronger, fairer and better Britain.

Following the House's approval of the economic and budgetary assessment that forms the basis of the convergence programme, the Government will submit the convergence programme to the Council of the European Union and the European Commission, with recommendations expected from the Commission in May. The submission of convergence programmes by non-euro area member states, and stability programmes by euro area member states, also provides a useful framework for co-ordinating fiscal policies. A degree of fiscal policy co-ordination across countries can be beneficial to ensure a stable global economy, which is in the UK's national interest.

The UK has always taken part in international mechanisms for policy co-ordination, such as the G7, the G20 and the OECD. Although we are leaving the EU, we will of course continue to have a deep interest in the economic stability and prosperity of our European friends and neighbours, so we will continue to play our part in this process while we remain an EU member and in other international policy co-ordination processes once we have left the EU.

The Government are committed to ensuring that we act in full accordance with section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993, and that this House approves the economic and budgetary assessment that forms the basis of the convergence programme.

4.8 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): We find ourselves in a strange position. We are debating a motion to approve the Government's programme for convergence with the EU at the start of an election campaign in the context of leaving the EU. That is an unusual set of circumstances, to say the least. Some see it as almost theological. There will no longer be a requirement for convergence, and the Conservatives have no idea how our economy might work post-Brexit, other than their plan for a bargain-basement deregulated tax haven. It is a simple, if flawed and dangerous, plan regardless of the position that people took in the referendum.

A complete lack of vision from the Government means that no one can be confident about what our economy will look like in just two years' time. Labour accepts the referendum result, which is why we did not frustrate the triggering of the article 50 negotiations, but we will never support the chaos of a Conservative plan for Brexit that will potentially put our economy in danger. That does not mean being a "saboteur", as suggested in some newspapers today; it means doing the job that we were sent here to do. Wealth concentrated in the hands of a tiny super-rich elite and corporations treating us like a tax haven is not particularly good, and it is not what people voted for.

We have heard much in the debate over the past few months about taking back control. We heard time after time that we will take back control, but we should not take back control and put it in the hands of a group of plutocrats while leaving most people across the country worse off year after year. When we take back control, it has to be shared by everyone, not just a few.

A Labour Government would deliver a final deal that reflected Labour's values, ensuring a strong and collaborative future relationship with the EU, which the Minister mentioned. We would defend people's rights and protections, preventing the race to the bottom that is feared. There is a clear choice between a better future for the whole country under a Labour Government and a bargain-basement tax haven under the Conservatives.

The Brexit course set by the Prime Minister will have huge repercussions for our country and our economy. In 2016, the UK exported goods and services to the EU totalling £548 billion, with imports totalling £585 billion. The EU accounts for 44% of UK exports of goods and services, and 53% of imports. Despite the Government's laid-back approach to trade with the EU, a hard Brexit puts much of those exports and EU imports at risk. Sterling has already dropped by nearly 20% against the dollar since the UK voted to leave the EU, becoming the world's worst performing major currency in October 2016. Many economists now suspect that the pound may depreciate even further as negotiations inevitably deadlock and begin to flounder.

When the Conservatives came to office, they committed to balancing the books by 2015, and they broke that promise. It is unequivocally a promise broken. They then put the date back to 2019-20, and again it was not delivered. Here we are, days away from the Dissolution of Parliament, without the Government making as much progress on the deficit as they promised. The Chancellor regularly says that it is a rolling target, but there is no such thing. He either has a target or he does not.

Under this Government, debt as a percentage of GDP has continually risen and now stands at 85%. How can that be a sign of a healthy economy, notwithstanding that the Minister has indicated it will start to come down? GDP growth per capita under this Government has not once surpassed the pre-crisis trend of 2.3%. In fact, growth has been revised down for 2016, 2018 and, now, 2019 and 2020. Again, that is hardly the sign of a strong economy.

In seven years, the Conservatives have borrowed £750 billion, and I remind people time and again that that is more than all Labour Governments combined. Since 2010, 10 of the Government's 14 Budgets and autumn statements have seen an increase in forecast

borrowing, and their record on borrowing can be summed up in two words: missed targets. Make no mistake that the Conservatives are the party of borrowing. Is it any wonder that the Conservatives borrowed so much when the public finances each year have huge gaping holes? This year, we saw the Chancellor's attempt to hit self-employed workers with a rise in national insurance contributions, and the Conservatives' U-turn on that measure left a £2 billion black hole in the projected public finances. How can we rely on the Conservatives' rosy assessment of the economy when we know that the sums do not add up?

That feeds into the wider problem with the public finances under the Tories. Children are beginning to sit in crumbling schools, and across the country people are waiting ever longer to be seen by professionals in the NHS, which is undergoing the worst crisis in its history. Why do we have that sorry state of affairs? Because the Conservatives have sacrificed the services that everyone uses just to pay for £70 billion of tax cuts for corporations and the super-rich over the next few years. The Government have presided over the slowest recovery since the 1920s, with both economic growth and average earnings growth downgraded yet again. Despite falling unemployment, workers are suffering the worst decade of pay in 70 years. Rising inflation is now outstripping wage growth.

The Government have done little to address the scandal of chronic low pay and insecure employment, which is reflective of an economy that is not working as they claim. So their promise of a £9 national minimum wage has drifted downwards, while inflation is increasing the cost of living for everyone.

The Government's assessment of the economy makes no mention of the continued economic imbalance in respect of the devolved nations and the regions. We simply cannot continue to have such an unbalanced and unequal economy. That comes back to the point I made at the start about the disparity in regional economic growth, which I see in my region and in many others.

John Redwood: So how much extra tax should the Government impose next year to deal with the budget deficit the hon. Gentleman is worried about?

Peter Dowd: I am sure we will have that debate during the general election process.

As I mentioned, this Government have pledged to take back control from Brussels, but what about control for the millions of people who live outside the M25? How can this Government square their desire for less interference from Brussels with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government not batting an eyelid when banning local councils all over the country from charging £1 for fun runs in local parks? Is it really the job of the Secretary of State to micro-manage park budgets? Have we come to that? Have we come to a British Secretary of State telling local authorities, "You can't charge these people £1, you can't charge them 50p"? That is ludicrous, which is why we have to take back control, so that when control comes back to this country it is pushed down.

It is all the more bizarre that the Secretary of State has taken that position, given that both he and his predecessors have cut local government support by as

[Peter Dowd]

much as 60% in some areas. Authorities have had not only huge cuts in their budgets, but interference on piddling amounts of money, such as £1 for park runs. It is pretty pathetic.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful set of points. On the point about local government finance, it is all very well for the Government to withdraw revenue support grant, but at the same time they are not doing anything about the other side of the account: the council tax banding system. The Government are doing nothing to rebalance that system, which makes up local government revenue apart from the revenue support grant. If they do not rebalance that, things are grossly unfair. The RSG was brought in because a band D median did not exist for all parts of the country, and it certainly does not exist for the north-east of England, which is why we have required RSG from its inception in the early 1990s.

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. This Government have abandoned local government—apart from Surrey County Council.

We cannot have a fair and prosperous economy until all regions and cities have access to adequate funding and investment in infrastructure—until all regions and cities have the power to implement financial decisions at a local level without the constant heavy-handedness of a Westminster-obsessed Government. The referendum result in favour of leaving the European Union was a vote against not just so-called “unaccountable bureaucrats” in Brussels, but the lack of accountability of the Government here at home at those local levels. For many people in this country, the Government are alien and have no relevance to their lives. For many people, this place has no relevance to their day-to-day living; they see it as a bubble and, as we often see here, it is a bubble. The Government sit here in Westminster and Whitehall making decisions, and little consideration is given to the ramifications and the disastrous effect their policies have on ordinary people’s lives. That is why a post-Brexit Britain must look seriously at devolving economic powers to the cities and regions across the country. The Government can no longer pretend that we are a unitary state that can be ruled by diktat from London, given that we have a Parliament in Scotland, Assemblies in Northern Ireland and Wales, and a Mayor in London, and of course we will have the city region Mayors in Manchester, Liverpool and the West Midlands from next month. [Interruption.] The Minister says that the Government created them, and I completely accept that, but they have to give them significant powers and responsibilities. The Government have been dragging their feet in many regards on that.

Under seven years of Tory mismanagement, our economy has seen stagnant wages, slow growth and low productivity. I note that the Minister did not mention productivity once in his speech—[HON. MEMBERS: “Yes, he did.”] Okay, perhaps he mentioned it once. We have also seen excessive borrowing, rising debt and failed promises. The Chancellor has presided over an economy that has seen tax giveaways for the richest in our society, at the expense of those on middle and low incomes. The Government have drastically cut public services and failed to balance the books. If re-elected, the Conservatives

would radically cut tax in a desperate bid to attract overseas investment and transform our country into a low-pay and low-tax economy.

The assessment of the economy presented by the Government does not account for their catastrophic record and failed economic targets, or for the huge black holes in public spending. It makes no assessment of what the UK’s post-Brexit economy will look like, nor does it acknowledge the economic difficulties ahead. I urge the House to reject the motion.

4.20 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It is a pleasure to make my final speech in the Commons before the general election. The electors of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath will determine whether I return to make any speeches here in future.

I was intrigued by and enjoyed the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), who pointed out that it is rather strange to be debating this subject: we are facing being dragged out of the European Union, yet we are discussing convergence. I knew this would be a tremendously popular debate—we need only to look around the full Benches to see how popular it is—so I took a leaf out of the Leader of the Opposition’s book and tweeted that I was going to be speaking on this important topic, in the hope that I would get the equivalent of “Mary from Rochdale” letting me know the key points I should raise. Only one person replied with a suggestion of what I should include in my speech, and it was: “Can you say hello to my Auntie Sadie in Balloch?” I could not possibly do that in a speech of such importance, but perhaps that clarifies how many of the things we debate in this House are very technical and difficult for the public to engage in. On a serious note, they are none the less very important.

The Minister talked about the OBR forecasts. Yesterday, I showed great prescience—or lack of it. Scott started to work for me on the day that the general election was declared. I gave him one task to prepare for this speech: I asked him to contact the Library and to find out how many independent evaluations had ever been done of the Treasury or OBR models of the UK economy. This morning, the Library staff got back to say that they could not find that any such evaluations had ever been undertaken. That is perhaps not surprising when we see some of the results of those models.

In following up, I asked the Library staff to look into how the OBR model was described by the OBR. They directed me to the OBR’s website, on which we find the wonderful statement that much of its model is based not on hard fact but on the judgment of those who use it. Different people might get incredibly different results using the same model. There will come a time when Governments of whatever shade are going to have to consider the way in which we understand and model the economy, and how far we can ever rely on forecasts of the type the House has been receiving for a good number of years.

This could obviously be a fairly wide-ranging debate but, thinking about the future, I thought I would make one or two remarks about issues that will still need to be addressed when we have exited the European Union. Exiting itself will not contribute anything; it will require the will of Government to do something. The Minister rightly mentioned the importance of business investment.

Last year, the House held a debate on quantitative easing—I seem to recall that the hon. Member for Bootle took part in it—that I think was slightly less popular, in terms of the numbers taking part, than this debate. None the less, it was interesting that so many of those who spoke in that debate talked about the problem that QE had created for investment. The assumption from the original essay by Friedman in 1969 was that introducing QE would lead to a rise in asset prices, the consequence of which would be to increase confidence in business and a significant increase in investment. We know that that has not happened, despite well over £600 billion of QE being introduced. It would be interesting to know how the Government, or the future Government, will tackle the rewinding of QE.

In recent days, senior bankers have made some very intemperate remarks about the business sector. I wish to point to one that was made just two days ago in the *Daily Express* by a senior executive from the Royal Bank of Scotland. He described as a “bunch of chancers” a group of small and medium-sized enterprises that were pursuing some reconciliation of the problems they experienced from the Global Restructuring Group and the like. Can Members imagine any other industry talking about its customers as a bunch of chancers? Apparently, those customers were called that because they may have the audacity to go to the courts to seek redress. If Members look at the RBS accounts, they will see that RBS has tripled the amount of money that it has set aside for the hiring of lawyers to defend cases—I see a Member nodding. It expects to defend cases worth something in the order of £1 billion. Surely that says something about our banking culture which will need to be addressed.

One matter that I have been pursuing in this House is the issue of Scottish limited partnerships and other forms of limited partnerships that have been, particularly since 2008, subjected to use by international criminals, including, and perhaps particularly, those from eastern Europe, Ukraine, Russia and the like. The amounts involved now total many billions of pounds. About 10 days before recess, there was an urgent question on the latest money laundering scandal. When I questioned the Minister at the time, I pointed out that, at the heart of these scandals, lie these limited partnerships. Since 2008, 22,000 Scottish limited partnerships have been created. They are completely opaque; we have no idea who owns them. Many of them seek to operate in tax havens and to launder significant amounts of criminal assets.

John Redwood: Before he closes his remarks, do the hon. Gentleman and his party think that the EU is right to say that state debt should not be above 60% of GDP?

Roger Mullin: It is perfectly reasonable for the EU to make such a statement and to seek to have some control over debt. It is interesting to note that the Scottish Government can at least say today, all these years after the Scottish Parliament was created, that they have absolutely no debt. That is certainly something that this Government cannot claim.

Regardless of whether we were going to be in or out of the EU, this country—the UK and all its member nations—would still face major economic challenges that require will and intelligence to address. Surely that is the message that we should all be taking to our constituents as we face the future.

4.28 pm

Mr Gauke: As I stated in my opening remarks—as much as 30 minutes ago—following this debate, and with Parliament’s approval, the Government will inform the Council of the European Union and the European Commission of our assessment of the UK’s medium-term economic and budgetary position. That is based entirely on information and documents already presented to Parliament. Presenting that information through the submission of the UK’s convergence programme is a legal requirement under the EU’s stability and growth pact.

Let me pick up on a couple of points made by the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd). First, he made the case for greater devolution. I remind him that it is this Government who have put in place the new metro Mayors—no doubt he is spending much of his weekends and constituency Fridays campaigning for the Labour candidate for Mayor of the Liverpool city region. We also have elections in Manchester and the West Midlands. That was not created by the previous Labour Government; it was created by this Government, recognising the need for decisions to be made at local level and for real powers to be devolved to that level. I am surprised that he was so unwilling to credit the Government for what we have done on that front.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman accused me of not mentioning productivity in my remarks, and he made comments about the Chancellor not discussing it generally. In fact, the Chancellor regularly comments on the need to improve our productivity, and in my remarks a little while ago I drew attention to the measures we are taking on schools, skills, and technology and innovation, which, as I said a few minutes ago, are at the heart of our efforts to finally address the country’s long-standing productivity challenges. It is very difficult to see how the Labour party’s policies, which would drive away business investment and discourage enterprise and innovation, would do anything other than weaken our productivity. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to fight the next few weeks on the subject of productivity, I for one would welcome that.

In the Budget, we continued to prepare this country for long-term prosperity, first and foremost by putting our economic stability first and by continuing to improve the state of our public finances, but we also set out meaningful investment in our future productivity and our current public services. This is therefore a plan that strikes the right balance between reducing our deficit, preserving fiscal flexibility and investing in Britain’s future. Those are the foundations of a stronger, fairer and better Britain. Those are the foundations of a strong and stable platform for the upcoming exit negotiations. That is the basis of the convergence programme we present to the European Union. On that basis, I am pleased to commend the motion to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 191.

Division No. 198]

[4.32 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Allen, Heidi
Afriyie, Adam	Amess, Sir David
Aldous, Peter	Andrew, Stuart
Allan, Lucy	Ansell, Caroline

Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Barclay, Stephen
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Sir Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartlidge, James
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Elliott, Tom
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel

Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, rh Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David

Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kinahan, Danny
 Foster, Kevin
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Perry, Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark

Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig

Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wragg, William

Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Tellers for the Ayes:
Chris Heaton-Harris and
Christopher Pincher

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Philip
Day, Martyn
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Flello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky

Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McInnes, Liz
McLaughlin, Anne
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol

Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mullin, Roger
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nuttall, Mr David
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat

Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Thangam Debonaie and
Jeff Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves, for the purposes of Section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993, the Government's assessment as set out in the Budget Report and Autumn Statement, combined with the Office for Budget Responsibility's Economic and Fiscal Outlook and Fiscal Sustainability Report, which forms the basis of the United Kingdom's Convergence Programme.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You may remember that I have previously raised the issue of having time to debate in the House the Government's rape clause and two-child policy. The last time I raised the matter, the usual channels came back to me and assured me that time would be made available in a delegated legislation Committee for the rape clause to be debated. The final list of DL Committees has appeared in the Whips Office, and as far as I know there will now not be time, with the proposed election, for the rape clause to be debated anywhere in this House.

There are no third-party referrers in Scotland because the NHS and women's organisations think that the guidance is not sound and are refusing to co-operate with it. Is there any recourse for me to raise this with the Government ahead of the election, to ensure that these very important issues get debated?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I think the hon. Lady has very successfully done so herself. As she can see, on the Treasury Bench is the Leader of the House, who will, I am sure, take up the matter with her. I thank her for the point of order and for giving me notice of it.

Ballydugan Four

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

4.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a privilege to speak in this House on any issue, but on this occasion I speak about something I have wanted to raise for some time: the case of the four Ulster Defence Regiment men who were murdered at Ballydugan, outside Downpatrick.

Four men jump into a vehicle and head to the next part of their job. They have worked together for some time, and the craic is great as they journey through the beautiful countryside on an idyllic morning. Just as any of us might do on any given day, they leave behind wives, children and loved ones to do their job and earn their pay. There the similarity ends, however, as the atrocity unfolds.

This is an important issue, and I am sure that Members in the House will heed its significance. I declare an interest as a former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment. I served in it for three years, as did some of my colleagues on this side of the House. Other hon. and gallant Members in this House have served in other regiments, and I am pleased that they have made an effort to come to the Chamber as well.

On the morning of 9 April 1990, Private John Birch, Lance Corporal John Bradley, Private Michael Adams and Private Steven Smart, all members of the Ulster Defence Regiment, were murdered by the Provisional IRA in an attack on their mobile patrol on Ballydugan Road, Downpatrick. The four young soldiers, all in their 20s, were travelling as part of a two Land Rover patrol en route from Ballykinlar to Downpatrick when a 1,000 lb bomb placed in a culvert beneath the road—I repeat, a 1,000 lb bomb; imagine the magnitude of that—was detonated by command wire. The explosion was so powerful that it lifted the soldiers' Land Rover 30 ft into the air and hurled it 30 yards into a field, killing them instantly and leaving a crater 50 ft long, 40 ft wide and 15 ft deep.

Those are the facts of what happened on that fateful morning. These are the faces of those whose lives were destroyed and whose family's lives were torn apart, never to be the same. The men in the service of Queen and country, much like the officer on duty in this place last month, were simply doing their job and nothing else; there were no links to anything other than their desire to wear a uniform and their bravery in serving the community in Northern Ireland, which we salute.

I remember three of these men very well. Lance Corporal John Bradley, 25, of Cregagh, Belfast, was married with a two-year-old son and a three-month-old daughter. He had recently been promoted, having served four years with the Ulster Defence Regiment. He had served with the Royal Highland Fusiliers, and came from Port Glasgow in Renfrewshire. Private John Birch, 28, was married with a four-year-old son. He had joined the regiment in February the previous year, and came from Ballywalter, where I was raised. The fact of the matter is that I can remember when John Birch was born. His wife was expecting again. Private Steven Smart, 23, was from Newtownards, the main town of

my Strangford constituency. He had served for 18 months in the regiment. His mother is dead, but his father is still living.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing forward this Adjournment debate. I had the honour of serving in the 3rd County Down Battalion of the Ulster Defence Regiment, the same battalion as these four brave soldiers. Does my hon. Friend agree that, tragic as their deaths and their sacrifice are—the sacrifice of that regiment was immense—their legacy today is the fact that our children and grandchildren can walk the streets of Northern Ireland not having to look over their shoulder. That is because of the bravery of the men and women who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the other fine regiments that came to Northern Ireland—men and women who put their lives on the line.

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right: those who served in uniform in that regiment and other regiments in Northern Ireland deserve every recognition for what they did.

Private Steven Smart's father Samuel still lives in Newtownards, and his sister lives in Donaghadee. Private Michael Adams, 23, who was also from Newtownards, had served with the UDR for seven months, having formerly served with the Royal Engineers. I served with him—I served for 11 and a half years in the Royal Artillery, with the Territorial Army—and I well remember when we were both on guard duty at the Magilligan camp. You used to get guard duty when you had done something wrong; I am not sure whether Michael or I had done something wrong on that particular day, but we were on guard duty. We had a radio in the sangar, and we were listening to some tunes, one of which was "Stand by Me", a '60s song. Tonight, I suppose all of us who are in this Chamber are taking the opportunity to do the very same thing, and to stand by them.

These are men that I knew well. These are men whose faces I recall right now. These are men whom I honour and respect today. These are men whose families I see: I saw the mother of one of them just the week before last, and her grief is still evident. These are men who deserve justice. These are men who were brutally murdered by cowardly scum who were not fit to lace their boots.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I well remember that morning of 9 April 1990. It was 7.30 in the morning at the office—at that stage, I worked for my predecessor, the late Eddie McGrady—when we got a phone call from the BBC about what had happened. Our shock, our revulsion and our opposition was made quite clear on that day and on those following. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, on a Sunday afternoon some two and a half weeks later, there was a peace demonstration from the car park in Lower Market Street in Downpatrick out to the scene of that terrible atrocity? That was done to illustrate clearly that this was not done in our name, and to illustrate our total opposition to and revulsion at all forms of violence and all forms of death and destruction via terrorism.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Yes, I was aware of that. It indicates the revulsion that there was in the whole of the community in Downpatrick and further afield.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend mentioned the mother of one of the victims and he has mentioned children. Sometimes we are inclined to forget about the families who are left all these years after such events happened. I am sure he will agree that we must keep them to the fore.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for that intervention. He is right that this debate is an opportunity to recall the bravery of the young men, but also to ask the Minister who is here to respond—I spoke to him beforehand—for some action. I will do that at the end of the speech and it is important that I do so.

The disgusting actions of what is estimated to have been the 16 man and woman team that planned, co-ordinated, carried out and helped to cover up the attack are remembered by all right-thinking people in the Province. I became emotional in a debate a few weeks ago and in this debate because we all recall the pain and suffering at the loss of a loved one, friends and colleagues, and we still carry that pain today. There are other Members in the Chamber who carry pain. I think of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and the gallant Minister, who served in uniform in Northern Ireland. We thank them for that.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for giving way. Does he accept that the lives of the victims who are left behind—the mums, the dads, the brothers, the sisters, the children, the loved ones, the sweethearts—are defined by such events? Their lives are defined by “what happened to my life after I lost my loved one”. It is only in the definition of their victimhood that we will be able to heal and cure in some way that pain—when justice is achieved for those people. Hopefully, through my hon. Friend’s debate, we can open up a way to find justice and healing for the people who have been left behind.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for his thoughtful intervention and for those kind words.

Like too many people in the Province, I have been touched by the actions of men like the leader of the South Down Provisional IRA who was responsible for the murder of the four young UDR men at Ballydugan. That vile, evil, despicable excuse for a human was a man called Colum Marks. He was the IRA commander for South Down when he was shot. It is no coincidence that when he was shot the activity of the IRA in South Down stopped immediately. That is obviously an indication that he was the person not only pulling the strings and dictating, but taking part in action that was completely unacceptable.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend comes to an important point that needs to be emphasised. We have come to a sorry place when it is the men and women who put on uniforms and defended and protected the community and, in the case of Colum Marks, those who shot a commander in the IRA and saved countless lives as a result, who today are the people waiting on the knock at the door and wondering whether someone will come looking for them to haul them before a court and make them answer for what they did, which was within the law and was about protecting and defending the community. We want the Government to do more to

protect the integrity of the men and women who served in Northern Ireland on Operation Banner and in other theatres of conflict. They deserve that support.

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. That is partly what this debate is about. It is about seeking justice. It is about justice for those who served in uniform, as he said, and the importance of that.

Colum Marks headed up the gang and carried out the atrocity, lying in wait with his detonator in a forest just across from Ballydugan. When he had pushed the button and killed four brave, courageous young men, he got on his motorbike in his blue boiler suit, went up the railway embankment into Downpatrick, burned the motorbike, disposed of his blue boiler suit and was picked up by another person. There were 16 people involved in this. There was the person out on the road who told the people at Ballydugan that a Land Rover patrol was on its way. There was another person down the road who confirmed that. Another person left a 1,000 lb bomb. The next time hon. Members lift a 2 lb packet of sugar, they should multiply that by 500 to get the magnitude of the bomb left at Ballydugan. How long did it take them to put that bomb in that culvert at Ballydugan? They were seen doing it, by the way. The question I ask—the Minister knows this because I spoke to him beforehand—is why that visual evidence was not acted upon as it should have been to warn that UDR patrol and other patrols in the area.

Another person was picked up at the shopping centre—the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) will know the area better than I do—and taken to a safehouse, where he showered and changed his clothes. The clothes were destroyed and he was moved to another house. Sixteen people were involved in the murders of those four UDR men. Colum Marks is the man who pushed the button and blew the four UDR men to smithereens. He was also the IRA commander involved in the murder of John Moreland—the hon. Lady will remember this—who was a coal merchant on the Flying Horse estate in Downpatrick. As he did his last delivery, he was attacked by two men and shot dead.

Colum Marks’s hands are red with blood. Let us be honest. This man was not a freedom fighter. He was a low-life, mentally deficient psychopath, with no human decency whatsoever. He was rotten to the core, contemptible, detestable and loathsome. He was a man with no good in him whatsoever; a man that should never have been born. That was the sort of man he was.

Ian Paisley: My hon. Friend is defining that person in a particular way and I agree totally with his definition, but does he also salute the gallantry of the people who stood up to that beast, and recognise that we won the war that they claimed to be fighting and the freedom they claimed to achieve? Today, we are administering British rule in Northern Ireland. There is no all-Irish state republic. The Brits—us—are still there, and we are not going anywhere else. Their death has at least sealed the fact that it has been a victorious and gallant death.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his wise words. There are not enough adjectives to describe that loathsome person, Colum Marks, the officer commanding the IRA in South Down, and all the others involved in those murders and all the others during the troubles.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Nine people were arrested—I have read the historical inquiry report. One was charged with a minor charge and did a certain amount of time, but the person who killed the four UDR men was free, until one fateful day for him in Downpatrick. As he was setting up a horizontal bomb to attack and kill even more people in Downpatrick, he was caught in the act of trying to kill other UDR men and other police officers and shot. Justice was done in that he came to the end of his reign. It is pity it did not happen a wee bit earlier, before the four UDR men were murdered and all the other actions he was involved in.

That is the legacy left by Colum Marks, whereas the legacy left by Lance Corporal John Bradley, Private John Birch, Private Michael Adams and Private Steven Smart is one of honour, of sacrifice, of dignity, of strength and of great love, not only for their families but for their country. That is the legacy that I and my colleagues on both sides of the Chamber stand to protect and reiterate today. Let me be rightly understood—I am reiterating the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley)—that Colum Marks and the rest of his abhorrent repugnant ragtag bunch deserve nothing other than the label of what they were: odious, filthy scum.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I speak for those of us who were in Northern Ireland in the Regular Army, including the Minister. Those of us who served in the Regular Army had incredible respect and affection for, and salute the gallantry of, every single member of the UDR, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and anyone who served the Crown in Northern Ireland. They were targets of terrorism. We salute them particularly because they lived and worked with their families around them. They had that huge threat of doing their duty with their families around them, whereas the Minister and I did not. We had huge respect for those who did that. I include the politicians of Northern Ireland, who were also under huge threat. I am sorry if my intervention was long, but I wanted to make that point from those of us who did not normally live in Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his intervention. I always look forward to his contributions, because they are always the wise words of a person who has served and done much for us in this Chamber and those from further afield. I know why his soldiers followed him: for his leadership, knowledge and command. We appreciate that very much and thank him for it.

During my time on Ards Borough Council I watched the families of the four brave soldiers murdered in their prime being re-traumatised by the repeated destruction of the memorial raised to honour their loved ones. Killing four brave UDR men was not sufficient for these evil people—they took a sledgehammer to smash the memorial outside Ballydugan. As an Ards councillor I was, with the help of the council, able to see the erection of a memorial in Newtownards to the four young men. Three of them came from the Ards Borough Council area and Lance Corporal Bradley came from Dundonald, which is just outside it. Unlike the Downpatrick memorial, the Ards memorial was not smashed with sledgehammers or desecrated by those with no respect or common decency.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. He has come to an important point. We hear a lot from those who are elected to this House but do not take their seats about respect. We would like to see Sinn Féin give a bit more respect to the men and women who serve our country. We would like to see the armed forces covenant fully implemented in Northern Ireland to ensure that the families and veterans who serve this country and sacrifice so much are given the support they deserve. Let us see Sinn Féin step up to the mark and show respect for a change.

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. Respect is something that is earned, and it is very much lacking from Sinn Féin.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for very kindly giving way again. I say this ever so gently: would he and his colleagues agree that there is now a need for a resolution to the political talks process? One of the issues relates to legacy. I know that we perhaps come from different perspectives, but we all understand that many people lost their lives in very difficult and tragic circumstances. Does he agree that there now needs to be a resolution of the outstanding issues to allow the political institutions to be up and running in Northern Ireland and to provide for the people, rather than seeing a stripping and dilution of public services?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Yes, I do agree with that. It is important that we are committed to the talks process and the way forward. We just wish that all the participants, especially Sinn Féin, were of the same mind. There is a need for understanding and respect of other people's traditions. We have committed to that as a party, and we wish very much that Sinn Féin would do the same.

At the time, I wanted to do all I could to help the families realise that their loss would never be forgotten or taken for granted. That is the reason for this debate, and everyone who has spoken today has expressed that thought very well. Steven Smart's dad Samuel came to my office just last year and left me a large object wrapped up in newspaper. It turned out to be a blackthorn stick, which he presented to me. He had wanted to give it to me many years previously, but I had always refused and said, "No, Samuel, I am not here to receive anything. That is not the reason." He said, "Well, Jim, I am not leaving here with it. It is for you." I said, "Samuel, this is very important. It looks really well, with the motif of the Ulster Defence Regiment on the knuckle at the head of it." He said, "I have two, one for me and one for you." So Sam's stick now has pride of place in my office.

I can only imagine the pain that has been felt for 27 years. Children have grown up without their fathers, mothers and fathers have been without their sons, wives without their husbands. I say this to them: I can only imagine how every glorification of terrorism that you have sat through has twisted the knife in your stomach. I know that this debate will be being watched in Northern Ireland.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and some very good points. Does he share my view that we should also concentrate on mental health, think about how we can

look after all those families—and everyone else—and find a solution on which we can all agree as soon as possible?

Jim Shannon: That is certainly part of the issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) said earlier, there is trauma for the families who are left and the survivors among those who have served. Many Members who are present today have served, and it is always good to see them here.

I say this to the families: I can only imagine how watching the murderer of your child, father or spouse walk free from their sentence to carry out more crime has felt like coals being heaped on your head as you mourned. I can only imagine how you have cried for your loss, asked for justice and been ignored, while watching investigations and apologies apparently being handed out left, right and centre to those who came to the table with bloody hands. My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) has referred to that in a couple of interventions. I can only imagine what all that means, and so today I do what I can—all of us in the House do what we can—to highlight the issue.

Today I stand in the Chamber with my colleagues and friends on both sides of the House, and we declare again that we refuse to allow the rewriting of history to twist the ugly to try to make it beautiful, to make evil seem to be good, and to enable the unjustifiable to be thought of as in any way justified.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate. We hear a great deal from members of Sinn Féin who call for the disclosure of Government documents. I think it is about time that there was some disclosure from members of Sinn Féin who were in the IRA—and from members of the IRA themselves—of why the Ballydugan Four were targeted, and why others were targeted in other atrocities. I think there is a lack of openness in that regard.

Jim Shannon: I agree with the hon. Gentleman—indeed, the hon. and gallant Gentleman. He served in the Ulster Defence Regiment, like many of us who are in the Chamber, and wore the uniform of Queen and country. We thank him for that. As he says, we need Sinn Féin to step up and to recognise and understand the pain that we have suffered over the years in our community.

David Simpson: We talk about pain and disgust, and about the issue of disclosure. I am sure my hon. Friend will confirm that when it was disclosed that certain people had received “letters of comfort” when victims were still suffering, our party, and indeed the people of Northern Ireland, were totally disgusted.

Jim Shannon: I agree with my hon. Friend. That rankles with us all. I remember it very well, and I think those matters must be addressed.

We call on not simply the British Government and the Minister, whom we look to because he is very sympathetic and understanding about this issue, but the British people, to help us set the record straight and stem the current tide of political machinations that seek

to turn history around with collusion and skulduggery, and seek to distract attention from the facts. Those facts are as I have described: a 16-man and woman team planting a bomb that was intended to wreak as much death and destruction as possible, the death of four men in their 20s, and the injury of four other UDR men and two civilians who happened to be passing by in a car.

That was not those people’s goal, however. They wanted more. They wanted more blood, more agony and more heartache, and they carried out more atrocities until they were halted. That happened when Colum Marks—mass murderer and multiple monster that he was—was dispatched in Downpatrick after his attempt to kill even more police officers. This was not a holy war; this was cowardice. This was not freedom-fighting; this was a wretched hatred at work. This was not a noble cause, this was ignoble, unprincipled butchery.

As time moves on, we reiterate our call from the DUP Benches and from across the Chamber for justice for these four UDR men. It is very frustrating to hear the calls for justice for everyone else; I and my party, and the Members in the Chamber today, want justice to ensure that those brave UDR men, and those who wore the uniform whether in the police or the Army, get justice as well.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that justice will never be done if Sinn Féin and the IRA are allowed, through the legacy process, to rewrite history and present themselves as freedom fighters who had some just cause, rather than as terrorists who were simply out to subvert the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom?

Jim Shannon: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. People try to equate the two, but let us be clear: those in uniform were serving their Queen and country to maintain law and order; those who wore balaclavas and skulked around at night and pushed buttons on bombs and blew people to death are the murderers and the terrorists, and they have to be accountable for everything they have done. There can be no comparison or equation.

We seek justice for everyone, and that justice will not simply be found in the incarceration of every person involved in the bombing, from the bomb makers to the clothes washers—all 16 of them, every one of them who did a task in relation to this. Justice must also come through an end to historical fiction being accepted as fact.

Ian Paisley: Does my hon. Friend agree that the team involved in the action on the evening when Marks was dispatched, as he so colourfully put it, should be given medals for the service they did to our country in taking out one of Ulster’s worst terrorist criminals?

Jim Shannon: I could not have put it better myself; to tell the truth, that is exactly how I feel. My hon. Friend is right: the day that evil, obnoxious, psychopathic multiple killer was put in the grave was a day when Ulster became a better place. I say that without any compunction whatsoever or any sympathy for that person for what happened. It would have been better if he had never been born and come into this world to wreak havoc and murder and mayhem and injury across the whole of the Province.

[Jim Shannon]

I seek justice for the four UDR men murdered at Ballydugan on 9 April 1990. The fact is that 27 years ago, in Holy Week, the most unholy act of villainous slaughter was carried out by men and women, some of whom are walking around today instead of paying for their crimes. I sincerely ask every person who is listening in the Chamber and the Gallery or watching on television to stop the re-traumatisation of victims of the troubles by accepting the rewriting of history. Let the legacy be one of noble, honourable, upright, decent men who deserve the respect of being honourably remembered by the people they so sacrificially served. Those men were Lance Corporal John Bradley, Private John Birch, Private Michael Adams and Private Steven Smart.

We ask for justice for those four brave young men, and for their families who have lived every day with the trauma and the memories of losing their loved ones. All of us in this House remember their bravery, courage and sacrifice.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate. As has been mentioned, he is a former member of the UDR, as are the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott). Many people have stepped up to be leaders in Northern Ireland and have served gallantly in very troubled times, both in regular service in the UDR and in the RUC. I pay my respects to those organisations. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) put it absolutely correctly: we have huge respect for those people. We in the regular Army went home: we went back, in my case to Yorkshire, while he is from somewhere down south, I think.

Bob Stewart: Cheshire—which is not in the south.

Kris Hopkins: My hon. Friend went back to Cheshire. The point is that we went back to our homes, to a safe place, while lots of people who served in the UDR and the RUC still lived in fear every moment of the day. I would like to express my condolences and sympathy to the families and friends of the young soldiers who on 9 April 1990 tragically lost their lives in that horrendous terrorist atrocity.

It is evident that, for many people, the legacy of Northern Ireland's past continues to cast a dark shadow over the present. I am conscious that in approaching this issue we must recognise the terrible loss suffered by so many people during the troubles, in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the United Kingdom. Over the period of the troubles—broadly, from 1968 to 1998—around 3,500 people were killed, most though by no means all in Northern Ireland. Many were members of the armed forces, killed in the line of duty protecting the public and maintaining the rule of law. Thousands were also maimed or injured during the terrorist campaigns.

This Government have always been clear that we wholly reject any suggestion of equivalence between the security forces and those who carried out those terrorist atrocities. Terrorism was and is wholly wrong. It was

never and could never be justified, from whichever side it came—republican or loyalist. No injustice, perceived or otherwise, warranted the violent actions of the paramilitary groups. The terrorist campaigns caused untold misery and suffering and left lasting scars, physical and psychological, in the wake of every atrocity that was carried out. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), who has now left the Chamber, mentioned the fact that mental health is a big issue. We need to support our veterans, and there is work being done to see what scope we have to offer that support and ensure that we give them good access to those services. I hope that, the other side of the general election, we will be able to assure everyone who cares about our veterans that we are channelling them towards the support that they deserve and need.

As someone who served in Northern Ireland as a proud member of Her Majesty's armed forces in the British Army, I witnessed at first hand the remarkable dedication, professionalism and courage of the armed forces and the officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. More than 1,000 members of the security forces lost their lives over the period of Operation Banner, the longest continuous military deployment in our country's history. Awards and medals were mentioned earlier, and around 7,000 awards for bravery were made. Without the self-sacrifice of the security forces, their dedication and their gallant work to keep the people of Northern Ireland safe, the circumstances that enabled the peace process to take root would never have come about.

Dealing with Northern Ireland's past is complex and difficult, and many victims and survivors are still suffering on a daily basis as a result of the troubles. It is clear that the legacy institutions as they are currently set up are not working for everyone. We have a duty to victims and survivors to adopt a comprehensive approach that provides a way forward for all of them. That is why the Government continue to believe that the Stormont House agreement institutions remain the best way forward for dealing with Northern Ireland's past. I believe that these proposals will make the situation better for victims and survivors, and that they represent our best chance to prosecute terrorists for murdering soldiers and police officers, as well as other victims.

The historical investigations unit, which was proposed under the Stormont House agreement, has several important advantages over the current system in Northern Ireland. It will investigate deaths in chronological order, taking each case in turn. It will include in its investigations the many hundreds of murders by terrorists, including the murder of soldiers, such as that of 18 soldiers at Warrenpoint in 1979—the largest loss of life by the Army in a single incident in the troubles. Without reform of the current mechanisms, it is estimated that around 185 murders of soldiers will not be reinvestigated—not to mention the many murders of RUC officers. The HIU will also have a statutory duty to act in a balanced, proportionate, transparent, fair and equitable manner. The HIU will be time-limited, with an objective to bring an end to all investigations into the past within five years.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment on the case of the gentleman that the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, but there is provision under the proposals that the right institutions can go in pursuit of new evidence, get to the bottom of things and pursue the

people who are responsible. I say to the hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend—that if there is evidence, bring it forward and I will use all my offices to ensure that evidence is put in the right hands to be dealt with appropriately.

Sammy Wilson: Despite all that the Minister has said, does he accept that new evidence, or new ways of interpreting evidence, is now being used as a means to carry out what many regard as a witch hunt against members of the security forces who took out people like Colum Marks? That is where the anger and injustice are coming from in Northern Ireland. Many who served gallantly in Northern Ireland are being re-traumatised and now see themselves being used as some pawn in a politically expedient game to try to buy off Sinn Féin to get it back into government.

Kris Hopkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I give him my reassurance that the route that I have just suggested will address that and give people confidence. I am a former soldier and I played by the rules. Many people played by the rules. Occasionally, there were individuals who made mistakes, for which they must be accountable, but we were part of the establishment. We had rules of engagement. We believed in the Geneva convention, which has a set of rules, and that is the difference.

I saw the veterans' march that was on a few weeks ago, and Ulster Unionist MLA Doug Beattie, whom many Members here will know, was a guest speaker. He made many good points, but one of his key remarks was that if people break the law, they should face the law. There was a man who was campaigning for veterans, but he still recognised, as I do, that if individuals have broken the law, they need to be accountable, regardless of which side they were on.

Ian Paisley: I say gently to the Minister that I agree totally with that, but it does not address the point that my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) made. In this particular case, the officer who dispatched Marks has been through three separate inquests. I know the chap personally; he was a friend of mine growing up. He has been through one ombudsman's inquest, and now has hanging over him a second ombudsman's inquest, on the basis of the most dodgy, fragile, fake evidence that has been produced. That will be disposed of quickly, but that is not the point. He will be dragged through that process again, and his wife and family will be traumatised by it. He and his team should have been given a medal that night. That is the honour that our state should give to these people, rather than dragging them through this process of constantly going over what they did.

Kris Hopkins: I understand the passion with which the hon. Gentleman talks. It is important that our response and the state's response is balanced and proportionate.

Bob Stewart: I know that the Minister totally understands, but there is a real worry, as my hon. Friends on the other side of the House—they are really my friends—have said, about the proportionality of the investigations. Many people who carried out crimes seem to have had those crimes wiped clean or blown away, yet soldiers,

policemen and others who carried out their duties using the yellow card rules and under the law seem to fear that there will be a knock on their door and that they will be dragged before a court for something that happened as long as 40 years ago.

The worry of the people sitting in this Chamber—I know the Minister understands it, because we have discussed it outside the House—is that our men and women who did everything right cannot sleep as well as others who did everything wrong.

Kris Hopkins: My hon. and gallant Friend is right that it is about being proportionate. As a man of justice who wants to see things put right, he will know that people who do something wrong need to be accountable for it. Under the Stormont House agreement, it is important that we have a model that is right for the victims and survivors. I appreciate the support of Northern Irish Members on reaching a conclusion. Part of that is a working mechanism of government in Northern Ireland in which a devolved institution can work effectively to bring justice and peace to these individuals.

I have outlined why the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland recently announced his intention to move to a public phase on the legacy bodies and why he and I have engaged intensively with political parties and victims' groups to find a way forward on the outstanding issues. That approach has the potential to build greater confidence in the new bodies and resolve the remaining issues. It is clear that the status quo is not working well enough for victims and families. It is time to make progress.

The approach we are taking will ensure that our veterans are not unfairly treated or disproportionately investigated, and it will reflect the fact that 90% of the deaths during the troubles were caused by terrorists, resulting in so much pain and suffering. This Government remain unstinting in their admiration for the role that our armed forces played in ensuring that Northern Ireland's future will ever be decided by democracy and consent, and we salute the brave soldiers and police officers who sacrificed so much to protect us.

I have responded to several debates of this nature, and I know they are difficult for those who speak and intervene. We have talked about the horrors that happened on that day and afterwards, and hon. Members have talked about being respectful to each other and working together today in a different place that is not 9 April 1990. I went to visit Downpatrick last week, and the vision we have of that terrible moment is thankfully not the place it is today. Down High School is an amazing place full of young people, and I visited tremendous voluntary groups and enterprises.

Ms Ritchie: As someone who was born, reared and educated in Downpatrick, I can say clearly to the Minister that Downpatrick's was one of the first councils—this was back in 1973—to introduce and participate in a power-sharing arrangement at local government level, and that became the pioneer arrangement for the rest of Northern Ireland. Having talked to those pupils in Down High, and having met the staff and the people who participate in the projects at the Ballymote centre, located in the Flying Horse estate, does he agree that that is very much the view of Downpatrick that I and others want to see portrayed—an integrated place for a shared society?

Kris Hopkins: I do not want to get away from the subject of today's debate, but it is important to reiterate something. The hon. Lady is right to say that people across the community there have come together and they live in a peaceful, cohesive place. There are always tensions and pressures around, but Downpatrick is a completely different place now from how it was before.

I want to finish on the following point. During my visit to Downpatrick, I went to the police station there, because at 2 pm on that day PC Keith Palmer was being buried. The funeral service was here and we were over

there, and we had two minutes' silence for him at the memorial inside the police station, where many, many people who lost their lives are listed. We should remember the people who have been lost, but as we do so we should also make sure we project the future of the Downpatrick of today: a beautiful place, full of some amazing people.

Question put and agreed to.

5.36 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 April 2017

[MR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Diesel Vehicle Scrappage Scheme

9.30 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered a diesel vehicle scrappage scheme.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I also have great pleasure in leading this debate. The good attendance shows the strength of feeling for implementing a diesel vehicle scrappage scheme and tackling air pollution problems. In my speech, I shall touch on why we need a scrappage scheme, outline how such a scheme would complement the Government's new air quality plan, and suggest how systems could be designed and targeted at the dirtiest diesel engines.

Why do we need a diesel vehicle scrappage scheme? I think that everyone here knows how we got to this point. The previous Government said that diesel cars should attract less vehicle tax than petrol equivalents because of their better carbon dioxide performance, and the present Government carried on in very much the same vein.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for saying that, because there is a narrative that this was a perverse act by the previous Government. Can he confirm that in fact it was supported by all the other parties at the time—as he has rightly conceded, the policy was continued by the present Government—because CO₂ reduction was seen as the overriding imperative?

Neil Parish: Heaven forbid that I should say the last Government were perverse. It was the acquired wisdom of the day that we should reduce CO₂, and diesel produced more per litre than petrol, so encouraging diesel was the obvious way to go. There were some rumblings at the time, if I remember rightly, but I have to accept that we did not change the policy when we came to power. Of course, we have now seen the new science and seen the light, and therefore need to take action on particulates and on nitrogen oxides in particular.

Mr Spellar: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for intervening again, but he says that we have seen the evidence. Can he tell us the breakdown of emissions of particulates and NOx from various modes of transport, whether buses, trucks or private vehicles, and particularly as compared with other sources? I will mention a number of them—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Not in an intervention, I hope.

Mr Spellar: Incineration, power stations and a number of others, which I will reflect on in my contribution.

Neil Parish: I think that the right hon. Gentleman has started his speech already. The figure I can give him is that in the hotspots in our inner cities, some 60% of the nitric oxide comes from transport. It is quite difficult to break that down and say how much comes from buses, taxis, lorries, delivery vans and cars, but there is no doubt that tackling the private car, particularly in those spots, will help to make a real difference in reducing NOx emissions. Transport is a particular issue, as is the older diesel engine. We cannot ignore what is going on; we need to take action.

Motorists were encouraged to switch to diesel through changes to the vehicle taxation system. We now know that that was a policy mistake. The uptake of diesel cars rocketed. The proportion of diesel vehicles on British roads increased from 20% in 2005 to 37.8% in 2015. That was a deliberate Government policy. Between 2005 and 2015, we did see cleaner diesel vehicles, but naturally they still give off particulates and NOx.

In turn, the number of extra diesel vehicles has caused a host of air quality problems. Diesel engines emit a higher level of nitrogen oxides. Those gases cause or worsen health conditions such as asthma and bronchitis and even increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes. They are linked to tens of thousands of premature deaths in Britain every year.

As a result, the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which I chair, branded poor air quality a “public health emergency” in our recent report to the Government. Four in 10 local authorities breached legal nitrogen dioxide limits last year. That shocking statistic shows the scale of the problem.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that many diesel vehicles give off six to eight times or even more nitrogen oxide compared with petrol equivalents, but in that context does he agree that although it is commendable that Governments have focused on carbon reduction targets, and that may be the driver behind this policy, good environmental policy is also about looking at the other pollutant effects of cars and particularly diesel, and that the push towards electric cars may well be an important part of the long-term solution?

Neil Parish: I very much agree, because I think that any scrappage scheme must be very much linked to electric vehicles and certainly hybrid vehicles. I see little point in converting people from diesel back to petrol, especially if we use taxpayers' money to do that.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I support everything that the hon. Gentleman is saying. He knows that today I am publishing my Clean Air Bill, which deals with wider mapping to provide infrastructure for electric and hydrogen, more powers for local authorities and a broader fiscal strategy to confront the escalating number of people dying because of diesel emissions. Will he lend that Bill his support—I know he has put his name to it—today?

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman's Bill is a good idea, because we all have to work together on air quality to lengthen the lives of many of our constituents and certainly of many people in the hotspots. That is where electric vehicles, the charging points, taxis, buses and all

[Neil Parish]

those things come in. We need to look at hydrogen cars; we need to look at a whole range of vehicles, and perhaps sometimes we need to take people out of vehicles altogether. Norman Tebbit's "On your bike" may have a whole new meaning. If people go to work on a bike, that is good for the environment as well as for getting to work.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP) *rose*—

Neil Parish: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who is a member of the Select Committee.

David Simpson: I thank our esteemed Chairman of the EFRA Committee for giving way. Let us say that a diesel vehicle scrappage scheme is implemented. Does he envisage that it will be rolled out across the whole United Kingdom, or will it be left to the devolved nations to sort it out themselves?

Neil Parish: That is probably a decision for my right hon. Friend the Minister and the Government. We have such an esteemed Minister here this morning. As I was his Parliamentary Private Secretary at one stage, I especially know what an esteemed Minister he is and I expect to hear some very good and detailed policy from him in our debate this morning, so I look forward to his response. I suspect that it will be down to the devolved nations to roll out such a scheme, but I also suspect that devolved nations will be looking for a little cash to do that.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that many drivers of diesel cars will feel that they were encouraged to buy those cars, but now they face the prospect of local authorities seeking to fleece them for taxes in order to raise money to plug their own funding gaps, and that they will feel that that is deeply unfair?

Neil Parish: Yes. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The idea behind the scrappage scheme is that it will not only help with air quality but provide some recompense for people, in that those who were moved towards diesel will get a carrot as well as a stick. A stick, in the form of a £12.50 charge, will be applied here in London in 2019. I do not necessarily disagree with it, but a poorer family, who may not be able to afford another car, do need some help. A scheme such as the one under discussion is part of the balance that must be struck. As I said, people were encouraged down the route of diesel. We also have to get over a certain amount of scepticism among the public. They will be saying, "For years you were saying, 'Drive diesels.' Now you say, 'Don't drive diesels; drive hybrids and electric cars.'" That is absolutely right, but we have to explain exactly why we are going down that route, and a scrappage scheme would help to ease the pain.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way one last time?

Neil Parish: I certainly will to my hon. Friend.

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is being unbelievably generous to us, and we must not carry on trespassing on his generosity. So far he has not mentioned gas. Like

him I am a huge fan of electric vehicles, but does he accept that for heavy goods vehicles, refuse collection vehicles and so on, gas-powered vehicles could provide an important interim stepping stone, given that at the moment electric cannot shift that weight of vehicle in an economic fashion?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The conversion to gas can reduce the particulates back to about 60% to 70% of what they were previously, so a big gain is to be had there. I also understand that most lorries would have to carry their full capacity load weight in batteries in order to drive themselves, so at the moment the electric lorry is not an option. We will probably build towards some hybrids in the future. We also have to look at taxis; we want electric taxis, but for those that cannot become electric in the first instance we should perhaps convert them to gas and then to electric. It is the same with delivery vans and other vehicles. Part of our lifestyle these days is that we order a lot online and find a lot of vans going round. This is about a whole combination of those things.

Mr Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Parish: As long as the right hon. Gentleman makes it brief, please.

Mr Spellar: I thank the hon. Gentleman. The one thing that has been absent from his wide exposition over a range of transport issues is any actual costings of the changes he proposes. Has his Committee actually done any of that?

Neil Parish: I actually converted one of my own vehicles to gas. Usually, converting a vehicle is something like between £1,500 and £2,000, so it is not ridiculous money to convert to gas. All the bus companies and taxi firms will do all the costings and will know firmly how much it is. As I said, a certain amount of help is therefore needed to help the commercial sector to convert to the new world. Otherwise they will not do it because of the economics.

The Government have twice lost in court over their failure to tackle poor air quality. In November, the High Court forced the Government to come up with a new, better air quality plan. The draft will be published imminently—by 24 April at the latest—so we may hear something on that matter from the Minister this morning. Already, from this October, pre-2006 diesels and petrol vehicles will face a £10 charge when they enter London at peak periods. It is expected that diesel drivers will be hit hard. Separately, the Budget Red Book stated that the Government would consider appropriate tax treatment for diesel vehicles ahead of the 2017 Budget. Diesel owners who bought their vehicles in good faith are expected to be hit with higher bills.

Of course, I understand the need for tough action. These new measures are the stick to reduce diesel vehicle numbers, but what about the carrot? Where are the incentives to encourage drivers to move away from diesel? The Prime Minister recently said,

"I'm very conscious of the fact that past governments have encouraged people to buy diesel cars and we need to take that into account".

That is where the case for a targeted diesel scrappage scheme comes in; it perfectly complements the Government's clean air zone plans.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is being extremely generous with his time. Given that most of the concentration of nitrous oxide, nitrogen dioxide and particulates is in urban areas, does he think that in any scrappage scheme a priority should be given to people living in urban areas? It seems slightly generous and pointless to support people who own diesels in the middle of North Yorkshire, say.

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. Yes, priority does need to be given to the inner city, because that is where we are particularly trying to improve the quality—in the hotspots of poor air quality. There is perhaps also a need to help beyond the inner city, because—this is the point I have been making—people bought their diesels in good faith. Certainly, there should be a targeted approach. One of the problems with the previous scrappage scheme was that it was to boost car sales at that time—it is a lovely position for middle England to decide, “Let's change our car.” In some ways, there may be a need to target partly by income as well. If we are not careful, a lot of the people who we most want to trade in their older diesels may be those who can least afford a new car. That is perhaps beyond my pay grade, but it is not beyond the pay grade of the Minister, who will reply in a minute.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): Almost nothing is.

Neil Parish: Good; I look forward to the Minister's words of wisdom. The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) raises an interesting point—it is the hotspots in particular that we need to sort.

Road transport still counted for 34% of the UK's NOx emissions in 2015, and the rate of reduction from the sector has slowed down because of the increased contribution from diesel vehicles. Turning to the Government's plans, I was therefore disappointed that a scrappage scheme was not announced at the Budget. Of course, we are a little hopeful that something may be announced very soon. The Transport Secretary stated on “The Andrew Marr Show” in February that the Government were considering a scrappage scheme, but there have been no further announcements. I know that there are concerns about the costs of any scheme, and that is why it should be targeted and proportionate. It can be a key weapon in the Government's armoury in tackling air pollution problems.

What is more, a scrappage scheme is very popular with the public. A recent survey of over 20,000 AA members showed that seven in 10 backed the policy, rising to three quarters among young people. A separate survey published by the think-tank Bright Blue just two weeks ago showed that 67% of Conservatives backed a scrappage scheme. Ministers, this is a policy with significant public support, especially as we move, dare I say it, towards a general election—that was not in my speech.

What would a scrappage scheme look like? First, it would mean replacement by ultra-low emission vehicles. Any potential scrappage scheme should have a stringent

condition on the replacement vehicle. It should mandate users to swap their vehicles for an ultra-low emission vehicle or other forms of transport.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing the debate. He is outlining some of the things that he hopes will happen. At the weekend we saw some publicity regarding the explosion in credit for purchasing new and recently second-hand cars. Does he agree that the last thing we want to see is a further explosion of credit on the back of an issue that has resulted from the expansion of diesel cars over the past 20 years?

Neil Parish: That is always the problem. Naturally, in order to buy a new car, people often need credit. I suppose the argument is that if a certain amount of support is available for a new vehicle, people will not need to borrow quite as much credit to get that vehicle. I understand what the hon. Gentleman says, but we have to balance that with the fact that we need to improve air quality dramatically. That is why a scheme should perhaps be particularly targeted towards our inner city.

What I was talking about could include a public transport ticket, a car club membership, a rail season ticket or cleaner transport such as a new bicycle. A scrappage scheme may not necessarily be just about people changing their cars. I could do with a new bicycle to come in from Battersea every morning—it would be ideal. The scheme would work in a similar way to the pollution reduction voucher scheme operating in southern California. The whole idea of this morning's debate is to think slightly outside the box. The scheme also has a potential to provide a substantial boost to the UK's emerging electric vehicle market.

Secondly, the scheme would be means-tested. I do not want a scrappage scheme becoming a subsidy entirely for the middle classes. Households should not just be able to trade in multiple diesels for a cash subsidy. Instead, the Government should consider targeting a scrappage scheme at poorer households or those earning less than 60% of the median UK household income in particular.

Dr Poulter: My hon. Friend is kind to give way again. I congratulate him—as I should have done earlier—on securing this important debate. As he has outlined, one of the challenges is making sure that the incentives support lower-income families. Does he agree that we will need to learn lessons from past incentives that failed to do so, such as the green deal, if we are to make the scheme effective and help people in the poorer parts of our cities?

Neil Parish: I am sure that the Government, especially the Treasury, will be looking at this issue particularly closely, first because the best use of taxpayers' cash is to target those who most need it and secondly because it may be possible to widen the scrappage scheme while ensuring that those on lower incomes receive the most support. There are ways of tailoring the scrappage scheme to do exactly what we want, which is to get older diesels out and to help those, particularly those on lower incomes, who cannot otherwise afford to do so.

Geraint Davies: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's generosity in giving way. Does he accept that there is a strong case that the motor manufacturers, not just the taxpayer and the consumer, should make a major contribution towards the cost of such a scheme? Volkswagen has had to pay billions of dollars in the United States because of its cheat devices; we know that emissions on the road were at five or six times their supposed laboratory levels, and a lot of cars in France, Germany and elsewhere have been withdrawn for a refit. Is there not a strong case that the Government should go to the manufacturers for a contribution towards the scheme?

Neil Parish: I know that the Minister has had some strong discussions with Volkswagen. It is not just Volkswagen; car manuals often give a figure for miles per gallon and then a true figure that is about two-thirds of the ideal figure. They will say that the car does 60 mpg when it really does 45 mpg or 40 mpg, so there has been a certain amount of deception there. I also think that companies such as Volkswagen could buy themselves some public esteem by helping to support a scheme for moving towards electric vehicles. Not only should the Government talk to Volkswagen and other vehicle manufacturers; it would be good for those companies, which have manufactured so many diesels, to say, "We can help to convert people away from diesel." The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

Andrew Selous: Further to the point about Volkswagen, does my hon. Friend agree that there has also been a loss of tax revenue and that the Government should seek to get it back from Volkswagen and others? We taxed these vehicles believing that they were much lower-emission than they really were.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend raises a good point. It is not just that people have paid less tax because they and the Government believed that their vehicle was emitting less. Those people were also sold vehicles that did not achieve the emissions levels that the manufacturer said they did, which raises the question of whether not only the Government but the individual motorists who bought those cars are entitled to some compensation. I suspect that some cases will end up in the courts, and it will be interesting to see what the courts have to say about them.

The Government should particularly consider targeting a scrappage scheme at poorer households and those that earn less than 60% of the median UK household income. They could taper support, with lower-income households entitled to a higher level of support for exchanging their vehicles.

My third proposal for a new scrappage scheme is that it should be targeted. I would limit it to the 5.6 million diesel cars on British roads that were registered before 2005, which are on Euro standards 1, 2, 3 and 4 and have higher NOx levels of at least 0.25 mg per km. This would complement current clean air zone plans to charge vehicles of Euro 4 standard and below, as well as the London T-Charge that will begin this October. A scrappage scheme would give diesel owners the chance to replace their older, dirtier vehicles before clean air zone charging is implemented, which is quite important.

Another option would be to geographically target the scheme at this country's pollution hotspots. The think tank IPPR—the Institute for Public Policy Research—has

estimated that there are around 900,000 Euro 4 or older diesel vehicles in the 16 top pollution hotspots in the country. By creating a targeted scrappage scheme, the Government could help to remove more than half the dirtiest vehicles from the worst polluting hotspots.

My fourth proposal relates to funding. The previous scrappage scheme in 2009 was targeted at cars that were more than 10 years old. A vehicle could be scrapped in exchange for a £2,000 discount—£1,000 from the Government and £1,000 from car manufacturers. I propose that a new scrappage scheme could follow a similar model. Funding should also be capped and time-limited, like the last scheme, which set deadlines of February 2010 or £400 million, whichever was achieved first. If the Government earmarked £500 million for the scheme, that could take nearly 10% of the 5 million dirtiest diesel vehicles off our roads. Evidence from the previous scheme shows that it was generally the oldest and therefore more polluting cars that were being replaced. Moreover, past schemes have generally brought forward investment decisions.

I know that Ministers have baulked at the costs of a scrappage scheme, but they should not be put off. It need not be an open-ended funding commitment. A targeted scheme capped at £500 million would be a real tonic to get dirty diesels off the road quickly. Even better, they would be replaced with ultra-low emission vehicles or a clean transport option. The Government still have vast air quality problems and the last thing we want is for them to end up having to pay fines. It would be better to go forward with something positive.

I will finish with two thoughts. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has called air quality her Department's top priority. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has said that electric vehicles are at the heart of the Government's new industrial strategy. I cannot think of a policy that would better target both of those aims. A targeted, means-tested scrappage scheme in which diesel vehicles could be swapped for an ultra-low emission vehicle or a cleaner transport option should be a key weapon in the Government's armoury for tackling air pollution. It would be the perfect complement to the new clean air zones strategy. I look forward to hearing from the Minister and other colleagues.

9.58 am

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): As I mentioned earlier, I will publish my Clean Air Bill today. I should put on record that I completely agree with the sentiments and words of the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). We all recognise that we have limited resources, so a targeted, capped scheme would send the right signal to consumers and producers about the future and put the focus in the right place. The electric car company Tesla, which produced just 76,000 cars last year, is worth \$49 billion—\$3 billion more than Ford, which produced 6.6 million cars. In other words, the marketplace is ready for these changes, and the Government need to facilitate them.

My Bill sets out a wider plan to provide a hydrogen infrastructure, an electric infrastructure and new powers for local authorities to get the evidence on localised air

pollution, in order to have evidence-based restrictions and charges that protect the elderly, young people and general communities, alongside a fiscal strategy. This is a brave and sensible first step in that endeavour.

Mr Spellar: My hon. Friend talked about the market deciding. Which market is he talking about? Is it the bubble stock market, maybe reflecting fashionable thought, or is it the actual car market, which shows overwhelmingly that people are buying from the mainstream manufacturers?

Geraint Davies: Obviously, we can influence the market. More than 50% of new cars are now diesel. Margaret Thatcher knew about the problems of particulates and there was a judgment call on public health versus carbon. Since then, the problems with NOx have grown. The fact is that the amount of particulates and NOx being produced is much, much greater than people previously thought, partly because of the deception of Volkswagen and others. This is a public health catastrophe.

I will present the case for my Bill this afternoon with support from the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of General Practitioners and UNICEF. People will know that last year's report by the Royal College of Physicians found that 40,000 premature deaths were due to these emissions, as well as presenting emerging evidence about fetuses suffering long-term damage and about the damage to the neurology, and general physical and mental health, of young children in urban spaces, particularly in poor areas. Those children are being poisoned, which has a disastrous impact on the rest of their lives. I am not prepared, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (Mr Spellar) appears to be, just to go on with business as normal, backing the poison of the current industry, which seeks to maximise profits.

It is the function of the Government to regulate markets in the interests of the public and it is an outrage that parents are unable to protect their own children, and that—as we speak—hundreds of thousands of children are in playgrounds enjoying themselves but inadvertently inhaling poisonous fumes. We need to take action and I am glad that we are moving forward with this first step; I hope that the Government agree.

Graham Stringer: I agree with the general thrust of my hon. Friend's argument, but we should not let off the Government and all the parties in this House who supported the incentives for diesel. The health risks were known more than 25 years ago. A report by the then Environment Department in 1993, a piece in 2001 by the European Respiratory Journal and other sources all pointed out the health problems of NOx and particulates. People got the balance wrong between the perceived threat of carbon dioxide and the real threat of those poisons, but we should not pretend that there was ignorance of this issue in the past; there was not.

Geraint Davies: That is a point well made. I mentioned in passing that Margaret Thatcher and subsequent Governments were aware all along of these public health issues. Ironically, it is also the case that, with VW and the like, lorries often produce less NOx than cars. The reason for that is that defeat devices were found in lorries in America, but for some reason the authorities there did not realise that they were being deceived on cars on such a colossal scale.

Of course, ClientEarth has taken the Government to court, as we do not even satisfy minimum EU standards, let alone World Health Organisation standards, and I very much hope that as and when Brexit happens we will ensure that air quality standards are legally enforceable and at least at the level of the minimum EU standard, while moving towards the WHO standards.

These are difficult issues. I appreciate that people have bought cars in good faith. They feel that the current Government, which has been in power for seven years, the previous Labour Government and even the Government before that should have alerted them to these problems, and there is a move, alongside what is being said, perhaps to index fuel duties differentially. In the case of diesel, the real cost of diesel may not go up because of upwards inflation and because the cost of other fuels do not go up. Basically, the signals should be given that people would be wise to move forward.

I will ask the Minister a couple of technical questions. I would like him to comment on displacement issues regarding the targeting of the scrappage scheme; obviously, there are various incentives, which will affect different groups. I think we all share the view that many poorer communities will suffer the worst impacts of air pollution on their children. In addition, many poorer people have the worst cars, which they cannot afford to replace. Therefore, I welcome the progressive thrust of this debate, and to allow others to speak I will conclude my remarks there.

10.4 am

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I will depart slightly from the prevailing tenor of this discussion. I declare an interest, as one of the 11.7 million drivers of a diesel vehicle—in fact, I am a long-standing driver of a diesel vehicle—and as a Member of Parliament who represents one of the poorest areas of the country, but one that is at the heart of the British motor industry.

One of the things that I found slightly disturbing about the contribution by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), who is the Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, who is someone I hold in high regard, was about the cost of this scheme. When I asked him about costs, he just talked about the cost of converting an individual vehicle. There was no mention of what the overall cost to the Exchequer would be, nor about how we would deal with the infrastructure cost. For example, he talked about gas vehicles, but what would be the cost of creating a gas infrastructure across the country? Part of the essence of any scheme must be a national infrastructure to back it up, otherwise it would be exceedingly unattractive to individual motorists, notwithstanding the fact that, for buses and major truck fleets for example, it might make an important contribution.

One thing I found interesting was when the hon. Gentleman talked about fines. I was really surprised that he showed so little confidence in the ability of his Prime Minister to negotiate an effective Brexit that he thinks the EU will still be in a position to fine us.

Dr Poulter: The right hon. Gentleman is making an important point about cost, but many car manufacturers have a global market, so much of the innovation, particularly in the electric and hybrid car market, has

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already been achieved, because other countries have different regimes for taxing cars and providing incentives. That will reduce the cost of the roll-out of electric cars in the UK, which will be very helpful to us.

Mr Spellar: I am not entirely sure I follow that. I will break it down into two areas. One is about infrastructure cost. Whatever contributions have been made by the Toyota car company, for example, in creating a very successful hybrid vehicle, that does not alter the fact that people will need an infrastructure to charge up those vehicles. Although the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, who introduced this debate, may well be able to plug in his vehicle on his country estate, he may have noticed that in urban areas such as mine there is very tight terraced housing and a lot of high-rise flats—and an increasing number, by the way, of apartments in our urban areas. I would be interested if he could tell us how people will be able to charge their vehicles, what the infrastructure cost will be and what Treasury contribution will be required. A decision may have to be made, but at the very least people need to know what the overall cost will be.

Neil Parish: If I could just put the right hon. Gentleman right, I do not have a “country estate”; I have a farm. There is a little bit of a difference, and I was also a working farmer before I got here. Let me make that abundantly clear.

To be serious, the Government are already rolling out an infrastructure for charging points; we also want the fast charging points, so that people can charge up their cars quickly. As far as gas is concerned, there is an infrastructure out there already. A lot of garages supply liquid gas. There are probably not as many as we might need, but there is quite an infrastructure for gas out there already, so that does not need to be reinvented.

Mr Spellar: I think the hon. Gentleman is underplaying the position. I acknowledge the fact that he is a farmer—which is why I threw it in the way I did—but I would ask whether he and his neighbours use red diesel. There was no mention in his contribution as to whether the enormous discount on red diesel should be included in our considerations. Again, I note that there was no figure—no estimate—for how much all of this will cost.

Geraint Davies: The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) mentioned the cap of half a billion pounds for the scrappage scheme, but if the signal from the Government to the market is that having points for hydrogen and gas is the direction of travel, the market will accelerate the infrastructure provision. As has been pointed out, there is a gas and an electric infrastructure. We need to pump prime a hydrogen infrastructure and the market will invest. The old-style socialist view that everything has to be paid for by the state is not the case.

Mr Spellar: But we are talking about dramatic change, with 11.7 million diesel cars, let alone trucks, buses and so on. The idea that the current infrastructure or even a massively ramped-up infrastructure will be able to deal with that without major Government investment seems entirely fanciful.

Charlie Elphicke: In a world where there are around 30 million cars in the United Kingdom and 11,000 electric charging points, of which about 800 are fast-charging, does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that there is some way to go and that it is important to have a step change to the electric future?

Mr Spellar: If that is the case, I have to ask the hon. Gentleman how much that would cost and who would pay for it. One of the problems we have—I know this as a former Transport Minister—is that those who create policy, whether they are in the Department for Transport, Westminster City Council, London City Hall or even Birmingham Council House, overwhelmingly have clerical jobs by definition and travel in on public transport. Certainly in the London region, they travel overwhelmingly on rail. That is their mindset, and the mindset of many of the press lobby as well. Look how fascinated they are every time there are any problems on the railway, as compared with the situation on the roads.

If we go outside London—when I say London, I mean central London, because this applies very much to the London suburbs and the peripheral towns around London—and look at all the Government data, although there is a marginal shift at the moment, people overwhelmingly travel to work by road transport, whether by bus or in cars, which make up a significant proportion. That is how people get to work. People may fancifully say that people can get on their bike to do that, but if they are going 10 miles away to do shift work at a factory or a hospital, or if they are going to a building site carrying their tools, that is not a realistic option.

The problem is that the interests of London and the policies that affect London start to impact on the rest of the country. Even within London, there are all those builders coming in—that steady stream of vehicles travelling in on the motorways bringing in those who are constructing the city—and we are looking at significantly penalising them. That is why I asked the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton what actual assessment there has been of the problem, breaking it down. In his contribution, he said that there is no doubt that private vehicles contribute the bulk of the pollution. My council, Sandwell Council, did a study of the Bearwood Road only a couple of years ago. It found that buses formed 8% of the vehicles on Bearwood Road and contributed 57% of the pollutants being emitted there. It may be very sensible for him to say that we should target the problem by providing a subsidy to the bus companies—rather than taking away the subsidies from bus companies, as this Government have been doing, threatening them—and actually having a bus scrappage scheme to take the older buses out of the system. That would be a perfectly realistic way of looking at it.

Graham Stringer: Just before my right hon. Friend gets too carried away with making Brian Souter even richer than he already is from public subsidy, I would like to bring him back to the very sensible point he was making about infrastructure. I recently asked the Department parliamentary questions about the capacity of the electricity generating board to provide electricity if we moved over to a fully electric motorised fleet. Quite simply, we are nowhere near that capacity. The Department has not thought that through.

Mr Spellar: That is absolutely right, and I thank my hon. Friend for that. I suspect that the transmission capacity, particularly locally, will be affected in the same way. Equally, we have to look at the availability of petrol if we remove a great chunk of the diesel market, which may or may not also happen in the rest of Europe. What discussions has the Minister had with his European counterparts? The duty levied on diesel there is considerably lower, which is why they have much lower diesel prices in the EU. Reference was made to the European Commission putting the UK Government on notice and our Supreme Court responding to that, but it is interesting to note that the European Commission also mentioned a whole number of other countries, including Germany, France, Spain and Italy. Is there any common factor among those countries, apart from them being the major industrial countries of the EU? I therefore find it rather strange that we are looking at a major upheaval that does not seem to be mirrored by our European counterparts without getting proper figures in an impact assessment, and at a time when we are considering the uncertainties of Brexit. Apart from one or two towns and cities in one or two countries, there seems to be no similar reaction from other countries.

Equally, there seems to be no consideration as to whether, as was rightly said earlier, we could actually have alternative fuels for many heavy goods vehicles. There is a reason why, across the whole world, goods vehicles are overwhelmingly diesel. It has to do with torque, traction and so on, and that applies to many builders' vehicles, which are for lifting and generate power to do that. That would not be possible with an electric vehicle—certainly not with the current state of technology.

Electric vehicles may have some minor advantage when sitting in traffic, but many of those arguing for this proposal should perhaps be looking at better traffic management. With a number of cities, and particularly London, quite a bit of the congestion has been aided and abetted by the construction of cycle lanes. Boris Johnson's cycle lanes have generated congestion in central London, as taxi drivers and others will all attest, so we need to be looking at how we can deal with the problem in its various segments. With petroleum, it is true that we can keep cracking the oil in different stages and get more petroleum out, but that adds considerably to the cost—I will come to the cost to the individual in one second, after I give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Neil Parish: I am finding the right hon. Gentleman's contribution very interesting, because he is going into great detail on all the problems we have, but he is then saying that bicycles are causing problems. Surely people on bicycles are not emitting any emissions at all, other than breathing in and out as they are riding along. It is no good coming out with a whole list of things that are wrong with the proposal. I would like to see a bit of a more positive approach to the whole argument.

Mr Spellar: As the hon. Gentleman rides in on his bike from Battersea, he may notice that the bridges across the Thames are always much more congested than they used to be. That is because there is much less road space because of the introduction of cycle lanes.

Geraint Davies: I may be paraphrasing my right hon. Friend, but he said that the EU did not really care about the issue. My understanding is that there was a move for an EU air quality regulator that was blocked by the British in some sort of dodgy deal related to avoiding a banking regulator. There is movement towards air quality improvement and innovation in Europe. In the Council of Europe, in which I sit, an urban air quality study is going on. Given that 3 million people are dying across the globe, with 400,000 in Europe, there is an imperative to develop sustainable transport technology. The thrust of his argument seems to be—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Interventions are getting longer and longer. At least one other hon. Member wishes to participate in this debate.

Mr Spellar: In that case, I will speed up, Mr Chope. A considerable number die as a result of air quality because of cooking with solid fuel in enclosed spaces, particularly in Africa, which is certainly something we should look at and is certainly something to do with photovoltaic and storage. Also, on the assessments and the figure of 40,000, Roger Harrabin of the BBC has said that it could be anything between a fifth or five times as much as that. It is not about cardiac arrests or even lung cancer, but about the average reduced periods of life. A real study of the data is needed, accepting that there is a problem, but that this is about scoping it.

There is also the issue of sources of generation. In coastal areas, particularly in ports, what is the contribution of shipping to the numbers of particulates? What is the contribution of diesel trains? Perhaps the Minister will explain why the Government are cutting back on some of the electrification, which will mean more diesel trains going into urban areas. What is the contribution of power stations, central heating boilers and the burning of solid fuel? Interestingly, what is the contribution, as I mentioned earlier, of urban incinerators, of which we have a large number to deal with the problems of waste? Also, what is the contribution of tar, which is believed to be considerable, particularly in terms of small particulates?

As for the scrappage question, it is all very well to say we will give somebody £1,000, but £1,000 towards what? Towards buying a new vehicle? What does that say to someone who needs his car to get to work and who has probably already seen a drop in its value of about £2,000? What does it say to people who are asset poor and who need their vehicle to get to work? If we give them £1,000, who will lend them the money to buy new vehicles? Will they buy vehicles from further up the chain? There may be answers, but figures came there none during this debate.

What about taxi drivers? Birmingham City Council is proposing a purge of diesel taxis. Taxi driving is entry-level employment for many in this country in all communities. Are we telling them we will take them off the road and put them on the dole? That is certainly not an attractive proposition for many constituents who are active in the taxi trade.

I have already mentioned the question of where people will charge their cars. Even if we have fast chargers, how many can we put through the average service station on the motorway compared with how many can fill up there? How many can we have at any other service station? What about city centre areas? I accept there is

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probably a lower percentage of car ownership in some of those areas, but there are still a hell of a lot of cars. How will we have a charging system on the congested urban streetscape of Britain? And what will we do in isolated and rural areas?

Mr Chope, I am aware that we want to hear from the Front-Bench spokespeople, and, as you rightly drew to my attention, one other speaker wishes to participate, so I shall end now. This is a big debate. I do not think we should move forward with disconnected local schemes or without a well-thought-out, well-costed Treasury-backed scheme. We should not rush into this. The matters are serious. They are about international competitiveness, people's financial welfare, and, as people have rightly said, people's health and welfare. This is a big issue. We should not go ahead on prime ministerial whim or just on what local government decides. We need a proper national debate and proper national answers.

10.24 am

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this important debate. It was fascinating to listen to the speech by the right hon. Member for Warley (Mr Spellar), who set out in pithy terms the policy issues concerned with this matter. I draw attention to my declarations in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Also, I chair the all-party group for fair fuel.

Pollution is a serious problem, but it is important that we look at the science and the statistics and do not go around the place scaremongering. We must not allow the people who for a long time have not been in favour of cars to find another excuse to attack motorists and to seek to visit extra taxes upon them. So when we look at the serious problem of NOx we need to look at what has happened to pollution over the past decade and beyond, because it is revealing that NOx pollution levels have halved in the past decade. They have gone from 1.6 million tonnes in 2005 to 0.9 million tonnes in 2015.

Particulates are also down. Between 1990 and 2015 the most harmful particulate emissions reduced by 47% in the UK and PM10 fell by 51%. I think we should spend a little less time beating ourselves up and a little more time congratulating ourselves and our nation on the advances we have made. Much has been done, but there is much yet to do, and I want to address what we need to do next.

Geraint Davies: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the associated data, he will find that from 2010 to 2017 there was a levelling off and a gradual increase in particulates and NOx.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman always looks on the positive side of things. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs figures show that there has been a levelling off, but they are still hugely down. The hon. Gentleman should try to be more of a glass half full sort of person and look at the progress that has been made. He has promoted the Clean Air Bill, which, from the way he talks about it, will attack

motorists, diesels and cars. However, let us look at the scale of the problem in the round. Let us look at the science rather than the rhetoric. Let us look at the numbers. What percentage of nitrogen oxide pollution in London comes from diesel cars? The Labour Mayor of London proposes to try to fleece motorists out of £20 every time they visit the city. According to the London Assembly Environment Committee's report, the percentage is 11%. Separate figures from Transport for London indicate 12% from the diesel car. Some 750,000 diesel cars in London produce that amount.

Why has there not been any focus on the other 90% of the problem? The risk is that we only attack the motorists who thought they were doing the right thing when they bought the cars, because they were advised to do so. They were advised that it was a clean, environment-friendly thing to do. We are at risk of unfairly targeting and demonising those people, and of ignoring the other 90% of the problem. If we focus on 10% of the problem, we risk not looking at the other 90%. So what is in that 90% that needs to be in the air quality plans? I hope the hon. Gentleman will talk about that when he discusses his Bill and will look at the science and statistics and not just go after the poor motorists, many of whom live in his constituency. Let us look at where the problem comes from.

The answer is that 8% comes from rail: ageing trains chuffing up fumes at Paddington. Some 14% comes from non-road mobile machinery: generators on building sites. The system does not seem to allow plugging them into the main grid, which would be the obvious thing to do, so we have to have diesel generators. Why has action not been taken on that? Why have we not heard about that from the medical and the green lobby who want to target the motorist? We ought to hear about that. We ought to look at the diggers that do not have the filters that they should have, that do not have the same quality. We ought to clean up our building sites. We ought to look to do that, because if it is important, it is important across the board.

We need to look at non-domestic and domestic gas—gas central heating systems produce nitrogen oxide. So do Transport for London's buses—10% of nitrogen oxide in London comes from buses, which the right hon. Member for Warley mentioned.

It is very important that we do not demonise diesel drivers and that this is not seen as an opportunity for Labour Mayors and Labour councils up and down the land to fleece motorists with more taxes—many have set out such plans. As the right hon. Member for Warley pointed out, in many cases that would hurt the poorest, who have been priced out of cities, and would be unfair. We should make sure that we have an across-the-board plan to deal with a problem that affects everyone; we should focus not on the 10% but on the 100%. It is my plea that we treat motorists fairly—that we treat ourselves fairly. We should treat the whole problem and all of the pollution. That is how we will have the best chance of making sure we have cleaner air, a cleaner country, cleaner cities and a cleaner nation, for our sake, and the sake of our children.

10.30 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton

(Neil Parish), the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on securing this debate. I also feel obliged to thank the right hon. Member for Warley (Mr Spellar), who seemed to hold a debate within the debate and spoke at length. I was not sure if he was arguing against the scrappage scheme or the fact that we need to do a lot more, but some good points were raised—there are other serious issues. Personally, I do not think that should negate the arguments for the diesel scrappage scheme. He also touched on emissions from fuel generation, but I am not sure whether he mentioned biomass. Biomass is subsidised as a renewable energy source, yet its emissions are harmful, so that is certainly something in the wider mix that the Government need to look at.

The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) mentioned other things that cause emissions and touched on generators. There is certainly something wrong when the National Grid is procuring diesel generators as back-up for our energy supply, when we know they emit nitrogen oxide.

However, I agree in general with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton that a diesel scrappage scheme has merit. We have got to where we are because of the law of unintended or unknown consequences of previous Government attempts to reduce CO₂ emissions by promoting diesel, which he mentioned, although I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), who said that some of the evidence was there and should have been understood and thought about more clearly.

The bottom line is that we now know for a fact that nitrogen oxide emissions are an issue that needs to be tackled. The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) gave us some graphic details of the impact of diesel fumes and nitrogen oxide emissions. We know there are roughly 40,000 premature deaths a year. I congratulate him on continuing to push forward his air pollution Bill and wish him good luck.

A UN rapporteur has said that air pollution is a crisis that

“plagues the UK”—

particularly children—and that there is an

“urgent need for political will by the UK government to make timely, measurable and meaningful interventions”.

In November 2016, for the second time in 18 months, the Government lost a court case on their proposals to tackle air pollution, so they cannot stand back and do nothing. We need to take action.

Electric vehicles have been mentioned. Most hon. Members understand that electric vehicles only account for roughly 1% of the stock of cars on the road right now. On the current trajectory, electric vehicles will not be the solution to tackling air pollution, which is why further action is needed.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton spoke about carrot and stick. I agree in general, but I would not want to penalise those people who bought diesel cars in good faith because they were told it would be helpful to the environment and reduce CO₂ emissions, and did not have the knowledge that it would cause harmful effects. I support the scrappage scheme, but people should not be penalised. They need to be allowed to trade their cars in. I welcome the comments about

particularly supporting those who can least afford it, such as those who run older cars and need help to move on.

Other hon. Members have highlighted that HGVs are an issue, as are transport refrigeration units, which I have mentioned before in relation to electric cars. Transport refrigeration units emit more particle emissions than the main diesel engine itself, so the Government need to look at that. I welcome the Government's proposal to consult on the use of red diesel, because we should not subsidise the owners of transport refrigeration units to emit harmful particles.

The hon. Member for Swansea West mentioned Volkswagen, which has agreed to settle \$4.3 billion in the United States. This Government should be doing more to get money out of Volkswagen, which would go a long way to funding a scrappage scheme, and perhaps also to starting to fund some of the wider infrastructure that the right hon. Member for Warley highlighted. The Government managed to negotiate a deal with Nissan in terms of Brexit, but a joined-up approach in terms of scrappage, trading in diesel cars and looking at wider issues would be much better than a behind-closed-doors deal that nobody actually knows what it contains.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton suggested that the issue might be left to devolved nations, although he did accept that the UK Government would perhaps need to help provide funding. This is purely and squarely a UK Government issue. The original diesel promotion schemes came from the UK Government, so it makes sense that the UK Government should have to rectify the matter. It should not be left to devolved Governments to do that on their own—it needs the support and leadership of the UK Government.

I support the measures. I understand some of the wider points made, and the Government do need to look at air pollution in the wider mix, but a diesel scrappage scheme would be a good start. I would also note that scrappage laws in the European Union are now a green measure, because 95% of cars need to be recycled once scrapped. At least taking cars off the road will not lead to adverse dumping elsewhere, which is good. I caution the Government to make sure we stand by that ethos as we move into the post-Brexit world. We have already heard rumblings from the hard Brexiteers about how we can relax environmental standards. That would certainly be the wrong way to go, especially when tackling air pollution and climate change.

10.37 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for securing this important debate. Having read some of the minutes of his Committee, I can tell that he gives Ministers a hard time—he is exactly the kind of friend any ministerial team needs.

This is a very timely debate, although I have to say that I think it is the first debate in which we have heard only male voices in my short time in this place. I am not quite sure what that tells us, but clearly women and children are among the 40,000 people who, as the Royal College of Physicians tells us, suffer premature death in the UK every year because of these issues. To take one local example, Brixton Road in south London breached

[Daniel Zeichner]

its annual air pollution limit for 2017 after just five days. The Government's continued failure to address the problem meant that they were taken to the Supreme Court.

Labour recognises the need for action. In our view, clean air is a right, not a privilege. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) for the work he is doing on the Clean Air Bill and I note his powerful point about the role that manufacturers should be playing in sorting out some of the problems.

We heard a powerful speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (Mr Spellar), which was fitting, as he is a former esteemed Transport Minister. He made a wide-ranging set of points. I very much agree about the need to protect hard-working people who need their vehicles to get to work, and his strong plea for robust evidence in the debate.

There is no denying that diesel vehicles account for a large percentage of NOx emissions. A 2016 DEFRA report stated that road transport still accounted for 34% of UK nitrogen oxide emissions in 2015. The European Commission reported in 2016 that around four fifths of road traffic nitrogen oxide levels come from diesel-powered vehicles. Decisions have been taken in the past to incentivise the ownership of diesel-fuelled private cars, which reflected the urgent need at the time to act on the threat of CO₂. That worked, because that is now down more than a third since 2000.

This is not just about private cars, as we have heard: buses, coaches, taxis and minicabs are all high-mileage vehicles that operate within our towns and cities. Just looking at diesel private cars in isolation is therefore not the complete answer to the problem we face. It has to be seen in the context of the move to a greener and more efficient public transport system across the UK, which means removing barriers to the uptake of electric vehicles and rethinking vehicle excise duty. Any diesel policy must take clear account of the impact it could have on CO₂ emissions, and it must avoid severely penalising the almost 12 million diesel car owners who, as we have heard, bought their vehicles in good faith.

It is clear that scrappage schemes can work. Labour's scheme, introduced in 2009, shows that they can impact consumer behaviour, but the circumstances now are different. It is not about stimulating the economy following a global downturn, but about taking the most air-polluting vehicles off our roads. Any scrappage scheme must be shown to achieve value for money, and it must be targeted at the right drivers.

A recent Royal Automobile Club Foundation report sounds a warning note about that. It suggests that the cost of implementing a scheme could be expensive and may not automatically achieve the expected benefits. Targeting older diesel vehicles in the bands known as Euro 1, 2, and 3 could take 400,000 cars off UK roads, costing the Government and industry a combined £800 million, but that would cut the total emissions of diesel cars by only 3.2%, and only if all those drivers elected for an electric vehicle replacement. The percentage drops to 1.3% if the drivers opted for the newer Euro 6 models. The findings show that creating a robust scrappage scheme is far from simple. It is not necessarily about how dirty a vehicle is or how many there are, but about how many miles they do and where they do them. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton

(Graham Stringer) made a very strong point when he suggested that any such scheme should focus on cities, and I think the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton agreed with that point.

Have the Government considered the RAC Foundation findings? Has the Minister considered the Mayor of London's proposals for a targeted scheme that supports low-income families? Without targeting the right drivers operating in crisis areas, a scrappage scheme risks having a limited impact. It is therefore absolutely essential that the Government publish robust environmental evidence and a cost-benefit analysis for any proposal.

Scrappage schemes are only one of the measures that need to be taken if we are really to tackle the air quality crisis effectively. Not only are we awaiting the Government's third attempt at producing an air-quality plan following a judicial review, which should happen imminently, but I am afraid that they are more than 1.5 million vehicles short of their 1.6 million 2020 target for electric hybrid and alternative fuel vehicles. They are also going backwards on the 2020 renewable transport fuel targets. In our discussions on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, Labour pressed for strong action on reviewing the plug-in grant and charging point schemes, both of which were cut by the Government, for licensing and accreditation for technicians—both proposals were backed by the Institute of the Motor Industry—and for a clear review of vehicle excise duty, which was backed by the RAC Foundation, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders and many other motor and active travel organisations.

As someone who has spent much of my time in Parliament talking about buses, I know that there are huge opportunities to improve the environmental performance of our bus fleets. As was pointed out, in some areas they are ageing and very polluting. It was disappointing that the Government did not take up some of the Opposition's constructive proposals on the Bus Services Bill. I urge them to think about that further. There is an opportunity to create a greener bus network, so I ask the Minister to assure us that analysis will be done to look at how we can make better use of the Bus Services Bill to improve our fleet's environmental performance.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee told us last year that only five of the 12 worst-polluted cities have been given the ability to charge to enter clean-air zones. Will the Government also look at extending the network of clean-air zones, which Labour committed to in 2015?

The Government have some serious questions to answer about air quality. We believe that to breathe clean air is a right, and the health, environmental and economic case for acting is overwhelming. Action on diesel is part of the solution, but measures must be cost-effective and targeted actively enough to affect the high-mileage vehicles that operate in our towns and cities. That means investing in greener buses and public transport, reviewing the plug-in grants and excise duty rates for electric vehicles, reducing other barriers to electric vehicle uptake and extending clean-air zones to more local authorities. One way of rising to these challenges is to back the London Mayor's call for a new clean air Act that is fit for the 21st century. That would send a powerful message to everyone that clean air is not a privilege but a right. A YouGov survey shows that two thirds of the public support that.

As we eagerly await what must only be an exhaustive and robust air-quality strategy—at the third attempt—I hope the Minister considers his response. The truth is that we can no longer hold our breath while we wait.

10.45 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope, and to speak in this debate. I have just 15 minutes to deal with this important subject—I hope it will be 15 minutes of pure joy.

Disraeli, the greatest Conservative Prime Minister, said:

“The fool wonders, the wise man asks.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) has indeed asked a question about what he feels is an important contribution to the developing strategy on air quality, which, as he knows, I have been working on with colleagues at DEFRA and others across Government so as to put it in place in a way that is both practicable and demanding. I say practicable, because I am not in the business of penalising drivers—particularly those on modest incomes who bought their diesel vehicles in good faith. They were badly advised, largely by the previous Labour Government, as we heard from various contributors to the debate. There has been refreshing honesty in that respect today.

Mr Spellar: Will the Minister tell us whether he or the Conservative Opposition in any way opposed those measures at the time?

Mr Hayes: I can answer that question directly. The Conservatives took an entirely different approach in opposition. In our 2001 environment manifesto, the then Conservative Opposition called for a vehicle excise duty to be based on air pollution and vehicle emissions rather than just carbon dioxide. None the less, Gordon Brown went ahead with the scheme unaffected by that advice. That is the direct answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question. Ministers do not give many direct answers, but that is a model example of one.

Mr Spellar: Will the Minister tell us how the Conservatives voted in Parliament on that?

Mr Hayes: In the short time available to me, I do not have access to *Hansard*, and it would absolutely wrong for me to give any information that is not pinpoint accurate. That is not my habit, Mr Chope, and it is certainly not something you would permit in this Chamber. I now need to rush on to deal adequately with the contributions that have been made to this debate.

It is absolutely clear that the prosperity of our nation and, more than that, the common good depend on our wellbeing. Closely associated with wellbeing is the health of our people—urban and rural, young and old. If we are going to promote a better Britain to fuel—if I can put it in these terms—the common good, we need to look at air quality and pollution, as that is critical to health.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con) rose—

Mr Hayes: I want to deal with a pseudodox before I give way to my hon. Friend.

It is important to recognise that air quality has improved. I do not want there to be any misunderstanding about that. Over time, air quality in this country has improved. That goes right back to the Clean Air Acts of the late 1950s and through the 1960s. Even in recent years, air quality has improved with respect to nitrogen monoxide emissions by something like 20%, so let us not start from a series of misassumptions.

Marcus Fysh: I am very heartened to hear that the Minister estimates that we should look after the rural areas just as we look after the cities. I was a little worried that the Opposition spokesman’s contribution suggested that we should purely focus on cities. In Yeovil, we have an air quality management area, which needs managing. I am a supporter of this potential scrappage scheme as one means of alleviating that. We have a congestion issue. I would love the Minister to come look at a bypass scheme to alleviate that on Sherborne Road. This is an excellent part of what we should be doing to address that issue.

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend is right that in implementing any set of policies we need to be clear about the particularities of different localities. The circumstances in rural areas are different in all kinds of ways. The biggest problem with air quality and pollution is obviously in urban areas, and the Government’s approach—of which clean air zones are the exemplification—has, of course, focused on just such areas. It would be inconceivable for us not to be sensitive to different circumstances, which is why we are so determined to work with all agencies and local government in particular to ensure that the specificity of any proposals that we put into place is sufficient to deal with those particularities. He is absolutely right to raise that.

Having said that air quality has improved, let us be clear: we must do more. There is no complacency in making a bald statement about the facts. We have to go further, for, as Disraeli also said:

“The health of the people is really the foundation upon which all their happiness”

depends. It is right that high nitrogen dioxide levels exacerbate the impact of pre-existing health conditions, especially for elderly people and children, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton and others made clear; it is right that we protect those most affected by poor air quality. I am absolutely committed to that objective.

People know this already, but I am not afraid or ashamed to restate it: Government can be a force for good. I mentioned the Clean Air Acts, and in those terms Governments were a force for good and can continue to be so if we get the regulatory environment right. Air pollution has reduced, but we need to tackle it with a new vigour and determination. Road transport is at the heart of that, because it is the single biggest contributor to high local concentrations of nitrogen dioxide, and it is nitrogen dioxide that has featured large in the debate.

Geraint Davies: The Minister mentioned the reduction of pollution, but will he not accept that the aggregate reduction of pollution in Britain is linked to the demise of the coal mines and the exporting of our manufacturing base, as well as the financial disaster in 2008? If he

[Geraint Davies]

focused his measurements on more recent years and urban environments, there has been a worrying escalation in the NOx and particulates that we are talking about. We should therefore support the scheme.

Mr Hayes: In recent years emissions have been a problem in particular areas—I acknowledge that clearly—and the Government are particularly keen to deal with the effects on those areas. The air quality plan will of course have a national footprint, as it is a national plan. The particularity I described was about Government setting out an appropriate and deliverable framework, and then working with localities to ensure that in the implementation of that framework all those local circumstances are put in place. That is the point that I was making about urban and rural areas and the different circumstances that apply there.

Clean air zones cover a designated area and involve a range of immediate local actions to support cities to grow while delivering sustained improvements in air quality and transition to a low-emission economy. Measures that could be implemented include the promotion of ultra-low emission vehicles; upgrading buses and taxis; promoting cycling schemes; and, in the worst cases, charging for the most polluting vehicles. In 2015 we named five cities, Birmingham, Leeds, Nottingham, Derby and Southampton, that are required to introduce a clean air zone. The Government are engaging with the relevant local authorities on the schemes' detailed design.

Clean air zones will support the transition to a low-emission economy, but the Government are considering how to mitigate the zones' impacts on those worst affected. I am not in the business of disadvantaging those who are already disadvantaged and in exaggerating the circumstances of those who already face tough choices and have a struggle to make their way in the world. That is not we are about and would not be the kind of fair politics that I believe in and to which this Government are committed. A fairer Britain is one that takes account of such disadvantages and we will do so in the construction and delivery of this policy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton suggested that a means-tested scrappage scheme could address some of those issues. He emphasised the fact that his scheme would be means-tested, and he did so with a fair amount of passion. Hegel said:

“Nothing great in the world has ever been accomplished without passion”,

and my hon. Friend has displayed that very passion today. Let me be clear: I note his points and I will ensure that they are considered as part of our consultation and as part of our work. I do not think you get much better than that typically in Westminster Hall.

It is absolutely right that the Government's clean air zone policy recognises all the challenges that have been set out by various contributors to the debate and it tackles the problems of the most polluted places by acknowledging that low-cost transport is vital to people's opportunities and wellbeing.

Mr Spellar: I have a one-sentence question. How much money have the Department and the Treasury designated to deal with the problem?

Mr Hayes: I am happy to give another straight answer to another straight question from the right hon. Gentleman. In February this year we awarded almost £3.7 million of funding to projects, including one in Gateshead to encourage cycling and to upgrade traffic management, and another in Nottingham to trial fuel cell technology and to encourage ultra-low emission vehicles in the local NHS. Alongside that, we are making significant investment in a range of green transport initiatives. Since 2011 the Government have invested more than £2 billion to increase the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles and to support greener transport schemes, as well as pledging £290 million to support electric vehicles and low-emission buses and taxis in the 2016 autumn statement. More than that, just last week, £109 million of Government funding was awarded to 38 cutting-edge automotive research and development projects focused on greatly reduce automotive emissions and their footprint. Those are the facts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton proposed to put ultra-low emission vehicles at the heart of a scrappage scheme. We are already investing a significant amount of money to support the ultra-low emission vehicle market, because we believe that the transition to a zero-emission economy is both inevitable and desirable. We want almost every car to be low-emission by 2050, as hon. Members know, because they have heard me say it before.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will not, for the sake of time, but I put on the record that my hon. Friend has been a great champion of his constituents' interests in this and so many other ways.

We are going further and have introduced a Bill, the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which has been referred to in our debate and has gone through Committee. It is designed to promote a charging infrastructure for electric vehicles and we also dealt with autonomous vehicles in our consideration of it. The Bill was debated in Committee without amaritude or contumely. There seemed to be a cross-party view that we need to move ahead both with care and with a degree of unprecedented vigour to promote the take-up of electric and other low-emission vehicles. We will therefore put in place appropriate infrastructure, which was a point made in the course of this debate. I said today, in a breakfast meeting with the sector from which I rushed to come to Westminster Hall, that I will be rolling out the competition for the design of electric charging points which I mentioned in that Committee.

In the brief time I have available, I need to draw the whole of the Chamber's attention to the breakdown of where the emissions emanate from. The question was asked several times: why and where? It is all here, on this list, which is exhaustive. I have not time to deal with it now, but I will make it available to every Member who has contributed to and attended the debate. It breaks down the very points that were made. For example, are emissions coming from shipping? By the way, shipping is important, and I want to do more in that respect, as argued for by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), the chair of the maritime all-party group, as well as in respect of railways and so on and so forth.

Let me move to my exciting conclusion in the couple of minutes that I have available—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Does the Minister intend to allow the mover of the motion to respond?

Mr Hayes: I will give my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton a brief time, if he is happy with that.

One of the other big problems has been Europe, and the failure of the Euro testing regime has come together with increased use of diesel vehicles following tax incentives introduced by the Labour Government. The failure of that EU regime to put in place real tests that made a difference has been a contributory factor that, as in so many other ways, was injurious to the interests of the British people. This Government are determined to put the wellbeing, welfare and health of our people at the heart of all we do. We will bring forward the plan and the policy, and they will be balanced and certainly not penalise those who are worse off. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the chance to say so.

10.59 am

Neil Parish: I thank everyone for their contributions and the Minister very much for his reply. We need a scrappage scheme along with public transport and everything that we have discussed this morning. We need to reduce the amount of pollution in order to get better quality air in our cities and throughout the nation. A diesel scrappage scheme is very much part of that.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

EEC, EC and the EU: UK Financial Contributions

11 am

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK's total net financial contribution to the EEC, EC and EU since 1 January 1973.

May I say what a huge pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope? I thank Mr Speaker for granting me this important debate. I hope that the debate will do what it says on the tin, because if my hon. Friend the Minister is unable or unwilling to do so, I shall reveal this country's total net financial contribution to Europe since we joined the Common Market on 1 January 1973. It is a huge figure, which British taxpayers have had to spend over the past 44 years.

Mr Chope, you will recall that we joined what was then called the Common Market with effect from 1 January 1973. Its official title was the European Economic Community. Since that date, it has changed—sometimes with and sometimes without the consent of the British people—into the European Community, or the EC, and from that into the European Union. According to detailed and authoritative research published by the Library, over the past 44 years this country has contributed a net total, in real terms—in today's money—of £187 billion. That sum has been transferred from British taxpayers to European Union taxpayers. That is up to 2016; it does not include this year, next year or the bit of 2019 before we leave that dreadful organisation. If the real-terms total is something like £187 billion today, it will be well over £200 billion by the time we leave. I estimate that we will have spent £209 billion on being a member of that organisation—that is our membership fee.

It is simply outrageous for any EU negotiator to demand that this country continues to pay to leave when we have contributed all that money, net, since we joined on 1 January 1973. I look to my hon. Friend the Minister, who is an excellent Minister in the Department for Exiting the European Union, to be extremely robust when he negotiates our exit from that institution.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hollobone: I would be delighted and honoured to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Graham Stringer: I am grateful. I assume that the figures the hon. Gentleman is giving are cash figures and are not updated to current value. Does he agree that, had that money been put in the country's wallet, we would now have the largest sovereign wealth fund in the world?

Mr Hollobone: That is an extremely good point. The cash figure—the total of our actual payments each year in the value of money at that time—is £137.4 billion. In real terms—in today's money—it is £184.571 billion, so £185 billion. I have added £2 billion just for fun. That is the sort of tactic that the EU negotiators will adopt, so we should start playing them at their own game. Of course, they will demand that we pay an exit or divorce bill for leaving. My argument is that we should not pay anything at all.

[Mr Hollobone]

The European Commission's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, has reportedly put the exit bill at close to €60 billion. Estimates of the payment are contingent on what liabilities and assets are included and how those are shared. For example, the Centre for European Reform has produced estimates ranging from €24 billion to €73 billion, while the House of Lords European Union Committee, in its excellent report, "Brexit and the EU budget", which was published on 4 March, points to evidence suggesting that the EU will demand between €15 billion and €60 billion. That range of estimates highlights the fact that almost every element of the potential payment is subject to interpretation and the Commission has laid out no official bill or rationale. Negotiations will determine which liabilities and assets are shared and how they are shared.

The Lords Committee concluded that if no agreement was reached with the EU,

"the UK would be subject to no enforceable obligation to make any financial contribution at all."

The Committee received competing interpretations but felt that that interpretation was the most persuasive, although it stressed that there could be political and economic consequences of the UK leaving without reaching an agreement on the payment. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that there will be political and economic consequences in this country if we have to pay a massive exit bill. That would be unacceptable to my constituents and, I suspect, to most Members of this House.

There are three big sources of potential liabilities as we leave, which I would dismiss almost in their entirety. The first is called—I am sorry to use French in the Chamber—*reste à liquider*, or RAL. In its annual budgets, the EU commits to some future spending without making payments to recipients at the time. The EU refers to those outstanding commitments as *reste à liquider*, and it has been suggested that the UK may be asked to contribute to that RAL when we leave.

Again, estimates of the potential size of those payments vary. Evidence to the Lords Committee suggests that the EU will argue that we could be liable for a share of between 5%, based on our share of allocated financing, and 15%, based on our gross contribution to the EU budget. The Commission's current forecast of total RAL across the whole EU by the end of 2020 is €254 billion. Using that forecast and our maximum potential share of 15%, our liability would amount to some €38 billion. At the other end, were we to pay 5% based on our proportion of allocated pre-financing under the multi-annual financial framework, our liability could be as low as €12.7 billion. Obviously, I say that our liability should be zero, but if it is going to be at the bottom end, it should be no more than €12.7 billion.

There are other potential liabilities under the multi-annual financial framework. I am sorry about all this jargon, Mr Chope, but as you and I know, that is the way the EU has been run for the past 44 years. There is an outrageous suggestion that, because the multi-annual financial framework runs until the end of 2020, were we to leave in April 2019, we might be liable for payments made between that date and the end of 2020. Quite how the EU comes up with that is beyond me, but that is

apparently its serious negotiating stance. Again, estimates vary from €14.8 billion on a 5% share to €44.4 billion on a 15% share.

However, even the German Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble—I am sorry to use German in the Chamber, Mr Chope—has suggested that actually a new multi-annual financial framework could be negotiated, which would come in as soon as we leave in April 2019, thus reducing our liability to nil. The Lords Committee said that

"in Germany at least, there is an acknowledgement that the commitments made in the MFF may not be legally or politically due".

It would seem to me that even the Germans are embarrassed by some aspects of the EU's early negotiating stance. I argue that our liability should be zero, but the low end of the estimates is just short of €15 billion.

Then there is the thorny issue of potential pension liabilities for British nationals serving in the European Commission. The Commission of course might argue that we are liable to pay some of the pension contributions for the non-British nationals there, on the basis that the nationality of the pension recipients is irrelevant under pension law. Again, the range of estimates for our potential liability for those pensions ranges from something like €1.2 billion to €9.6 billion. If we add up all those potential liabilities, €12.7 billion, €13.2 billion and €1.2 billion at the low end for the three different categories—RAL, MFF and pension liabilities—the potential bill is €27.1 billion.

Against that, however, there is a strong moral case: we will have contributed just short of £210 billion in real terms during the lifetime of our membership. Surely that entitles us to a big slug of the EU assets. That is what would happen in any divorce court if a couple were getting divorced. According to the excellent note from the House of Commons Library, the EU has €154 billion of assets, including property, equipment, loans and investments, cash and other fungible assets. The Lords Committee concluded that the theoretical maximum that the UK could claim would be €23 billion, using 15% as a relevant share.

The UK is a member of the European Investment Bank and has capital invested in it. The Lords Committee expects that if the UK were no longer to be a member of the EU, and was therefore not a member of the EIB, it would have its capital returned, potentially with a share of the bank's equity. The Committee says:

"The UK might expect its €3.5 billion in called up capital to be returned if it ceased to be a shareholder. Based on the current net worth of the EIB, the UK may be due a share of equity in the region of €10 billion."

Of course, Baroness Thatcher negotiated a rebate while she served her glorious 11 years as Prime Minister. In one of her finest moments, she secured a far better deal for many years of our membership of the European Union. Without the rebate, our net real-terms contribution would of course have been even higher. I can in fact reveal that since it was introduced in 1985, it has saved British taxpayers in real terms—today's money—£117 billion. That is a huge saving for the country as a result of what Mrs Thatcher did. We can imagine that our total net financial contribution would not have been £210 billion; it would have been £117 billion higher, had it not been for Maggie's efforts. Sneakily, however, the EU pays us the rebate a year in arrears, so I urge the Minister in negotiating to make sure it does not

try not to pay us the extra years' payments we require when we leave. That is one of the sneaky tricks that it might try, and it would be worth €6 billion.

If we add up the €6 billion rebate, €10 billion from our share of the European Investment Bank, and €23 billion as our reasonable share of the assets, it comes to €36 billion potential assets coming our way against potential liabilities of €27.1 billion. So I would argue the EU needs to pay us. We have contributed north of £200 billion in real terms over the lifetime of our membership. If we look closely at the negotiating areas, we can see that a robust negotiator such as my hon. Friend the Minister at the table, eyeball to eyeball with Michel Barnier, should be banging the table in defence of this country and insisting that we will pay not a penny piece when we leave, because we have already contributed far more than our fair share.

I am looking to my hon. Friend the Minister, on behalf of my constituents in Kettering, 61% of whom voted to leave in the referendum, as did 52% of the people of the country: let us make sure that we have a sensible, reasonable and fair deal for the country when we leave the European Union. I hope that the Minister will stare it down.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on securing the debate. Like you, Mr Chope, he has been a doughty champion for UK taxpayers and the UK national interest over a number of years.

My hon. Friend asked about the UK's total net financial contribution to the EEC, EC and EU since 1 January 1973, the year that the UK joined the European Economic Community. Neither the UK nor the European Union publishes an aggregate audited figure representing that contribution. However, details of annual UK public sector contributions to the EU budget are published in a document entitled "European Union Finances", most recently in February 2017. In the past three years our net contributions to the EU budget were £9.7 billion in 2014, £10.7 billion in 2015, and £8.6 billion in 2016. It is true that UK has been a net contributor every year, with the exception of 1975, since our accession to the European Economic Community. Our status as a net contributor reflects the fact that the UK is one of the largest economies in Europe and, indeed, in recent years has outperformed many of the others. However, there are no aggregate audited figures in the public domain that represent our net contribution over all that time.

Graham Stringer: The Minister mentioned audited reports. If I were a councillor anywhere in the country I would be sent to prison if I paid money to organisations with unaudited books. Why do we keep making contributions to the EU when it has not had audited books for 20 years?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, which was well made during the referendum debate, which determined that we should end the relationship in which vast contributions were made.

Aside from the issue of auditing, to aggregate the figures a range of complexities and variables would need to be addressed, such as differences—as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering mentioned—between

the cash value of our payments and the real-terms 2017 prices, exchange rate fluctuations, and corrections to contributions in future years. Although the House of Commons Library paper includes a list of the UK contributions since 1973, no consolidated figure has been released by either the EU or the UK Government. The net contribution figures that I mentioned earlier are based on the UK definition, which includes the EU revenue generated through traditional own resources, VAT contributions and gross national income share of contributions. That is then netted off against the public receipts received through EU funding and the UK rebate. Private sector receipts do not flow back through the Government, so they are not included in the net contribution calculations.

As my hon. Friend also mentioned, the UK Government led by Margaret Thatcher successfully secured the rebate in 1984, which was introduced in 1985. It sought to correct a particularly pronounced imbalance between the amount the UK had to contribute and the receipts it received. The rebate was designed to reimburse around two thirds of the difference, thereby reducing the UK's net contribution, although the exact method of calculation—like many things in the European Union—is highly complex, because certain areas of EU spending are excluded. The last Labour Government gave away some of the rebate, which contributes to the higher level of our recent contributions. I assure my hon. Friend that, encouraged by his exhortations, we will pay close attention to the detail of the rebate, including the timing of its payment, in our approach to the coming negotiations.

The European Commission also publishes outturn data on all member states' contributions to the EU budget and their receipts on a calendar-year basis. The figure that gives for the UK's net contribution are different from the numbers derived from the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecasts and UK data. The main reason for that difference is that the European Commission's numbers take into account all of the UK's receipts, including those that go directly to UK-based recipients, such as funding for research paid to UK universities.

On 29 March, the Prime Minister confirmed the Government's decision to invoke article 50 of the treaty of the European Union, acting on the democratic will of the British people. The article 50 process is now under way, but while we remain a member of the EU, the UK will continue to play a full part in EU business, including EU budget negotiations. We will remain committed to budgetary restraint and ensuring that we live within the current deal on the multi-annual financial framework. However, it is important that, once we have left the EU, control over how our money is spent will reside with the UK's Government and Parliament—something I know that all the hon. Members in their places have campaigned for over many years.

We will also need to discuss how we determine a fair settlement of the UK's rights and obligations as a departing member state, in accordance with the law and in the spirit of the deep and special relationship that we seek with the EU. I cannot prejudge the outcome of the negotiations. Debate over UK payments according to the rights and obligations of our membership is only speculation at this stage. However, I will address some of the key aspects of our financial settlement with the

[*Mr Robin Walker*]

EU. As the House of Lords EU Committee's report acknowledged, there are a range of opinions about the legal interpretation of existing obligations between the UK and the EU—both liabilities and assets. There is also significant uncertainty over those potential rights and obligations, and how to calculate the UK share.

Disagreement and uncertainty over the potential assets and liabilities of a member state leaving the EU are to be expected when this process has never been undertaken before. The House of Lords EU Committee's report, "Brexit and the EU Budget", which my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering rightly praised, notes that:

"The total UK contributions to and receipts from the EU budget are variable, difficult to calculate, and subject to interpretation. It is therefore difficult to reach an unequivocal figure for the UK's current commitments."

It also notes that different approaches can be taken to calculating any UK share of the EU budget as a departing member state. It concluded that the process of disentangling the UK from current financial contributions will be a matter for negotiation and dependent on the political decisions made—which is the point my hon. Friend quoted.

Mr Hollobone: One of the weapons my hon. Friend has at his disposal, as the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) said, is that Her Majesty's Government operates audited accounts; our accounts are true. When negotiating with Michel Barnier, my hon. Friend can make the point again and again to him that his accounts are not audited; whereas our figures are verifiable, his are not.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and the Government certainly have confidence in our figures, as we always do. The fact that they are audited adds strength to that confidence.

In addition, as my hon. Friend and the House of Lords report mentioned, the UK is one of the largest shareholders in the European Investment Bank, and we benefit from investment opportunities that that bank supports. As we exit the EU, we will need to address questions over our future relationship with the European Investment Bank. There may be European programmes in which we might want to participate in future. We are

an active participant in Horizon 2020, for example—the EU's main funding instrument for collaboration on research and innovation.

The UK has a proud history of leading and supporting cutting-edge research and innovation within the EU. As we exit the EU, we would welcome agreement to continue to collaborate with our European partners on major science, research and technology initiatives. If so, it is reasonable that we make an appropriate contribution. However, that will be a decision for the UK as we negotiate the new arrangements. There are clearly various ways in which that could be done, and the Government are confident that we can achieve an outcome that works in the interests of both sides. That would form part of a new deep and special relationship between the UK and the EU.

As the European Union considers its future and the UK builds its new role in the world, we will also redefine our relationship with the EU and our neighbours in Europe. The Prime Minister has now set out the Government's plan to achieve a new positive and constructive partnership between the UK and the European Union. The UK is a country that meets its international obligations. It is in the interests of both the United Kingdom and the European Union to agree a new partnership in a fair and orderly manner, with as little disruption as possible.

We want to play our part in making sure that Europe remains strong and prosperous and able to lead in the world, projecting its values and defending itself from security threats. We want a deep and special partnership that takes in both economic and security co-operation. However, as the Prime Minister set out in her Lancaster House speech on 17 January 2017, having been a net contributor to the European budget since we joined the Common Market in 1973,

"the days of Britain making vast contributions to the European Union every year will end."

My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering called for us to be extremely robust in our approach. I assure him that, as befits the tough reputation of my Secretary of State, we will be robust in defending the UK's national interest throughout the process.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Universal Credit

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

2.42 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the roll-out of universal credit.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, not least because I have been attempting to hold a debate on this issue for several weeks, if not months, because of the sheer volume of universal credit-related problems raised with me by constituents. I originally secured the debate for 22 March, but it was understandably cut short following the appalling attack on Westminster that afternoon, so I would like to take this opportunity to place on the record my eternal gratitude for the selfless and incredible bravery of PC Keith Palmer on that day. My thoughts very much remain with his family and with the families of those from around the world who were killed or injured as a result of that sickening incident.

Before I expose the myriad issues that my constituents have faced in dealing with this Government policy, and at the risk of repeating what I said on 22 March, I want to set out the context for this debate. As all hon. Members are aware, universal credit is a new benefit that is being introduced to replace means-tested social security benefits and tax credits for working-age individuals and families, including working tax credit, child tax credit, income-based jobseeker's allowance, income support, income-related employment and support allowance, and housing benefit. According to the Government, the aim of universal credit, using real-time information on claimants' circumstances, is

“to simplify and streamline the benefits system for claimants and administrators, to improve work incentives, to tackle poverty among low income families, and to reduce the scope for fraud and error.”

Following years of repeated delays and false starts, the infamous reset in 2013 after the Major Projects Authority told the Government to go back to the drawing board, and concerns expressed by the National Audit Office that delivery of universal credit had been beset by

“weak management, ineffective control and poor governance”, the new benefit is finally, but very painfully, being rolled out across the country. As the Library briefing note helpfully produced for the debate highlights, since the 2013 reset, the Department for Work and Pensions has been developing and rolling out universal credit using a twin-track approach. The briefing note states:

“This involves rolling out Universal Credit using IT systems developed prior to the 2013 reset (the ‘Live Service’) while, simultaneously, DWP develops the Digital Service (now known as the ‘Full Service’) from which Universal Credit will eventually be operated”—

I hope everyone is still following me. That means that, since spring 2016, universal credit has been available in all jobcentres across the country, but in most areas it is available only for new claims from people with relatively simple circumstances—single unemployed people, or people with very low earnings, who satisfy the gateway conditions. In the small but increasing number of areas that have full service universal credit, all new eligible claimants will receive universal credit, as will existing

claimants of legacy benefits who report a change in their circumstances that results in their being “naturally migrated” to universal credit.

Following the “reshaping” of the next phase of universal credit's roll-out announced in a written statement on 20 July 2016, the Secretary of State confirmed that the DWP intended to continue the roll-out of full service universal credit to five jobcentres a month until June 2017 and expand that to 30 a month from July 2017. There will be a break over the summer of 2017. The Government hope to scale up full service roll-out to 55 jobcentres a month between October and December 2017 and accelerate that to 65 a month by February 2018, with roll-out to the final 57 being completed in September 2018.

As a consequence, under the Government's current plans, universal credit should be available across the country to all new claimants and existing claimants with changed circumstances by September 2018, and the final stage of the roll-out of universal credit, the “managed migration” of existing benefit claimants with no change in their circumstances, will commence in July 2019 and be completed by March 2022—some five years later than the original target. Quite how that complicated timetable now fits alongside the DWP's proposals, published in January, to close an estimated one in 10 jobcentres and merge or co-locate many others is something on which it would be helpful to receive confirmation from the Minister when he responds to the debate.

It is clear that the roll-out of universal credit is a hugely complex task and that hard-working jobcentre staff are being placed in an incredibly challenging situation. The Library briefing note states that it involves

“not simply the creation of a new benefit but development of entirely new administrative systems to support it. This includes development of the Digital Service, the online IT system via which claimants and DWP will manage awards, and training staff to administer a new conditionality and sanctions regime that imposes requirements on in-work as well as out-of-work claimants.”

As universal credit requires a broader span of people to look for work than is the case with legacy benefits—for example, by including those in receipt of housing benefit or child tax credits and, indeed, the partners of universal credit claimants—there has been a marked effect on the claimant count in areas that have full service universal credit. In the year to January 2017, there was a 25.5% increase in the claimant count in full service areas, compared with an increase of 0.1% across the UK as a whole.

There are numerous concerns about the impact of universal credit on existing claimants, particularly families with disabled children whose caring responsibilities prevent them from working. The charity Contact a Family estimates that those families could be up to £1,600 a year worse off after being transferred to universal credit. We also still have the disturbing two-child limit for the child element of universal credit for all families making a new claim, regardless of when their third child was born, and the totally unacceptable situation in which women will be forced to prove that any third child was born as a result of rape. Serious concerns remain about the cuts to work allowances introduced from April 2016 for universal credit claimants. The Children's Society highlights that they mean that

“Universal Credit support for most working families was considerably reduced”.

[Catherine McKinnell]

The Government have pressed ahead with their potentially deeply damaging decision to remove entitlement to the housing benefit element of universal credit for 18 to 21-year-olds, subject to certain exemptions—a move that has been roundly condemned by homelessness charities including Centrepoint and Crisis. Meanwhile, organisations including the Federation of Small Businesses and the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group are pressing the Government to think again about the minimum income floor, given its potential impact on many genuinely self-employed people with incomes that fluctuate from month to month.

There is, of course, the fact that the change in the universal credit taper rate from 65% to 63%, as announced in the 2016 autumn statement, does not come close to outweighing the cuts to work allowances. The general secretary of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers recently commented:

“The very modest reduction in the high clawback rate of 65% of net earnings to 63% is a tiny step in the right direction, but is worth less than £300 for most working parents. It goes nowhere near offsetting the enormous £2,000 to £3,000 annual cuts that Universal Credit represents or taking the taper back to the 55% rate that was originally intended. Universal Credit is a ticking time bomb that will plunge far more working families into poverty, when they are transferred on to it. We supported the initial intentions of Universal Credit, to simplify benefits and improve incentives to work. However, severe cost cutting has turned Universal Credit into a real threat to the incomes of low-paid working families.”

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for securing this important debate and for ensuring that it took place today. She knows that I have raised the issue of the increase in housing debt for those on universal credit, and that in Newcastle the proportion of tenants in debt has increased greatly. The Minister said that that increase had not actually occurred; however, I have figures showing that the average debt for non-universal credit tenants in council housing is £300, whereas for universal credit tenants it is £636. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a huge increase for working and non-working families?

Catherine McKinnell: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for her insightful intervention, which highlights one of the major issues caused by the roll-out of universal credit when combined with the impact of the cuts agenda. This is a ticking time bomb and it is of particular concern to areas such as ours—Newcastle—given recent analysis by the TUC highlighting that while employment in the north-east grew by 60,000 between 2011 and 2016, a staggering 40,000 of those new jobs were without guaranteed hours or baseline employment rights. That means that some 124,000 people in our region—the equivalent of one in nine workers—now work in insecure jobs. Given that the north-east has the highest rate of insecure employment of anywhere in the UK, those people need a universal credit system that functions.

That leads me to the reason I have been trying to secure this debate. I want to focus on the actual experience of people in Newcastle upon Tyne North attempting to claim universal credit, in the hope that the Minister will acknowledge the clear failings in the system, do something to address the situation and commit to putting the failings right before universal credit is rolled out elsewhere.

To put this into context, the universal credit live service was rolled out to three jobcentres in Newcastle in April 2015, following which full service universal credit was introduced to Newcastle’s Cathedral Square city centre jobcentre in May 2016, the Newcastle East Jobcentre Plus in February 2017 and finally the Newcastle West Jobcentre Plus on 15 March. To return to the written ministerial statement of 20 July, the Secretary of State clearly said:

“It is essential that the Universal Credit rollout for all claimant types is delivered in an orderly and successful manner; that claimants receive the support they need in a timely fashion; and that welfare reforms are delivered safely as the roll out continues.”—*[Official Report, 20 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 23WS.]*

I welcome that aim, but I have to tell the Minister that it simply is not happening in Newcastle. Indeed, it is fair to say that my office has been deluged with complaints from constituents about a universal credit system that is clearly struggling to cope and failing to deliver the support that claimants need in anything like an orderly or timely fashion.

Those concerns include a universal credit verification process that requires claimants to produce photographic identification such as a passport or driving licence, which many simply do not possess and certainly cannot afford, even though some have been in receipt of benefits for several years. Deciding that universal credit must be digital by default has also created significant difficulties for many, making it extremely difficult to obtain information about their claim from a human being. Constituents face long and expensive telephone queues, and when they do get through, they are told to report any concerns or queries via their online journal, following which they have to wait for increasingly long periods to receive a response. The fact that universal credit is centred on an online journal system assumes that all claimants have access to the internet or are computer literate. That is certainly not the case for many people across Newcastle, and it can make it very hard for people to verify updates on their claims or post information about their work activity, which is necessary to prevent their claims from being suspended.

I also have numerous examples of universal credit claims being shut down before they should be; of documentation being provided to the DWP, at the constituent’s cost, and repeatedly being lost or even destroyed; and of totally conflicting, often incorrect, information being provided to constituents about their claims. That is because of a clear lack of understanding about universal credit by the staff who are trying to administer it, and it also results in incorrect payments being made. Indeed, one of the cases I have been handling involves a constituent who received a £600 universal credit payment, while no one at the DWP is able to explain what it is for. There are significant inconsistencies in payment dates and amounts paid, even for people who work regular hours and have regular incomes, leading to overpayments of universal credit that the introduction of real-time information was supposed to prevent.

Claimants are waiting significantly longer than the commonly advertised six-week period to have their universal credit payments processed. That leads to many finding themselves in very serious financial difficulties as they wait for the DWP to get its act together—hardly surprising when all their benefits are rolled into one payment, which, if delayed, can make just about managing feel like an aspiration.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am listening with considerable concern to the hon. Lady's account of what the universal credit roll-out is doing to her constituents. My constituents are due to suffer the same fate in December 2017, which means that, with the six-week non-payment period, a lot of them will face the entire Christmas and new year period with no source of income at all. Does she agree that at the very least the roll-out should be suspended, and that the best result would be to follow the Scottish Government's request to stop this process immediately, fix the problems and then continue with expanding it or rolling it out, if that is the right thing to do?

Catherine McKinnell: I take on board the hon. Gentleman's serious concerns and, indeed, implore the Government to get this process right before they roll it out across the country.

There are also some fundamental flaws in the system. The fact that payments are made monthly and in arrears effectively embeds debt into the system—as landlords awaiting receipt of the housing benefit element of universal credit know all too well—and requires repeated applications for advance payments from DWP and/or budgeting skills, which many people sadly do not have. Indeed, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently commented:

“People risk debt, destitution and eviction while they wait...to receive their first UC payment”—

a description that surely belongs in the world of Charles Dickens, rather than in the modern, fit-for-purpose and efficient social welfare system that we should have in 21st-century Britain.

So what was the DWP's initial response to the increasing number of complaints about universal credit claims? In a letter dated 20 January 2017 and addressed to

“Colleagues working in the welfare advice sector”,

MPs in full service universal credit areas were informed that they could not receive any information about a constituent's case unless the constituent in question had provided online explicit consent directly to the DWP. The letter stated that such consent

“must be given freely, unambiguously and in an informed way. The claimant must be clear on the information that they want to be disclosed and who the information can be disclosed to...Consent does not last indefinitely, but covers a particular query or piece of business.”

Even when I had been sent an email by a constituent that provided me with all the details of their case and that specifically asked me to intervene on their behalf—usually because they had reached the end of their tether—that was not deemed sufficient proof for the DWP to provide me with information about the case. I am, of course, pleased that that ridiculous situation has now been reviewed, after complaints by many hon. Members and an intervention by the Leader of the House, but I must emphasise that it caused weeks of additional challenge for my constituents and for my caseworkers in Newcastle, who were deluged with universal credit cases but could not receive any sensible information about them.

The Minister need not take my word for the problems that people face in Newcastle. He can come and visit the Newcastle citizens advice bureau, for which the DWP's

explicit consent edict remains in place. He can hear about the 85 universal credit clients from Newcastle upon Tyne North alone that the bureau has supported in the last year, who have faced severely delayed payments and, in the bureau's words,

“unnecessary hardship through no fault of their own”.

They face that hardship because of difficulties in finding or accessing a computer, failure of jobcentre staff to provide information about advance payments, incorrect information held on claimants' records, incorrect advice being provided by jobcentre staff, and incorrect payments being made.

Alternatively, the Minister can come and meet staff from Your Homes Newcastle, the arm's length management organisation responsible for managing Newcastle's council housing stock, to discuss the significant level of support that they are having to provide to tenants through the universal credit process. Indeed, Your Homes Newcastle has highlighted that it and Newcastle City Council have so far provided support to 506 people,

“specifically to help those who may be unable to manage monthly payments or don't understand UC and need explanations at the very start of their claims. The time taken to support customers in personal budgeting varies between 2 and 15 hours of support, although there are some exceptional cases where this can take considerably longer. The average time per case is currently 3.5 hours and this is carried out by staff co-located at Jobcentres. The cost of placing three staff in Newcastle Jobcentres to provide this service is £93,651 annually.”

That support is above and beyond the 25 minutes to two hours that it can take Your Homes Newcastle staff to assist tenants through the initial universal credit claim process. Some of the more complex cases can take significantly longer. Indeed, Your Homes Newcastle staff have highlighted the case of one tenant whose universal credit application has taken them approximately 100 hours to progress. Throughout that time, the woman has seen a significant decline in her health and wellbeing, as well as real financial hardship because of the severe delays and mistakes on the DWP's part. If this represents a simplification and streamlining of the benefits system, I dread to think what a more complicated system would look like.

Of particular concern to Your Homes Newcastle is the significant impact on rent arrears of the roll-out of universal credit and the associated delays. I know that the Minister has repeatedly claimed—no doubt he will do so again this afternoon—that a large number of cases that enter universal credit have existing rent arrears. However, Your Homes Newcastle has made it clear to me that its current income collection rate is 93.9% of the rent due from tenants who are on universal credit, compared with 99.8% of the rent owed by other tenants. As a result, there was a reduced income collection of £220,000 for customers on universal credit at the end of the financial year. Your Homes Newcastle went on to state that tenants on universal credit owe a total of £784,000 in rent arrears, of which some £381,000—just under 50%—are solely as a result of universal credit. As Newcastle City Council has informed the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, of the 1,380 Your Homes Newcastle tenants claiming universal credit on 10 March, some 1,186—more than 85%—were in rent arrears. The average level of those rent arrears was £686, more than double the average of £300 for YHN tenants in rent arrears. Clearly the situation is completely unsustainable.

[Catherine McKinnell]

Housing-related concerns about universal credit are shared by the homelessness charity Crisis, which clearly states that, as it currently operates, universal credit “is causing rent arrears, threats of eviction and homelessness for our clients”.

Meanwhile, the Residential Landlords Association has raised concerns that

“as it currently operates, Universal Credit is causing rent arrears problems for a considerable number of tenants. Changes are needed to provide tenants and landlords with greater confidence that rent can be paid on time and in full.”

All three organisations—Your Homes Newcastle, Crisis and the RLA—are pressing the Government to make alternative payment arrangements much easier to set up.

It is clear to me and to many other hon. Members that the roll-out of universal credit is having a significant detrimental impact on far too many of our constituents. These issues are not unique to Newcastle; they are being replicated across the country, as other parliamentary debates—including one recently secured by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—have made all too clear. Indeed, some of the concerns that I have highlighted this afternoon recently caused the Work and Pensions Committee to reopen its inquiry into the impact of universal credit. The Chair of the Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), commented:

“Despite a growing body of evidence about the very real hardship the rollout of Universal Credit is creating for some, often the most vulnerable, claimants—and the struggles it is creating for local authorities trying to fulfil their responsibilities—it is flabbergasting that the Government continues to keep its head in the sand.”

I agree.

On behalf of my constituents, of people in other areas in which universal credit has been fully rolled out, and of people in the rest of the country who will still have to endure this process, I strongly urge the Minister to take his head out of the sand and start addressing the very real issues that the roll-out of universal credit—the Government’s flagship policy—is causing. We must ask ourselves: how many times, from how many people and organisations across how many parts of the country must the Minister hear that universal credit is not working before he finally accepts that it is time to act?

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I will call the Front Benchers at 3.42 pm, half an hour before the end of the debate at 4.12 pm. I ask hon. Members to speak for between five and six minutes, so that everyone gets an equal share.

3.8 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing this important debate and on her thorough and comprehensive speech.

Like the hon. Lady and probably every other hon. Member present, I am contacted daily by constituents who have encountered significant problems with the benefits system. In some parts of my constituency, principally Kirkintilloch and surrounding villages, that situation has been made many times worse by the

roll-out of full service universal credit. I know from speaking to local people, advice agencies and landlords that, in short, the roll-out of universal credit there has been a dog’s breakfast. It has had profound implications for the constituents concerned, and I support those who call for it to be halted now.

I was contacted recently by a constituent who is suffering from depression, anxiety and agoraphobia. She described the “living nightmare” of waiting six weeks for her payment, which itself represented a £30 cut to her previous social security payments. She concluded her email to me by relating the

“enormous negative effect on my mental health...I can honestly understand now why so many people struggle and give up and end up taking their own lives. This has to stop”.

I agree.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North has already pointed out some of the major flaws in universal credit. A key point is that those flaws are not teething problems that can be simply ironed out as we muddle along, which is what the Government seem to think. As the hon. Lady has said, all the evidence suggests that there has been an incredible upsurge in the number of cases of claimants building up rent arrears caused by the huge gaps between applications and payments, the very restricted ability to request direct payments to landlords and significant problems resulting from the system of monthly payments, all of which create huge budgeting problems and personal budget crises.

Most fundamentally, as the hon. Lady has pointed out, many of the changes referred to, combined, are set to punish families with children. We have heard from some organisations that families will be left worse off by up to £1,000 a year by 2020, but single-parent families are particularly hard hit by a massive £2,380 cut on average. We know that overall the Government’s pursuit of cuts looks set to force up to 1 million more children into poverty in the years ahead.

When a social security system acts completely contrary to its original purpose, and when its so-called reforms are substantially increasing rather than reducing poverty, it is surely time to go back to the drawing board and ask what we are seeking to achieve. While people and families suffer, landlords and advice services in my constituency are also finding this situation a nightmare. There are concerns that it is leading private landlords to shy from accepting tenants who are in receipt of universal credit payments.

I want to raise one specific issue that not been touched on yet: what seems to be the shambolic system for processing applications for alternative payment arrangements. The class of people entitled to make such applications is limited, but it will become significant in volume because it includes many of those in arrears. Housing associations in Kirkintilloch tell me that problems arise even from the outset, with applications for APAs not acknowledged or processed. Indeed, multiple application forms are sent out to the organisations involved. Most importantly, payments appear to be utterly erratic. As I understand it, the housing association is supposed to receive one payment for all the tenants on APAs each four weeks.

However, I understand from one housing association that since an initial payment was made in December it has only received payments for perhaps two or three tenants when there are supposed to be around 14 or 15 on APAs.

In addition, they are receiving APAs for ex-tenants, despite notifying the DWP that they have moved on. Their concern is that if this is happening in a relatively small area such as Kirkintilloch, roll-out in places such as Glasgow will be an even bigger disaster both for constituents whose arrears are going through the roof and for the housing associations relying on the payments. As Crisis argues, the mechanisms for allowing direct payments must be made simpler and more accessible.

In addition, as with other advice services, advisers working in housing associations highlight the huge logistical problems caused, as the hon. Lady has said, by the abolition of implicit consent. To go beyond that, advisers have also raised the lack of places for them to go now to escalate and resolve issues faced by clients and tenants. For all those reasons, I argue that the roll-out should be stopped now. If the Government insist on carrying on regardless, they should take urgent action to resolve the predicament of too many claimants, just as the Scottish Government are looking to use their limited flexibilities to alleviate the worst features of the system. So, allow tenants to choose to have payments made directly to landlords and to have the option to receive twice-monthly payments. If the Government do not listen, their universal credit promises will have been broken, and a reform that was said to bring simplicity will instead bring complexity and cuts.

3.13 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing this important debate, as the daily lives of our constituents are being adversely affected by the operation of the universal credit system. I want to highlight for the Minister a couple of examples of West Lancashire constituents who are in receipt of universal credit and what their experience is. The system is far from improving work incentives and tackling poverty among low-income families and far from developing a particularly effective new administrative system. Families are not paying only the financial cost of the system failures; there is an emotional cost as well.

As for improving work incentives, a young person in West Lancashire was offered four days' work. In accepting, he had to get the jobcentre adviser to sign a form confirming that he was in receipt of universal credit. If the forms were not completed by the deadline set by the employer, the job offer was to be withdrawn. Two days before the deadline, he was told that the form would need to be sent to the DWP's Wolverhampton office to be signed, which was ridiculous. Only through my intervention and the good sense of a senior jobcentre official was the matter resolved in the end.

It strikes me that there is an organisational culture in the DWP in which process trumps outcomes. I have dealt with the case of a single parent with one child going out to work. Their problem was caused by the unintelligent and inflexible assessment system that universal credit operates. Those of us who are paid monthly know there are occasions when our payday is earlier owing to the standard payday falling on a weekend or a bank holiday. In some instances, universal credit assesses a person as having two sets of income in the one month and therefore they do not get any payment. In the case

of my constituent, they lost out on £350 for their childcare costs. The following month, the payday was also brought forward.

I suspect that the Minister will say that, in the round, the payments will equalise out, but that fundamentally ignores how household budgets operate and the family's need for the payments they receive to be consistent and regular. For families whose day-to-day existence is financially balanced, that leads to them asking whether they are really better off in work, if that is the result. A change in one month's payment can have a ripple effect that lasts considerably longer than one month for a family's financial position to recover.

Another West Lancashire family, a working couple in receipt of universal credit, experienced problems receiving payments in four consecutive months, which included their claim being incorrectly closed after the information that the claimant provided was not entered in the system. Having not received their payment, they called the Department to seek an explanation and asked for a call back. Owing to the request being processed incorrectly, there was no call back. In months three and four, payments were again not paid. What did the DWP do? It sent a letter apologising for the repeated failures, which it said were due to an "oversight" on the part of the Department for Work and Pensions. Well, that's okay, then—I think not. Anybody with an ounce of compassion for the people they deal with would not even put such words on a piece of paper.

For their trouble, the family received a £25 consolatory payment, although the DWP could not say when that would be paid because it takes weeks to process. I am sure that, for the Minister and the people operating the universal credit system, such failures seem to be minor administrative mistakes. I raise them in the desperate, perhaps forlorn, hope that the Minister will begin to understand that such mistakes have monumental and disproportionate consequences for the people on the receiving end. It is not only about the financial costs; there is a lasting emotional cost.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply, but I remind him that he will be judged by his actions in making the system better for families, rather than contributing to their daily struggles. He has that responsibility.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I have been advised that, as names have rolled over from the previous time, unfortunately I have to restrict the time limit to four minutes. I apologise for that, but there are many people with an interest in such an important subject.

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on setting the scene so well. The subject is a concern for my constituents. Although there is no roll-out at the moment in Northern Ireland, it is on its way and September will be the witching hour for it coming in, so we have some concerns. I am worried about my constituents who have mental health issues, which are exacerbated by stress. Health issues have been very much in the media over the past few days. Prince Harry and Prince William are examples of those with stress-related issues, and I wish to express concern about such issues. I firmly believe there is a better way of doing things.

[Jim Shannon]

We are all aware of the report submitted by Crisis, which I am sure Members have read. It is not easy reading for any parliamentarian. It relates to the most vulnerable in our society. The report suggests that the overwhelming majority—89%—of English local authorities surveyed for “The Homelessness Monitor” in 2017 have expressed concern. New claims for universal credit are typically taking eight to 12 weeks to process—much too long. Delays are being experienced by people with more complicated circumstances, including those who have lost identification documents during a period of homelessness. Those were issues that I did not expect. I certainly did not expect people to be waiting for up to three months to receive the calculation of their benefit entitlement. I will never forget seeing a billboard for the Simon Community homelessness charity, stating that one in three families in the UK are only a month’s pay cheque away from losing their home. That is something that sticks in my head. So one in three could lose their home before universal credit would be processed to pay them. That is almost incredible, and it is totally unacceptable.

What is being done to address the failure in the system? What is in place to help those who may lose their home during the waiting period? The monthly payment to people who are not used to budgeting and, indeed, do not know where to start to budget their finances is not helpful. Crisis clients are struggling to budget over a monthly period, and because many have had their rent paid directly to their landlord for years and simply do not know how much their rent is, it is a massive issue. The same issue is relevant to landlords, 68% of whom say that direct payments of universal credit housing costs to claimants have made them more reluctant to let to people receiving universal credit. If the system disadvantages applicants to start with, and disadvantages them again with the landlords, we must look at it. Sixty-six per cent of landlords say the current situation has made them more reluctant to let to homeless people. That was not the intention behind universal credit, but if it is now a fact of the process, we must address the issue as well.

As well as the planned six-week delay in first payment, waiting days and the maximum backdating period of one month, people are experiencing unforeseen delays as a result of administrative errors: a third penalty—and the administration system lets them down again. Those issues are causing rent arrears, threats of eviction and homelessness. It is clear that the DWP should reduce the waiting time between submitting the online application and being invited to appointments necessary to progress the claim, and that waiting days at the start of a claim should be abolished. At the very least an exemption should be introduced so that people who are homeless do not have to serve waiting days. Where is the compassion and understanding in the system? I have great concerns about what the impact will be on households across the Province and, indeed, in my constituency. There must be a rethink of the scheme, with special reference to circumstances in Northern Ireland. Let us learn for the future from the problems of today. The most vulnerable people are being put into an untenable situation and we must help them, not worsen their living situations. I again urge the Minister and the Department to rethink the whole scheme completely, immediately.

3.22 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for obtaining this important debate. All the hon. Members who have spoken have made many constructive and proactive points based on individual experiences and the casework that we all regularly do. I know that in the Minister we have someone who is keen to listen and engage, and to take many of the challenges that have been raised today. I hope that he will further improve what is an important way of dealing with benefits in a modern society.

Universal credit is a vital part of our being able to deliver record employment in every region of the country and, crucially, to help improve people’s future opportunities and not just simply get them into work. The fundamental difference—this helps with many of the challenges that have been raised—is that for the first time the claimant has an individual, named work coach, someone they can turn to throughout the whole process. When opportunities and challenges come up, there is someone to help them to navigate the securing of additional childcare, training and support. Evidence has already shown that those on UC are typically able to spend 50% more time looking for work. For every 100 people who found work under jobseeker’s allowance, 113 found it under universal credit. It has removed the dreadful 16-hour cliff edge that under the old system prevented people from progressing towards full-time work, and it makes sure that work always pays better than benefits, with the support of claimants and taxpayers.

Crucially, the individual support is allowed to be personalised and tailored. I was interested to see what difference that makes, so in the past month I have twice been to visit the Swindon jobcentre to see how claimants are progressing through the system and to meet the staff, who in the past 20 years have navigated a huge amount of change from Governments of different parties and political persuasions. I went to see what was making a big difference. Swindon is an early adopter and we have been rolling out UC for quite some time. I understand that perhaps there is more experience there than in some areas where it is only beginning to come in.

I made notes on my visit. The staff are not people who will always give representatives of Government an easy ride, but they made it clear to me that they saw UC as a cultural change. The morale of the staff had significantly improved, as they were empowered to offer personalised, tailored support for the people who are often those furthest away from the jobs market. As we get close to structural full employment, the people seeking work need additional support, and we have empowered the staff to give it. In conjunction with the introduction of UC, jobcentres are being refreshed. The layout is brighter and less cluttered and the centre is a hive of activity, which is less intimidating for the claimants coming in. It is interactive and vibrant, and the staff felt they were a collective team, working together to help to support the people most in need of it. They felt that the ethos was now about what they could do to help; it was a conversation, and small steps. It was not rigid. It was removing the stigma of the jobcentre and encouraging external organisations to work in partnership to deliver the key improvements.

For me, the final thing was the recognition that the issue is not as simple as getting someone into work, typically on the national living wage. It is about providing support once they are in work and have shown they can turn up, and shown their dedication. It is about their being able to increase their hours, get promotion, become a supervisor and get additional training, so that they can progress up the career ladder that many of us took for granted. I was surprised at how positive the staff were. Yes, there are challenges—that is why there is a debate and why the Minister needs to engage with the issue—but overall UC is making a crucial difference to some of the most vulnerable people.

3.26 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I do not want to repeat things that have already been said. I want to concentrate on the impact that universal credit is having on homelessness and the potential for the eviction of private tenants. In my experience from my constituents, the delay in assessment of cases has undermined and threatened the tenancies of a considerable number of people. When housing benefit administration was part of the local authority, there was an officer responsible for preventing homelessness. In my case, I am fortunate that Mr Langley has been in charge of the housing department for as long as I have been the MP for Mitcham and Morden. When I had a problem with a constituent being threatened with homelessness, he would go down to housing benefit and say, “You’ve got to get on top of this case and process this claim.”

That intervention is no longer happening. Most of the constituents I see are in work. They all go to work but have no opportunity to earn the sort of money that would pay a private rent, often in the region of £1,200 or £1,500 a month. It does not take many weeks for people to find that they have got behind by hundreds or thousands of pounds, and for it to feel impossible that they will ever get on top of that. Officers of Jobcentre Plus and researchers may tell Ministers all sorts of things, but my experience is that when I recently attended a private landlords forum and asked, “Does universal credit make it more or less likely that you will rent your property to someone dependent on assistance with their rent?”, they said that universal credit made it universally less likely they would do so. The consequence in the housing market, where social housing vacancies are reducing by the week, will be devastating. As a result of poor and slow processing of universal credit, local authorities are, and will be, picking up large families in temporary accommodation—at huge cost to the taxpayer, apart from the misery involved.

3.29 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing this debate. We always say that debates are important, but this debate is vital for people who are suffering through the universal credit full service roll-out.

My constituency of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey was one of the pilot areas, so we were ahead of the game in terms of the full service roll-out. We have seen the effects of it on real people and the Minister will

be aware that I held an Adjournment debate on those effects, giving many case studies. We do not have the time today to go through many of them, but I will touch on one.

There are still the same problems that there were at the time of that earlier debate, and still the same problems that there were when we were originally scheduled to have this debate. The UK Government should listen and halt this faulty roll-out. People are going months without money; the roll-out is increasing poverty. It is hitting the most vulnerable the hardest, and it is causing real harm. In my constituency, we now have well over a hundred cases of people with universal credit issues, and those are just the people who have reached out to us as an MP and his office. Many more people are going under the radar. Also, there are new people visiting my office every day.

I want to refer to one person, Rachael, who came to see me. She went 16 weeks without payment. At the time she sought our support, she was 22 weeks pregnant and also had a three-year-old daughter to look after. Her pregnancy left her very unwell, but she was still told to travel to Aberdeen, which is 100 miles away, because it was not accepted that she had the correct national insurance number for universal credit purposes. She was fainting and had other symptoms due to the pregnancy. She had virtually no money left, and what little she had she was using for food and warmth as she could.

Rachael could not afford to go to Aberdeen and was scared of going 100 miles without any support, which caused her significant mental distress. She even had a letter from her midwife saying that she was unfit to travel. She was already in receipt of child tax credits and child benefit without any issues arising. Until a couple of weeks prior to contacting us, she had been in work and paying NI, and even though the NI number was never contested for universal credit purposes, she had paid NI and also had a P45 after leaving that employment.

Eventually, and following my intervention, it was agreed that Rachael could attend a face-to-face interview at the jobcentre in Inverness, and she has now started receiving payments. However, her story is symptomatic of the stories of many other people who face making long phone calls to get through to people, causing them high phone bills. Departments are unable to communicate, conflicting information is given, and delivery partners are unable to speak directly with Department for Work and Pensions colleagues.

I have asked the Minister to come to my constituency to speak to the staff at the citizens advice bureau and to the partners that the UK Government have employed to deal with this issue, such as Highland Council. The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) should come to the highlands as well to speak to people there, because he will find a very different reception to this roll-out. The DWP staff and jobcentre staff are under enormous pressure; it is not fun to work there.

I do not have much more time today to say what I would like to say. There is much, much more that I could put to the Minister. This roll-out is devastating the lives of people in my constituency, and it is coming to other constituencies. It is a shambolic roll-out, which means hardship and pain; it is simply brutal to people. There has been no sign that the Tory Government are capable of listening or caring, especially on issues such as the rape clause. The Minister could listen to people;

[Drew Hendry]

he could visit; he could learn; and he could and should stop the roll-out. He can fix it and treat people with dignity. Will he agree to do so today?

3.33 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Universal credit is often described as a troubled programme, and the problems with it go right back to the initial naivety of Ministers about implementing a programme of this scale. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) pointed out in her excellent opening speech that we were originally told that it was all going to be done and dusted by October 2017. I was the Opposition spokesperson in this area at the time that was said, and I pointed out that that was not a plausible timescale. We are now told that it will be done by 2022, which is five years' late, and it will be delayed further still.

The most astonishing example of naivety was in "21st Century Welfare", a document published in July 2010. Paragraph 7 of chapter 5 says:

"The IT changes that would be necessary to deliver a more integrated system would not constitute a major IT project".

That is the heart of the problem. There was an utter failure at the outset to grasp the scale of what was involved; there has been not just one major IT project but several.

There is an enduring problem, which probably underpins a number of the difficulties that we have heard about today, including the unexplained overpayments that my hon. Friend referred to in her opening speech. That problem is the fact that real-time information does not work properly. RTI is the system through which employers notify Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs in an automated way about how much they are paying to each of their employees in each month. It appears that there are serious inaccuracies in the data being sent to HMRC. Of course, those data are then sent on to the Department for Work and Pensions, and as a result errors are being made in the calculation of how much universal credit is due. It looks as though that will become an increasingly major problem.

It is well-known that there have been problems with RTI. We were promised that a post-implementation review was going to be published last month. It has not been published and there is no sign of it as yet, which reflects the scale of the problems that HMRC is facing. The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales submitted evidence to the post-implementation review almost exactly a year ago, saying:

"There is a significant risk to the successful roll-out of universal credit...if immediate steps are not taken to resolve the underlying system issues that lead to data corruption within HMRC systems, which are then passed on to universal credit claimants."

Can the Minister give us any reassurance that these very serious problems will be fixed by HMRC before we have more problems of the kind that we have heard about today, or can he at least tell us when the post-implementation review of RTI will finally be published?

There are benefits, in principle, from universal credit; the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) has a point. Community Links—which works with jobseekers and claimants in my constituency and which has pointed out repeatedly what a grim experience

going to the jobcentre has become since 2010 because of the changes that have been made—also says: "At its best, universal credit has transformed client-coach relationships for the better". There is real potential and the system could be significantly better, but it will not improve and its potential will not be realised unless these major technical problems are resolved. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some encouragement that they will be resolved.

3.37 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I want to speak today to try to balance the picture of doom and gloom that some Members have painted about not just universal credit but the entire welfare system and indeed all the welfare reforms of the past seven years.

In early 2009, I received an extremely emotional letter from a constituent who had tried to do the right thing by going back to work. However, she immediately found that by working more than 16 hours a week she was in fact far worse off. She asked me how that could be—why did welfare policy trap her and not help her? I promised then that I would work as hard as I could for a system where work always pays.

When I hear the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) saying that people working through universal credit are only 37p in the pound better off net of reduced benefits, rather than the 45p in the pound that was originally intended, I want to remind her that that same person was not only no better off per pound under the previous Labour system but was significantly worse off as a result of being unable to keep any of the money she was earning and losing significantly as a result of the benefits lost. So universal credit delivers on the "work always pays" approach and I hope that we will never go back to a system where work does not pay.

Equally, when other Members complain about the delayed roll-out of universal credit, I remind them how disastrous the "big bang" approach of the roll-out of tax credits only a decade ago actually was. The gradual process of rolling out universal credit is infinitely preferable.

Let me also give some reassurance to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is not currently in his place. He is awaiting the arrival of universal credit, but it is good news for his constituents and, when it arrives in his constituency, he should go and see the people on it, as I have done in my constituency of Gloucester, and hear from them what their own experience is. In fact, earlier today I spoke to the Jobcentre Plus in Gloucester. Its staff are broadly very positive about universal credit. We now have 720 people on it, of whom roughly 220 are working. Many of the others are on training courses, including for things such as forklifts. That is broadly good news, but that does not mean that everything is perfect.

The Work and Pensions Committee started an investigation into universal credit only a few weeks ago. I am afraid we will be unable to finish it before Parliament is prorogued, but it has flagged up two issues that others Members have alluded to and which I hope the Minister will touch on in due course. The first is the delay in payments to individuals, and the second is the inability of some who are claiming universal credit to manage their finances adequately so that they do not get into arrears on their rent payments. Both are real issues.

There is a case for saying that some housing associations need to engage with their tenants more effectively than they have in the past. Guaranteed payments are an extremely easy business for any landlord; none the less, there are problems, and most jobcentres and housing associations will confirm that.

In conclusion, universal credit is happening. The slow and arguably delayed roll-out is a good thing in terms of allowing for the problems that occur with any big system to be rectified early, before the system goes nationwide. It is coming on faster now, and there are two specific areas where the Department will need to look closely at whether improvements can be made.

3.41 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I think a profoundly concerning picture has been painted for us today of how the roll-out of universal credit is proceeding in practice. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on focusing her attention on that, and I am glad we have had the opportunity to debate these issues prior to Dissolution. She and the other Members who have spoken have constituencies that have been at the forefront of the full roll-out of universal credit, and they have outlined a litany of problems that are having a severe impact on the people affected—problems that are causing immense hardship, debt and insecurity and are putting huge, unnecessary and wholly avoidable pressure on other public agencies.

Many of those problems were widely predicted. For example, a range of stakeholders—everyone from social landlords to homelessness charities and those working with disadvantaged groups—warned that the full service roll-out was likely to lead to a sharp rise in rent arrears and evictions. Many warned that the move to monthly payments could lead to hardship for people on very low incomes. Unfortunately, from the testimony of MPs this afternoon, those fears were well founded. Some of the other problems highlighted today, such as the unacceptable delays in receiving payments, the exorbitant cost and prolonged call handling problems with the telephone helpline, were not anticipated, in that they are not policy changes, just failures of the system. People claiming universal credit in the full service roll-out areas have been human guinea pigs in the process and are paying a heavy price.

Two key issues have arisen today with the delays in payments. First, even if the system was working perfectly, many claimants would wait six weeks for any money. That is an excessively long wait for new claimants, particularly when we know that people rarely claim as soon as they become entitled to benefits. Usually they exhaust their savings or redundancy package.

3.43 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.52 pm

On resuming—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): The debate will go on until 4.22 pm. I call Dr Whiteford.

Dr Whiteford: Usually people have exhausted their savings or redundancy money before they claim benefits, but if someone starts a new job, it is normal to be paid

at the end of the week or month in which they start. The Government have said consistently that they want universal credit to mimic the world of work, but in that respect it really does not, and they need to look urgently at waiting times.

We all understand that processing a claim will take some days, but the monthly payment and discounted first seven days slows down the process unnecessarily and leaves people in considerable hardship. In reality, many claimants are having to wait a lot longer than six weeks. Eight to 12 weeks is more typical in some full service areas, and often longer. That is just not okay, and we have heard today about how those problems are not just abstract. I know from previous discussions on the subject that people have lost their homes. Many people on universal credit will be in work already so may have some other source of income, but a significant minority of new claimants will be sick and disabled people, assessed as unfit for work, and people who have just lost a job. The advance payments available are simply inadequate and are driving people into food banks, into debt and into trouble with their landlords. The bottom line is that the system is failing. It is in chaos.

Rent arrears are possibly the most far-reaching adverse impact of the full service roll-out. The Highland Council alone has seen rent arrears soar by £1 million, which is entirely and solely attributable to the roll-out of universal credit. My concern is that that is just the tip of the iceberg. We can get accurate figures of the scale and extent of the problem from local authorities, but the impact on other social landlords is likely to be profound. I know that housing associations in Scotland have warned that increases in arrears damage their financial stability, hitting their ability to invest in existing properties and build new ones. Private sector tenants and landlords face significant problems too, given that landlords may be servicing mortgages and may not have the level of solvency needed to wait several months for unpaid rent. We are already witnessing evictions. Just as worrying, we are already seeing evidence that some landlords are simply refusing to consider universal credit tenants.

Evictions and homelessness cause untold upheaval and misery for all involved and have a huge impact on other public services. The homelessness charity Crisis reports that 89% of English local authorities fear that the roll-out of universal credit will exacerbate homelessness. That situation is avoidable. We do not need to go down that road. The Government need to get a grip.

The Government have offered the excuse that the sharp increase we have seen in arrears appears to fall over time, several months down the line, but, frankly, that obfuscates the scale and extent of the increase in arrears. It also obscures the debt and hardship that those tenants, on desperately low incomes, are enduring in order to pay off a level of arrears that they would never have incurred under the previous system. It is yet another way in which the universal credit system fails to mimic the world of work, where most landlords require rent to be paid upfront a month in advance and, certainly in the private sector, expect sizeable deposits. Once again, the systemic pressures of the new system are being borne by people on marginal incomes—those with the fewest assets and means, working in the lowest paid jobs, recently unemployed or unable to work because of ill health or disability.

[Dr Eilidh Whiteford]

The other major breakdown in the system is in relation to the online accounts and problems with call handling on the telephone helpline. In many parts of rural Scotland, digital connectivity is well behind that in urban areas, notwithstanding significant recent progress. In my own constituency, 25% of people do not have access to the internet. It also remains substantially more expensive than in urban areas, and because of that, there are significant numbers of people with limited digital skills and experience who rely heavily on public access terminals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) highlighted the high costs and time involved in travelling from rural areas to a diminishing number of jobcentres. I do not think a 200-mile round trip is acceptable. To put that trip in perspective, it would be like asking somebody here in central London to travel to Nottingham or Stoke-on-Trent for a DWP appointment. I do not think that is realistic.

My hon. Friend also highlighted a litany of problems with the telephone helpline. If someone calling from a mobile phone has to wait half an hour on the line, they could spend as much as a third of their weekly income on food, heating and essentials. Twenty quid may not sound like a king's ransom to higher rate taxpayers, but for someone on a very low income, it is an enormous amount of money. Even if the Government's assertion that waiting times are only eight or nine minutes was backed up by the documented experience from MPs' offices and citizens advice bureaux, that is still a fiver. Proportionately, that is a lot of money for someone in receipt of £73 a week who is struggling to pay rent, heat their home and buy food.

Universal credit should have been quite easy to roll out in the highlands, in that there is a relatively buoyant labour market and universal credit should, in theory, be better suited to managing patterns of seasonal employment, which is widespread in the region. But it is proving to be a disaster, not just there but, as we have heard today, across the UK.

My last point is this: leaving aside the catalogue of incompetence that has dogged universal credit from the start, the new benefit is turning the screws on low-income working families and is now unrecognisable from its original design. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, by 2020 families with children will be, on average, £960 pounds a year worse off than they would have been under the previous system. The effects are magnified for families where one parent is working full time and the other is working part time or is at home with the bairns. Parents of severely disabled children are losing out. Those who will be most disadvantaged are single parents working full time in low paid jobs, who will be, on average, £2,380 pounds worse off. That is almost £200 a month.

The idea that work always pays under universal credit is just nonsense. It is a massive cut in household income and it punishes people who are already working full time, doing everything they can to make ends meet. For some of those people, work will no longer pay, and they would be better off if they cut their hours. That is exactly the opposite of what universal credit was designed to do. The policy has been so filleted by successive

austerity cuts that it is no longer able to deliver the improvements it promised. Instead, it is set to drive up child poverty.

As we have heard today, the full service roll-out of universal credit is proving to be a disaster. It is causing chaos for landlords, housing associations and local authorities. It is causing turmoil, upheaval and real hardship in the lives of claimants who are entitled to support. We have had no adequate assurances from the Government that the systemic failures are being addressed. In those circumstances, I believe that we need to call a halt to the universal credit roll-out and go back to the drawing board, because at the moment it is an unmitigated mess and ordinary people are paying the price.

3.59 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on her persistence in securing today's debate and on delivering an excellent, wide-ranging speech. I associate myself with her remarks about the debt of gratitude we owe to PC Keith Palmer. My thoughts are with his family and friends, and all those who lost their lives or were injured in the attack on 22 March. Today's debate is really important, and we have heard compelling contributions from many Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who spoke with real authority and insight.

In 2010, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the then Work and Pensions Secretary, announced that universal credit would radically simplify the existing social security system, make work pay and help lift people out of poverty, but the stories we have heard today show that that is simply not the case. Universal credit brings with it a huge range of problems. Its roll-out has been repeatedly delayed. So far, the completion date has been moved back seven times. It was originally set for the end of this year, but the Department is now aiming for March 2022. The roll-out is still mainly restricted to groups whose claims are reasonably straightforward, such as single people without children. However, the Government now intend to speed up the roll-out, and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North described how the introduction of the full digital service is now causing major problems in areas such as her constituency. The former Work and Pensions Minister, Lord Freud, told the Work and Pensions Committee in February that universal credit could take decades to perfect. Does the Minister agree with Lord Freud on that point?

The design of universal credit means that claimants are left for six weeks at the start of their claim without any income while their initial claim is processed. In some areas, the wait is even longer due to delays in dealing with claims. Croydon Council said in January that the average delay is 12 weeks. That can cause people to be in arrears with their rent, leaving them at risk of eviction and turning to food banks. What are the Government going to do to reduce the delays, and will they end the six-week initial wait for payment?

Then there is the Catch-22 that arises when universal credit meets a council's legal obligations in relation to housing. If councils house people waiting for a payment

in temporary accommodation, they are legally obliged to ensure they do not remain there for more than six weeks. However, to claim help with housing costs through universal credit, someone must have lived in a property for at least six weeks. Will the Government reconsider that rule, which does not fit in with councils' legal obligations?

Once a claim has begun, payments are monthly under universal credit, rather than fortnightly, as with tax credits. That causes some claimants problems with budgeting. There is evidence that private landlords are becoming increasingly reluctant to rent to universal credit claimants because there is no provision for direct housing payments to the landlord except where someone is assessed as being vulnerable or already has two months' rent arrears. Will the Minister look again at the issue of direct payment of the housing cost element to landlords so all tenants claiming universal credit can choose to do so?

[MR DAVID NUTTALL *in the Chair*]

An investigation by *The Guardian* recently revealed widespread evidence that thousands of tenants on universal credit are running up rent arrears because the minimum waiting period for the first payment is just too long. Surveys by housing associations found that up to nine in 10 tenants on universal credit either run up rent arrears or increase the level of pre-existing arrears because many of them are not financially equipped to cope with long waits without any income. In September 2013, a National Audit Office report on universal credit revealed that IT failures had already cost £34 million, and highlighted the

“weak management, ineffective control and poor governance.”

Since November 2014, DWP has been gradually rolling out the full digital service to a limited number of areas as well as the original live service in others. There are differences not just in the way the services are managed and in the kind of claims, but in the rules for claimants between the two versions in relation to childcare costs and assessment periods, for example. Even now, the universal credit IT system is not capable of coping with the two-child limit this April. Families with more than two children who make fresh claims will actually be diverted to tax credits until November 2018. DWP insists on pressing ahead with a policy that is not just morally wrong, because of the way it implicitly treats some children as more important than others, but which the Department cannot even technically implement properly. Will the Government reconsider the two-child policy?

Universal credit poses further challenges. Just as the Government were speeding up the roll-out of UC, they announced plans to close more than one in 10 jobcentres throughout the UK. It is simply not good enough to quote figures about online claims to justify closure plans. Making a claim online can present real difficulties for people who are not confident in using IT or do not have easy access to the internet. DWP admits that it is likely that online claims are sometimes made only with help from jobcentre staff. Sorting out problems that arise is complicated by the requirement that claimants who contact their MP for help also authorise DWP online to release information to the MP. DWP recently said it will not be necessary to do so for MPs, but said nothing about advice agencies and welfare advocates. Will the Minister make it clear that the DWP will release information to advice agencies acting on behalf of a claimant without further online authorisation?

Universal credit will place other new demands on staff, who will have to assess whether self-employed people claiming universal credit have a viable business plan, and operate in-work conditionality, which will require people already in work to increase their pay. Will the Minister look again at the model of generalist work coaches that DWP is adopting to assess whether it is appropriate to the new challenges that universal credit will involve?

Staff will also have to deal with an increased number of claimants. As universal credit is based on household income, the partners of somebody claiming universal credit can be invited to attend a jobcentre to discuss work even if the partner has not themselves made a claim. People not in work who claim child tax credits or housing benefit but not jobseeker's allowance are not required to look for work at present, but they are required to do so under universal credit. Will the Government reconsider their plans for jobcentre closures, which risk chaos as the speed of the roll-out of universal credit is increased?

Alongside the practical problems that the roll-out presents, changes to universal credit since 2010—especially cuts to in-work support—have undermined its capacity to reduce poverty. The Government have refused to listen to criticisms of cuts to the work allowance from Labour and voluntary organisations. Analysis by the Child Poverty Action Group and the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that families with children will be worse off by an average of £960 a year by 2020, compared with the income they could have expected under the original design of universal credit, and single-parent families could lose £2,300 on average. Will the Minister review the impact of work allowance reductions on working families—particularly working single-parent families?

The combination of the delayed roll-out of universal credit, the U-turn on tax credit cuts and the dramatic changes to universal credit work allowances is actually increasing the complexity of our social security system. If two families have exactly the same circumstances but one claims tax credits and the other claims universal credit, they may receive very different rates of social security. It is a genuine postcode lottery, because that is how universal credit has been rolled out.

Given all that, it is little wonder that the Government are now silent about how many people they believe universal credit will lift out of poverty. In 2011, they estimated that it would be 950,000. Two years later, it had fallen to 400,000, and by last year they preferred to keep silent. Will the Minister tell us the DWP's current assessment?

We are seeing different rates of social security for people on tax credits and universal credit and different rules for people on the live and full digital services. We have even heard that the Office for National Statistics is concerned that the statistics for the claimant count no longer present an accurate picture of the labour market because they include all universal credit claimants. Is it really a simpler system? Our social security system is already struggling to cope with its introduction, even before the jobcentre closures go ahead. Far from lifting people out of poverty, there is growing evidence that universal credit risks impoverishing people waiting for payments and making it more difficult for claimants to find affordable housing. Severe cuts to in-work support

[Margaret Greenwood]

mean that it can no longer genuinely claim to improve work incentives. Even the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has called for the cuts to be reversed, as they go against the key principles of universal credit.

Really important issues have been raised in this debate about the effect of the Government's roll-out of universal credit. There is a huge range of issues, such as debt, eviction, the stress and anxiety for some of our most vulnerable citizens, and pressures on DWP staff and the system itself. I ask the Minister to respond clearly to the points raised in this important debate and explain how the Government intend to get a grip on universal credit.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that the debate will finish at 4.22 pm, and I ask him to try to leave a couple of minutes for Catherine McKinnell to wind up before that.

4.9 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I echo what the hon. Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) said about PC Keith Palmer and all the victims on that terrible day when last this debate was convened. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North on securing this important debate. We have had a wide-ranging debate today.

Let me be clear at the outset that the roll-out of universal credit continues to plan. As Members are aware, universal credit is now in every jobcentre in the country. The programme has just passed an important milestone of more than 1 million claims. The service has been deliberately rolled out in a steady way, as alluded to by some of my hon. Friends, using a test-and-learn approach to allow us to user-test the service and get immediate feedback.

In such a large system and organisation, with so many branches and so complex a set of data, I admit that sometimes things go wrong. That is not unique to universal credit, but happens and has happened on occasion for many years throughout such systems. Of course we very much regret that when it does happen, but it does not change the fundamentals of what the universal credit programme is achieving.

The longest-standing senior responsible owner and programme director in the programme's history are in place, and both have been in post for well over two years. In that time the programme has stabilised and delivered all its key milestones on time and on budget. When last scrutinised by the Major Projects Authority, the programme was moved to an amber rating, which is rare for a project of this size.

Even having the best team in charge is not necessarily enough: it has to be combined with the right project disciplines and the proper oversight to ensure success. That is why the team is implementing a fully developed, agile approach to delivery, explicitly designed to ensure that the service is continuously improved, based on the user feedback that I talked about, and is flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances or new information. The programme is also subject to comprehensive and rigorous review internally and externally.

All that combines to create the safest, most secure programme delivery achievable. We are working quickly, and will continue to do so, to deal with any challenges, which will of course emerge, to ensure that universal credit is delivered safely and securely. I recognise that there are concerns, and I welcome another opportunity today to discuss and address them.

As part of the UC full service implementation process, we had a full external stakeholder plan to ensure that those stakeholders have a proper introduction to the full service before it goes live in their area. The full service was launched at the Newcastle West jobcentre on 15 March 2017, making Newcastle one of the first core cities to transition fully to the service. I am also aware that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North has been in contact with the local district manager for Jobcentre Plus on more than one occasion and that she has been invited for a visit.

A couple of hon. Members asked about the changes being made in the DWP estate. I reassure them that in the planning and modelling we of course account for all the changes to welfare systems and our support for claimants. An important point to make is that although we are changing some of the physical estate, which involves some jobcentres merging with others, we are not cutting back on our frontline people—in fact, we expect to have more work coaches working with and supporting people into and in work at the end of this process than we do at the beginning.

The scale and nature of the change represented by universal credit is bound to cause some anxiety, but the benefits it brings are many, going far beyond the £7 billion in annual economic benefits and even beyond the advantages to claimants of simplicity, stronger work incentives and personalised support. UC represents a generation-changing culture shift in how welfare is delivered and how people are helped, creating a system that allows people to break free from being dependent on welfare, to take control of their lives and to move into work. That will have an impact on a large number of people: we estimate that by the time UC is fully rolled out, about 7 million recipients will benefit from the advantages of universal credit.

We must remember that universal credit picks up from a flawed pre-existing system and strives to solve a number of problems that have for some time been thought to be near intractable. In the old system, complexity and bureaucracy had often served to stifle the independence, to limit the choices and to constrain the outlook of its recipients. With UC, we are untangling the bureaucracy, strengthening the incentives and simplifying the system and the signals it gives.

The behavioural effects we are seeing are strong. Claimants are responding to the clear incentives to work and, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) said, spending twice as much time looking for a job as they did under the legacy system: 113 people are moving into work under the new system for 100 under the old system. People throughout the country are therefore already benefiting from universal credit, and more will do so.

The design and structure of UC is transformational in its focus on replicating the world of work. UC encourages claimants to take greater responsibility for their finances and incentivises them to earn more and to make progress once in work. A flexible, clear and tailored claimant

commitment helps claimants to understand fully their responsibilities, and a work coach provides personalised support, helping people to stay close to the labour market and to overcome whatever barriers they have to work.

Critically, universal credit removes the hours rules and the cliff edges that have long been a feature of our systems, plaguing legacy benefits and tax credits. UC removes the need to switch between different benefits as people move into and progress in work, simplifying the system and ensuring continuity. It provides a consistent taper for claimants as they move into and through work. The recent taper reduction will benefit 3 million claimants once UC is fully rolled out, providing further tangible and visible benefits to making progress in work.

Thanks to the real-time information link, immediate adjustments can be made to the UC award, which is far beyond the blunt mechanism of annual reconciliation. That also means that people can quickly see the effect of the changes they are making. For the first time we now have simple levers to optimise the system, creating a fully dynamic and adaptable welfare system fit for the modern world. Digital is at the heart of the new system. The majority of jobs these days require some computer capability and competency, so it is also right that the system to help people into work is digital, too, as well as more efficient as a result.

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not, or I will run out of time.

Let me assure the House that I recognise what a complex and important issue housing arrears are. Many different factors are at play. As colleagues know, UC pays housing costs directly to the claimants and they pay rent to their landlord. That mirrors the world of work, which is an important part of the fundamental culture change I mentioned. That of course has been the case for some time, since the Labour Government rolled out the local housing allowance in the private rented sector in April 2008.

Catherine McKinnell: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: I will give way to the hon. Lady, because it is her debate, but I am also conscious that I am running out of time and will not be able to cover everything.

Catherine McKinnell: The Minister made reference to housing payments mirroring the world of work, but I am aware of no workplace in which the employee is expected to wait six weeks or more for payment.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making the important point about the timing of payments to individuals. No one should wait more than 45 days for their first UC payments, unless they are exempt from waiting days, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned. Various exemptions include those for prison leavers and for people coming across from other benefits, such as income-related JSA or

ESA. For those exempt from the waiting days, the wait is no more than 38 days. A claimant who cannot wait that long, however, may apply for an advance of up to 50% of the total award to provide support through to the UC payment being made. That is an important facility, and we continue to work on raising awareness of its availability.

There have been some delays in the payment of the UC housing element, largely because of, for example, mismatches between what claimants tell us and what landlords tell us is the rent due. We continue to work on process improvements around that. The pre-existing system was itself far from perfect, and we believe the processing times for the UC housing element are about the same as those for local authorities paying housing benefit. According to research by the national organisation for ALMOs—arm's length management organisations—three quarters of tenants on universal credit were already in arrears before coming on to UC. Nevertheless, we continue to address those issues and we recognise that further improvements can still be made. That includes a dedicated team to handle the processing of rental information for both claimants and landlords.

In Newcastle upon Tyne North, the claimant count has come down by 36% since 2010, but of course we have to continue to support more and more people into work as they fulfil their potential and ambitions. Colleagues will know that implicit consent has been restored to MPs. There are particular sensitivities and difficulties about the breadth with which implicit consent can be granted, given the depth of personal and sensitive information within universal credit to which the individual claimant holds the key, but claimants are able to give explicit consent to advice agencies and so on as appropriate.

I fear that I am out of time. I conclude by saying that we must continue to work together to resolve issues as they arise and ensure a successful roll-out. We are standing on the cusp of historic change in our welfare state—a dynamic and fundamental change that is already transforming lives for the better and will improve many more. This is welfare reform in action—changing the dynamics in the system, making things simpler and ensuring that work always pays, to the benefit of millions.

4.20 pm

Catherine McKinnell: I am sorry to say that I am not reassured by the Minister's response to the significant issues with the current system. We are not talking about the principles or the aims of universal credit; we are talking about the serious reality on the ground for people trying to access the support that they are entitled to. The Minister appears still to have his head in the sand. I hope that that is simply because he has not had time properly to address the issues that several hon. Members outlined and he will go away and look at them. These are not just glitches in the system. The consequences are disastrous for the individuals concerned. The Minister did not address the issue of embedding debt in the system and has not taken seriously the impact of the issues that people are experiencing. I am also not convinced about his commitment not to reduce jobcentre staff, given that two of the jobcentres in Newcastle are set to close. This debate will continue.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Cavity Wall Insulation: Wales

4.22 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cavity wall insulation in Wales.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall—I think for the first time—and to lead a debate on this issue. Unfortunately, after many years of campaigning, lobbying and debates, it is still unresolved.

Many of my constituents had cavity wall insulation installed, having been persuaded—in fact, I would use the phrase “deceived by omission”—that it was suitable for their homes and for local weather conditions. How wrong they were. Many have found that out to their cost, as they have suffered damp and damage, stress, threats to health and ever-present black walls.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The whole of Wales and indeed much of the UK’s western seaboard is categorised as having very severe exposure to wind-driven rain. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Building Research Establishment maps that point that out should have been widely publicised by the Government so that people could assess whether cavity walling was appropriate in their area?

Hywel Williams: That is certainly the case. It is an elementary step. One just needs to look at the map of the UK. The west of Wales, the south-west of England, the north-west of England and Scotland are all coloured a deep blue, and areas such as East Anglia are coloured white. A five-year-old could look at that map and see where the rain was going to be and where there might be problems. Unfortunately, many people were not aware of those maps or of this issue.

The consumer redress process so far has been unsatisfactory. Vulnerable people have been left in damp and damaged homes. The industry guarantee scheme has failed many victims and has shortcomings, including sometimes—I am sorry to say this—a hostile attitude to victims. There is an opportunity for the Government to put things right, and my demand—I put it as strongly as that—today is for the Minister to take decisive action to protect consumers from further bad practice, identify all victims and fully compensate all those who have been affected by what is clearly a Government-backed scheme.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman’s comments. I, too, have constituents who have been terribly affected. In one case, an elderly couple had cavity wall insulation installed 10 years ago by Domestic and General, which subsequently went into liquidation, and they have had the shambolic experience of dealing with the Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency—particularly its head of customer service—and all sorts of other agencies. It has just become one shambles after another, and they have not had redress.

Hywel Williams: I am afraid that the picture the hon. Gentleman paints is all too common, especially in Wales but also in parts of the north-west of England. For example, people from Blackpool have travelled all the way to Bangor and Caernarfon to see me to explain the difficulties that they have had in areas where cavity wall insulation has been installed without explanation and there is wind-driven rain, which is the danger.

I welcome the long-awaited report of the Bonfield review entitled “Each Home Counts”, which was released on 16 December last year; some hon. Members may have seen it. A review was first considered by the then Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), on 3 February 2015, during the second debate we had on the issue. I spoke in that debate and expressed my concern about the attitude towards victims of cavity wall insulation of some in the insulation industry and the official bodies that allowed this to happen.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman speaks about this issue with great authority and passion for his constituents and people across the UK. My constituent Sarah Morgan recently discovered that she had two different CIGA guarantees for her property—one with a clause detailing the homeowner’s responsibility for property maintenance and one without. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that subtle change is being used by CIGA as nothing more than a get-out clause?

Hywel Williams: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is blessed with clairvoyance, because I was going to raise that matter. It is extraordinary that the maintenance clause is in the small print, as I understand it, and then suddenly reappears in the rather fancy guarantee as a separate and prominent item of its own. I should imagine that had people—especially older and perhaps disabled people—been aware that they had to maintain the house to a high standard, a lot of them would not have gone in for cavity wall insulation in the first place. That has certainly been my experience with the many cases that I have come across.

This matter has been raised on numerous occasions by cross-party alliances, supported by the tireless work of the victims’ support group, the Cavity Insulation Victims Alliance. I am glad to have this opportunity to commend CIVALLI’s work, which it does with virtually no resources. It communicates the distress of consumers who reach out to it, dismayed at the effects of cavity wall insulation, the process through which it was sold and installed, and the attitudes of bodies that were set up to protect them. Its efforts have resulted in this matter being brought to the forefront of the political agenda, a “better late than never” review and some positive steps.

As CIVALLI and I rather expected having met Paul Bonfield, the review focuses on recommendations for future cavity wall insulation but does not place responsibility or blame for redress or provide compensation for those who have been disadvantaged. The review is forward looking, and quite reasonably so, but our concern is with the large number of historical cases.

The review underlines some positive progress. The British Board of Agrément and CIGA have launched a scheme whereby property assessments are independently reviewed for compliance with industry specifications to ensure that cavity wall insulation installations are carried out only on suitable properties. It strikes me, though, that the review’s publication and the progress made so far is much too little, much too late. I might say that the Titanic, alas, is already going down.

My concern is about the millions of homes already treated with cavity wall insulation, a proportion of which are problematic. I do not know what that proportion is,

and it seems that no one else does either, for that matter. We do not know how many there are or where they are, but it is clear that cavity wall insulation has been installed in properties unsuitable due to their location, the size of the cavity, the state of external walls, rendering or pointing.

My constituency, Arfon, is in the category 4 area; in fact, much of west Wales is category 4, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) noted. When I raised this issue with the then Under-Secretary in the debate in February 2015 and asked her whether cavity wall insulation should have been installed in these areas, her response was:

“My recollection is that mostly it should not have been.”—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2015; Vol. 592, c. 20WH.]

That is as clear as can be: it should not have been put in, but it was. Installers, CIGA, manufacturers of cavity wall insulation, Governments and everyone seemed to claim that insulations were preceded by a full assessment of the suitability of the property. I am yet to see an assessment report, and seriously wonder whether such reports exist in any real sense.

In my experience, installers failed to take customer complaints seriously and to provide adequate redress. There seems to be a culture of avoiding customer queries, not responding at all, failing to provide full answers to straightforward questions and denying liability. I have heard people say so many times that they were told that it was just condensation—“Open a window and let all that expensive heat out; we’ll sell you some more”, presumably.

Extraction of failed cavity wall insulation is only one element, and most customers will not be offered even that. In my opinion, customers should also be able to recover costs for interior and exterior damage due to the poor installation and extraction, plus compensation for the distress caused. When I have talked to CIGA, it has said—quite reasonably, I think—that it is a guarantee scheme, not a compensation scheme. However, people have suffered, and they deserve compensation.

Many people complain that they signed up for cavity wall insulation only because they were explicitly told that it was a Government-backed scheme, and they feel that the Government should take responsibility for putting things right. In fact, I have seen a sales video that, after about eight minutes of hard sell, has a prominent TV personality saying clearly that it is a Government scheme. Now, he is a salesman and a television personality, but people took him at his word.

We know that CIGA proffered a 25-year guarantee but, again, that guarantee was worth little to most people after it became clear that there was not a suitable system of quality assurance for installers. Indeed, that was a matter I took up with the previous Minister.

4.32 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.47 pm

On resuming—

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): The debate may now continue until seven minutes past 5.

Hywel Williams: I was talking about the guarantee and the fact that a clause in the small print has now been amplified to the main document. My friends in CIVALLI have told me that, on one property, there are two guarantees, two versions of the same guarantee—one with and one without that clause. It seems to me that CIGA sometimes uses the maintenance condition as a get-out clause. If people had been properly aware of the stringent maintenance rule, many of them would not have risked having CWI. The guarantee is pointless if the maintenance is unaffordable. Many of the people who put this material in are older, disabled or on low incomes; in fact, in Wales 25% of people are living in fuel poverty. Those people will not be up a ladder making sure that the rendering under the roof is proofed against wind-driven rain. The fact is that people in deprived areas were targeted, because they were keen to take part in the scheme and save money on their heat.

Many of the companies that carried out the installations are now defunct. Through recent correspondence with the British Board of Agrément, I have been notified that provisions have been put in place to help consumers where cavity wall insulation has been abandoned, for either company liquidation or inadequacy reasons. I think that is to be respected, but I am worried about this matter more generally.

I am worried that CIGA is under-resourced, hence the resistance to addressing remedial damage and to funding extraction properly. It is adamant that installers should assume liability, but in my constituents’ experience, that often proves impossible, especially given that so many of the companies have gone into liquidation—they were something of a fly-by-night set of organisations. That is resulting in a pattern of CIGA offering to extract from one wall only, which is against expert guidelines and will lead to other problems.

My constituent Alwyn Williams has been battling for three years with this problem. The original installers went bust. CIGA refused to help and refused all liability for two years, on the basis of the poor maintenance clause. It has now offered to extract from one wall. I have spoken to several experts in the field of extraction, including Andrew Quayle of Titan Insulation and Damian Mercer of Cavity Extraction Ltd, who tell me that extracting from one wall creates a cold spot and is likely to severely worsen the problem in the long term.

CIGA does offer an alternative dispute resolution, which I am glad of, and CIVALLI offers support and advice. There is, however, a yawning power gap between the two sides here. Of course, victims require an independent private survey, which can cost around £300; otherwise, there is not a lot of chance of them winning their case. Due to the sheer number of failed CWI installations, the extraction industry is now booming, and I fear we are putting ourselves in line for a further scandal, as extractions are carried out but not properly inspected.

My speech today has been on many of the industry’s failings, but as I said earlier, this is a Government-inspired scheme. Successive Governments have advocated unpoliced and unregulated cavity wall insulation schemes in the race to secure carbon reduction targets—energy companies are being fined by Ofgem for not reaching those targets. That is all at the expense of the quality of life of the victims; their lives have been ruined.

[Hywel Williams]

At the very least, the UK Government should have the answer to the following questions. How many people have suffered at the hands of this particular scheme? I have heard estimates of 1% or 2%, but given that there are millions of installations, that is a large number of people. Who are the people who have been affected? Where do they live? I think they live on the west side of Britain. How will their problems be rectified? The big question is, who is going to pay for all this? To be fair to CIGA, it is under-resourced. It depends on its guarantee income, which surely will not be sufficient.

I will end by saying that, in the debate in 2015, the then Minister, who is now the Home Secretary, said that an election was due and she would leave the file open on her desk for her successor. We now have an election due again, and I hope the Minister is not going to sign off by saying that the file will be left open. We really do need some action as soon as possible on what I can only describe as an emerging scandal.

4.53 pm

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) on not only securing this debate but his persistence over many years on this subject on behalf of both his constituents and a wider population of people who feel their voices are not being represented clearly enough. In that context, I would like to place on record my appreciation for the work of the Cavity Insulation Victims Alliance, members of which I had the pleasure of meeting briefly before the debate started again. We must work towards a situation in which no one feels they are a victim, but we are clearly not there yet.

I would like to say something briefly about the context of the debate and the consumer protection that we think is in place and that should be working. I will also try to answer some of the hon. Gentleman's questions about the scale of the problem as we understand it and perhaps give him some reassurance about the progress we think is being made and the Government's commitment to continue to press for an even better response on something that is clearly causing a great deal of hardship, difficulty and distress.

The hon. Gentleman knows the context very well and alluded to it. This Government, like previous Governments, have been keen to make it easier for people to take insulation and other energy efficiency measures that will help to make their homes more comfortable, warmer and more environmentally friendly. He knows as well as I do that if cavity wall insulation is fitted appropriately—that is a big if—it can be very effective in reducing consumption and cutting people's bills. We have therefore committed to the insulation of a further million homes in this Parliament through a policy tool known as the energy company obligation, which is increasingly focused on trying to provide support for the poorest and most vulnerable households. That is the policy context, which he understands well.

Given that ambition, it is incredibly important that a good level of trust underpins the supply of these services. That trust is what we are really talking about today, and in too many places it does not exist. Consumers need to

feel confident that they can trust the quality of the advice that they receive and of the installation that takes place in their homes. We need consumers to have the confidence to make decisions about their properties to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. This will not work unless there is that element of trust in the system.

On consumer protection—I think the hon. Gentleman knows this, but it is worth briefly placing on the record—a lot of regulation is in place to give the kind of consumer protection that we all want to see for our constituents. The installation of all cavity wall insulation must meet the requirements of the Building Regulations 2000. Materials used in cavity wall insulation are subject to specific standards and must be certified by an independent technical approval body. All cavity wall insulations installed under the energy company obligation are subject to a survey prior to installation. I understand his point about independent services, but the requirement for a survey is in place, in part, to verify that the measure is suitable for the property; I think that that is one of his major points, particularly about the part of the country that he represents. All installers working under ECO must also comply with a PAS—publicly available specification—that sets out requirements for the installation of energy efficiency measures in buildings, including cavity wall insulation. Ofgem requires technical monitoring inspections of 5% of measures installed under ECO. It also requires, as the hon. Gentleman noted, that cavity wall insulation measures installed under ECO be accompanied by a 25-year guarantee. As ECO administrator, Ofgem sets out clear requirements for those guarantees as part of its scheme guidance: they must include assurances not only about the quality of installations and the products used, but that funds will be available to honour the guarantee, which must cover the costs of remedial and replacement works.

Those are the protections in place. We recognise, because the data show it, that sometimes things may not work out as expected for consumers. When that happens, it clearly causes a great deal of distress. If there is a problem, our advice is that consumers should initially contact the installer who carried out the work and see whether the problem can be rectified. If that is unsuccessful, they should contact the guarantee provider of the energy company that originally carried out the work. If a consumer's claim is covered under the terms of a guarantee, either the guarantee provider or the installer will arrange for the necessary works to be completed at no cost to the householder. In many cases that should provide a solution to the problem. However, if for any reason there is no effective guarantee in place, consumers may wish to obtain further guidance from their local trading standards office or seek professional legal advice.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the scale of the problem—the number of insulations completed and the number of consumers who have reported concerns. According to CIGA—the Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency, which is the largest provider of guarantees for cavity wall insulation, as he knows—since 1995, 330,000 cavity wall insulation installations have been completed in Wales and 3,663 consumers, or 1.1%, have reported concerns. Some may argue that that is a statistically relatively small number, but as far as I am concerned it is 3,663 consumers too many. We need to work towards a situation in which there are no victims and no problems with the quality and probity of insulation work, as he set out powerfully in his speech.

The important thing is that when problems are reported they are addressed. Of the 3,663 recorded cases, CIGA claims to have resolved 2,939 while installers have resolved 724. In answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, that is what the statistics show. My concern—I will be candid with him because he alluded to this—is that the statistics may understate the problem because they cover people who have reported a problem. He told me anecdotally that in his constituency there may be a much higher number of people who have not reported a problem and who are passive in their misery about what has happened to their homes. The Government must be sensitive to that.

We are not remotely complacent, which is why, as the hon. Gentleman said, we commissioned a review of quality, standards and consumer protection across the whole domestic energy efficiency and renewable energy sector, including cavity wall insulation. I am glad he welcomed that. I know he thinks it may not be sufficient, but I thank him for welcoming it.

The “Each Home Counts” review published on 16 December 2016 recognises that there should be consistent, high quality work in this sector and has made a number of recommendations, which will be taken forward by the industry with the Government's support. This work is enormously important to our constituents because it is about their homes and very little is more important to them. There should be no room for cowboys in this market and we must hound them out. The review engaged with a diverse range of stakeholders and demonstrates the potential for a new approach to increase consumer trust.

Ensuring a clear and robust standards framework, not just when work is undertaken as a result of Government policy but wherever it happens, is fundamental and that is one of the key actions that the industry is now taking forward, which we will monitor carefully. The review includes recommendations to improve the provision of advice to consumers, as well as for improving skills and training in the workforce. We expect to see implementation plans—words are not sufficient—and delivery proposals from the industry in the coming month.

The hon. Gentleman expressed concerns about CIGA that have been expressed before and those concerns and criticisms have clearly been valid. CIGA is the largest

guarantee provider and an important institution in this context. I have been assured—I will follow this up after the debate to seek extra assurance—that it has taken steps to improve the service it provides to consumers. It is under new leadership, as the hon. Gentleman probably knows, and those steps include hiring additional technical inspectors, appointing a consumer champion and introducing access to an independent alternative dispute resolution service operated by a provider approved by the Chartered Training Standards Institute. I will not repeat what previous Ministers said about leaving an open file, but I will write to the chief executive of CIGA setting out clearly some of the reservations that the hon. Gentleman eloquently expressed in this debate, and I will seek an explicit response.

I assure the hon. Gentleman, other hon. Members, CIVALLI and all those out there who are concerned about the issue that we genuinely recognise their concerns. It is in everyone's interest that the market operates efficiently and that there is trust between customers and service providers. We are focused on ensuring that consumers can choose the right energy efficiency measures for their homes to deliver carbon and bill savings. We share hon. Members' concerns that the work should be done consistently well and, if not, that appropriate redress should be available.

I am assured that CIGA has listened to the concerns expressed in previous debates in this House—it would have been deaf if it had not—and that steps have been taken to make the organisation much more customer service-friendly, but it needs feedback from Members of Parliament and other representatives on how much progress is really being made. I hope that the details I have set out about the significant steps that have been taken to improve customer service are reassuring.

I assure the House that the Government will continue to work with the industry to improve further the standards and quality in the energy efficiency and renewable energy sectors so that, as we move forward and try to encourage more of our constituents to upgrade their homes to make them warmer, more comfortable and more environmentally friendly, they can do so with trust.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered cavity wall insulation in Wales.

Regional Flags: Driving Licences and Number Plates

5.5 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of regional flags on driving licences and number plates.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall, and to have secured this debate. It is worth while bringing this debate before the House as we begin the process of withdrawing from the European Union. As Members will be aware, we see the EU flag on driving licences and number plates throughout our daily lives. All licences have the EU flag as well as the flag of the United Kingdom. While we can display the EU flag on number plates, at the moment it is optional.

In around two years' time, the UK will be leaving the European Union. That means that our laws will no longer be influenced by European bureaucrats or politicians and the UK will be an independent sovereign state once again, where motor vehicles will no longer be under EU jurisdiction. The EU flag will disappear from UK licences and number plates. That not only symbolises Brexit, but provides us with a great opportunity to be much more inclusive when it comes to the flags representing different parts of our great United Kingdom. Post-Brexit, a standard UK driving licence will just have the UK flag on it. We will also have number plates that will just display registration numbers and letters. That said, it is worth pointing out that motorists have the option of displaying the Union flag, the cross of St George, the Scottish saltire or the red dragon of Wales, along with the other accompanying identifiers, on their current vehicle number plates. That was legislated for in 2009, and the addition of the Union Jack to driving licences was announced in 2012.

With the EU flag disappearing from both, there is a real opportunity for us to consider displaying flags that represent different parts of Britain. First, I would at least like to see the current rules on number plates extended to driving licences. If motorists are allowed to have the flags of England, Scotland or Wales on their number plates, that should be extended to driving licences too. Where the flag would go on the licence is a minor detail, but considering that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency produces tens of thousands of individual licences every year with individuals' names, addresses, IDs and other details, I cannot see why it would be any more difficult to include a second flag, which could be chosen by the licence holder.

Alongside the flags of England, Scotland and Wales, I urge the Minister to consider flags from other parts of the United Kingdom. I am a very patriotic Cornishman, and it would give me great delight to see the St Piran's cross on my driving licence. The flags could go on licences and number plates, but if the Minister is in favour of a slower approach, groups of flags could be extended to number plates first and then to licences, if consultation proved to be positive.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very strong case. Does he agree that it is not just the people of Cornwall and Devon who would like to have something different on their number plates? I am sure that many people based in Yorkshire would like to have the Yorkshire rose on their number plate, rather than the pretentious and increasingly irrelevant EU flag.

Scott Mann: It is almost as if my right hon. Friend has read my mind. Later in my speech I will go on to talk a little about Yorkshire, and he has made a passionate case for his area. The Minister may have concerns about the financial and administrative burden for the DVLA from licences, but when it comes to number plates, many motorists will be willing to pay for new plates displaying the flag of their region or of their choice. That could be a way forward, where motorists are allowed to display a greater variety of flags on number plates at their own cost. That could then be extended to licences at a later date, if that was deemed suitable.

The Minister may be concerned that the proposal may create confusion for authorities overseas when vehicles are taken abroad. To address that, I propose that, should a motorist want to have a flag for their country or county—or, in Cornwall's case, duchy—the flag could be accompanied by a Union Jack to make it clear that the vehicle was from the United Kingdom.

There are many fascinating flags in this great country of ours that represent the whole of the UK. Ultimately, I think our Union Jack is the best. It represents the union of our four great nations and is looked upon by millions of people around the world as a flag of democracy, the rule of law and freedom of speech. Thankfully, the Union Jack has been reinstated on UK driving licences and is permitted on number plates. People are proud of where they come from, and that should be allowed to be expressed in the form of licences and number plates.

As the former Secretary of State for Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), said on St George's day in 2013:

"The tapestry of the United Kingdom's regions and counties binds our nation together...we are championing traditional local identities which continue to run deep...by considering the use of regional or county flags, we formally acknowledge the continuing role of our traditional counties in our united country's public and cultural life. This government is championing local communities, continuing to cherish and celebrate traditional ties and community spirit."

That brings me on to my favourite flag, the black and white flag of St Piran, which represents a symbol of many people's Cornish identity.

Although not a country, Cornwall is the duchy. Its Cornish population has been granted national minority status under the European Council's framework. I have been conducting constituency surveys through communities in North Cornwall. When asked about having the option of the St Piran's flag on their driving licence or number plate, a big majority say that they would like that to be considered. This debate goes far beyond the St Piran's flag. The point of having the debate today is to give Members the opportunity to voice any support they have for flags within their areas of the UK. In England, for example, that could include the flag of Yorkshire, with its white rose, the flag of the Isle of Wight, with its diamond shape hovering above the ocean waves, or the Invicta flag of Kent, with its white horse against a red background. In Scotland, it could include the flag of Caithness, with its blue and gold cross representing its beaches and seas. In Wales, it could include the flag of Anglesey, with its three yellow dragons. At this point, this is purely a debate. The Minister cannot go into too much detail on the prospect or any ideas that he has, because of the Brexit process, but I would welcome his thoughts and those of fellow Members.

In conclusion, the United Kingdom is a collection of many different areas that have proud histories, identities and cultures. As we extricate ourselves from the European Union and embrace the brighter future of our sovereignty, it is worth having a debate about the idea of flags on driving licences and number plates. I will now be glad to sit and listen to what other MPs and the Government have to say on the record. [*Interruption.*]

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. I would ask any Member wishing to speak to stand up.

5.13 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am sorry, Mr Nuttall, but I was stunned by the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). I thank you for the opportunity to speak and I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. We share an office and have discussed this subject many times. His constituency is North Cornwall, while mine is the furthest west it is possible to get, and as he said, our constituents say they would like to see flags on driving licences and number plates.

I know that the Government are ambitious for local areas and are keen to devolve more responsibility to them. They want local areas such as Cornwall to seize the day and take charge of their own destiny. They want to promote regional strength and identity, and of course they want to make a success of exiting the EU. Cornwall is a place of significant interest. Those of us who live there are immensely proud of our heritage, our culture, our natural environment and how we work together as a community to help and care for one another. We know that is true, and every year tens of thousands flock down to see us and covet all that Cornwall is and stands for. Cornwall is a special place in the UK, and I make no apology for asking for special treatment from time to time. My hon. Friend was very generous in describing the various flags that could go on licences or number plates. As far as I am concerned, Cornwall would be a perfect pilot for this. I am ambitious for Cornwall to lead the way in having the St Piran's flag on number plates and licences.

Cornwall wants to be treated fairly, but we also want more attention than we perhaps get at the moment. On this occasion, our request is straightforward and in the gift of the UK Government, once we leave the EU. My hon. Friend and I are simply arguing that Cornish residents, if they choose, can celebrate Cornish identity by placing our Cornish flag, the St Piran's flag, on driving licences when they are issued or replaced, and also on vehicle registration plates.

As my hon. Friend said, since 2009 it has been legal to display the Union flag, the cross of St George, the Scottish saltire and the red dragon of Wales on vehicle number plates. Extending that right to Cornish residents and to other regions would be welcomed by my constituents and others elsewhere. Permitting motorists to display the flag of St Piran on their vehicles is a relatively simple yet effective way of enabling people to proclaim their Cornish identity, and I know that many residents in the county would be proud to do so. With modern technology, that cannot be beyond the wit of man. Any costs incurred could easily be recovered from the charges already payable for driving licences and number plates.

I am keen not to prolong this debate more than necessary, so to conclude, Cornwall is a unique and special place. I am unbelievably proud to represent the far south-west of the county. Once Britain has left the EU, there will be more opportunity to safeguard and promote our Cornish identity. Allowing such measures on licences and registration plates provides a tangible way in which a local area can celebrate its heritage, culture and identity. I believe that it would be a great way to celebrate the new Great Britain that we want, post-membership of the EU.

5.17 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate. I loved his line about an independent, sovereign state, which is something that has been close to my heart for a long time. I hope to see Scotland as an independent, sovereign state in relatively short order.

We can all support the principle of being able to choose to show a regional or national identity in flags on driving licences and number plates. We should be open to the ability for people to choose the representation to promote their individual area and the nation that they are from—it is incumbent on us to be as open as possible. I fully support the choice for the option of the St Piran's cross and for it to be set next to the Union flag or indeed the cross of St George. Similarly, in Scotland, if the good people of Caithness want to have their flag next to the saltire on their driving licence, that is something that should be taken forward too. There is lots to agree here and there should be flexibility from the Minister in how that goes forward.

I will be brief in my summing up, because, although we can say that we agree with the principle, it is difficult to pick a lot to challenge. But I would say this: while there is a collective rubbing of hands of some people who favour the Brexit position and cannot wait to exit the European Union, I would remind people that the European flag has been a symbol of free movement across Europe. When that symbol is connected with and on vehicles, it shows how easy it is for people to move from one country to another without any restriction.

One of the biggest challenges coming is not the question of what flag will be on a hon. Member's or a member of the public's number plate. It will be what happens to the customs rules, cabotage arrangements and people's ability to move around and do business in Europe. Although we are enjoying a debate about flags, there are serious issues to be dealt with by the Government. As of yet—the Minister will know this well, because he has been challenged many times by me directly—there are no answers on what is happening with free movement.

The ability for people to choose, and to reflect their area, should be supported, and, as regards the main thrust of the argument advanced by the hon. Member for North Cornwall, I absolutely support people's ability to make that choice. They should have the choice nationally; they should have the choice regionally.

5.20 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Nuttall. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall

[Daniel Zeichner]

(Scott Mann) on initiating the debate. In the light of the Prime Minister's decision to invoke article 50 last month, and ahead of the general election in June, it is right that we discuss in this place the many and varied ramifications of leaving the European Union, from the big issues right down to what some might see as the finer detail about the symbols that appear on our driving licences and number plates. Detail it may be, but it is important nevertheless, because symbols matter. The questions of who we are as a society and as a country and who we identify with are at the heart of the decision taken last June, so the significance of these issues should not be underestimated. I still carry my "Sack Boris" Oyster card holder from previous London mayoral contests, partly because its message is timeless, but also because it makes a small statement. Doubtless others could cite similar examples.

On the issue of number plates and driving licences, as things stand, the United Kingdom is still a member of the European Union, and as such we operate within the body of EU legislation to which we have agreed. Accordingly, it is clear that we are not at the moment in a position to introduce regional flags on driving licences and number plates, because only the use of national symbols is permitted. With regard to number plates, the relevant legislation is regulation 16 of the Road Vehicles (Display of Registration Marks) Regulations 2001. That allows the display of

"the international distinguishing sign of the United Kingdom".

Although it was not until April 2009 that the UK Government introduced regulations to permit the display of national symbols, we now see number plates bearing not just the Union flag, but, as we have heard, the cross of St George, the saltire and the red dragon of Wales, as well as letters denoting the UK or one of the individual nations that form the Union.

The EU legislation relating to photocard driving licences is set out in annex I to the third driving licence directive and came into force in January 2013. It states:

"After consulting the Commission, Member States may add colours or markings, such as bar codes and national symbols".

Since July 2015, all photocard licences issued in England, Scotland and Wales have carried the Union flag alongside the EU flag. However, unlike with vehicle registration plates, symbols of individual nations within the UK are not permitted on driving licences. That has led to some consternation in certain areas of the country; in fact, I am reliably informed that it has even spawned a thriving cottage industry in very small stickers of saltires and Welsh dragons for those who wish to accessorise their driving licence. It does seem inconsistent that number plates are permitted to bear a number of symbols of the various nations that make up the United Kingdom, whereas driving licences are allowed to bear only the Union flag.

The responsibility for deciding which national symbols are put on UK driving licences rests with the Secretary of State for Transport, except in Northern Ireland, where that power has been transferred to the Department of the Environment. As the EU directive does not explicate what constitutes a national symbol, the Secretary of State has to determine what, if any, national symbol they would like to introduce, and consult the EU Commission. That is perhaps the crux of this discussion—

what constitutes a nation? That is a very big question indeed and one that, as we know, can both inspire and divide and so has to be handled with care and discretion.

Of course, the party of nations and English regions is Labour, unlike the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, who tore asunder our regional structures in the last Parliament—an act of vandalism that Vince Cable famously described as "Maoist". In the spirit of supporting thriving and healthy regions, I happily endorse the notion of regional symbols, but I gently say to the Minister—

Sir Greg Knight: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us how far he would go in deregulating in this area if he was in office? For example, would he go beyond regional symbols and allow other symbols, such as a motif or artwork used by a sports club or local car club?

Daniel Zeichner: I have to say that our detailed policy discussions in the run-up to the general election have not extended to that level of detail so far. It is an interesting suggestion that I will happily consider in the future, but for the moment I will concentrate on regional symbols. The point I was about to make to the Minister is that symbols are important, but if one is to have a symbol for a region, there needs to be a region first; I suggest that that is where we ought to head back to. However, that is possibly a bigger debate for another day.

I conclude by giving an assurance that a Labour Government will bring the policies on number plates and driving licences into line with one another so that, if nothing else, we have consistency. If that helps to build community, solidarity and a positive sense of identity in our nations and regions, that can only be a good thing.

5.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. May I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate about the use of regional or national flags on driving licences and number plates? I welcome this opportunity, because this is clearly an area of much interest to colleagues from all over our country.

We all know that, on 23 June last year, we voted as a nation to leave the EU. My hon. Friend is correct that many opportunities will arise from that decision. For example, one of the many implications may well be that we will be able to alter the design and components of our driving licences and number plates. I will take each issue separately, and I will start by commenting upon driving licences, which is actually quite a complex area.

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has been issuing driving licences since 1973. It holds the records of around 47 million drivers and issues around 11 million licences each year. While I appreciate that my hon. Friend and other colleagues see the outcome of the referendum as an opportunity to include regional flags on our driving licences, I have to highlight that that could have practical implications that I ought to share with the House. There would be an administrative burden on the DVLA, and associated costs that would, in due course, be passed on to motorists.

I will explain a bit about the photocard driving licence itself. As we are all aware, there are different designs for a provisional licence and a full driving licence.

At first glance, the driving licence looks a little like a credit card. It is credit card-sized and is plastic, and it contains a photograph and some details about the driver, including their name, address and the vehicles that they are entitled to drive. However, it is much more sophisticated than that. For example, it is made entirely from polycarbonate and is built up of multiple layers. It has been rigorously tested to the highest standards to ensure that it complies with international security standards, and to ensure that it is fit for purpose and will retain its integrity for the 10 years of its lifespan.

In terms of the licence's production, the DVLA is supplied with base cards, which arrive at the DVLA containing only the title—"DRIVING LICENCE"—the Euro flag, the Union flag and the background print; everything else is printed on-site. The driver's photograph is actually not so much printed, as one might expect, but laser etched on to the polycarbonate material. The driving licence has many other security features, and is therefore one of the most secure and recognisable public documents that we have.

As my hon. Friend is aware, the Government introduced a new driving licence design in 2015 that incorporated the Union flag. When that change was made, the DVLA explored the possibility of giving drivers the option of having the Union flag on their licence or not, so some of the thinking on the prospect of consumer choice has been started. That work showed that the cost to the DVLA would be between about £14 million to £20 million, and it would potentially take two years to implement. The Government decided, therefore, to include the Union flag on all driving licences, without offering a choice, to underpin the sense of national identity and pride that we all share, notwithstanding that the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) may take a slightly different view of that. Overall I think there is pride in our national flag and our identity as British citizens.

At the same time the DVLA looked at whether it would be desirable to offer drivers the option to have other symbols on their driving licence, such as the cross of St George, the saltire, the red dragon of Wales or indeed, potentially, the cross of St Piran. While it may seem a simple undertaking to give motorists a choice of what to display on their licence, the cost of doing so was even greater than the cost of providing an optional Union flag, which I mentioned earlier. If the optional element is removed—for example if all licences in Scotland were issued showing the saltire—that obviously would have a cost implication, by reducing it. Then, of course, there would be further complications; how would the distribution of the design be decided? Would it be a question of where the driver lived? Of course Scots live right across the United Kingdom, and people from other parts of the country live in Scotland. That presents some quite complicated operational implications for the DVLA.

There are also some potential road safety and security risks. Among the most obvious would be the credibility of our driving licence in the eyes of foreign enforcement agencies. When so many people from the UK drive in places around the world, the recognisability of our licence is a valuable asset.

Drew Hendry: Does the Minister agree that currently, with the EU symbol on the driving licence, that problem is greatly lessened, and that by choosing hard Brexit,

without taking into account cabotage and customs or keeping access to the EU, the Government will create problems for drivers?

Andrew Jones: I fear that that is potentially temptation to rerun the referendum debate. We have been there, and we need to come together and implement the decision of the British people. Obviously, there are practical implications, some of which are risks, and some opportunities. The key thing, of course, is to make sure that we have the best possible deal for the country, and far more opportunity than risk.

My point about the interoperability and recognisability of driving licences is reasonable, because they are perhaps the most common form of identity document that people use. They are not designed to be an identity document but they are used for that purpose in many cases, and it is important that a driving licence should be a robust and secure document that retains its identity. A further implication is that its integrity should not be compromised by more fake licences being in circulation. A lack of familiarity with the licence could of course make it easier for fakes to go undetected.

We estimated what might happen if each county or region were allowed a design. I recognise that few parts of the country have the sense of identity that Cornwall has—

Sir Greg Knight: And Yorkshire.

Andrew Jones: I am coming on to Yorkshire. We have heard from two proud and passionate Cornishmen in the debate, speaking up for their county, as ever; but other parts of the country also have strong identities. I am a proud Yorkshireman and I think nowhere beyond Yorkshire and Cornwall can match that sense of identity. However, I am treading into dangerous territory, and that is partly the point. We would be treading on regional and county identities that are very complicated. I notice that even within the ceremonial county of Cornwall the Isles of Scilly have their own flag, and their population is just over 2,000, with just 600 vehicles registered on the islands. They may want their own flag displayed on their licences, and I am sure that that would apply to many parts of the country. There are strong affiliations and loyalties across our marvellous, united nation.

Building various designs into the card manufacturing process would obviously have an impact on printing and despatch costs for the DVLA and would also have implications for turnaround time. All those points need to be considered as we take the debate forward.

We have regional identities on our number plates. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the registration number is a unique means of identifying a vehicle for taxation, law enforcement and road safety purposes. It has a proper and significant practical implication. It is important that the police are able to quickly identify a vehicle and that witnesses are able to recall registration marks. To that end, the law requires that number plates are clearly and easily readable.

The rules regarding what can be displayed on number plates, including any optional regional flags, are specified in UK law. Those rules simply ensure safety on our roads. They support the police and other enforcement agencies in identifying vehicles to prevent and detect crime, particularly through the use of automatic number plate recognition cameras. With that in mind, the law

[*Andrew Jones*]

has to be specific about what information can be shown on a number plate, to minimise and prevent the use of unlawful products.

Currently in the UK only number plates supplied by official registered suppliers can be displayed on a vehicle. Registered number plate suppliers are fully aware of what is allowed to be displayed and must ensure that the number plates they supply meet legal standards and that adequate sales records are maintained. In addition to display of the registration number, the law provides for the voluntary use of specific national identifiers or the display of the EU flag, if people wish it.

The display of the EU flag with the inclusion of a GB identifier is called a europlate. It enables motorists to travel across the EU without the need to display the conventional oval GB—either a sticker or a little banner—to identify the member state in which the vehicle is registered. Currently UK motorists travelling within the EU can display either the europlate or the traditional oval sticker. Vehicles registered in the UK and travelling outside the EU have no choice but to use the oval sticker.

Sir Greg Knight: As we move closer to leaving the European Union, will the Minister look again at this? It seems to me that as long as a number plate is clear and can be read and understood, if someone wants to personalise their number plate modestly, we should not stand in the way of them so doing.

Andrew Jones: I recognise that we are moving into a place where the old rules will cease to apply, and we can determine more as we wish, but I will come to my right hon. Friend's point.

The law changed in 2009 to allow the voluntary display of either the European flag or UK national flags, so we have choice in the area of number plates. Motorists can choose between the Union flag, the cross of St George, the saltire or the red dragon of Wales on their number plates. The display of a national flag or the EU flag is a matter of personal choice; nobody is compelled to decide one way or the other.

We have strong regional and national identities within our United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall highlighted the recognition of Cornwall, but that applies to many other parts of our country. It is fantastic that we have such a diverse and unique cultural mix in our different nations and parts of our nations, in which people take great pride. I am certainly a proud Yorkshireman, particularly when it comes to cricketering matters.

Any proposals to allow a wide range of flags or regional identifiers to be displayed on number plates have to take into account the wishes of wide groups in

other parts of our countries. Choosing the regional identifier would be complicated. We would also have to ensure that it worked from a law enforcement perspective. So there are practical implications, road safety implications and law enforcement implications, and it is a brave person who treads too far into the area of regional identity.

I entirely recognise the strong desire to reflect the pride that we feel in our different parts of the United Kingdom. We are at the start of a process. I am not saying either yes or no; we are simply at too early a stage in this process to decide. However, I recognise that there are opportunities. I regard this debate as the start of our national conversation about what we would like to have on our driving licences and on our number plates. I also recognise that technology presents opportunities to personalise and to print, but I have also tried to explain that there are some significant practical implications from a DVLA perspective and from a law enforcement agency perspective. There are cost implications as well.

I recognise the proud and passionate pleas from our Cornish colleagues, and I have great sympathy with them. I also recognise that we will receive messages from all parts of our country and I hope that everybody will contribute as we decide what our licences and number plates look like, as we leave the EU and have the freedom to make our own decisions.

5.41 pm

Scott Mann: We have had an excellent discussion and this has been a very worthwhile debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) made some great interventions; my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made a very passionate case for his part of Cornwall; the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made some interesting and valid points, although I do not agree completely with some of the things he said; and the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) also made some very valid and interesting points.

I thank the Minister for listening. Obviously, we will not be here in Parliament for much longer, but it would be nice to come back and re-engage in this debate in a few weeks or months. I thank him for listening to the debate and I hope that he will consider this matter in the future if he is back in his position and I am back in mine.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the use of regional flags on driving licences and number plates.

5.42 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Wednesday 19 April 2017

EDUCATION

Technical and Further Education Bill: English Votes for English Laws

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): I am pleased to announce the publication of analysis of English votes for English laws in relation to amendments to the Technical and Further Education Bill during its passage through the House of Lords.

The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering

whether to certify that Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws. Bill provisions that relate exclusively to England or to England and Wales, and which have a subject matter within the legislative competence of one or more of the devolved legislatures, can be certified.

The memorandum provides an assessment of tabled amendments to the Technical and Further Education Bill, for the purposes of English votes for English laws, ahead of Commons consideration of Lords amendments (CCLA).

This analysis reflects the position should all the amendments from the House of Lords be accepted.

The memorandum can be found on the Bill documents page of the Parliament website at:

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/technicalandfurthereducation/documents.html>

I have also deposited a copy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS598]

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Wednesday 19 April 2017

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**not later than
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