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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 20 April 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Air Quality National Framework

2. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to introduce an air quality national framework. [909658]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): The UK has made significant progress in improving air quality in the past decade, with lower emissions of all five major air pollutants. However, the UK is among 17 European countries, including France and Germany, that are not yet meeting EU emissions targets for nitrogen dioxide in parts of our towns and cities. To help to address this, the Government last year consulted on a clean air zone framework, which will be published shortly.

Rachael Maskell: Following three humiliating defeats in the courts for failing to address the 50,000 deaths a year in this country due to poor air quality, and where the Government defended the indefensible, Justice Garnham ordered the Government to produce a new air quality plan by this Monday. Labour believes we need to go further with an air quality national framework as part of a clean air Act. What are the main pillars of the plan and how much resource has the Secretary of State allocated to addressing the UK's poor air quality?

Andrea Leadsom: It is a great shame that the hon. Lady criticises this Government, who since 2011 have committed more than £2 billion to increase the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles and support greener transport schemes and have set out how we will improve air quality through a new programme of clean zones. In addition, in the autumn statement we announced a further £290 million to support low-emission buses and taxis, retrofitting and alternative fuels; and, as I say, we will consult on our plans to improve nitrogen oxide emissions very shortly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to be intemperate with the Secretary of State, but this is just so much pie in the sky. Every time we have Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions,

she says that something will happen soon. When are we going to have our big natural environment report? When are we going to stop people being poisoned in our cities and towns like Huddersfield, and when are we going to see action—now, not next week, next month or next year?

Andrea Leadsom: Let me be very clear: the Government are totally committed to cutting harmful emissions that worsen our air quality. We have made great progress already in the past decade, which is more than the Labour Government did. Emissions went up on their watch. We absolutely recognise that there is more to do and we will publish our proposals very soon.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I am very concerned about people who bought diesel cars thinking that they were the best way forward. Will the Secretary of State discuss this matter with the Transport Secretary, the Treasury and the devolved Administrations to ensure that these people are not penalised? We need to find a way forward that looks after them.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. In taking steps to reduce harmful nitrogen dioxide emissions, we have to take into account the impact on ordinary working families and businesses. As the Prime Minister made very clear, we completely understand that people bought diesel cars under incentives from the last Labour Government. They bought them in good faith and we need to ensure that they are not penalised for the actions they took.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State consider a targeted diesel scrappage scheme that supports low-income families in particular? The opportunity to do so was missed in both last year's autumn statement and the Budget.

Andrea Leadsom: I can assure the hon. Lady that the Government are looking at all possible areas both to reduce emissions of noxious substances such as nitrogen oxide and to ensure that we have good mitigation across the board to try to support ordinary working families. All types of mitigation are on the table.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland has very low air pollution with all areas in the low pollution band, but it is essential that the national framework is truly nationwide and encompasses Northern Ireland. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with her counterpart in the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that that happens?

Andrea Leadsom: I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that we have had discussions right across the devolved Administrations on this subject. The UK Government and all the devolved Administrations take it very seriously. We are working together closely and we will make an announcement in due course.

Leaving the EU: Environmental Standards Regulations

3. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Whether it is her policy to (a) retain and (b) strengthen existing environmental standards regulations after the UK has left the EU. [909659]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

The great repeal Bill will ensure that the whole body of existing EU environmental law will continue to have effect in UK law. Over time, we will have the opportunity to ensure that our legislative framework is outcome-driven and delivers on our overall commitment to improve the environment within a generation. I can assure the House that the Government will continue to uphold our obligations under international environmental treaties, champion high standards in environmental protection and continue to seek to influence other countries to do so.

Jeff Smith: Ensuring that environmental regulations are introduced in the great repeal Bill is fine: that is very important. At least as important, however, is ensuring that those regulations are permanent. Will the Government commit themselves to placing no limit on the timeframe within which regulations will remain in place to protect our health?

Dr Coffey: The country decided to leave the European Union last year. We are trying to provide as much certainty as possible to ensure that regulations continue to exist as part of UK law, and, as a consequence, that will be the case. It concerns me that the hon. Gentleman thinks we are somehow going to rip up the rule book, because that is far from being the outcome. We want a better environment for our future generations, and that is what the Government will deliver.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The Minister knows very well that the EU environmental regulations have been very helpful to people like me—and you, Mr Speaker—in holding the feet of HS2 to the fire when it comes to protecting our environment. Will she undertake not to allow any diminution in the protections that are afforded to areas of outstanding natural beauty, and to ensure that our exiting of the European Union does not hand HS2 a blank cheque enabling it to ride roughshod through our countryside?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Government have already committed themselves to upholding the highest environmental standards—standards that we cherish—in developing HS2, and, indeed, other infrastructure.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I echo the call from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for a national framework rather than ad hoc local decision making, especially given that emissions are currently declining? Will the Minister bear that in mind while she is working on the EU air quality regulations? In drawing up the framework, will she take account of all causes of air pollution, properly cost the alternatives—I am thinking particularly of the costs to drivers and the taxpayer—and urge the Government to stop demonising diesel drivers?

Dr Coffey: I think it fair to say—and we have said it at this Dispatch Box before—that when we are tackling air quality issues we must work with local communities, because the solutions will vary and there must be targeted interventions. I am afraid—well, I am not afraid—that our Government are not demonising diesel drivers at all. It was the Labour Government who introduced

incentives for people to start using diesel. It happens to have been the current Mayor of London who stood at the Dispatch Box in his last year in the Brown Government and said that Euro V emission standards would solve the problem. We know that that is not the case, but we are clearing up the mess. Together, we can work across party lines to ensure that we have cleaner air for the people whom we all represent.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): One of the environmental standards that we can improve outside the European Union as much as inside relates to the state of the oceans. As the Minister knows, a massive amount of dumping of plastics is damaging sea life and coral wellbeing. A huge United Nations conference will take place between 5 and 9 June. Ministers will be busy doing other things, but what will this Minister do to ensure that the British voice is properly heard to ensure that something is done to clean up our oceans?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend will be aware that we launched our litter strategy recently. We know that a great deal of the litter that ends up in the marine environment comes from the land, and we must proceed with our work on that, because marine conservation is particularly important to us. We have continued to extend our blue belt, not only around the this country's coastline but in overseas territories. As my hon. Friend pointed out, a general election will take place in the middle of the oceans conference, but I can assure him that the interests of the United Kingdom in providing global leadership will be well represented.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): While the great repeal Bill may bring short-term stability and a working statute book when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, it remains to be seen whether this Government, or indeed future Governments, will take any action to erode the UK's existing environmental policies. What assurances can the Minister give the constituents who have written to me expressing deep concern about environmental protections post-Brexit?

Dr Coffey: I can only continue to try to assure the House, and the hon. Lady's constituents, that we made it very clear in the manifesto on which we stood in 2015 that we wanted to be the first Government to leave the environment in a better state than the one in which we found it, and that is what we will do.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): On 24 November 2015, the then Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), announced that the UK Government would ban lion trophy imports by the end of 2017. What progress has been made in that regard, and what reductions in trophy lion hunting does the Minister expect to be made following the review of international treaties when the UK has left the EU?

Dr Coffey: I did not quite catch the opening of the hon. Gentleman's question, when he referred to something from 2015, but I assure him that all these imports are undertaken on a case-by-case basis and that we continue to work with other countries to ensure that we conserve

important species throughout the world. It is a key issue in which the UK is a global leader. We will continue to work with other countries and to have an influence.

Microbeads

4. **Mrs Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What progress her Department has made on its plans to ban microbeads from certain products. [909661]

7. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What the timetable is for the ban on microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products. [909666]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The consultation closed on 28 February and we are currently examining the responses. Our intention is to introduce legislation this year, with a ban on manufacturing expected to apply from 1 January 2018 and a ban on sales expected from 30 June 2018, as was outlined in our proposals.

Mrs Villiers: I strongly support the Government's plans to ban microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products, but they account for probably only about 4% of the micro-plastics polluting our rivers and oceans. What are the Government doing to tackle the other types of micro-plastics which we want to stop polluting our oceans?

Dr Coffey: The consultation also sought to gather evidence on the extent of the environmental impacts of micro-plastics from other sources. We are reviewing the responses to that consultation, and any new evidence will be used to inform actions to protect the marine environment. I assure my right hon. Friend that we are also looking at the litter strategy, the use of plastic bottles and on-the-go consumption, but I remind her that we need to be careful as we take that forward as a lot of microbeads and plastics are the outcome of, for example, recycled bottles that are made into fleece.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I was recently rummaging through my wife's collection of shampoos, and to my horror I found a plastic container of Olay anti-wrinkle, anti-ageing lotion, complete with exfoliating microbeads. Obviously, neither the Secretary of State nor her Minister would ever need to use such a product, but will the Minister get on the telephone to the chief executive of Procter & Gamble and tell him that selling that sort of product is completely outrageous and that it should be withdrawn from the market at once?

Mr Speaker: The leisure pursuits of the hon. Gentleman are truly extraordinary.

Dr Coffey: What I find extraordinary is that Lady Bellingham, who is a flawless picture, would even need these products. I am sure my hon. Friend will be buying flowers later today to make up for this.

It is fair to say that we are working with manufacturers now and a lot of them are already starting to remove these products proactively. That is good news, but we want to ensure that that avoidable pollution is taken out of our environment permanently.

Food and Drink Sector

5. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with her EU counterparts on the food and drink sector. [909663]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We regularly meet EU counterparts at Agriculture and Fisheries Council and at Environment Council. Food and drink issues are routinely on the formal agenda and are frequently discussed at informal bilaterals, too.

Sir Edward Leigh: The great and noble county of Lincolnshire is the bread basket of England and much of the food that we eat comes from that county. Glyphosate has been proved to be harmless by scientists. It is used by farmers in the safe production of wheat and the food we eat, so can the Minister assure me that once we regain control of our destiny its use will be reauthorised?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend knows, the European Union is currently reviewing the use of glyphosate, but the European Food Safety Authority, the food safety agency for the EU, as well as the German authorities that led the work are very clear that it is a safe product. The UK has therefore consistently backed a position in line with the science to continue to authorise glyphosate.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): My first DEFRA question, on 18 June 2015, was on convergence uplift. Now, €230 million should have flowed to Scottish farming. Since then, the Minister has demonstrated an uncanny ability to procrastinate, which my children could only envy. However, this is not children's homework or getting to bed on time; it is fundamental money that is important to Scottish farming and it is now a matter of trust. The Minister wants us to believe that we can trust this Government with post-Brexit UK policy. Where is that money? How on earth can Scottish farming trust this Government and the Tories?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this a number of times, and he is aware that the review that we intended to carry out last year was delayed because of the referendum, which has clearly changed the context dramatically. We continue to have discussions with Scottish industry; indeed, just yesterday I met NFU Scotland to discuss future agriculture policy.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What can be done to encourage the European Union to promote the processing of foodstuffs in developing countries? I am thinking particularly of olive oil and coffee, where the value added tends to be within the European Union.

George Eustice: The UK and indeed a number of other European countries have preferential trade agreements in place to support developing countries and give them tariff-free access to the European market. This is important to the development of some of those countries, and the issues that my hon. Friend raises are regularly discussed at the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): The fishing industry in my constituency is an important part of the food-processing sector. As part of the discussions with EU ministerial counterparts, what efforts will be

made to ensure that there is no border in the Irish sea, thereby permitting fishermen to fish in both parts, as they currently can?

George Eustice: As the hon. Lady will know, there has been an issue with the voisinage agreement, a long-standing agreement between the UK and the Irish Republic. There had been an issue with the Irish courts on this, and I discussed it just a couple of weeks ago with the Irish Minister, when we also talked about the arrangements we might have after Brexit.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Like my constituency neighbour my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), I have the honour of representing a constituency whose farmers feed the country. Will my hon. Friend the Minister work to ensure that farmers in Louth and Horncastle and beyond are not put at a disadvantage with their EU competitors when these exciting new trade deals are negotiated?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend represents an important farming constituency, and I reassure her that I worked in the farming industry for 10 years and am passionate about it. I have been going up and down the country in recent months meeting farmers to discuss their concerns. We have a fantastic opportunity now on leaving the EU to design a new agriculture policy that is fit for purpose.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Press reports earlier this week suggest that the Danish Government may press for restrictions on UK fish imports to the EU if the Danish fleet loses access to UK—mostly Scottish—fishing waters when the UK leaves the EU. That would have very serious implications for Scottish fish producers, who currently export in the region of almost half a billion pounds-worth of fish to the EU every year. What conversations has the Minister had with his Danish counterpart this week, and what solutions is he proposing?

George Eustice: As I said, I have regular meetings with all EU counterparts; indeed, I believe that the Danish Minister is planning a visit to the UK in the next few weeks, and I hope to meet him then. The hon. Lady should not worry about the opening positions that people might take in a negotiation: what matters is not what people ask for but what the UK Government are willing to grant. I simply say this: the Scottish fishing industry does not want to be dragged kicking and screaming back into the EU. It wants to leave the EU and the common fisheries policy; it wants to take control of our waters.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The fishing industry is vitally important to my constituency. Will the Minister update fishers there and around the UK about if, and when, the Government will trigger their intention to withdraw from the 1964 London fisheries convention?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point: there is a 1964 London fisheries convention which has access arrangements for a number of countries. As we have made clear on numerous occasions, we are looking at this very closely, and, as the Prime Minister said just two weeks ago, we hope to be able to say something on this shortly.

New Markets

6. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What progress her Department is making on opening up new markets for British farmers and food producers. [909664]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Since 2015, DEFRA has opened or improved terms for over 160 markets for agri-food commodities. Increasing access to markets is a priority set out in the food and drink international action plan. We work with industry to identify and prioritise new markets and increase export value.

John Howell: In my role as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Nigeria, I have recently invited the Nigerian agriculture Minister to come to the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that it will be important to show him the whole of the value chain in agriculture, in which we do so well?

George Eustice: I commend the work that my hon. Friend does in building relations and important trading links with Nigeria, which is an important trading partner. It is also an important market for some fisheries products, including mackerel. I am delighted to hear that he has invited the Nigerian agriculture Minister here to see some of the great work that we do through the supply chain and some of the technology that we use to reduce waste in the supply chain.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that it is crucial to place the needs of the agricultural sector at the heart of the Brexit negotiations? Is it not clear that if the Government do not get their act together, a bad Brexit deal would leave British farmers and food producers facing the double whammy of cheap food imports and tariffs on their exports?

George Eustice: Access to the UK market is incredibly important for European countries as well. We export around £11 billion-worth of food and drink to the European Union, but we import some £28 billion-worth of food from the EU. That is why farming unions across the EU are telling their Governments that they must have a free trade agreement with the UK.

Sue Hayman: But how do the Government intend to deliver on these promises? The Country Land and Business Association is saying that the Government should admit that they cannot design a workable new agricultural policy in less than two years because DEFRA simply does not have the capacity to do so. The Government's failure to reach an agreement could leave our farmers unable to compete at home and abroad. What specific guarantees can the Minister provide here today to rural communities across the country that farming subsidies and tariff-free trade will be guaranteed under a Tory Government?

George Eustice: We have some tremendously talented policy officials in DEFRA and in our agencies, and they have been working closely on the detail behind the design of future agricultural policy on some of those issues. The Prime Minister has made it clear that she is

going to make an offer to the other European countries of a bold, ambitious and comprehensive free trade agreement.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): One of the markets that farmers in northern Lincolnshire are hoping to expand is the production of crops that can be converted into bioethanol fuel. However, they are concerned about the Government's commitment to this market. Can the Minister reassure them that this is a market for future expansion?

George Eustice: We see a role for bioethanol fuels, but we are also keen to ensure that we do not lose too much good agricultural land to biofuels. My hon. Friend will be aware that this is predominantly an issue for the Department for Transport, and I would invite him to raise it with that Department in the next Parliament.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) has just pointed out, markets are not only country-based but product-based. The UK has a tremendous market for lactose-free milk, most of which is imported. What can we do to encourage UK producers to develop that product and manufacture it in the UK?

George Eustice: We have a strong dairy industry in this country, and there are lots of opportunities of that nature. We have established the food innovation networks, and we have the agritech fund and a number of other funds to support innovative product development of that kind.

Leaving the EU: Food Prices

9. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on food prices. [909669]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Energy prices and exchange rates are the key drivers of change in agricultural commodity markets, and they affect all the countries in the world, irrespective of whether they are members of the EU. Following the sharp spike in food prices in 2008, they levelled off in 2014 and fell by about 7% over the following two years. In the past year, they have seen a modest increase of about 1.3%.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for his response, but the fact is that the Office for National Statistics is reporting a surge in food prices that is likely to continue. Children are returning to school hungry after the Easter holidays and elderly people are being admitted to hospital malnourished, but still the Government refuse to measure hunger and food poverty levels in this country properly. Is it not the case that they refuse to measure those things because if they did so, they would have to admit some culpability?

George Eustice: No, the hon. Lady is wrong; we do measure them. We have the long-standing living costs and food survey, which has run for many years and which includes a measure for household spending among the poorest 20% of households. I can tell her that household spending in those poorest households has remained steady at around 16% for at least a decade.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes: on the matter of food, I call Mr Marcus Fysh.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Farmers across the south-west are rightly very proud of the high-quality food that they produce, be it beef, lamb, milk and so on. What opportunities from leaving the EU does the Minister see to ensure that they get a fair price for that food in the future?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend knows, we have recently had a call for evidence and a review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. Representations have suggested extending its remit further up the supply chain, and we are considering those representations. The Groceries Code Adjudicator has made a good start to improving the relationship between producers and supermarkets in particular.

12. [909673] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): It is common in food processing plants for 70% of the employees to be EU migrants. It is not clear where their staff will come from in the future. Is the Minister committed to defending that sector in the Brexit negotiations, so avoiding price rises from that driver?

George Eustice: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that I have had regular meetings with food processors. Just two days ago, I had a meeting with the new president of the Food and Drink Federation, and this issue has been raised. According to the Office for National Statistics, some 30% of employees in the food processing sector are from other European Union countries. The Prime Minister has been clear that she wants to safeguard and protect the rights of the EU citizens who are here and that that she would expect that to be reciprocated—and that that can be agreed early in the negotiations.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May I gently remind the Minister again of the paradox that we starve the poor by refusing to buy their food from them?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. As I mentioned earlier, we give preferential trade access to some developing countries: the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries are especially important in sectors such as sugar. It is important for them to develop those industries.

Ivory Trade Ban

10. **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): When her Department plans to begin its consultation on banning the trade in ivory. [909670]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue and I share her concerns. She will recognise that we want to get the proposals right, and we will consult as soon as we can.

Pauline Latham: Does the Minister agree that when the policy is in place rigorous enforcement will be one of the most vital elements?

Dr Coffey: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend: robust enforcement will be important to ensure that the rules are effective. She will recognise that the police and border agencies do an excellent job of enforcing the current rules. We will work with them on how best to enforce the new measures, but she will also recognise that our strategic approach to tackling the illegal wildlife trade is about enforcement, strengthening criminal justice and tackling demand, so that together we can help to solve the poaching crisis.

Seasonal Agricultural Workforce

11. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with fruit and vegetable growers on the seasonal agricultural workforce. [909672]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): I very much enjoyed my visit to my hon. Friend's constituency last week. It was a great pleasure to meet some of her growers, including those at Oakdene farm, to discuss seasonal labour. I am very aware of the horticultural sector's concerns about labour supply issues. The Government plan to commission advice from the Migration Advisory Committee and to consult with businesses later this year.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State obviously had an agreeable excursion: I am very interested to hear about it.

Helen Whately: I thank my right hon. Friend for coming to Kent to visit one of my local fruit farms and listening to the growers who assembled there, especially as it was during the Easter recess. Can she give me an update on the discussions that she has had with the Home Office about introducing the much-needed seasonal agricultural permit scheme?

Andrea Leadsom: I visited not only my hon. Friend's constituency, but that of my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), so I had a lovely day in the county I grew up in. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) is right that this is an important issue. The Government have assessed the need for a pilot seasonal workers scheme, and have decided that the evidence shows that one is not needed. As I have said, the Migration Advisory Committee and a consultation with businesses later this year will seek to determine exactly what the need is, and the Government are committed to making a huge success of the food and farming sector as we leave the EU.

Topical Questions

T1. [909701] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): As this is the last DEFRA questions before the election, I remind the House of the Government's twin ambitions for food, farming and the environment: to grow more, sell more and export more great British food; and for us to be the

first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. Only last week we published the first ever national litter strategy for England and announced a £10 million grant scheme to restore England's iconic peatlands. We look forward to putting our case to the country.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What is my right hon. Friend doing to support our fisherman, in particular the under-10 metre fleet—that is 33 feet in English money?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my right hon. Friend can still do the sums. The Government have taken several measures to make the inshore fleet more economically sustainable. For example, we have permanently transferred unused quota from over-10 metre vessels to the under-10 metre fleet, representing a 14% uplift to the under-10 metre fleet. We continue to top-slice the quota uplift, which is now more than 1,000 tonnes, in order to help the under-10 metre fleet.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Contrary to what the Minister of State said earlier, recent inflation figures reveal that food prices are rising at their fastest pace in three years, adding over £21 to the average household shopping bill in the last three months alone. When will the Secretary of State get a grip on a soaring cost of living that is affecting millions of families?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): As I pointed out in answer to an earlier question, we saw the biggest spike in food prices in 2008 due to energy prices. Food prices fell by around 7% between 2014 and 2016. It is true that there has been modest increase over the last 12 months of 1.4%.

Mary Glindon: Rising food prices simply add to the burden on those with little money for food. The Food Standards Agency recently reported that one in four low-income families struggles to eat regularly, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission has shown that disabled people are more than twice as likely to live in food poverty. How much longer can the Secretary of State refuse to monitor and publish figures on UK food insecurity and food bank usage?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, we have always monitored spending on food through the living costs and food survey, and food spending among the poorest 20% has been stable at 16% for over a decade. This Government have put more people in employment than ever before, taking more people off benefits and giving them an income. That is how to tackle poverty.

T2. [909702] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): It is not just the coastal areas of Lincolnshire that are particularly prone to flooding. While the Government have invested record amounts in concrete defences, inland areas are also susceptible to flooding. What role can natural flood management play in protecting properties and people?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of natural flood management, which I saw for myself on a recent visit to Leicester when I launched a £1 million competition for natural flood protection.

In the right place, it can absolutely help alongside more traditional measures. We are investing a total of £15 million to fund natural flood management schemes across the country, which will help to support many communities that are at risk of flooding, and we will continue to build the evidence.

T3. [909703] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Secretary of State will surely have the good sense to join me in speaking up for the free movement of workers as the easiest way of avoiding horrendous labour shortages in the food and drink industry.

Andrea Leadsom: We have already addressed the issue of seasonal workers in the agricultural sector, and it is important that we assess the needs there. As for workers who already work and have made their lives in this country, the Prime Minister has said that it is absolutely her intention to ensure that those rights are protected, provided that the EU reciprocates. It is exactly right to look after British workers who have moved to the EU at the same time as protecting the valuable contribution that EU citizens make in the UK.

T4. [909704] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): In the interest of customer choice and transparency, is it not about time that all halal and kosher meat products were properly labelled at the point of sale? That would benefit those people who particularly want to buy such products, as well as those who particularly do not want to buy them.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner on that issue, which he and I have discussed on numerous occasions. The Government are committed to giving consumers as much transparency as possible and to improving labelling wherever we can. He understands that there are some difficulties—there is no single definition of halal or kosher, for instance—that make compulsory labelling complex. He is also aware that the European Union has been looking at the issue. Obviously, once we leave the EU there will be an opportunity for us to look at all these issues.

T7. [909708] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The 25-year food and farming plan, the 25-year environment plan, the cycling and walking strategy: those supposedly environment-enhancing strategies were all promised to be published before the summer—summer 2016. The Secretary of State has clearly failed the environment, failed farmers and the food industry, and failed to keep her promise. People are now losing their jobs and incomes on her watch. When will those plans see the light of day?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady might be aware that a significant decision was taken by the people of the United Kingdom last summer to leave the European Union. We have been clear about our ambition to make a huge success of the food and farming sector, and to be the first generation to leave our environment in a better state than we found it. On what that means for our plans, it is essential that we consult widely with all the stakeholders. They have clear evidence and ideas to give us for a future outside the EU that is more successful than ever.

T5. [909705] **Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), will the Minister please give my constituents across north Northumberland the reassurance they need that, should the European Commission choose not to follow the EFSA recommendation and decide to ban the use of glyphosate anyway, the UK Government will ensure its continued use remains possible in the UK regardless?

George Eustice: As I said in response to the earlier question, the evidence is fairly clear. EFSA has studied the matter, and it believes that glyphosate is safe. It has always been the UK's position to follow the science and the evidence on pesticide decisions, which is why we support the reauthorisation of glyphosate. We will continue to have an evidence-based, science-based approach to these issues when we leave the EU.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State agree that we need good science, good technology and good innovation? What will she do about the fact that ChemChina has taken over Syngenta, a leading scientific research company largely based in my constituency but with research centres in Jealott's Hill? Syngenta is the fifth leading innovation company in our country that the Chinese Government have absorbed—ChemChina is not listed on the stock exchange, even in China. What is she going to do about it?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that pesticides and crop protection products are quite an integrated industry across the world. It is not uncommon for foreign-owned companies to be based and operating in the UK. We have some of the world's best scientific expertise in this area, which is why companies choose to locate here.

T6. [909707] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Littering and fly tipping blight our countryside and often cause real problems for those, including farmers in my constituency, who have waste dumped on their land. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the steps the Government are taking to tackle that problem?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that we launched our litter strategy for England on 10 April. The strategy will seek to cut the £800 million annual bill to taxpayers for cleaning up after litter louts. We have delivered on our manifesto commitment to let local councils fine small-scale fly tippers. We have also given local authorities the power to seize and crush vehicles that are involved in fly tipping, and we are ensuring that community payback is used to clear up litter and fly-tipped waste.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Food processors in my constituency operate integrated processing, distribution and packaging plants across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. What assurances can Ministers give those companies that there will be no border restrictions that inhibit their operations between the UK and Ireland after Brexit?

George Eustice: As the hon. Lady knows, the Prime Minister has made it clear that she wants a bold, ambitious and comprehensive free trade agreement. We

are looking closely at the issue of border controls, particularly in respect of the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. We talk regularly to industry on the issue, and we have a meeting with some of the devolved Administrations later today in which we will be looking at precisely these sorts of issues.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Lamb is trading at significantly lower prices this year than it did last year at this time. New Zealand lamb comes in during the winter, when our lambs do not, and there seems to be too much New Zealand lamb in our major retailers and not enough British lamb. I would like the Minister to bring it to the attention of the major retailers that British lamb should now be in the shops, which should not be packed with New Zealand lamb.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. At Easter, people really want to buy high-quality west country, Welsh and Scottish lamb, and indeed lamb from every part of the United Kingdom. We faced an issue this year, in that prices were actually very good during the winter, which meant that a number of sheep producers decided to sell their lamb early and so there has been less British lamb available at this time of year.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State be pushing for a total ban on ivory sales in the 2017 Conservative manifesto, equivalent to the unrealised pledge in the 2015 manifesto?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): As I outlined to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) earlier, we are working carefully on the proposals and we hope to publish a consultation in due course.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), we in the west midlands are seeing a terrible spate of fly-tipping on a commercial scale, including of hospital waste and household waste. May I ask the Minister seriously to help the farmers with the costs of deterring these serious criminals from dumping such hazards on their land?

Dr Coffey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. We know that fly-tipping is a particular problem at the moment, which is why the Environment Agency is working with councils and with farmers to try to prevent waste from being dumped in the first place. We will continue to pursue waste crime as an urgent priority. People who despoil our countryside and our streets deserve to be sentenced to the full, but we need the evidence to do that, which is why sometimes these things can take time to develop.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Apart from the EU citizens already here, does the Minister recognise that food processors will need to continue to recruit employees coming to the UK from other EU countries?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, absolutely. As I said, the Home Office is looking closely at future needs for businesses. We absolutely recognise that for businesses in the UK to thrive they will need access to some of the brightest and

the best from around the world, and the Migration Advisory Committee and a consultation with businesses will be looking at those needs later this year.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Cleaning up the nation's bus fleet is an important part of tackling air quality, but does the Secretary of State agree that smaller companies such as Southgate & Finchley Coaches in my constituency will need time to adapt, particularly where the cleanest vehicles are not yet available on the second-hand market?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend is correct to point out that we need to work with industry. I know that the Department for Transport has been proactively working on plans for some time with manufacturers to make those improvements, so that as a nation we can make the technological changes to vehicle emissions that are important in improving our air quality.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Cancer Drugs: Funding

1. **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What assessment the Commission has made of the effectiveness of the National Audit Office's scrutiny of the long-term viability of funding for cancer drugs. [909689]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I can inform the House that the NAO published an investigation into the cancer drugs fund in September 2015, which set out the facts relating to the fund to inform consideration of what had been achieved. The NAO's investigation followed up on a number of concerns raised during the earlier work on progress in improving cancer services. The investigation found that all parties agreed that the fund was not sustainable in its form at the time, and that NHS England was proposing a new arrangement for the fund. It also noted that NHS England did not have the data to evaluate the impact of the existing fund on patient outcomes.

Pauline Latham: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Can he tell the House whether the Public Accounts Committee has actually looked at this issue?

Sir Edward Leigh: I can indeed. This is a very serious matter that everybody wants to improve, so the Public Accounts Committee followed up on the National Audit Office investigation and recommended that the Department of Health and NHS England make better use of their buying power in order to pay a fair price for cancer drugs and improve data on patient outcomes. The NAO also followed up on several related issues in an April 2016 report. It recommended that the Department and NHS England should, in collaboration with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, consider affordability and ensure best prices for high-cost drugs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The findings show that although 40 cancer drugs were available through the cancer drugs fund in 2013-14 and 2014-15, some 71% of patients were covered by the 10 most common drugs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that surely that

indicates a need to move those 10 drugs on to the NHS list? Does he believe those findings have had any effect on Government policy on cancer drugs and the cancer drugs fund?

Sir Edward Leigh: Which drugs are approved by NICE is of course not a matter for the Comptroller and Auditor General, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. He makes his point well and I am sure the House has heard it.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I would like to ask the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), what the Church of England is doing to help to protect churches throughout Northumberland from the theft of metal from their roofs.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): Mr Speaker, do you wish me to reply to the question? The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission cannot respond to it.

Mr Speaker: I rather thought that the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) was posing a supplementary to Question 1, which was the basis upon which I called her. Never mind; it is not a great sin.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I have a feeling that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) has an insatiable appetite, and there is no change there.

Mr Sheerman: Thank you for that compliment, Mr Speaker.

Is the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) aware of the real challenge, which has been brought to my attention by the excellent team at Huddersfield royal infirmary, that it is rare cancers that are the problem because they are very expensive to develop drugs for? There is a special case to be made for the treatment of and supply of drugs for these rare cancers. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of that minority group?

Sir Edward Leigh: I am aware of that group, and the hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We all hear in our constituency surgeries the heart-rending cases of people who are denied life-saving drugs. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee are fully aware of this issue and are going to continue to put pressure on the Government with regard to the cancer drugs fund to ensure full transparency so that we are always aware of the problems and can assure affordability for all our citizens.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Religious Dress and Symbols: Workplace

2. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of the implications of the European Court of Justice ruling of March 2017 on wearing religious dress and symbols in the workplace. [909693]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England was very concerned by the judgment of the European Court of Justice that stated that blanket bans on the wearing of political, philosophical or religious signs do not amount to cases of direct discrimination, because that conflicts with the pre-existing rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. By leaving the European Union, we presumably stand some chance of resolving such inconsistencies.

Sir David Amess: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is yet another reason to be pleased that last year the British people took the decision to leave the European Union? The ruling was deeply offensive to people of all faiths and totally unnecessary.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes, and it was completely at odds with the statutory purpose of the Church of England, which was put far better than I possibly could by the head of the Church, Her Majesty the Queen, when in 2012 she made it clear that the Church of England

“has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country.”

That is what we should be able to do if we can resolve this inconsistency.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Leaving the EU: Value-for-money Scrutiny

3. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What strategic plan the NAO has adopted to ensure value-for-money scrutiny of policies adopted as a result of the UK leaving the EU. [909695]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I assure my hon. Friend that, among the many opportunities provided by Brexit, there is a chance to revise the National Audit Office's work programme. In fact, it is determined by the Comptroller and Auditor General and is regularly revised. Taking back control and leaving the EU will be a major task for Departments, but of course some Departments will be more affected by Brexit than others. The NAO is keeping in close touch with all Departments as they make their Brexit preparations. That is likely to mean additional work for the NAO, not least the audit of the new Department for Exiting the European Union.

Mrs Murray: Will the NAO audit the settlement with the EU?

Sir Edward Leigh: Eventually that will indeed be a matter for the NAO. We are currently at a very early stage of our work: we are simply ensuring that all Departments, particularly the Department for Exiting European Union, have their tackle in order for this monumental task. I am sure that all Government Departments will do it most efficiently.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) is a member of this important Commission and therefore we ought to hear from the fella.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I should declare an interest, as I sit on both the Public Accounts Committee and the Commission itself. Further to the question of the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), I asked the Comptroller and Auditor General of the National Audit Office what concerns he had about the additional workload on his Department as a result of Brexit. He has many concerns, as intimated by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but said that he needs to know the details of the Brexit deal on the table before he can properly ascertain the impact. Is the hon. Gentleman confident that we will know the detail of this Brexit deal in 18 months' time?

Sir Edward Leigh: The hon. Gentleman is leading me astray. As Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, which is charged with the budget of the National Audit Office and its work programme, I am not sure whether I am qualified to comment on the nature of the negotiations. I can give an assurance that the Comptroller and Auditor General believes that that is now a fundamental and really important part of his work. There is so much that could go wrong with efficiency in Government Departments in this task, and we will be keeping a beady eye on matters. With the hon. Gentleman's help on the Commission, we will ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General has adequate resources to ensure that the interests of taxpayers are protected.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Marriage: Preparation and Aftercare

4. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps the Church of England takes to monitor the number of marriages recorded and the extent and quality of marriage preparation and marriage aftercare provision within each parish. [909696]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I must pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his long-standing support of the institution of marriage. I am very pleased to tell the House that, since he last asked this question in 2011, the Church of England has launched the successful new initiative, "Your Church Wedding", which is designed to increase the profile of church weddings, highlight the possibility for those seeking to be married, and offer more consistent marriage preparation and aftercare.

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful for that answer, but the fact is that marriage rates have unfortunately declined in recent years. I know that my right hon. Friend will agree with me that there is nothing inevitable about that, given that for a decade, between 1962 and 1972, they rose. As this is a real social justice issue, with the

decline in marriage rates having a particularly significant impact on lower-income families, will the Church appoint a bishop to promote healthy marriage, with the aim of spreading best practice in every single parish across the country?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I genuinely believe that this new initiative will spread best practice. I am sure that all bishops regard themselves as a bishop for marriage. However, there is no doubt that there has been a decline in church weddings, and that is in part due to the fact that there has been liberalisation of the legislation around where couples can get married. None the less, we should celebrate the fact that they want to get married. I will finish with one good new trend: women over 65 are getting married in increasing numbers.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have additional information. We are most grateful to the right hon. Lady.

Number of Vocations

5. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of recent trends in the number of vocations. [909698]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The number of people selected for training for ordained ministry within the Church of England has been stable for some time. However, the age profile of serving clergy means that larger numbers are retiring, leading to an overall decrease in the number of active clergy. The Church seeks to address that by increasing by 50% the numbers training for ordained ministry: an increase from about 500 to 750 by 2020.

Sir Desmond Swayne: That is an A* answer, but how can we do even better?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Quite simply, we need to make it easier for people who feel the call to enter ministry to do so more flexibly. The Church offers not only a three-year residential course to become an ordained minister, but part-time peripatetic provision. As a result of the apprenticeship levy, resources will be available to the Church for people to learn on the job. That should make it a whole lot easier for people to enter ministry.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend believe that the number of vocations would be improved if the Church of England did more to protect its churches in Northumberland from metal theft, which leaves young ordinands with a lot of logistics to deal with when they should be focusing on their parishioners?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I must congratulate my hon. Friend on her ingenuity in raising the very important and serious matter of metal theft—an ordained minister cannot practise without a roof on their church. This is a serious problem. The Church of England offers guidance, and I refer hon. Members to the ChurchCare website. There is a range of metal substitute products that can be used even on listed buildings. Currently, there is a pilot system for marking lead, which is designed to help scrap metal dealers so that they can identify when stolen goods are being presented to them. This is a

serious matter, and we are working closely with Government Departments to try to make it harder for the criminals to impede the desire of those who wish to minister in the Church and to make sure that the roof stays on.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome that news, and the initiatives on raising the number of clergy vocations. Stealing metal from church roofs is indeed an unfortunate vocation. What are we doing in the Yeovil area specifically to stop such theft?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I do not have information on Yeovil specifically, but advice is available on the Church's website for every diocese—unfortunately, every diocese is affected by this serious crime. In addition to the deterrents I outlined in my previous answer, there is a system for fixing or locking lead—perhaps I should not give it away in the House, because then the criminals will know about it. It is pertinent to my constituency, where that system was used after the second theft of lead from a church roof. The deterrence means that even in the dead of night it is possible to catch evidence of the crime taking place. I recommend the Church's website.

Christian Communities: Africa

6. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent representations the Church of England has received on the Christian communities in Egypt, South Sudan and northern Nigeria. [909699]

Dame Caroline Spelman: As this is likely to be the last question today, Mr Speaker, please allow me to congratulate the parliamentary unit of Church House on the splendid way in which they have briefed me throughout my two years as Church Estates Commissioner, for none of us can be complacent about returning to our existing posts after the general election.

This is a serious question. The Church of England and the offices of the two archbishops are in regular contact with the Church in Egypt, South Sudan and Nigeria directly through the Anglican Communion Office. They are most concerned about the recent attacks in Egypt, where on Palm Sunday 44 people died at St George's church in Tanta.

Diana Johnson: The 2017 World Watch report by Open Doors states that persecution increased for the fourth year in a row during 2015-16, with murders of Christians in places such as Nigeria and Egypt, as the right hon. Lady mentioned. What practical measures can the Church offer to communities in such countries?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I attended that Open Doors event here in Parliament, where a Nigerian pastor spoke movingly about the violent persecution of himself and his congregation in northern Nigeria. With regard to Egypt, I am pleased to say that Bishop Mouneer has secured intensive security measures for the Christian Church in Egypt, including emptying the streets around churches and cathedrals of cars, and putting extra police on duty to protect worshipers before services begin.

Persecution and Detention of LGBT Citizens: Chechnya

10.33 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on allegations of persecution and detention of LGBT citizens in Chechnya, Russia, and on what discussions the Government have had with their counterparts on the issue.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of over 100 men in Chechnya because of their sexual orientation is of deep concern to the UK. Credible reports suggesting that at least four people have been killed and many have been tortured are particularly shocking. Statements by the regional Government in Chechnya that appear to condone and incite violence against LGBT people are despicable.

We condemn any and all persecution, and call on the authorities promptly to investigate and ensure that perpetrators of human rights abuses are brought to justice. That would be in accordance with international human rights commitments adopted by the Russian Government to respect the human rights of all individuals.

The Minister of State, my noble Friend Baroness Anelay of St Johns, released a statement on 7 April outlining the Government's concern at the reports and called upon the Russian authorities promptly to investigate and ensure that perpetrators of human rights abuses are indeed brought to justice.

The Foreign Secretary has expressed his serious concerns through social media. Officials from the British embassy in Moscow reiterated those concerns directly to the Russian Government on 13 April, and we are working with international partners in Russia as part of wider lobbying efforts. The EU made a statement on behalf of member states at the Permanent Council of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe on 6 April, and the UK permanent representative to the Council of Europe delivered a statement on behalf of the UK in the Committee of Ministers on 19 April.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you for granting this urgent question this morning, Mr Speaker.

I praise the Minister for his sincerity on this issue, which he takes very seriously, and for his comments. This is truly a shocking anti-gay campaign, involving over 100, and possibly several hundred, men. I praise the non-governmental organisations and journalists in Russia, the UK and elsewhere who have brought this issue to public attention. We are talking about detention, beatings, abuse and electric shock treatments, and—I do not say this lightly—some have talked about gay concentration camps. We have also heard of at least four killings.

The LGBT community in Cardiff South and Penarth has repeatedly raised this issue with me, and PinkNews tells me that its petition on it is its most signed ever. LGBT Labour wrote to the Prime Minister on this issue last week; sadly, it did not get a reply, and the matter was just passed on to the Foreign Office. There have also been representations from MEPs from all parties.

President Putin already has a record of persecuting the LGBT community. He also takes a keen interest in Chechnya, so is he turning a blind eye, or is he complicit in the actions of President Kadyrov? Let us remember that President Kadyrov's spokesman said that you cannot detain people who simply do not exist.

Shaun Walker of *The Guardian* expressed the horrors we are seeing. He described the situation of an individual who, at least once a day, had metal clamps attached to him that

“sent powerful electric shocks through his body. If he managed not to scream, others would join in, beating him with wooden sticks or metal rods”

and demanding

“to know the names of other gay men he knew in Chechnya.”

If we had any doubts about the brutality of this regime towards the LGBT community, we need not have them any longer.

I praise the Minister's sincerity on this issue, but I have to ask why it has taken the Foreign Secretary so long to speak out—a tweet simply is not enough. We have also not heard clear condemnation from the Prime Minister. Has she or the Foreign Secretary spoken directly to the Russian or Chechen Governments? Have they called in the Russian ambassador? Does the Foreign Secretary now regret his cancelled trip to Moscow, where he could have raised these atrocities in Chechnya, not to mention those in Syria? Was the issue raised in the G7 discussion about sanctions on Russia? Will the Minister say more about what is being done to co-ordinate with EU colleagues and the United States on this issue?

The Foreign Secretary tweeted that the situation was outrageous, but the Foreign Office has referred questions on whether we will provide refuge to people fleeing this horrendous persecution in Chechnya to the Home Office. As yet, there is no clarity, and I hope the Minister can provide some.

Sir Alan Duncan: Let me say at the outset that I applaud the hon. Gentleman for raising this topic, and I hope it is one around which the House can unite without any party politics, because the strong, united message he is calling for is exactly the one we should be sending.

The actions in these reports are utterly barbaric. One of the most disgusting things I have seen is a Chechen security source stating that these arrests are part of what he called a preventative clean-up. That followed a request by an LGBT group called Gay Russia simply for licences for gay pride parades in the North Caucasus—the group had not yet even applied for a permit in Chechnya.

Human rights groups report that these anti-gay campaigns and killings are orchestrated by the head of the Chechen republic, Ramzan Kadyrov. He has carried out other violent campaigns in the past, and this time he is directing his efforts at the LGBT community. Sources have said that he wants the community eliminated by the start of Ramadan. Such comments, attitudes and actions are absolutely beyond contemptible.

I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that the Government fully condemn this action. We do use all engagement with Russia to make our voice clear, and I did so, personally, with the deputy Foreign Minister of Russia, Vladimir Titov. I met him two or three weeks

ago, and we spoke about general human rights matters, but also about Chechnya. I hope the House will be fully united in giving the strongest possible siren message to Russia, and to Chechnya in particular, that this kind of activity is beyond contempt and not acceptable in the world in which we live.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): May I pay tribute to you, Mr Speaker, for the support that you have given to the LGBT community ever since you have occupied the Chair and prior to that?

It is absolutely right that this issue should be raised here, as it has been determined that we have more openly gay Members of Parliament in this Parliament than anywhere else in the world. I was asked in 2010 why I came out. It was partly to send a signal to other people who were troubled about their own sexuality to give them hope and confidence—to say that if people like us can be open about our gayness, then hopefully they will be able to take from that some form of moral support that may help them to do likewise.

We have made fundamental changes around the rest of the world in looking at climate change, for example. We made massive advances when we brought countries together on that issue. Can we not do the same on LGBT issues so that we can have LGBT change throughout the world? May I suggest to the Minister that one area that might be worth a lot of attention is the Commonwealth, where some of the countries that are part of our family of nations have slid back on LGBT rights? Will he place some concentration on that and show that the British Government are going to lead the way on LGBT change throughout the world?

Sir Alan Duncan: Indeed. One of the other strong messages as we approach a general election is that candidates in any party will be able to stand and be openly gay without being in any way ostracised by their own party, or indeed, we hope, any part of the electorate. That in itself sends a strong message to the world. It is a great tribute to the House and our democracy that over the past 15 years or so we have seen all parties have gays sitting on these green leather Benches. Whatever the outcome of the election, long may that continue. I also hope that that will be reflected in the Commonwealth in the years to come, as my hon. Friend suggests. We must campaign within Commonwealth countries to make sure that they do not fail to reflect the standards that we in the House reflect with regard to the LGBT community.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I add my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question today? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for bringing such an important matter to the House and speaking so eloquently. I also thank the Minister for his response and pay tribute to his long and proud record of standing up for LGBT rights: he is a brave and much-needed pioneer in that regard within his party. I well recall an article by Peter Hitchens in the *Daily Mail* in 2002—I am sure that the Minister does as well—entitled, “I’m sorry, Mr Duncan, if you’re gay, you’re not a Tory”. Thank goodness that in this country that kind of reprehensible prejudice has been consigned to the dustbin of history.

However, there is no room for complacency. This appalling and disgusting prejudice still represents official policy in some parts of Europe, and we must do something about it. In recent days and weeks, we have heard reports from Russian LGBT organisations and human rights NGOs documenting the most terrible abuse, and we have all read them with great distress. This is nothing short of officially sanctioned policy from the Chechen authorities, but the Russian Government, who bear ultimate responsibility for their citizens’ safety, appear to be looking the other way, and that is scarcely any better.

A week ago, LGBT Labour wrote a letter to the Prime Minister in which it asked particularly that she

“meet with the Russian Ambassador as a matter of urgency to demand answers; and to ensure that the Foreign Office is doing all it can with the Russian Government, and our European and international partners, to free those who have been detained and to shut the camps down.”

We are speaking today with a strong and unified voice. However, while I applaud, of course, the right hon. Gentleman’s raising the matter as deputy Foreign Secretary, it needs to be escalated. I hope that as a result of this urgent question we get an undertaking from the Government that it will be raised at a much higher political level. This is a matter that Prime Minister should take an initiative on—she should call in the Russian ambassador and demand some answers.

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the right hon. Lady for her tone. I had actually forgotten about the Hitchens article—I am not sure that I want to be reminded of it—but at least I can take pleasure in the fact that now I am but one of many on the Tory Benches. I hope that my statement can be seen as reflecting the Prime Minister and the entire Government’s personal condemnation of the situation. I note the right hon. Lady’s wish to see the issue raised to a higher level of political comment.

In another of the most contemptible elements of this whole issue, a representative of Chechnya’s Council on the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, Kheda Saratova, who is supposedly charged with the task of upholding human rights in the republic, has said that she would not accept an application for help from a gay person, because the persecution of gay people should not be condemned in Chechen society, even if a person is killed by their own family. The LGBT community in Chechnya is at risk not just of persecution by the Chechen authorities, but of falling victim to so-called honour killings by their own family members. They are not safe inside Chechnya and, as I said earlier, what is happening in that republic is beyond contemptible.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I agree entirely with the Minister’s condemnation of this terrible occurrence. Building on the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), may I ask the Minister whether he is aware that, although many Members, including me, will be unable to attend next week’s plenary part-session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, because of the general election, some of our colleagues will be there? Will he have a word with Ambassador Christopher Yvon to see whether the matter could be raised, for example, in the free debate during next week’s plenary

[Mrs Cheryl Gillan]

part-session? It is important that the matter is raised continually in an international environment, to put more pressure on Russia and the Chechen authorities.

Sir Alan Duncan: The Council of Europe is a very important voice for the expression of wider continental opinion. I will certainly convey to our ambassador my right hon. Friend's wishes, which I sense are also the wishes of the entire House.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The scenes and stories emanating from Chechnya are beyond comprehension and utterly sickening, and we share the sentiments expressed by others. Although we may still have many challenges on LGBTI equality in the UK, we are fortunate that we have come a very long way and, in having that greater freedom, we absolutely must use our voices, whether we are members of the LGBT community or not. We must say, loudly and clearly, that we condemn this horrific brutality.

For the Chechen authorities not only to deny the attacks, but to claim, incredibly, that no gay people exist in their province is at best extraordinary and at worst deceitful. We fully endorse Amnesty International's call to action to protect those at risk in the region, and the UK Government can do more to protect LGBTI people around the world. The Scottish National party manifesto called on the UK Government to establish the position of a special envoy to promote the rights of LGBTI people around the world as an integral part of UK policy. Will the Minister consider that for his party's forthcoming manifesto? May I also appeal to him and his colleagues to act on our proposals and put all the pressure he can on Chechnya and Russia to stop these abhorrent abuses and the persecution of gay men and the wider LGBT community? We cannot stand idly by and let this happen. Those facing abuse must know that we care and that we are standing up for them.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am pleased to say that I broadly agree with the hon. Lady and that all that she wishes to see us do is enshrined across the board in our Government policy, including through the Department for International Development, the Home Office and our foreign policy, and so it will remain. In that sense, I think we should all be envoys in what we do internationally. Indeed, Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials in Russia regularly meet LGBT activists and attend LGBT events, such as QueerFest and the Side by Side film festival in St Petersburg, so that we can provide visible support. We have also provided support to organisations such as Stonewall and helped to facilitate Sir Ian McKellen's visit to Russia last year, during which he met LGBT activists in Moscow, St Petersburg and Yekaterinburg. I think that his powerful messages about UK values resonated, at least with Russia's next generation.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is there an element of reversion to type here, in that it was always a feature of totalitarian regimes to vilify minorities as a matter of routine political management? Equally, it was typical of the former Soviet Union to identify any person who posed a political threat, to brand them as gay and to detain them in a mental institution.

Sir Alan Duncan: Chechnya does, indeed, seem to be the worst of the lot. In that sense, as part of Russia, I urge President Putin to make his views clear by condemning what is going on in Chechnya.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): This reminds us that those of us who are gay are phenomenally lucky in this country. I remember meeting an 83-year-old lesbian activist in Russia in 2009. I asked her how she got away with it, and she said, "I think President Putin thinks that women don't have sex after the age of 80. How wrong can you be?"

The serious point is that we should pay tribute to those who are standing up at the risk of their own lives, and I am glad that the Government are acting on that, but is this not all part of a piece? President Putin appointed Kadyrov as President in Chechnya, and he was elected with 98% of the vote—that does not seem at all bizarre, does it? He and Putin have both repeatedly abused human rights. They have used violence to excess, and they have always resorted to violence, even when they have had the opportunity to use a peaceful means to provide a solution. Will the Government make sure that people who engage in such activity, and those who are involved in the murder of British people working in Russia, do not enter this country?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that an 80-year-old activist gives us all a bit of hope in this world. Having just turned 60—

Chris Bryant: You didn't!

Sir Alan Duncan: Oh yes, I did—[*Interruption*—and I know I do not look it.

Much more seriously, what the hon. Gentleman says is absolutely right. This is part of a wider picture across Russia, although I say again that Chechnya appears to be the worst example. Within the constraints of our ability to influence what happens in any country, we have to speak loudly and collectively, and we must be brave and courageous. At a diplomatic level within the country we will do our utmost to continue to put pressure on the regime and ensure that it understands that in the modern world, this kind of activity is barbaric, and that it can no longer be allowed to continue.

Mr Speaker: If memory serves me correctly, the right hon. Gentleman's birthday was 20 days ago.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I start by thanking the Minister for his very forceful statement. On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I have written to the Russian ambassador. I echo the calls made by other Members today for the UK Government to call in the Russian ambassador and ask him, in particular, what will be done to protect the journalists who were involved in leaking this story. Clearly they, as well as the LGBT community, are now at risk. Finally, have any lessons been learned since the G7, where our Government unfortunately failed to secure sanctions against Syria and Russia, about how to improve co-operation to ensure that action is taken against Chechnya at an international level?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think the right hon. Gentleman has deviated slightly from the collective tone of the House. As I think he will appreciate, what happened at the G7 was in response to fast-moving events following the gassing of people in Syria.

As I said a moment ago, on the issue of gay rights in Chechnya or, indeed, anywhere else in the world, we need to speak with one voice not only in this House but by working together with other countries and NGOs. We must make sure that the world collectively homes in on the likes of Chechnya, and Russia more generally, and makes it clear that they are completely out of step with the rest of the world and that they will, over time, lose all credibility and become increasingly derided. It is high time for them to grow up and understand what the modern world is all about.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), on exposing the latest manifestation of the barbaric treatment by Russia of the people of Chechnya for over a decade. I pay tribute to Lord Judd, the Council of Europe rapporteur for many years, who reported fearlessly on the terrible things happening in that country. We entirely support the opposition, which should be worldwide, but we should reflect on the fact that this terrible activity is spreading. One reason for that is the fact that there is now less pressure on countries to improve their human rights, because they do not have the incentive of joining the European Union, which demands high standards. We are, sadly, going back to barbaric treatment not just in Chechnya but in many other countries, including Turkey.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the noble Lord Judd for all the efforts he has made over the years, but I say again that it is for all of us to work collectively across parties, across countries and across all organisations to ensure that the simple rights for people, which should never be denied them, are upheld in all countries across the world.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Considering how this may be misrepresented abroad, particularly in Russia, is it not important to emphasise that this is first and foremost a matter of human rights, and certainly not a matter confined only to those who happen to be gay? Is it not interesting that this is being discussed 50 years after the House of Commons changed the law on homosexuality? If there is a debate in July near the anniversary of the actual date when the legislation was passed, I would hope to be here—I will certainly do my utmost to be here—to explain why I was pleased to vote for the change in the law. I think I am the only Member who did so now remaining in the House.

Sir Alan Duncan: The way the hon. Gentleman is going he will be here in another 50 years' time. He makes a very valid point about the importance of promulgating the truth. When we hear absolute, blatant propaganda, we should not shy away from robustly countering such lies. For instance, Kadyrov's spokesman has called reports of persecution and murder absolute lies themselves. Indeed, as we heard earlier, he added that "there are no gay men in Chechnya" and that "You cannot detain and persecute people who simply do not exist". Even worse, he went on to say that if they did exist, their own relatives "would send them somewhere from which there is no returning."

It is the use of language like that that appears to condone the outright murder of someone simply because of their sexual orientation. That is utterly unacceptable and condemns them in the eyes of the decent world.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his statement. I am delighted to be called to speak. My concern is not just as a member of the LGBTI community, but in the broader sense of the profound impact of social, economic and political impoverishment on all Chechen society. Whether we like it or not, Kadyrov has in some terms the fundamental support of his nation, as a region of the Russian Federation. How we undermine that is through investment in foreign aid to tackle human rights abuses across the world. Will the Minister commit now, on the Floor of the House, that in fighting for LGBTI rights and other human rights in places like Chechnya, his foreign aid budget will not change after the general election?

Sir Alan Duncan: We should all commit to fighting prejudice wherever we find it. I hope that, in the election on 8 June, that will be one of the views we all hold as we present ourselves to the electorate. The hon. Gentleman raises a deeper point, which is that the House needs to understand foreign affairs, to take an interest and to debate countries such as Chechnya. I hope that early in the next Parliament the opportunity will present itself, so that the arguments we are beginning to hear today can be made even more loudly after 8 June.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The House rightly speaks with one voice in condemning the abhorrent acts in Chechnya, but this is not the first time the Russian Government have been found wanting when it comes to human rights. They need to be constantly reminded that they should honour their international human rights obligations. How can we ensure that other countries are similarly robust in explaining that to the Russian Government, not least because those members of the LGBT community in Chechnya must be feeling so insecure at the moment?

Sir Alan Duncan: We work through all collective European and other organisations, and, of course, through the United Nations more widely. Because we speak frankly, we have had a rather scratchy relationship with the Russians recently, but we will not shy away from raising these issues both frankly and forcefully. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will maintain a policy of robust engagement with the Russians, and that it will include matters of this sort.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): All Glasgow weeps at this news, and when I return there later this afternoon there will be a vigil in George Square at which politicians and ordinary people will express their horror at what is happening in Chechnya.

I must disagree with some of my colleagues, in that I see no need for this matter to be escalated to the Foreign Secretary. I think that the Minister is a very capable Minister, and a deeply thoughtful Minister.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). Is it not time for us to join countries such as Canada in having an envoy on LGBT rights who will report directly to the Prime

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

Minister? I also echo what was said by my hon. Friend from Clydebank and—in the context of the Commonwealth—by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans): now is not the time to cut the foreign aid budget.

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words—unusual, I have to say, during this particularly fervent political period, but deeply appreciated nevertheless. I am contemplating their inclusion, in quotation marks, in my election address.

I note what the hon. Gentleman said about an envoy. It is not for me to say what our policy will be on that, but my personal observation is that a dedicated envoy is not always as effective as action by all Ministers across the board, and, indeed, by all Members of Parliament. If that is in the hon. Gentleman's manifesto, however, we will let the people decide.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on raising this important human rights issue. May I add a word of caution about complacency? We have a united voice in the House of Commons, but when I paid an official visit to part of the European Union, towards the east, I found disturbing evidence of the lingering influence of attitudes of this kind, so we should not be complacent. I was particularly worried when I saw examples of some pretty virulent propaganda in Austria. We should be on our guard wherever this kind of human rights rears its ugly head.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think we should take those as serious words of wisdom from a senior Member of the House. We must always look at our own supposed allies to make sure that they have not got—let us call them diluted views. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out that Europe, for starters, must be united if we are to make our voice clear and resonant in the wider world.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Having tabled an early-day motion on this very subject earlier in the week, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing the urgent question and to you, Mr Speaker, for permitting it. Will the Government assure us that members of the LGBTI community in Chechnya will be granted asylum in the United Kingdom should they flee and seek refuge on our shores?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have to tell the hon. Lady that that is primarily a Home Office matter, and a matter for the proper workings of asylum legislation.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In February, the Foreign Secretary announced the £700 million empowerment fund to come from the aid budget to

project soft power and human rights. How is that fund being used to promote LGB rights and equal rights campaigners and to support civil society in Chechnya and elsewhere? May I echo the points of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) because the Minister has not yet confirmed the Government's commitment to the 0.7% aid target? This is precisely a demonstration of why that target is so important.

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman makes proper reference to the empowerment fund, for which, I understand, bids are currently in play. Given the election, I imagine that that process will be forestalled slightly, but I am confident that within many of those bids there will be programmes designed for the promotion of human rights in many of the countries at which the fund is directing its efforts.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I pay tribute to the amazing work of Yorkshire MESMAC, which is based in Leeds and first brought these appalling abuses to my attention. The abuses are chilling, horrific and evil, but also a clear breach of international law. What discussions has the Minister had not only with EU partners but with the United Nations to look at an initiative to stamp out this appalling persecution, wherever it may happen?

Sir Alan Duncan: Those discussions take place regularly in all the forums in which we are represented. More often than not, it is the UK that is in the lead in designing initiatives and statements that echo exactly the opinions that the hon. Gentleman just stated.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The appalling treatment that LGBT people face in some countries makes it all the more important that officials here making decisions on sexual orientation-based asylum cases get them 100% correct. Will the Minister at least make representations to the Home Office that no asylum case should ever be refused solely on the basis that a person can return home and hide their sexuality?

Sir Alan Duncan: I undertake to convey the comments of the hon. Gentleman, and indeed this entire exchange, to the Home Secretary.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order should really be raised after the business question. Does it relate to the urgent question? No. The hon. Gentleman is such a patient fellow. We can always hear from him later. In fact, there will be a great sense of anticipation in the House as to what he is planning to raise.

Business of the House

11.7 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 24 APRIL—Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointments and Regional Rates) Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

TUESDAY 25 APRIL—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Finance (No. 2) Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

WEDNESDAY 26 APRIL—Motion to approve a Ways and Means resolution on the Digital Economy Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Digital Economy Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Criminal Finances Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 27 APRIL—Consideration of Lords amendments.

The House may also be asked to consider any Lords messages that may be received. The House will not adjourn until Royal Assent has been received to all Acts.

Since this is probably going to be the last weekly business statement in this Parliament, may I take the opportunity to thank the staff of the House for the service that they provide to every one of us throughout the Parliament, and to wish them the opportunity to put their feet up a bit over forthcoming weeks?

Secondly, I wish particular good fortune to those hon. Members on both sides of the House who have decided that they will not seek re-election. Each of them in their own way has striven to represent the interests of their constituents during their years here, each of them has brought particular experiences and political commitments to the causes for which they have fought, and all of them have contributed to building democracy in this country, and I place our thanks on record.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business for the very last week of this short and eventful Parliament; I will save my further thanks for the end of my response. This was an eventful Parliament, not least because of the death of PC Keith Palmer, Leslie Rhodes, Aysha Frade, Kurt Cochran and now Andreea Cristea, as well as the injury of many others. As the dean of Southwark cathedral said at the memorial service for PC Keith Palmer, they died in the shadow of the clock that counts the minutes, the hours and the years of our lives. And, of course, our beloved colleague Jo Cox should have been fighting this election. We need to remember them as we campaign, during the election, for a country that is tolerant and just.

The Prime Minister wants stability and to strengthen her hand in the negotiations, but blames the opposition parties for calling a general election. This is about her dithering and confusion, and watching her back. First, what an arrogant alleged statement it is that she should

presume to know the outcome of an election. Secondly, what have her Government been doing for the last nine months? Thirdly, can the Leader of the House confirm that if the Government win, we will not enter into a rolling programme of snap elections during the negotiations?

The Prime Minister wanted to trigger article 50 without a vote, but the courts said that we live under the rule of law and that Parliament should have a say—this is a democracy, not a dictatorship—and there has been silence from the Government since July 2016. Her Majesty's Opposition called for a White Paper on the Government's plans for Brexit in October 2016, but there was silence until a speech in Lancaster House, not this House. Mr Speaker, I do not know what the matter with the Government is; they seem to be afraid of you and of making statements in the House. I find you very personable—except when you say “Order, order.” Only later did the Government set out their 12 points of principle. Finally, a White Paper was published in February. Her Majesty's Opposition insisted on a final vote on the deal and forced the Government to agree, because we are a representative democracy. As the Prime Minister sat in front of the great portrait of Robert Walpole to sign the letter to Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, she forgot to mention Gibraltar, one of our overseas territories, where 96% of people voted to remain—no wonder she forgot to mention them.

The Government therefore appear to be speaking for the 52%, while Her Majesty's Opposition will balance the views of the 52% and the 48% and speak for the country. The confusion lies within the Prime Minister's party, not within the Opposition. Of course the Government want a general election, because they need a new manifesto. Every day the Government break a manifesto pledge. There was no mention of lifting the cap on grammar schools in the 2015 manifesto; that became Government policy, and it is now stalled by opposition from all sides of the House. An increase in national insurance contributions for self-employed workers was ruled out of the manifesto, but then became Government policy, and then there was a U-turn. The manifesto said nothing about doing no harm to the vulnerable, yet their cars are being taken away as they wait for their personal independence payment assessments; many hon. Members have written on behalf of their constituents to stop the vulnerable losing their only mode of transport before they can appeal the decision.

This is a dithering, confused Government who cannot make a decision for the good of the country, so may we have a final debate next week on what leadership and stability really look like? We on this side of the House say it looks like this: for children, it is protecting Sure Start and free school meals for all primary school children; for students, no increase in tuition fees; for working people, a £10 minimum wage that will lift them out of poverty, not the living wage of £7.50; for society, investment in our public services, with local authority grants that are based on the need to protect local services, such as police forces and libraries, not special deals for special friends; ensuring small businesses thrive by preventing late payments; supporting those who care for others by an increase in carer's allowance; and for senior citizens, protecting pensions and compensating women affected by an increase in the state pension age. Policies for the seven stages of life—that is what this

[Valerie Vaz]

country needs. No dithering, no confusion, just clear vision and strong leadership. Her Majesty's Opposition, in government, will work for a tolerant, fair and dynamic United Kingdom.

I should like to echo the Leader of the House in thanking all the House staff for their brilliant support. I should like to thank you, Mr Speaker, and your office, and the Leader of the House, his erstwhile deputy and his office for all their help. I also thank my office and everyone who has made my job easier, including my Chief Whip, who tells me to cut out the jokes. Tomorrow will be Her Majesty the Queen's 91st birthday. She shares her birthday with my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for whom it will be a significant day. I hope he will not mind my saying that it will be his 60th.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): And me!

Valerie Vaz: Oh, it is the right hon. Lady's birthday as well! I will not say what her age is. [Interruption.] She is 21, as are we all. I echo the Leader of the House's thanks to those Members who are standing down. They have given their lives to public service, and we thank them all. Finally, I should like to say that it has been an absolute privilege to be the shadow Leader of the House.

Mr Lidington: I associate myself with the hon. Lady's final gracious words, and with her tributes to those who lost their life in the recent terrorist attack and to our late colleague, Jo Cox. I hope that it will not be long into the life of the new Parliament before the permanent memorial to Jo can take its place in the House of Commons. I know that that will be welcomed and supported by every Member of this House and of the next House of Commons. I join the hon. Lady in wishing many happy returns to Her Majesty, to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan). As my right hon. Friend's constituency neighbour, I can tell her that whatever number might be appended to her years, nothing can diminish her vigour or her commitment to working on behalf of her constituents. Like her, I have always enjoyed and appreciated my relationship with our other constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow). Indeed, following the last boundary change, I became an elector in the Buckingham constituency, and I now have a particular interest in the outcome there.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Did you vote for him?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman peruses Mr Speaker's previous election material, he might find the answer that he is seeking.

The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) asked me a number of questions. I have to say that, when it comes to Gibraltar, her Front Benchers have a very short memory. People in Gibraltar have not forgotten how the last Labour Government tried to sell that territory down the river, or how they sought a joint

sovereignty agreement. That proposal was rejected by the people of Gibraltar by a margin of well over 90% in a subsequent referendum.

The hon. Lady made a number of assertions about policies that I am sure will be debated in the country in the weeks to come. I simply say that all of us in this House, whatever political perspective we bring to these matters, want the kind of public services in which we can take pride, and which work effectively for our constituents who are vulnerable and in need of help. It is the belief of this Government and this party that the foundation for effective public services is a strong and growing economy. Under the plans put forward by the Leader of the Opposition, any chaotic Government of his would be incapable of funding public services, because they would bankrupt the British economy, raise taxes on ordinary working families and pile yet more public debt on to the next generation—a betrayal of young people.

The hon. Member for Walsall South said that she looked forward to the Leader of the Opposition being in a position to form a Government, but we know that three quarters of her parliamentary colleagues had no confidence in his ability to continue as the leader of the Labour party. Few Labour Members of this outgoing Parliament will be able to say with a straight face that they really have confidence that the Leader of the Opposition should be entrusted with the government and leadership of this country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Pursuant to what the Leader of the House said about our late and esteemed colleague, Jo Cox, I advise the House that the memorial to her had been scheduled to be installed in the Chamber next month. That date fell within what will now be the election campaign, and therefore a rescheduling is essential. The matter was discussed by relevant colleagues, the Jo Cox Foundation and me yesterday, and it is fully intended that the installation will take place very soon after the start of the new Parliament.

Mrs Gillan: Notwithstanding my advanced years, I appear to have gained no more wisdom, because I wish to ask the Leader of the House for a debate on my and his favourite subject, and no doubt yours, Mr Speaker: High Speed 2. We need an emergency debate on HS2 next week, because in evidence to the Transport Committee yesterday, the boss of HS2, David Higgins, indicated that its failure to consider conflicts of interest led to the fiasco of its key contractor, CH2M, withdrawing from a £170 million contract. I want to know who will take responsibility for that, especially as this is a massive project—the largest infrastructure project in this country. We need to examine whether senior management are fit for their roles and should be in charge of such large amounts of taxpayers' money at a time when we will be away from this place and unable to scrutinise them. May we have an emergency debate on HS2 next week?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend is right to pursue this matter of great importance to her constituents and mine, and those in other constituencies along the proposed route. The failure of due diligence that Sir David Higgins acknowledged should not have happened. I am glad,

therefore, that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport made it clear in his evidence to the Transport Committee yesterday that he gives a high priority to fair and transparent procurement in HS2, and all such projects for which he has responsibility.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week and the abrupt and premature ending of this Parliament. This will almost certainly be the last business questions for this Parliament, and I think I am the only shadow Leader of the House who has lasted the full two years. It has been a pleasure to work with the Leader of the House and the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). I shall give my thanks at the end of my contribution.

May we have a big shout out to all the Members who will compete in the London marathon on Saturday?

Chris Bryant: It is on Sunday.

Pete Wishart: It is at some time over the weekend. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) has the distinction of being the first Scottish National party Member to compete in the London marathon. I pity her political opponents when she laps them on the leaflet run during the election campaign.

Before the House rises, we must have an urgent statement on the status of all the Conservative Members of Parliament under police investigation for electoral fraud. Up to two dozen Conservative MPs face the possibility of being prosecuted in the middle of the election campaign. The public deserve to know what will happen under those circumstances. Will it be possible for those Members to continue as candidates in the general election if those prosecutions happen? With the first charging decisions to be made on 20 May, many people suspect that that is the real reason for this snap election. We need to hear from the Leader of the House whether that played any role in the Government's determination of the election date.

May we have a debate about debates and a Prime Minister who seems feart to participate in the television variety? It was the Prime Minister who unilaterally called this election, but she will not debate the issues with her political opponents, and it is right that all the broadcasters are considering empty-chairing her so that the maximum embarrassment is heaped upon her.

Lastly, I wish all Members of Parliament—well, nearly all Members of Parliament—a good election and pay tribute to those who are standing down. I thank the staff, who have served us diligently over the course of the past two years, and you and your office, Mr Speaker. I also want to echo the words of the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz): as we leave today, we will remember Jo Cox and wish that she was out there on the stump with us, fighting for her re-election. It is so tragic that that has been taken away from this House.

Mr Lidington: I join the hon. Gentleman in wishing every success both to his colleague the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and to all colleagues from all parties as they make their final preparations for the London marathon on Sunday. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that their marathon training

will serve them all in good stead for the seven weeks that now beckon us all—seven weeks that may give the rest of us the opportunity to wear out some shoe leather, although I suspect not quite as much as those who are competing on Sunday. I hope, too, that all those Members are successful in raising large sums of money for the various charities that they are supporting.

The hon. Gentleman made a serious point about the police investigations, and I want to reiterate what the Prime Minister said yesterday. We stand behind all our candidates at the forthcoming election, who will be out campaigning for a strong, stable Government in the national interest. A number of police forces have conducted investigations, many of which have been dropped. It is right that such matters are investigated properly, but the battle bus was directed by the national party, as was the case with other political parties, and we are confident that individual colleagues acted properly.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for being an exemplary Leader of the House? He is widely regarded as someone of impeccable integrity and has conducted his office impeccably during this Parliament, and I hope that nothing will change.

May I also draw the Leader of the House's attention to and put down a marker about Select Committee staffing? We have wonderful staff who work incredibly hard, but Committee specialists tend to change too often. That does not happen in the Library, where specialists sometimes remain in post for a decade or more. It would strengthen the role of Select Committees if we could look at changing the nature of staffing, rather than put up with the current turbulence. I appreciate that that is something for the next Parliament, but I wonder whether he could leave something on his file to remind him when he gets back.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. Clearly, there is a balance to be struck between the value of continuity that he describes and the need to ensure that individuals have the opportunity to develop their careers in service through a variety of difference experiences and occupations. However, I will make a note, and I am sure that the Leader of the House—whether it is I or somebody else who has these duties when the new Parliament assembles—will want to take a close look at the matter.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Backbench Business Committee has concluded its business for this Parliament, and I am grateful to the Leader of the House because we have had our full allocation of Back-Bench time in the Chamber in this Session.

We have half a dozen outstanding debate applications lying unheard and, if it is all right with the Leader of the House, I will ask our Committee Clerk to write to his office to seek an airing for those debates in the new Parliament, possibly before the new Backbench Business Committee is established, as happened in the current Parliament—general debates were scheduled by the Leader of the House's office. Some of the subjects could possibly be debated in that time.

I place on record my thanks to the members of the Committee. The ever-presents: the hon. Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Paisley and Renfrewshire

[*Ian Mearns*]

North (Gavin Newlands) and for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). The later arrivals: the hon. Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) and for Witney (Robert Courts). The members who departed in this Parliament: the hon. Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Kettering (Mr Hollobone). And those who had more than cameo appearances for a brief time: the hon. Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter).

And I thank you, Mr Speaker. That is me done for this Parliament.

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Gentleman and the members of his Committee for their sterling work during this Parliament. Backbench Business allows Members on both sides of the House to raise issues of importance to our constituents that might not be the subject of Government legislation. I take careful note of his point about the scheduling of general debates in the next Parliament, which I will consider carefully.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Today I will desist from eviscerating Veolia, but I hope, electorate willing, to be returned on 8 June to pursue this appalling company on the Floor of the House. Shortly after that, Mr Speaker, I will ask you whether you have received the apology you requested from the company a few weeks ago for misleading me, as the hon. Member for Broxbourne.

Does the Leader of the House agree that, early in the next Parliament, the Procedure Committee needs to revisit Standing Order No. 122A to ensure that it reflects the reality of contested elections for Select Committee Chairs and the expectation of the House that those elected into such roles will serve the full term of the Parliament in which they are elected?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me notice of his question, which gave me the unexpected opportunity to study Standing Order No. 122A and the associated Standing Orders of the House. I concede that the Standing Orders relating to the election of Select Committee Chairs are capable of being construed in a number of different ways. It seems to me that the way forward is for the Procedure Committee in the new House of Commons, when it is constituted, to take the issue away, to examine the current Standing Orders, to consult across the parties in the House and to come back with recommendations in due course.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I thank you and the Leader of the House for making it clear that we will remember Jo Cox at the earliest possible opportunity. We all wish that she could be on the campaign trail with us. I will be on the campaign trail but will not be returning to the House, so I thank you, Mr Speaker, and everyone here for the 20 years that I have been privileged to represent Birmingham, Edgbaston. It has been a privilege.

The next Parliament has a very difficult task. The Government have to implement the will of the people, as expressed on 23 June 2016. The Opposition have

to scrutinise the Government in a constructive but, nevertheless, relentless way to ensure that we get the best deal.

Finally, I paraphrase Nancy Astor: I will miss the House, but I will miss the House more than the House will miss me.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Lady is characteristically gracious and self-deprecating in her remarks. Those of us who have served with her in this House will remember her and her contributions for a very long time.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I appreciate that we have very little time left in this Parliament but, nevertheless, I request that consideration be given to a debate on the additional £10 billion that the Government have committed to the NHS until 2020. It is certainly starting to see results in my constituency, with the opening of new units at Crawley hospital.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this point, and I join him in welcoming these new units. It seems to me that the commissioning authorities and the trusts in his part of the country have taken advantage of the record Government spending on our NHS to reconfigure services in a way that will provide better services for his constituents and those in neighbouring constituencies in Sussex in the future.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Let me try again with the Leader of the House: is it possible in the next few days to have an urgent debate about the appalling state of our roads? In Nottinghamshire, there is a £320 million backlog on road repairs and some of the roads in my constituency are simply shocking. The Government's response is to give the county council £14 million, but it will take 30 years to repair all of the roads at that rate. This is not good enough and the Government need to do something about it.

Mr Lidington: The Government set aside £23 billion for infrastructure in the autumn statement and we are investing a record £15 billion on road schemes. The amount we are spending on roads includes allocations to local authorities to fill in potholes and carry out other essential road maintenance, as well as providing for central Government spending on motorways and trunk road schemes. But I come back to the point I made to the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz): the ability of any Government to provide for increases in public expenditure of the kind that the hon. Gentleman is seeking rests upon the capacity of our economy to create wealth and increase employment. The policies that I am afraid his party are espousing in this general election campaign will impoverish our economy and saddle future generations with debt.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May we have a debate on hospital services in Shropshire? Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the recent comments by Simon Wright, the chief executive of the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, that the women's and children's unit—the paediatrics unit—at the Princess Royal hospital in Telford is now safe and that new services such as cancer care patient services will be introduced over the coming months? Is that not more evidence that the NHS is safe in Conservative hands, both locally and nationally?

Mr Lidington: I very much welcome that news from Telford and Shrewsbury. It is important that these detailed decisions about the configuration of services are taken at local level and driven by the assessment of those in charge of our NHS locally about what is needed for their particular communities. One set-up will not work equally well in every part of the country, and there does need to be local sensitivity, and I am really pleased that that is what seems to be happening in Shropshire.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The reputation of politics was rock bottom, but now it is subterranean, as we have done nothing to reform the deep corruption at the heart of our political system by doing nothing about lobbying and the revolving door. What the country needs is a leader of integrity—a man who is not mired in corruption and is not dedicated to seeking office in order to gain insider knowledge that can then be prostituted to the highest bidder upon leaving office. We need a man who is different from what we have had, and that is what the country is looking forward to. When can we investigate the activities between previous Ministers and Electricité de France and Blackstone investments? These are unresolved problems, where we have people leaving this House honoured but then having the consolation of vast salaries of up to £650,000 for a part-time job. This does not honour politics—it drags politics down into the gutter. What we need is a new Prime Minister of probity and integrity.

Mr Lidington: As always, the hon. Gentleman speaks with passion, and in this case on behalf of the 25% or so of Labour MPs who support the Leader of the Opposition. He may not have meant it in this fashion, but I think he was being extremely unfair to successive Prime Ministers from both the main political parties in this country, and to the people who have served in their Governments, who have, after leaving office and membership of this House, gone on to work in other capacities in our country. Whether Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat, these are men and women who have things to offer and, subject to the various codes and rules that apply, it is right that when they leave office, and particularly when they leave membership of the House of Commons, they should be free to pursue new avenues.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) is wrong: she will be missed by the House.

Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the persecution of Christians throughout the world? Given that we start proceedings each day with Prayers, were we to hold such a debate, it would send out an extremely strong message.

Mr Lidington: I cannot offer my hon. Friend an immediate debate, but every single Member of the House will have been shocked by the attacks on Coptic churches in Egypt during holy week, which will have reinforced in all our minds the importance of the point he has made. He will know that in her Easter message the Prime Minister spoke up strongly about the need to defend religious freedom around the world, and made particular reference to Christians and other religious minorities who do not enjoy the freedoms we are fortunate enough to cherish here in the UK.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): One month ago, I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on female representation in politics. Two weeks from today, the voters of Renfrewshire will elect a new council administration, but although the Scottish National party will offer a 50:50 gender split among its candidates, only 29% of Labour and a shameful 17% of Conservative candidates are women. If the Leader of the House is doubly fortunate to be returned to both the House and his current role, will he endeavour to schedule a general debate on this subject early in the new Parliament?

Mr Lidington: The Government could not have been clearer about our wish to encourage more women to take part in public life, not only through seeking membership of the House of Commons and local authorities but through many other forms of public service. Successive leaders of my party have worked hard to promote that, not least my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. My party, unlike the hon. Gentleman's, has a woman leader both in Holyrood and at Westminster.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) has been an outstanding Member of Parliament. Her successor, whoever they may be, has an incredibly difficult act to follow.

Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Prisons and Courts Bill has been abandoned for this Parliament and will have to start its passage through the House again in the next Parliament? Can he tell us which Bills will be going through the rather grubby process of the wash-up, which is a rather unsatisfactory way to pass laws?

Mr Lidington: The Bills that were introduced to this House quite late in the current parliamentary Session and which received carry-over motions so that they could be debated in what would have been the third Session of this Parliament, including the Prisons and Courts Bill, will fall. I referred in my statement to some of the measures that we will be addressing during the wash-up period next week. As my hon. Friend knows, though, discussions are going on through the usual channels about how to handle particular pieces of legislation; I do not want to prejudice the outcome of those discussions.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, may I thank you and the Leader of the House for your kind remarks about my neighbour and friend, Jo Cox? Jo will be in all our minds as we fight this election. She was a radical and a reformer. She cared about this House, but she was discontent with it because she thought it was not as accountable as it could be in this modern age. Can we think about that during this election period? When we come back, may we have an early debate on that? I say that to whoever is on the Front Bench over there—I quite fancy the job of Leader of the House myself. *[Interruption.]* There is no ageism here, Mr Speaker. Seriously, may we have a serious debate about how we make this place more accountable? Many of my constituents find that the call for an early election has got in the way of accountability. People like me who wanted to stay in the European Union accepted the will of the people, but want to fight like mad to make sure we get a good deal. If we can

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

have the money for our public services that was mentioned, surely we should have a good deal. This House is now in a weaker position to make sure that that happens.

Mr Lidington: I simply do not see the connection between there being a general election and this House being in a weaker position. I would have thought that the fact that we had a House of Commons charged with a new mandate from the people to carry through the referendum outcome meant there was greater strength of purpose in this House and indeed on the part of the Government in going forward to what will be very challenging negotiations. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind about the utter determination of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to secure the best possible deal for all the people of every part of the United Kingdom at the end of those negotiations.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Government make time for a statement on North Korea? Although security concerns there are currently uppermost in many people's minds, will the Government convey the concern of many of us in this House that the policy of the Chinese Government of returning refugees and escapees from North Korea to the North Korean regime to near certain death or lifetime imprisonment, sometimes going on for three generations of their families, is not something that many of us in this House want to be silent about?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a very cogent point. The Government are concerned that China continues to regard North Koreans fleeing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as economic migrants rather than treating them as refugees under the terms of the 1951 UN convention. As we all know, the scale of human rights abuses in North Korea is too severe for the international community, including China, to ignore. We have repeatedly called on the Chinese authorities at the very least to respect the fundamental principle of non-refoulement that is built into the United Nations convention, and we did that most recently at our regular UK-China human rights dialogue.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I recently met the father of toddler, Harry Studley, whom hon. Members may remember was shot in the head with an air rifle in south Bristol last July. Harry's dad has impressed me not only with his resilience in the face of adversity—he told me that Harry is doing well—but with his determination that, as a nation, we should learn something from this incident. May we have a debate about what measures the Government can put in place to improve air rifle safety—for example, the introduction of compulsory trigger locks on these lethal weapons?

Mr Lidington: First of all, may I wish Harry a full recovery and express my best wishes to those caring for him and treating his injuries? The Government keep the legislation and misuse of air weapons under review. At present, we have no plans to ban or license them. The vast majority of people using air weapons do so safely and responsibly. High-powered air weapons do require a firearms licence and even low-powered air weapons

are subject to a range of controls, including restrictions around their sale. A small minority of people tragically misuse air weapons in England and Wales—sometimes in the way that the hon. Lady describes—but by introducing a further set of controls we would divert police resources from controlling the other higher risk firearms, such as rifles and shotguns, which is an area where the police should give priority

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I am sometimes asked by constituents who have watched our proceedings on television whether we really hate one another. They see us shouting across the Dispatch Box and ask, "What are they like after they've done battle?" I then explain the reality, which is that sometimes I have more difficulty with Members on my own side than with those sitting opposite.

Chris Bryant: Name names!

Mr Evans: You know who they are, and they know who they are.

The reality, of course, is that we build lasting and enduring friendships with Members from all parties, and none more so than the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), who leaves an enduring legacy in the work she did on Brexit, and to whom I am grateful. Given your end-of-term latitude, Mr Speaker, I hope that you will allow me to say: I will miss you, Gisela, and I wish you well for the future.

As far as future debates are concerned, it would not be business questions if I did not mention that there is an issue with potholes in Ribble Valley—I will spend the next seven weeks looking at them as I drive around visiting towns, villages and hamlets. I hope that as part of our imaginative manifesto for the future, we can consider allowing district authorities to bid for some of the money made available by central Government so that we can fill those potholes.

Mr Speaker, I wish you and all the parliamentary staff well for Dissolution and in all the hard work that will be needed to prepare for the new Parliament.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes the point that it is sometimes quite difficult for people outside this House, many of whom see only the moments of high drama on their TV screens, to understand that we all come to this place with an equal electoral mandate, and with passionately held political views about how best to make things better for the people we represent, but actually there is a certain amount of camaraderie that transcends party political differences, and friendships that are built across party lines over many years.

On my hon. Friend's policy point about Ribble Valley, the idea of having a system for additional bids from local authorities is an interesting one. I will ensure that it is placed in the incoming Transport Minister's in-tray after the election.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): The Leader of the House did not clarify the point about 2 May, so perhaps we could have some more information on that. Is he aware that the families of the victims of the Hyde Park bombings have been denied legal aid to fund their civil action against the chief suspect? Will he meet the Members and peers who support the victims' campaign

in order to consider the Government making exception funding available so that justice, which they have been denied for 35 years, can be delivered?

As an Ulster Unionist, may I associate myself with all the remarks that have been made in thanking all those who have helped us over the period we have been here? It is particularly good to hear that we are remembering Jo Cox. The strength of her husband has been quite fantastic. I wish all the best to those Members who are standing down. I wish to share an Irish blessing—it is such good wording—with all Members for when they are knocking on doors:

“May the road rise up to meet you.

May the wind be always at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face;

the rains fall soft upon your fields, and until we meet again,

may God hold you in the palm of His hand.”

Mr Lidington: I think the whole House warmed to the hon. Gentleman’s concluding comments. I join him in his salute to Brendan Cox, who has shown the most inspiring courage and fortitude over the months since Jo’s murder, but who has also spoken out fearlessly in defence of democracy and human rights and against extremism, at a time when he must have been under the most appalling personal stress.

On the hon. Gentleman’s specific point about legal aid, I think that implicit in his question was the fact that these decisions are taken at arm’s length from Ministers, but I will ask the Minister responsible for the legal aid system to make contact with him and other interested colleagues in both Houses. On his point about Tuesday 2 May, although the working assumption at the moment is that the House will not be sitting, that day is available should it be needed to ensure that business is completed. By law, the Dissolution of Parliament must take place one minute past midnight on Wednesday 3 May, so Tuesday will be the last day on which Members of this Parliament and their staff will have access to their offices in the House of Commons.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I was somewhat disappointed and dismayed to hear that Walsall Borough Council has declined to take part in the Government’s pilot scheme on voter identification measures at polling stations. Is the Leader of the House aware of any advice for presiding officers at the forthcoming local and mayoral elections and at the general election to deter personation at polling stations?

Mr Lidington: The Electoral Commission does provide such guidance to returning officers and their staff, including those running polling stations. The handbooks from the commission specifically include a procedure for dealing with personation and guidance on dealing with other issues. I am disappointed to hear that Walsall Council does not wish to follow best practice, and I hope it might reconsider following my hon. Friend’s representations.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The coalition Government introduced a £173.5 million fund for a modern public mass transit system in Leeds, and I was delighted that this Government stuck to that commitment. With the election, of course, that has been thrown up in the air, so may I ask the Minister what will happen? Can

he assure me that when this place is not sitting there will be proper scrutiny of Leeds City Council’s unambitious and poor plans for spending that money?

Mr Lidington: First, there will be elections in Yorkshire—certainly, in the Greater Leeds area—this year. The processes for the auditing and scrutiny of expenditure within Government will also continue, and Ministers will remain in office. What there will not be until the new Parliament assembles is the opportunity for Members of this House to raise cases where they think money has not been spent to best effect. However, we are talking of a matter of only seven weeks, so it will not be long before Members representing Leeds and every other part of the country can raise such points.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): May I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) said in welcoming the Government’s increased investment in the NHS? I also acknowledge what the Leader of the House said about the need for local decision making on health service matters. None the less, I seek his reassurance that in the next Parliament we will have the opportunity properly to scrutinise any proposed changes that result from NHS England’s sustainability and transformation plans. As he will know—I have raised this in the House before—there is considerable concern about services at North Devon district hospital in my constituency. The concern is that any proposed changes might be rather hastily imposed by local health service managers. Will he assure me that we will have an opportunity to scrutinise those matters?

Before I sit down—it seems I have the privilege of being the last Conservative Member to ask a business question in this Parliament—may I echo the comments that have been made about our colleague Jo Cox? Mr Speaker, may I also thank you, your staff and the staff of the House for helping to run the business of the House so smoothly? Long may it continue.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I can assure him that the next House of Commons—in this Chamber, in Westminster Hall and in the Health Committee when it is re-established—will have the opportunity to consider sustainability and transformation plans as they come forward in all parts of the country. Any such plan has to meet four tests for service change: it must be supported by GP commissioners, be based on clinical evidence, demonstrate public and patient engagement, and consider patient choice. The NHS organisations involved are obliged to consult the local authority’s health overview and scrutiny committees on any proposals for substantial changes to local health services. Those committees can make a formal objection to such a substantial service change and then refer the decision to the Secretary of State for a decision—and the Secretary of State is of course, like all Ministers, accountable to this House.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, before I ask my question I would like to put on record my sincere thanks to the hon. Members for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for assisting me when I was unwell yesterday. I also extend my thanks to the wonderful Commons staff and to the medics for their usual excellent care.

[Natalie McGarry]

In Culture, Media and Sport questions on 16 March, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and I asked the Minister responsible about our long campaign for caps on the ruinous stakes for fixed odds betting terminals, and we were assured that a long-promised announcement by the Government would be made in the spring. Will the Leader of the House commit today to keeping this firm commitment before the Dissolution of Parliament?

Mr Lidington: No, I cannot promise that, because once a general election has been announced the normal rules on Government purdah start to apply fairly promptly, and they will certainly apply from the end of this week. This is a matter for the Cabinet Secretary rather than for Ministers. While Ministers will be free in the next 24 hours or so to make a number of statements, as soon as the purdah rules come into play, which I am expecting to happen tomorrow, the Government machine is prohibited from making such announcements because it must maintain impartiality during an election period.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): We all know that to ensure that constituents can get better paid, better quality jobs and that our businesses can compete better abroad, we must ensure that our people have the right skills. It is a disgrace, therefore, that in my area we are facing further savage cuts of beyond £20 million per year to our local schools. Before Parliament is dissolved, may we have a statement from the Education Secretary on why this Government are pulling the rug from under our young people and taking us back to mid-1990s levels of Tory underinvestment in our schools? Our young people deserve better.

Mr Lidington: First, I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the number of pupils attending schools that are rated by Ofsted as “good” or “outstanding” has risen since 2010 to the highest level ever—some 89% of pupils attend such schools—and the number of individual schools that meet those standards is also at a record high. He chose not to mention this Government’s commitment to 3 million good apprenticeship starts. Nor did he mention this Government’s renewed focus on technical and vocational education, which is absolutely essential if we are to give young men and women the opportunities that he, like me, wishes to see them enjoy.

I think that behind the hon. Gentleman’s question was an attack on the proposed new funding formula for schools, but it has long been the case, argued by Members of Parliament on both sides of this House, that it was not tolerable to continue with a situation in which almost identical schools in different geographical areas could find that one school received half the money per pupil that the other, comparable school was receiving. As he knows, the new funding formula is the subject of a public consultation that has just closed. The Secretary of State is considering what her response should be, and she will come forward with proposals in due course.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Leader of the House referred to Gibraltar. May I remind him that Gibraltar has a Labour Government, and we in Rhondda certainly know that any Labour Government is always better than a Tory Government?

Rather than that, however, I want to ask the Leader of the House why the Government have broken their promise, in that Minister after Minister has said that if the Opposition demand a debate and a vote on secondary legislation, there will be a debate and a vote, but for the past two years successive Leaders of the House have repeatedly refused to allow us a debate and a vote. In particular, dozens of our constituents, many of them with severe mental health problems, are worried about the changes to personal independence payments and concerned that the changes are going to go through without any debate or any vote. They are absolutely furious. Why will the Leader of the House not stand up now and say, “Yes, we’re going to have a debate and a vote next week”?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman knows that an election has been called, and that makes a difference to the allocation of time for business, particularly as we have to make provision—I think that this is agreed across the House—for emergency legislation in relation to Northern Ireland, which will take time that might otherwise have been available for other purposes.

On personal independence payments, if the hon. Gentleman looks at what is actually going on, he will see that the number of successful appeals against PIP decisions is only 3% of cases that have reached a decision, and that the number of people with mental health conditions who are getting additional help under PIP is significantly higher compared with the disability living allowance. PIP represents a big improvement on the previous situation.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman is on very dangerous ground in praying in aid the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, because all political parties in Gibraltar detested and resented the previous Labour Government’s proposals for their territory.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I echo the comments made about our colleague and friend, Jo Cox? Of course, Jo was a huge champion of international development. Although I am pleased that there will be a memorial to her here in the Commons, one of the greatest memorials would be for all parties in the upcoming election to recommit to the cross-party agreement on 0.7% for international development. It would be a great tragedy if that was abandoned.

Jo was also a great champion of the situation of older people in this country. We have a surprise general election, so I wonder whether we could have a surprise Government statement in the next few days on righting the historic injustice facing the WASPI women and so many other pensioners across the country, including Allied Steel and Wire workers in my constituency, who have been led down paths that have resulted in them not receiving what they expected to receive in their retirement.

Mr Lidington: It will be important, as we leave the European Union, that the United Kingdom is even more outward looking on the world than it is already. I am certainly proud of the way in which we use our very generous aid programme to give humanitarian assistance to people in need in parts of central and eastern Africa, and to people both inside Syria and who have taken refuge in neighbouring countries.

On the state pension age increase for women, transition arrangements are already in place and the previous Government committed more than £1 billion to lessen the impact of those changes. No one will see their pension age change more than 18 months compared with the previous timetable. The problem with what the hon. Gentleman seeks is that to reverse the Pensions Act 2011 would cost more than £30 billion, and neither he nor his party has any plan as to how they would find that money.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Six innocent UK military veterans, including Billy Irving, remain in jail in India. The Foreign Secretary has still not met their families. This Government have been in a tizzy over Brexit and have not been focusing on those men, and now this cynical Tory election means that their perilous situation slips even further down the priority list. These military veterans deserve better, so in the time left what are the Government going to do to get Billy and his colleagues home where they belong with their families?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady has raised that case before, so she knows that the Prime Minister has raised the case of the Chennai six with Prime Minister Modi of India; that Foreign Office Ministers and our high commissioner in New Delhi have raised the issue many times with their Indian counterparts; and that representations continue to be made to the Indian high commissioner here in London. The case is with the judicial system in India, which is a mature democracy, and we will continue to make all representations possible on behalf of those men. We are certainly not giving up and it is wrong for the hon. Lady to suggest in any way that we have done so.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): South Tees clinical commissioning group announced a fortnight ago that the Marske medical centre, which serves more than 5,000 people in the village, many of them elderly, will close at the end of June. NHS England has provided emergency GP cover for the last year after Danum Medical Services, the company that previously ran the centre, went into liquidation. Not a single bid has been received—what a damning indictment of this Government's market approach to healthcare.

I have written to ask the Secretary of State for Health to step in urgently on behalf of patients who rely on the GP service. Will the Leader of the House bring the matter to the urgent attention of the Secretary of State? Otherwise, any mention of protecting the NHS in the Government's manifesto will be seen around my way for the hollow sham that it is.

Mr Lidington: I will certainly refer the particular case to the Secretary of State for Health and his team. In respect of the hon. Lady's strictures about the use of private sector contractors, under the previous Labour Government there was a significant increase to 4.5%, from memory, in the delivery of NHS spending through contracted-out services, and the proportion has grown only very slightly since 2010.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I return once again to the national shipbuilding strategy. We have been told since last summer that it is imminent,

most recently on 8 February, when the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), assured Parliament:

"It will be published in spring 2017."—[*Official Report*, 8 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 174WH.]

Can the Leader of the House confirm today that the shipbuilding strategy will not be published before the end of this Parliament? Does he accept that that will be seen by the shipyard workers on the Clyde and elsewhere as a complete betrayal, and yet another gross dereliction of duty, by this Conservative Government?

Mr Lidington: We are not going to be shy of publishing the national shipbuilding strategy, but I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) about the impact of purdah rules. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman and his party would be the first on their feet to complain if we had announcements coming out of Whitehall during a general election campaign; he would argue that those announcements were designed to help a Government seeking re-election.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Conservative Government in London spent £7 per person on transport projects in the south-east for every £1 per person spent in the north. Meanwhile, schools in Sefton face a cut of £518 per child and the loss of nearly 500 teachers. Before the election, can we have a statement about whether the people of Sefton Central have been let down by the Government and why they have had such appalling treatment?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman looks back to as recently as the autumn statement he will find that £13 billion of infrastructure investment was reserved for northern England. I could list some of the projects—improved connections to Manchester airport, £317 million for the Tyne and Wear metro and so on—that benefit northern cities and regions directly. In his question to me, he ignored the fact that investment in London can actually bring direct benefit to centres outside London. The Crossrail trains are being built in Derby, providing jobs there, and components for London buses are made in Falkirk and Ballymena. All parts of the United Kingdom are benefiting from that programme of Government investment.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point similar to that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), can we have a statement before Dissolution on the procurement of Type 26 frigates? The best shipbuilders in the world—the workforce of the Govan shipyard—have waited for two years for work to start on those frigates. As a minimum, if we are not to receive a statement, will the Leader of the House ensure that the Ministry of Defence writes to me with an update?

Mr Lidington: I will draw the hon. Gentleman's concern to the attention of Defence Ministers. As I think I have said at this Dispatch Box before, the Government hope that steel cutting can begin on that programme as soon as possible. He will know that two carriers—the two biggest warships ever built for the Royal Navy—are being constructed in Scotland as we speak.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Following the official opening last month of Carrington power station in my constituency, which was attended by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), a number of north-west businesses remain unpaid following the liquidation of the project contractor, Duro Felguera UK, by its massive Spanish parent. I am sure you will agree, Mr Speaker, that it is disgraceful for our local businesses to lose out on a major infrastructure project that contributes to our national energy security. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent statement to be made next week on the support that can be made available to those businesses, particularly during Dissolution?

Mr Lidington: It is clearly important that businesses, particularly small businesses, are paid in full and on time within the terms of their respective contracts. As the hon. Lady knows, if a liquidation is involved, a particular legal regime kicks in. If she would like to let me have some details, I will send them on directly to the Minister with responsibility for energy.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In the remaining days of this Parliament, can we please have a debate about the northern powerhouse? London gets 10 times as much per head of population to spend on transport as do Yorkshire and the Humber; schools in my patch face cuts of up to £400 per pupil; our NHS, under its sustainability and transformation plan, is set to see cuts of £328 million; the council budget has been slashed by 50%; and we have the smallest number of police officers in Humberside since the 1970s. Can we please have a debate on what the Tories have against Yorkshire, and against Hull in particular?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Lady looks at the record, she will see that large sums of money—I have already mentioned the £13 billion for transport in the autumn statement—are being allocated to Yorkshire, the Humber and other parts of northern England, and that more than 60% of the increase in private sector employment since the 2010 general election has been in parts of the United Kingdom outside London and the south-east. She will see that Yorkshire and Humberside are benefiting from the sound economic policies that the Government are pursuing.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that in the coming election she would be “out there campaigning in every part of the United Kingdom”.—[*Official Report*, 19 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 669.]

Perhaps there will be a statement on that. May I helpfully suggest that she visit the Stirling constituency, where the presence of a hard-Brexit, hard-right, pro-austerity Prime Minister will do the SNP the world of good when it comes to winning the campaign?

Mr Lidington: I know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is looking forward with relish to coming to Scotland and making the positive case for a Conservative Government. She is also looking forward to pointing out that after 10 years of SNP stewardship, there has been a decline in the national health service in Scotland

and standards in Scottish schools are being overtaken by those in schools in England, Wales, Poland and Estonia.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I am proud to be part of a final Caledonian flush in this, the last business questions of this Parliament. I hope that on Sunday there will be more of a Caledonian flash: everyone has a sprint to the election, but some of us have a marathon to run. I wish the other 30 Members of the House of Commons who are taking part well in their endeavours. It is one of those occasions on which we put politics aside, and we will stand together and run together for our local charities. First and foremost, as Members of Parliament, we are there to stand up for and represent our local charities and organisations.

I will be representing and raising money for Jak's Den, in memory of Jak Trueman, a young man who died of a very rare form of cancer around the time of my election in 2015. His mother Allison Barr and his sister Aimie do a huge amount of work in my local community. I will also be raising money for and representing the Michelle Henderson Cervical Cancer Trust. Michelle was in the year below me at high school, and she very sadly died a number of years ago of cervical cancer. Her work is continued by her father Willie Henderson, the famous Scottish footballer. Running the marathon will be a very proud moment for me, and I wish all who are running in it well.

Mr Lidington: I reiterate the good wishes I expressed earlier to the hon. Lady and others who are competing in the marathon on Sunday and I salute the work of the charities she is supporting.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Many of my constituents will be affected by recent changes to welfare policy brought about by the Government. Given that they will soon be left without a Member of Parliament for over a month due to purdah, will the Leader of the House make provision next week for urgent business to reverse these iniquitous changes until after the general election?

Mr Lidington: No. The Government's changes to welfare policies have contributed towards a significant growth in employment, which is at record levels. That includes a big increase in the number of disabled people in work. They are now gaining the dignity and self-respect they want to have through their participation in the labour market. At the same time, we have increased and protected the benefits received by the most disabled people in the United Kingdom.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): May I first echo the comments of the convenor of the Backbench Business Committee and ask for clarity on whether there will be debates in Westminster Hall next Thursday? If not, will the business be carried over? The Leader of the House said a few moments ago that we are all elected with an equal mandate. Well, even Margaret Thatcher recognised that the return of a majority of Scottish National party MPs from Scotland would be a mandate to take forward our policies on independence, yet the current Prime Minister does not seem to respect

the mandate of the Scottish Parliament to give Scotland a choice. May we have a debate on which Prime Minister was right?

Mr Lidington: The mandate given by the people of Scotland in 2014 was for Scotland to remain in the United Kingdom. I wish the hon. Gentleman and his party would respect that.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Our families sacrifice a lot for all of us to be in this House. Over this Parliament, the family of Jo Cox gave the ultimate sacrifice. Personally, I know that I could not undertake this role without the love and support of my husband John and my family. I am sure every Member in this House would say the same about their spouse and family.

On 27 March, the Prime Minister stated to the staff of the international development team in East Kilbride:

“Because of the work you do...this United Kingdom and the values at its heart is one of the greatest forces for good in the world today.”

Will the Leader of the House intimate whether there will be a debate in the House after the general election to ensure that this and any future Government retain their commitment to spending 0.7% of GDP on international development aid and do not push it into the budget headings of other Departments?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman knows that the 0.7% target is calculated by reference to the OECD's definition of overseas development expenditure. That definition is confined not purely to expenditure programmes controlled by the Department for International Development, but to Government spending that meets the OECD criteria. I can assure him that, if the Government are re-elected, there will continue to be a strong United Kingdom commitment to an active and generous policy of international development. It is right that we continue to help the poorest and most vulnerable people in the

world. It is also right that we contribute towards the better governance and long-term stability of countries at risk, because that helps us to tackle some of the broader international problems that we in the United Kingdom and our European neighbours face.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is good to follow our answer to Arthur Scargill, Mr Speaker—with a bit of Glasgow finesse no less.

It has been some two years since I was elected to this Parliament. I have to say that at the start of it I did not think that, two years in, we would have left the European Union and I would be on my second Prime Minister. Hopefully, in a few weeks' time, I will be on my third Government. They say a week is a long time in politics. Over the time that the right hon. Gentleman has been Leader of the House I have asked him about many issues, but for the past six months I have consistently raised the issue of jobcentre closures in Glasgow. Given what he has said to other colleagues with regard to other Government announcements, would I be right in thinking that he expects Glaswegians to go to the polls not knowing which jobcentres his Government intend to close?

Mr Lidington: Since the hon. Gentleman is wishing for a change in Government, he is confirming that his party wishes to prop up the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as the leader of a putative coalition or minority Government. It is good to have that confirmation on the record.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about the provision of jobcentres in Glasgow, as he has heard me say before, Glasgow has a greater concentration of office space for jobcentres than any other major city in Scotland. We have seen proposals from the Department for Work and Pensions to rationalise the estate in Glasgow so that his constituents and others in Glasgow can have a better-quality service. All necessary expert staff will be concentrated in a smaller number of locations, which will be fully accessible to his constituents.

Points of Order

12.26 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much for indulging the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire. During the urgent question, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) intimated that I represent my home town, the great borough of Clydebank. I am sure you will be very well aware, Mr Speaker, that I not only represent my great home town, the borough of Clydebank, but the ancient borough of Dunbarton and of course the mighty Vale of Leven. I am delighted to say that I will be standing for re-selection and, hopefully, re-election as the Member of Parliament for the greatest constituency in this House, West Dunbartonshire.

Mr Speaker: Lest any of us were unaware of the sheer extent of the hon. Gentleman's reach, whether physical or metaphorical, such concerns have been comprehensively allayed by his—I use this term non-pejoratively—opportunistic attempt to raise a bogus point of order. We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is not related to the previous point of order.

Mr Speaker: It is very reassuring to know it is unrelated.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Breaking with all convention, I think this actually is a point of order, Mr Speaker. The crux of my question to the Leader of the House concerned Government announcements and

purdah. I have no idea whether there will be an announcement on which jobcentres they intend to close. Could you advise me, Mr Speaker? Is there anything to stop the Government making that announcement between now and the dissolution of Parliament?

Mr Speaker: No.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on the Prime Minister's statement yesterday to the House, in which she stated that

"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."—[*Official Report*, 19 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 685.]

If we had stuck to the fixed term for this Parliament, the general election would have been in 2020. The negotiations, therefore, would not have been in the run-up to the election. They would have finished. Does the Prime Minister need to explain to the House that her plans for negotiating our exit from the European Union will go beyond those two years, as promised to the House?

Mr Speaker: I think there is a degree of linguistic licence available to, and sometimes deployed by, Members in all parts of the House, including those who sit on the Treasury Bench and on the Opposition Front Bench. If the Prime Minister felt the need to clarify her remarks she could do so, but I have no sense that she feels any such need. I hope the hon. Lady will understand if I say that I do not think this is a matter into which it would be proper for me to intrude. It is substantially a matter of interpretation and debate. The hon. Lady, with some skill, has used her opportunity to flag her concern and it is on the record. I know how persistent a terrier she is, so if she is dissatisfied doubtless she will pursue the matter.

EU Referendum: Lessons Learned

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee Statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the first Select Committee statement. In a moment I shall call the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Mr Bernard Jenkin, who will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of it, and to do so briefly. I will then call Mr Jenkin to respond briefly to those questions in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. I reiterate that interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

12.30 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me time to present PACAC's 12th report of this Session, which is entitled "Lessons learned from the EU Referendum", and which is still topical in so many ways. We shall be producing further reports at the fag end of the current Parliament—including, on Monday, a report on the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments—but I fear that there will be no opportunities for them to be presented on the Floor of the House before the Dissolution.

The referendum on our membership of the EU and the vote to leave by a margin of 52% to 48% represents one of the most momentous political events in our politics for decades. It has already had, and will continue to have, far-reaching consequences, and it will shape the destiny of our country. PACAC's report, published last week, seeks to draw out some important lessons to be learned from the EU referendum in relation to the purpose of referendums and how they should be conducted. It builds on the work of our predecessor, the Public Administration Select Committee, whose report on the Scottish independence referendum was published in the last Parliament. We hope that both reports will be regarded as required reading for anyone who plans a major referendum in the future.

PACAC argues that referendums are appropriate for resolving questions of key constitutional importance that cannot be resolved through the usual medium of party politics. However, it also argues that the system is less satisfactory in the case of what might be called a "bluff call" referendum which—as happened last June—is used by the Government to try to close down an unwelcome debate. Future Parliaments and Governments must consider the potential consequences of promising referendums, especially when, as a result, they may be expected to implement an outcome that they opposed.

PACAC argues that referendums should be limited to matters that are in some way of fundamental or constitutional importance and lend themselves to binary questions, and to instances in which the consequences of both possible outcomes are clear. That is not least because referendums still create a tension in our parliamentary system of government. Although we are becoming used to direct democracy, it contrasts with

our constitutional traditions and culture of representative democracy. Direct democracy, as we have just learned, can be a shock to the system, particularly when most of the elected representatives disagree with the result. The forthcoming general election is all the more necessary because it will heal that rift, and will translate the direct mandate from the EU referendum into a representative mandate for a new Government and Parliament.

That, however, is the point of a referendum. It is a new way of challenging entrenched opinion, just as the Anti-Corn Law League overturned agricultural protection and the campaigns to widen suffrage and to open our economy to free trade challenged the establishment in previous centuries. Today, people are educated and have direct access to the information. Voters are therefore more capable of deciding individual questions for themselves, and less willing to accept wisdom handed down from on high.

PACAC also considered the conduct and delivery of referendums in the future. It found that Government fears that the purdah restrictions provided for in section 125 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 would impair the conduct of government were groundless. The Committee recommends that those restrictions, which are vital to the fair conduct of referendums, should be extended to cover the full 10 weeks of a referendum period, as recommended by the Electoral Commission. It is something of a testament to Select Committees that we succeeded in persuading the House of Commons to prevent the Government from altering the purdah rules in advance of the referendum. We also recommend that the rules be updated to reflect the digital age. We support the Law Commission's proposals to consolidate the law regulating the conduct of referendums.

As for the administration of the referendum, the evidence gathered during PACAC's inquiry suggests that while it was not without some faults, the referendum was on the whole run well. PACAC commends the Electoral Commission for the successful delivery of the referendum, which was of enormous scale and complexity.

One of the most significant problems was the collapse of the voter registration website just hours before the registration deadline on 7 June. The Government attributed that to "unprecedented demand". More than 500,000 online applications to register to vote were recorded on 7 June alone. According to the Electoral Commission, the problems that led to the website's crash were aggravated by a large number of duplicate applications: 38% of applications made during the campaign were duplicates, and there was no way of checking online whether an application was a duplicate. PACAC supports the Electoral Commission's recommendation that the Government develop an online service to enable people to check whether they are already correctly registered to vote, which would be invaluable in preventing the website from collapsing again in the future. Such websites should be better tested for resilience.

The media devoted a great deal of attention to our having raised the possibility that the website collapse had been caused by a cyber-attack. Whether or not that can be proved is not the point; it is important to be aware of the potential for foreign interference in referendums or elections, responsibility for which is actually being claimed by some countries, and attacks experienced by

[Mr Bernard Jenkin]

others. Permanent machinery for monitoring cyber-security in respect of elections and referendums should be established.

Lessons relating to the protection and resilience of IT systems against possible foreign interference must also extend beyond the technical. Our understanding of cyber is predominantly technical and computer-network-based, but Russia and China use a cognitive approach based on an understanding of mass psychology and how to exploit individuals. In my capacity as Chair of PACAC, I shall be writing to the Intelligence and Security Committee to raise the issue of cyber-security in the EU referendum, and to ask whether it will be following up on PACAC's concerns. Today, however, I am encouraged by reports that the National Cyber Security Centre will be advising political parties on the matter during the forthcoming election campaign.

PACAC also again looked at the role played by the civil service during the referendum. We expressed concern that the manner of the presentation of some Government reports, particularly those from the Treasury, and the decision to spend £9.3 million on sending a leaflet to all UK households advocating a remain vote, were inappropriate and undermined public confidence in civil service impartiality. PACAC reiterates the recommendation made by its predecessor, PASC, that there should be a new paragraph in "The Civil Service code" to clarify the role and conduct of civil servants during referendums. It currently contains no reference to referendums.

Finally, we looked at the degree of contingency planning that was made in respect of a possible leave vote. In the run-up to the 1975 referendum, according to the contemporary accounts, Whitehall prepared for a possible UK exit from the common market with a "fairly intensive" programme of Cabinet Office-led contingency planning. PACAC was alarmed to learn that in the run-up to the EU referendum last June, the Government's official position was that there would be no contingency planning. The only exception was planning in the Treasury to anticipate the impact of a leave vote on the UK's financial stability.

PACAC was relieved to learn that work was undertaken within the civil service on the potential implications of a leave vote, albeit without the knowledge of Ministers and despite their explicit instructions. There was a secret away day. Civil servants should never have been asked to operate in a climate in which contingency planning was officially banned, and the Government should not have shirked their constitutional and public obligation to prepare for both possible outcomes. PACAC recommends that, in the event of future referendums, civil servants should be tasked with preparing for both eventualities, as they do in the case of general elections.

It is essential for referendums to be well run, to be conducted fairly, and to command public trust and confidence. PACAC therefore hopes that the Government will heed our recommendations so that the country will be ready for any further referendums in the future.

Let me take this opportunity to thank the House, but more particularly my Committee and its dedicated staff, for the privilege of serving as Chair of PACAC in the current Parliament.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the fairness you have always shown me in this and previous Parliaments.

The report is clear: the referendum was called to call the bluff of the Brexiteers, civil service neutrality was clearly jeopardised and, as the Chair of the Committee said, there was no preparation for the vote to leave. Is not it obvious that the referendum was held not in the national interest but in the governing party's interest? Now, with 30 of its MPs under investigation, we are having an election, instead of focusing on the outcome of the referendum. Paragraphs 102, 103 and 104 of the Committee's report should concern the House—and, in fact, the whole country. We have not done enough to secure our systems for either referendums or elections. In the Chair's view and the view of his Committee, are our systems strong enough, at the time of a snap general election, in the event of a concerted cyber-attack, to which the report refers, by a foreign power or from some other source? Even at this late stage, does he think that there is anything that we can do to strengthen our systems' resilience?

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. I will not tangle with all the things that he raised, but we have a pretty resilient system. The fact that the vast majority of votes cast are pencil or pen marks on bits of paper that are physically counted means that it is basically an impossible system to hack. What we need to be aware of is the vulnerability of electoral registers and systems. The dispersal of our electoral register among different electoral authorities is another source of resilience: there is not one system to hack. However, we need to be aware of what certain countries might want to be seen to be doing—what they might want to be seen to be attempting to influence the result of, or want to be thought to influence the result of. I do not think that any country influenced the result of the leave vote in the EU referendum. I do not think that the result in any election in any major country would have been altered, but we need to understand why certain countries are doing this and what psychological effect they are trying to create by attempting these things, and we need to be alert to the vulnerability of our systems.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and his Committee on a comprehensive report. I agree with the remarks from the Opposition on cyber-activity. Does he agree that we need much better monitoring of cyber-activity as a matter of urgency, not just for referendums but for elections generally?

Mr Jenkin: I do. We made a specific recommendation that a new body be established to monitor cyber-activity in relation to referendums and elections. However, I emphasise that we are in a much stronger position than countries that have electronic voting or single population registers. I have confidence in our system, although we need to be more alert in order to maintain public confidence; that is the main point.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am a member of the Committee, so there is plenty I could say about the report, but I will respect your wish, Mr Speaker, for us to keep comments and questions short. The most important line in the report is perhaps that there should be "careful and restrained use of the machinery of government"—

for example, of the civil service and the purdah provisions. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in encouraging the UK Government to trust the devolved Administrations and allow them to organise and run their referendums without external interference from this place?

Mr Jenkin: It is a fact—I make no comment on it, as an impartial Chairman of my Committee—that referendums are constitutional matters and therefore are reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament. I recognise that there is some demand for a new referendum in Scotland, but even the Good Friday agreement says that there should not be a referendum more than once every seven years. There needs to be a respectable interval between referendums, otherwise they just become meaningless. How many times in the European Union have we seen another referendum called when the first gave the wrong result? I do not put the Scottish National party in that category, but calling referendums too often is actually a contempt for democracy.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Was there any discussion in the Committee about the franchise for the referendum? If 16 and 17-year-olds and EU citizens had been allowed to vote, we might have had a very different result. They will be allowed to vote in the Scottish council elections in two weeks, but they will be denied a vote in the UK general election about four weeks after that. Would it not be appropriate to have consistency, and for the franchise to be as wide as possible?

Mr Jenkin: I ask the hon. Gentleman: why stop at 16? Why not 14 or 12? These are subjective judgments made by different bodies in different parts of the constitution. That franchise is a devolved matter; it is a matter for the Scottish Parliament. Personally, I favour maintaining the status quo in the UK.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Does not the hon. Gentleman agree that our system for referendums and elections is more vulnerable to invisible manipulation and corruption than at any time since 1880? The great weakness of the report is that it ignores the evidence provided, principally by the journalist Carole Cadwalladr, on the use of botnets, artificial intelligence and algorithms to influence millions of voters. The evidence is there from the United States and from this country. Under-the-counter systems are being used that we do not understand; they seek to trawl through websites to get information and subsequently influence voters. We are trying to deal with tomorrow's systems and tomorrow's high technology with regulations that are long out of date.

Is not it likely that in the coming election there will be more manipulation, that there could well be cyber-attacks, and that we cannot trust these results, because what is happening is under the counter and the Electoral Commission has no tools to deal with it in the way it should? We should not have a general election without

finding out the truth about the manipulation that has taken place here, in the US and possibly in other countries that we do not know about. We have not heard about that from GCHQ; we should have heard from it. It has reported on what has happened in the US, where there were cyber-attacks and manipulation. That could well have happened here; we do not know because we have not asked.

Mr Jenkin: With respect, I have asked that question, and I feel I have been rather brushed off by Ministers, perhaps on the advice of officials who are perhaps not as knowledgeable as the Committee is about the technicalities, algorithms or indeed the cognitive approach taken by some of the countries with which the Committee has made itself familiar. I am always grateful for the hon. Gentleman's contributions to the Committee—I think he is our longest-serving member—but personally I do not agree that this threatens the credibility of our elections. In 1880, one of my predecessors in North Essex conducted his election with his wife walking behind him down the high street handing out gold sovereigns. We have come a long way since that kind of corruption in elections, but we need to be alert to the things that the hon. Gentleman draws attention to, and to be ever more alert to the fake news that appears on the internet and is designed to manipulate people's expectations.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and to the work of the Committee. I was proud to be a member of its predecessor Committee, the Public Administration Committee, in the previous Parliament. Who knows, if there are more colleagues on the Liberal Democrat Benches in the next Parliament, as I am sure there will be, perhaps we will qualify for a place on the Committee.

Clearly, the consequences of the referendum, whatever view people take, were not properly considered. Planning was not done and the referendum Act was very shoddy and ill considered. It need not have been. Does the hon. Gentleman think that we need more clarity, and perhaps even legislation, to avoid that kind of thing and such a political referendum being organised in future, without planning?

Mr Jenkin: I think there is always an advantage in what one might call a post-legislative referendum, or a referendum on a proposal on which a White Paper is produced. The devolution referendums in 1997 were both premised on pretty well developed Government policy. One might even pay tribute to the Scottish National party and say that at least it produced a comprehensive document. The leave campaign did produce 600 pages explaining what leave might look like, but the Government had done no preparation, and it is for the Government to prepare for the outcome of a referendum that the Government initiated. I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and perhaps he will join us on the Committee again; I miss him.

Prison Reform: Governor Empowerment

JUSTICE COMMITTEE

Select Committee Statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the second Select Committee statement. In a moment I shall call the Chair of the Justice Committee, Mr Robert Neill, who will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and to do so briefly. I will then call Mr Neill to respond briefly to those questions in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. I reiterate that interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

I call the Chair of the Justice Committee, Mr Robert Neill.

12.50 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to present the Committee's 12th report of the 2016-17 Session, and thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kindness in calling me, and the courtesy you show to me as Chair of the Committee on all the occasions I inflict my words on the House.

It has been a pleasure to work with Committee colleagues on this report and a number of other ones. Like the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, we propose to issue a set of reports at the end as a wash-up to highlight the work we have been doing in a number of areas. This report touches in particular on a key issue in relation to the Government's prison reform programme: governor empowerment.

It has become apparent from the Leader of the House's statement that the Prisons and Courts Bill will be lost in the Dissolution of Parliament. I see that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), is on the Treasury Bench, and I hope that if our party is returned to office that Bill will be reintroduced as a matter of priority in the next Parliament, as I and most of our Committee believe that it sets out broadly the right agenda, and I hope we will be able to take that forward. But of course part of the reform programme does not require legislation; it is partly about a change of culture and also a change of regulations. Much can be done without that primary legislation, so I hope the Government will confirm that they are determined to press ahead.

In this report, we support the idea that prison governors should have greater autonomy and flexibility to shape the services provided in their prisons. We support that in principle, but also draw out areas where further information is needed and risks that need to be recognised honestly and then managed and mitigated. This report is the first that we publish under what is proposed to be a wide-ranging prison reform inquiry looking at a number of such areas both in development and implementation.

This is a difficult period for our prisons, with high levels of suicide and self-harm, and with drug use and assaults on both prisoners and staff continuing to increase

despite the best efforts of Ministers and dedicated prison officers at all levels. This remains an intractable problem, and we need to deal with it.

We have not addressed safety issues specifically in this report, although we did do so in the report on prison safety published last May. What we note is this: the principle of autonomy gives real opportunities, but there is as yet no clear evidence that greater autonomy itself will lead to better outcomes for prisoners. The Government have made a start on the six reform prisons, and we heard impressive evidence from governors and deputy governors of those reform prisons. But those reform prisons—which are pilots, in effect—will not be evaluated until after the reforms have been rolled out across the prison estate. We think it is important that we have reassurance from Government that there is an ongoing evaluation of the process as it is taken forward and there is enough flexibility built in to learn lessons and to make adjustments as necessary.

We also discussed structural changes to the governance of prisons. The new Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, established this month, will be responsible for the operational management of prisons, with the Ministry of Justice covering prisons commissioning and policy. We need more clarity on this, because policy and operations are not as easily separated in practice in the prison context as might appear to be the case in theory: policy decisions have significant implications for operations, and operational knowledge should inform policy decisions. One of the concerns sometimes expressed to us was a feeling among operational staff that there is a disconnect between their experience on the ground and the decisions taken by senior management at the centre. The reform programme gives an opportunity to rectify that, but it must be recognised that there is a problem there to be addressed.

Governors will get more freedom to decide how to run their prisons, and will be held to account for their performance. They will take on new responsibilities in phases, starting at the beginning of this month. As we will not be sitting in this House for some time, it is important that when a new Parliament is returned the Government give a swift update on progress made.

Most of the witnesses who gave evidence thought that giving governors greater power to make decisions would result in prison regimes and services that were better tailored to the prison population. However, we also heard evidence that many governors do not necessarily have the skills to perform their new functions. It is important that we have greater clarity as to how they will be supported, whether they will have access to training to develop these skills, and how that will cascade down through the rest of their management teams.

The reform prison governors who gave evidence to the Committee were very positive about the opportunities of their new freedoms and accountabilities. We were struck in particular by the evidence of Mr Nigel Hirst, governor of HMP Ranby, who said that he had worked with external organisations to develop new initiatives to improve prisoner-staff relationships, and several of the governors said they had recruited in more flexible ways. This could help with the well documented problems of recruitment and retention of experienced staff we heard about. That was starkly brought home to us, particularly in respect of London and the south-east, when we visited HMP Wormwood Scrubs. It is hard for prisons

to recruit people when they are in competition with jobs such as loading luggage at Heathrow which pay more. Greater flexibility in the way in which we reward and remunerate our prison staff to reflect local jobs markets will be important. We will continue, if in a position to do so, to visit prisons across the country to inform our work. I hope that the new Committee will, when it is reconstituted, make a priority of visiting one of the reform prisons to see exactly how progress is being made.

All governors will be held to account through performance agreements that they sign with the Secretary of State. A third of those agreements were meant to be in place at the start of this month, but at the time our report was published the Prison Governors Association had advised its members not to sign the agreements, and it is not clear whether any actually have been signed. We need clarity on that.

Those agreements are based around four performance standards tied to the purposes of prisons included in the Prisons and Courts Bill, which we welcome. Setting out a statutory purpose for prisons is good, and the approach is broadly right. The four standards are public protection, safety and order, reform and rehabilitation, and preparing for life after prison.

The Government say that the Secretary of State can intervene if governors do not perform well against those standards, but it is not clear from the evidence we heard what that intervention means, what shape it would take, and how it would recognise that the performance of prisoners as they left prison, for example, could not be wholly controlled by any one governor, as people often pass through a number of establishments during their time in prison. Also, performance will be influenced by what happens once people have gone through the gate, as it is termed, into rehabilitation in the community. We will need to know how that will be calibrated to make sure that the whole of the prisoner journey is properly reflected and that accountability is placed in the right place, rather than in a more general and unhelpful way.

Initially, the Government announced that they would publish league tables showing prisons' performance against these standards, and I welcome the Minister's comment in evidence to us that the Government

"will not publish league tables; we will make the data on prison performance available... We will not rank prisons from the best performing to the lowest performing based on their performance. It is about data."

That is a sensible approach, and we commend him for it. We think that that phrase perhaps set more hares running than was necessary, but we applaud a systematic and constructive use of data and hope we will see more information from the Government as to how the data are to be analysed and used in informing the development of policy.

We also welcome the fact that the Minister is reviewing those policies to enable governors to adopt their own approaches. I know that changes are planned for the prison regulations. A great many of the prison rules are now quite antique, and we hope that we will have updates in those areas soon. It has been emphasised to us that governors with the new powers should work closely with other service providers in the local community, including their local probation services. I hope that that will be kept under review. I was impressed that the then

governor of Wandsworth had turned up to meet the chief executive of his local council to see how they could work together. We need more initiatives of that kind.

I commend the report to the House, and I should like to thank all my colleagues on the Select Committee and our staff for the support that they have given me throughout this Parliament on the constructive and enjoyable work that we have done together.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I should like to pay tribute to the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), not only for his work on this report but for all his work as Chair of the Committee, of which I was briefly a member. Many of the Government's plans for prison reform might not now reach fruition. Their much heralded Prisons and Courts Bill will fail. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me and my Labour colleagues that rather than calling a general election, which the Prime Minister believes to be in her interest, the Government would have done better to stick to the task of fixing the prisons crisis?

Robert Neill: I do not think that it is an either/or, but I appreciate the spirit in which the hon. Gentleman always approached his work on the Select Committee. One sadness is that we have lost a number of Committee members from the Opposition party as a result of Labour's rolling reshuffle. I have welcomed each of them on their promotion to their Front Bench, and I wish them a long tenure in their current positions. I do not think it is a problem that we are having an election. Personally, as a Conservative I welcome it, and I hope that we will come back with a mandate, that the Government and the Select Committee will be swiftly reconstituted, and that we can get on with the job of prison reform. Whatever the outcome of the election, I know that members of the Committee from both sides of the House will want to continue to make the case for that reform, on which the hon. Gentleman and I agree in principle.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that governor autonomy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for prison reform? Does he also agree that, just as an outstanding chief constable, headteacher or hospital chief executive can make a significant difference to their institution, so governors such as Ian Bickers at Wandsworth are already making a huge difference?

Robert Neill: That is absolutely right. As we consider the issues around safety and other matters that attract the headlines, we sometimes forget that much good work is being done in prisons, and that a great deal of dedication is being shown. It is important that we should have a roll-out of the best, but it has not always been consistent in the past. We also need a management framework that empowers and enables those governors who want to push the envelope and push the margins to do their very best. They need to have the confidence that they can do that in a system that will support them managerially and financially. There are opportunities for this in the reform programme, but we need more details of how it is to be achieved in practice.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As a member of the Justice Committee, I should like to congratulate my hon. Friend—if I may call him that—the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on his expert guidance of the Committee. As he said, the work that we have done together has been very enjoyable. Governor empowerment should support a number of aspects of our prisons, including ensuring that they are safe and secure, that they are decent and that they offer support and assistance. Does he agree with the evidence suggesting that very large prisons housing more than 1,200 prisoners, which the Government are now planning, are less likely to achieve those standards and more likely to create greater challenges and pressures for governors?

Robert Neill: That issue has been raised in evidence, and there are differing views on the impact of larger or smaller units. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work and support, and for her immense knowledge in this area. Whatever the size and nature of an establishment, it is critical that there should be a proper relationship between staff and prisoners. One of the biggest problems is that there is often an insufficient sense of such a personal interface, and that can breed a sense of alienation. I personally do not have a hard and fast rule about size. The important thing is that however a prison is organised, it must be possible to build long-term relationships between staff and prisoners. That is why staff retention and morale are critical in creating the climate and atmosphere that enable people to be constructive in their time in prison, rather than falling into some of the other diversions, which can create difficulties.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I too want to raise the question of governor empowerment. I had the opportunity to discuss this with the governor of HMP Huntercombe in my constituency when I visited it recently. Does my hon. Friend agree that dealing with the risk of increased prisoner complaints which the Committee identified is actually within the control of the prison, as is happening at Huntercombe?

Robert Neill: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and for his work on the Committee, which has been tireless. Huntercombe is a good example of a prison where the governor is managing within the existing arrangements. We need to see more of that. We should not assume that everything has to be driven from the centre, although minimum standards must be adhered to in a system of complaints management that everyone, including prisoners, can have confidence in. Good governors can and do make a difference, but they must be confident that they have the support of the system and the management of the service in doing that.

Manchester, Gorton (Writ)

1.6 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): I beg to move,

That, following the House's decision on Wednesday 19 April that, in accordance with section 2(2) of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, there should be an early parliamentary general election, together with the Prime Minister's announcement that she will advise the Sovereign to appoint Thursday 8 June as the polling day so that Parliament will be dissolved on Wednesday 3 May, and in the knowledge that the by-election in the Borough Constituency of Manchester, Gorton, has been set for Thursday 4 May, Mr Speaker convey to the Clerk of the Crown the desire of this House that he do issue a writ of supersedeas to the writ issued on Tuesday 28 March for the said election.

The motion before the House provides for the by-election in the constituency of Manchester, Gorton, which was originally set for 4 May, to be cancelled in the light of the decision of this House yesterday to trigger an early general election. As the House will recall, that by-election was called to elect a Member to serve in the present Parliament. As this Parliament will be dissolved before the by-election date, it would clearly be otiose to go ahead with the by-election in those circumstances. An election for the Manchester, Gorton, constituency will take place as part of the general election on Thursday 8 June. As I said to the House on Tuesday, there is no statutory provision for the cancellation of a by-election, although there are various precedents. It is for the acting returning officer to cancel the by-election. The motion before the House provides certainty to the acting returning officer, at her request, by endorsing a new writ to supersede the original one.

The motion therefore requests you, Mr Speaker, to convey to the Clerk of the Crown the desire of this House that he issue a writ of supersedeas to the writ issued on Tuesday 28 March for the by-election. This will put beyond any doubt the authority of the acting returning officer to cancel the by-election process that is currently under way. I understand that this approach has the support of the other political parties in the House, as it avoids unnecessary expense and uncertainty for the candidates involved.

1.8 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion. I agree wholeheartedly with the course of action that is being taken. It is the only possible course of action, given that there is to be a general election on 8 June.

Question put and agreed to.

BILL PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND (MINISTERIAL APPOINTMENTS
AND REGIONAL RATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary James Brokenshire, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr David Gauke, the Attorney General and Kris Hopkins, presented a Bill to extend the period of time for making Ministerial appointments following the election of the Northern Ireland Assembly on 2 March 2017, and to make provision about the regional rate in Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2018.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 171) with explanatory notes (Bill 171-EN).

Backbench Business

State Pensions: UK Expatriates

1.9 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes the detrimental effect that the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations 2017 will have on the lives of many expatriate UK citizens living overseas with frozen pensions; and insists that the Government take the necessary steps to withdraw those Regulations.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on frozen British pensions, and with cross-party support, I move this motion on behalf of some 550,000 UK citizens living in countries overseas whose pensions have been frozen at the point at which they left the United Kingdom, in some cases many years ago.

Those people paid taxes and national insurance contributions in Britain throughout their working lives, and elected to move abroad in retirement to be close to family and friends, or simply through personal choice. On the basis that—as my hon. Friend the Minister said in November—entitlement to state pension is based on a person's national insurance contribution record, they paid their way and are entitled to receive their state retirement pension uprated and in full.

Let me make it clear from the start that this is a matter not of cost but of moral responsibility. It is a duty that has been disgracefully shirked by successive Governments of differing political persuasions since the mid-1960s. It is past high time to recognise that an injustice has taken place and to take a modest step, which I shall detail shortly, to redress a wrong that has been a running sore for too long. The motion calls on the Government to withdraw the social security benefits uprating regulations that effectively exclude overseas pensioners from pension uprating in all countries but those with which the UK has an historic, arbitrary and illogical reciprocal agreement.

My hon. Friend the Minister knows of the illustrious precedent for the motion. In 1998, a similar prayer against the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations 1998 was tabled. It was signed by the then Opposition Chief Whip, now Lord Arbutnot; my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), a former leader of the Conservative party and distinguished Secretary of State for Work and Pensions; the then leader of the Conservative party, now Lord Hague; my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley), another former Secretary of State; and the then shadow Leader of the House, now Baroness Shephard.

All those years ago, the party of which I am proud to be a member recognised the need to right a wrong inflicted on those who, in many cases, have served their country in the armed forces, the foreign service and many other walks of life, and who have, collectively and severally, paid their way. We are now—and I trust will remain—in government, so we have the opportunity finally to address and put to rest a debt of honour that must be paid.

I quote a UK pensioner living in Rayong, Thailand:

“I am resident in Thailand, where I retired nearly 8 years ago, and my State Retirement Pension remains at the same level as when I left, because Thailand, unlike the Philippines, for example, is not a country where pension increases are paid...there are some points which I feel should be brought to the fore.

Successive governments have always argued that pension increases can only be paid in countries with which the UK has ‘reciprocal agreements’, and that to extend increases outside these arrangements would negate their ability to conclude other such agreements in the future. However, that argument is utterly threadbare, given that the government announced more than 20 years ago its intention not to make any further reciprocal agreements.

There is a common misconception that expats pay no UK income tax. In the case of pensioners this is totally untrue, because all pensions paid from the UK are subject to tax, and I pay as much as I would if I were still living in—”

his former home in the United Kingdom; I will not identify him at this stage. He continues:

“While pensioners such as myself are paying into the UK economy, we take nothing out, so we make no demands on the NHS or social care. Now, even if we fall ill on a visit to the UK we have to pay for hospital in-patient NHS treatment. If over the years a significant number of us decide that because of reduced circumstances we have to return to the UK, the extra costs in health and social care would outweigh a good proportion of the ‘saving’ of not paying us the increases.

There is uncertainty at the moment on the status after Brexit of expat pensioners living in the EU, and their future right to pension increases...I can't speak for anyone else, but personally I would not ask for any back payment of the increases I have ‘lost’ in the last 7+ years. I would just be happy to feel that in the future I will have that little extra security of a few extra pounds to sustain me in the last years of my life.”

I will return to his points that refer to Brexit and a possible solution in a moment, but first let us take a look at some hard facts. There are 13 million recipients of the United Kingdom state retirement pension. A fraction over 1 million of them live overseas. Of that number, some 650,000 have their pensions uprated as they would in the United Kingdom because of the reciprocal arrangements already referred to. Baroness Altman said in 2016 that

“UK state pensions are payable worldwide and uprated...only where we have a legal requirement to do so.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 February 2016; Vol. 769, c. 251.]

That means that many people are denied that uprating. In fact, some 551,000 are excluded from uprating and find their pensions frozen from the point at which they moved abroad, in spite of paying their taxes and national insurance contributions in the United Kingdom throughout their working lives. As my hon. Friend the Minister made plain in November 2016, pensions are based on national insurance contributions.

Those 551,000 people have made those contributions. However, we still have the ludicrous situation that a British pensioner living on one side of Niagara Falls, in Canada, receives a frozen pension while another living just a mile across the falls, in the United States, has their pension uprated every year. Additionally, some Caribbean islands enjoy uprated pensions, while other small countries and overseas territories do not, with unintended and perverse consequences.

The UK representative of the Government of Montserrat, Janice Pantou, wrote to me to say:

“A number of Montserratians now living in the UK wish to return to take up residence on the island but are hindered from doing so due to the fact that should they emigrate to Montserrat—” go back home, effectively—

“their pensions would be frozen. Many of these individuals have lived, worked tirelessly and paid their national insurance contributions over the course of many years. It now seems they are being victimised simply because they desire to return to Montserrat or another Overseas Territory.”

[*Sir Roger Gale*]

The representative of the Falkland Islands in the United Kingdom, Sukey Cameron, also wrote to me, saying:

“The Overseas Territories have a different constitutional relationship with the UK and are not independent Commonwealth countries; therefore they should not be treated as such. To quote from the 2012 White Paper on the Overseas Territories ‘...the underlying constitutional structure between the UK and the Territories, which form an undivided realm, is common to all.’”

Of course, it is common to all, except in the case of pension uprating, where it is not.

The human consequences of this injustice can be devastating and are illustrated by scores of communications that the International Consortium of British Pensioners and the all-party parliamentary group on frozen British pensions have received from expatriate UK citizens. A spokesman for the Parity or Poverty Group, which has members in Canada, Thailand, Turkey and South Africa, says:

“We are trying desperately hard to undo the predicament that’s driving us into poverty. I can see it on the horizon for myself as once affordable items are now out of reach. I dread the future for myself and my wife.”

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): No one could have prepared better for this debate than my hon. Friend, and by the end of it I hope we will have set forces in train that lead to a curing of this injustice.

Sir Roger Gale: We shall await the Minister’s response with great interest. I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

A former constituent of mine, and a friend, now living in South Africa, wrote to me to say, “I have been looking after my wife since her stroke and increased dementia, plus incontinence now, for over a year. Reviewing the situation with our daughter, my wife is slowly going downhill. I am heading that way, too. I am worn out. To help with catering and finance, we are now on to Meals-on-Wheels for four days a week and are shortly to arrange five day or even five and a half day care support. Right now, our medical aid—insurance—takes half our combined basic OAP pension and the new care plan will certainly take the other half. Our daughter looks after our finances and generously helps and tops up when needed.” That is what my former constituent, a friend, is now reduced to. Sadly, I learned only this morning that his wife died last week, leaving him not only in penury but, apart from the care and affection of his daughter, alone.

Bernard Jackson, 91 years old, has returned to the United Kingdom from Canada and says:

“I was brought up to believe that Britain was a fair country. It’s a disgrace, it has to end, it’s terrible to meet pensioners over here who say they have to come back to Britain because they can’t manage.”

Joe Lewis, 90 years old, who lives in Canada and has recently lost his wife, will be moving back to the United Kingdom as he can no longer cope with his frozen pension. After suffering a severe fall, Joe is increasingly struggling to afford living and medical costs. The only way he can make ends meet is to use up all his savings. Joe Lewis, a nonagenarian, says:

“All I want is my full state pension which I have paid into my entire life”.

Here is another anomaly: any returnee, including those visiting the UK for a couple of weeks to see family on holiday, is entitled to claim their full uprated pension for that period.

Of course, cometh Brexit, cometh another issue that will have to be addressed. The 492,000 British pensioners living in the 27 European Union member states and EFTA countries are protected by the social security provisions of the EU single market, but what will happen to their pensions when we leave the EU? A resident in France wrote to me to say:

“I have been a ‘victim’ of a frozen pension for the past 15 years having lived in Zimbabwe for 45 years and being forced to move to a EU country in order to get my pension... During my working life, I continued to pay Class 3 NI contributions to safeguard my UK pension and it was only when I reached age 65 that I found out that my pension would no longer be indexed, and this has cost me many thousands of lost pounds over a period of 15 years. Now the same issue is rearing its head because of Brexit.”

Will there be 27 different reciprocal agreements or one blanket agreement? Will former EU pensioners find their pensions frozen like those in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Indian subcontinent, Montserrat and other countries? Surely now, in the light of Brexit, is the time at least to start to put all expat UK pensioners who have paid their dues on an equal footing.

I return to the resident in Thailand who said that he “would not ask for any back payment... I would just be happy to feel that in the future I will have that little extra security of a few extra pounds to sustain me in the last years of my life.”

Successive Governments, plucking figures out of the sky, have suggested that uprating overseas pensions would cost billions. In fact, the proposal that the all-party group supports, which goes nowhere near as far as the proposal that some would like and that justice probably dictates, is to uprate payments at the 2.5% from which UK-based recipients will benefit this year. That will cost not billions, but just £33 million. After five years, the budgetary impact will be £158 million. To set that in context, the triple lock costs the Government an extra £2 billion each year.

In the great scheme of Government expenditure, £158 million is small change—small change to settle a debt of honour, with no threat of legal challenge in respect of potential retrospective claims. That, surely, is a bill that, in the interests of a society that is fair for all, the Government cannot afford not to pay.

1.26 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), chair of the all-party parliamentary group on frozen British pensions, for his tireless and forceful campaigning on this issue over many years. I am proud to be a member of that group, but it is very much about his determination to see an end to this injustice. I hope that his campaigning, both personally and collectively, will soon start to bear the fruit that it deserves.

We are having this debate in an unexpected context. It was announced before the Easter recess, when none of us—even those on the Government Benches—had any idea that we would see Parliament dissolved and a general election. I think that is partly why fewer hon. and right hon. Members are here than there would otherwise have been, which is a shame. However, I was going to make the point anyway that there is a simple reason why this issue has never been resolved and

Governments have been able to ignore it again and again. I say “Governments” because, as the hon. Gentleman said, it has been ignored by successive Governments. This is not a party political issue. All parties have failed to deal with it during their times in government.

I love and am hugely proud of being my constituency’s representative. Representing Leeds North West is the part of my job that I love most. However, the reality is that these 550,000 British citizens, who are the same as every one of us here and as all our constituents who are UK citizens, do not have an MP. They do not have a single person who directly represents them and fights their cause in the way that we all do when we receive constituents in our surgeries who tell us about injustices that they face. One MP, or groups of us, can take up those issues and campaign until we finally get Ministers, of whatever colour or Government, to make a change. This group of people do not have an MP. They are disenfranchised and are not represented. Constitutionally, the length of time that this injustice has endured means that it may now be time to look at what France and other countries do and somehow have representation for our UK citizens who live abroad.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on securing this debate. I supported his bid.

Does the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) recall our meeting in the House of Commons two or three months ago with a number of people who had come from overseas to make representations? Surely it is bad when people have to come from overseas, at great expense, to lobby Members of the Westminster Parliament. This issue goes back to the 1960s, so he is right to refer to successive Governments. This has gone on for far, far too long.

Greg Mulholland: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I pay tribute to the dogged campaigners who have worked with the all-party parliamentary group. Their campaigning is remarkable, particularly given the distances involved. The situation he highlights makes my point even more clear. This group of campaigners, these British citizens, came to Parliament, but who could they directly contact? We meet our constituents when they come to lobby us, and we point people who come from another part of the country to their own MP, but we do not represent people who contact us from Canada, Africa or wherever it is because they are not our constituents. I pay tribute to the members of the APPG, and particularly to the very active members and the chair, for being prepared to represent such people through friendship.

Many of us have come to this issue because we have been told about a constituent’s relative or friend, or perhaps because we know someone in this situation. I do not know such a person, incidentally, but I have come to the conclusion, simply by engaging with, listening to and reading the arguments, that this disgraceful injustice cannot continue. It is morally wrong and legally deeply questionable. Ultimately, the position taken by successive Governments in ignoring the issue and using the same standard excuse for many years, despite this Government recently saying that they will look into the matter, will be shown to be legally unsustainable in an increasingly globalised world.

Let us remind ourselves that this is happening in the context of post-Brexit turmoil, which will have all sorts of effects. In the future there will be a very real threat to UK citizens who live in the European Union, and I know the APPG will lobby strongly to ensure that the situation is resolved as part of the Brexit negotiations. We discuss freedom of movement and immigration, but we forget to talk about emigration and the fact that many British citizens, for very good reasons, use their right to go to live and work, or retire, in another country.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): This topic is important to many people, and not only those living abroad who left the UK for very good reasons, including people who migrated here in the 1950s and have since gone back to live in India, Pakistan, Australia and other places. Those people have contributed to this country’s economic and social life. I congratulate the APPG and its chair on raising these issues and on meeting and listening to the Australian campaigners who came here. I hope that the next Government will take this on board and ensure that these people are not disadvantaged.

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Gentleman is right that this is not only unjust but clearly discriminatory, particularly to those in certain diaspora groups. As he knows, Leeds and West Yorkshire have a proud and strong Asian community. I am proud to have a mosque and a Hindu temple in my constituency, and the next constituency has a wonderful Sikh temple, and those wonderful communities are very much part of the life of the community and economy in Leeds. Members of any of those communities are discriminated against, in exactly the same way as anyone else, if they choose to go back to their country of origin, perhaps to live with family or to support family members. That is another reason why this is legally questionable as well as clearly unsustainable.

We are proud to live in a globalised world, whatever side we took in the EU debate. I did not hear anyone say, certainly not in this House, that we should stop wanting to play our full part in the world. I did not hear anyone say that we should stop wanting people from other countries to work in our economy and our health service. Equally, I did not hear anyone say that we want to stop our own citizens having the right to emigrate. In a globalised world we have people who choose to marry a foreign citizen and live in their spouse’s country to find work. This injustice is effectively denying the right of real freedom of movement to all the citizens of this country, which is extraordinary in a globalised world and in a nation that purports to want to play its full part. We are proud to have citizens living in and contributing to America, Canada, Europe, Asia and Africa. If their family have decided to live, work and make their lives in another country, it is understandable that some old people would wish to retire to be with them.

Indeed, as the hon. Member for North Thanet said, there is a huge saving to this nation when someone chooses to emigrate—the estimated annual saving is £3,800—yet we are not prepared to uprate their state pension, which they have paid into, even though the figure would clearly be significantly lower.

We cannot have a situation, as we have now, in which some UK citizens who choose to retire abroad have their pensions uprated and some do not. There is also

[Greg Mulholland]

now uncertainty for people who intend to retire to the European Union, and of course more people who are married to an EU citizen are now deciding that they would rather live in the European Union.

We need to get a grip on the issue and stop the disparity between people in countries that happen to have a bilateral agreement and people in countries that still do not. The Minister has an opportunity to put that right in this Government, unless he has something wonderful to announce today. He, like all of us on both sides of the House, needs to ensure that the issue is addressed. Let us make a firm commitment that whoever is here in the next Parliament from 9 June will ensure that this injustice is at least partially resolved by the next general election in 2022.

After the election it is clear that the Government, of whatever colour—people do not particularly question what colour the next Government will be—must do something, because they can act unilaterally in this case. There does not have to be bilateral agreement. A Government could act on the basis of justice and of wanting to resolve the matter by making a unilateral decision to make a change for all cases.

We need to do this properly and ensure that people living all around the world all get the proper state pension; that is the only real form of justice on this. We need to decide that from now on people should get the state pension that they paid into and that they deserve, regardless of whether they live abroad, particularly as they are not costing the NHS money and are not part of the ongoing crisis in social care, which, again, successive Government have failed to deal with in this country.

Clearly, the Government will not commit to doing this at the moment, although they should. I still challenge the idea that introducing a proper state pension for all citizens abroad would necessarily lead to backdating. That view is overcautious, and legislation could be brought forward carefully to avoid that situation.

A commitment has to be made to the partial uprating that has been pushed by the all-party group and mentioned today by the hon. Member for North Thanet. The estimated cost is very modest, even in the context of wider spending demands. It is a modest change, and it clearly could and should be made early in the next Parliament to help those who have suffered, and the many people whose standard of living has been affected. Remember that many of these people are not well off; they are not rich. Many of them are ordinary people who have chosen to live abroad for very good reasons, such as those I have described. As was movingly set out by the hon. Gentleman, this injustice, which has gone on for many years, has meant that older pensioners are facing penury. They are living in poverty because of this injustice perpetrated by the British state, so we need a commitment to partial uprating. It would be wonderful to get it today, but that is unlikely in the context of the general election.

I am committed to campaigning on this in future, if I am returned to this place after the 8 June election. I will carry on making this case, even though I am not doing it for constituents, because this is about justice. I pay tribute to my colleague in the other place, Baroness Benjamin, who is also a member of our group and who

has been very vocal on this issue in the Lords; I am sure that she and others will continue being so. I do not write the Liberal Democrat manifesto—they would not let me, although it would be very good if they did—but partial uprating should be in all the manifestos; the election has provided an opportunity for that. We should all commit to that, to ensure that uprating happens in the next Parliament. I will certainly put that to my party leader, and I hope others will do the same, because this is not a party political issue. It never has been. There is no direct criticism of any one party; there has simply been a failure on this, for the reasons I laid out.

Representative democracy has failed people who choose to move away from constituencies and no longer have one. Perhaps we could examine that. In the meantime, I hope that all parties, all members of the group and the Minister will consider whether it is finally time to commit to bringing in at least partial uprating, so that this clearly unjustifiable injustice is at last dealt with, and Governments of all colours stop ignoring it and looking away.

1.44 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House should thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) for the way in which they have spoken, and we look forward to the contribution from the Scottish National party. If my friend the Minister does not mind, I will talk through him, because he will not be authorised to make the kind of commitment that this House is asking for. The questions we have to address are: is what is going on fair? Is it logical? Is it right? The answer to each of those is no, and I thank John Markham and the International Consortium of British Pensioners for the briefing they sent, which points out that the situation is grossly unfair, completely illogical and morally wrong.

To illustrate the point, were I to have retired overseas in the “wrong” place, in the seven years since I could have taken the state pension, I would have lost £5,000. I plan to be re-elected; in five years’ time—we may have an election then—the loss would be £13,000. Clearly, I can afford it, as when I retire I shall have a second pension. It will come from the state, but any increases in it will not be determined by whether I live in one part of the West Indies or another. Just to make sure that the Minister is paying attention, perhaps he would like to tell us in which of the areas represented by the West Indies cricket team people would get increases. If I were to retire to the United States part of the West Indies, would I get an increase? Yes. If I were to retire to the Dutch part of the West Indies, would I get an increase in my state pension? Yes. If we went through some of the independent countries, we would hear the Minister tell us about the difference between Guyana and Barbados.

The point has been made about the lack of a parallel between Canada and the United States. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet asked, what is the reason for the difference in position in Thailand and the Philippines, except total chance? The point about this House is not to leave things to total chance. Old age pensions were introduced in 1906, or thereabouts, by a combination of Lloyd George and Winston Churchill to make sure that people were not left struggling in their old age.

Ministers may have been briefed to say that there is social security in some countries, but not in many others—Zimbabwe, which has been mentioned, perhaps being one of the worst examples. People who were asked by this country to stay on during Ian Smith's illegal declaration of independence now find themselves in penury. That is made far worse by the freezing of their state pension.

The number of overseas pensioners who are registered to vote has doubled since the last election, and it could double again and again. If instead of there being 400 of these people for each constituency, there were 800 or 1,600, people might start paying more attention more widely, but the arguments for unfreezing to deal with this injustice should not be about numbers of votes; they should be about whether unfreezing is right or wrong. Let us suppose that at the moment four pensioners in every 100 are affected, and the issue affects a third of their state pension. We can clearly cope with the sum involved. We will in any case be coping with a growing number of pensioners—give or take, depending on the lifting of the state pension age. When we were considering decimalisation in the early 1970s, somebody said, "This will confuse the elderly. Let's wait until they are all dead." The fact is that the situation for overseas pensioners will get worse until we can establish a fair principle right across the board.

I do not want to repeat all the speeches I have made in the past, but briefly and clearly, we have to ask Ministers: when will the time come when a Minister of a Conservative, Labour or coalition Government of any kind can stand up and say that they will put before Parliament, or accept from Parliament, proposals that are fair, logical and right?

1.48 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who made a gracious and fine speech about why this House, working cross-party, must deal with this issue. I commend all the other Members who have spoken in this debate, too. Let me say to the Minister that I suspect this is the last time in this Parliament that we will be discussing pensions matters. I have always enjoyed our spats across the Dispatch Box. I know he is an honourable and decent man, and I ask him to reflect carefully on all the speeches made this afternoon and to give us an indication that the Government are prepared, on the basis of affordability, to deal with this very real injustice that too many people are facing.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate on a motion standing in my name and that of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale). I am also grateful but saddened by the fact that we have to be here today debating this issue, which is fundamentally about fairness and which should, as has been said, have been resolved many decades ago.

The motion addresses the rights of just over 1 million UK pensioners who live overseas. We are talking about those who have paid national insurance on the basis that the payments made to the UK Exchequer entitle an individual to a UK state pension. When someone makes national insurance contributions, building up their entitlement, there is nothing that suggests that their

right to a full pension will be determined by where they choose to live in future. Each individual has earned that entitlement, and it should be honoured. It is a simple matter of entitlement in what ought to be a contractual arrangement.

The Government repeatedly call the state pension a benefit, but that argument is undermined by the basic principle that entitlement is earned by making contributions. To achieve a full UK state pension, a person needs to have accrued 35 years of payments. In such a regime, why should someone's place of domicile affect their rights? The UK is the only member state of the OECD that does not confer full pension rights, including the annual uprating of pensions, to those who have made contributions. It is simply not right that we discriminate against pensioners because of where they live; and let us make no mistake: that is what it is—discrimination. It is a failure of the United Kingdom to accept its responsibility to give full pension entitlement to those who have earned that right.

A person's entitlement to the annual uprating of the state pension is determined by what country they live in. Some 679,000 UK pensioners who live in other countries do get the annual uprating, but there are 551,000 whose pensions are frozen at the level at which they first received their state pension when living abroad. Someone who is now aged 90 who had retired aged 65 in April 1991 would, had they qualified for pension uprating, now be receiving £119.31 per week; if their pension was frozen at the 1991 level, their weekly pension would be £52 per week. That is without justification. Such an individual would have lost out on £39,489 of pension income over a 25-year period as a consequence of their being in receipt of a frozen pension and denied their full rights. Think about what that means: by refusing to grant uprating, we are impoverishing our pensioners.

The average amount received by a pensioner with a frozen pension is just £2,258 per year, whereas the average for a pensioner living in the UK is £7,198 per year. We are denying pensioners income that rightfully ought to be theirs. Many will have to receive support from relatives, or perhaps they will have to return to the UK, where the cost of supporting such elderly residents is invariably higher when health and other social costs are taken into account. We also have to think about the fact that many people came to this country to work, often for many decades, and want to return to their country of origin in retirement. Such folk are put off by the reality of potentially being penalised through the receipt of a frozen pension. Where is the humanity in this? Where is the dignity in stopping people who have given long service to this country and paid their way retiring as they wish? They want to know that they will receive their full pension rights. This is a wrong that we must deal with. People who come to this country should not be penalised when they choose to go home.

Other countries see the current situation as a diplomatic grievance, and that will no doubt be a factor when the UK discusses trade deals. Other countries are going to turn around and say, "You want a decent relationship with us, but you are not prepared to treat your pensioners who live in our country fairly." The fact that we are unique in the OECD in not accepting our obligations does not go down well with other Governments. We need to show leadership, and that we will stand by those who have earned a pension entitlement.

[*Ian Blackford*]

The International Consortium of British Pensioners has been mentioned by many speakers. I commend the consortium for the work it has been doing with the all-party group and the research it has conducted, which shows that because of the lower health and social care costs of somebody not living in this country, there is a saving of £1,575 for every pensioner who moves abroad. Such savings would partly offset the costs of annual uprating.

The House debated frozen pensions on 11 May last year. This debate follows other debates on this matter going back over the past few decades. The hon. Member for Worthing West mentioned Winston Churchill at the turn of the century; indeed, his grandson, also Winston Churchill, was involved in this matter, too. I have been sent a copy of a letter sent in 1993 by the younger Winston Churchill, the then Member for Davyhulme, to a retired pensioner living in Australia called Victor Humphries. Churchill stated in his letter that he hoped the

“Government may be shamed into taking steps to honour its commitment to expatriate pensioners”.

He went on:

“I have no doubt that if sufficient weight of Parliamentary support can be demonstrated for redressing this clear injustice, the Government will have no alternative but to back down.”

Winston Churchill was right in 1993, and all the Members who have spoken in this debate are right in 2017. It is shameful that, collectively, we have not yet dealt with this issue.

There is, of course, a topical aspect to the debate. Brexit hangs like a black cloud over this issue. Of the 679,000 UK pensioners who do receive an annual uprating, 492,000 are currently protected by the social security provisions of the EU single market. What is going to happen to the rights of those 492,000 UK pensioners post-Brexit? Will the Minister commit today to the continuation of the annual uprating for those living in EU member states? We often hear from the Government how they want to protect the rights of UK citizens living in Europe. Many of those citizens will be listening to or will hear about this debate. They will be concerned about their pension rights to the extent that, in the absence of any guarantees, many will consider whether they might not be able to afford to continue to live in an EU member state. The Minister can deal with that uncertainty today.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is inconceivable that this Government, or the Government after the election, would not guarantee uprating to British pensioners who live in the EU 27? As my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) said, it is therefore inconceivable that justice would not come at the same time for the people who have been denied it for so long. That would be discrimination of the worst sort.

Ian Blackford: I concur 100% with the hon. Gentleman; he is absolutely right. We have the opportunity today to deal with this matter and with the uncertainty facing UK citizens who live in Europe. That would be the right thing to do. As has been demonstrated, the cost of doing this for other British citizens would not be all that great. We can actually deal with this matter today if the

Minister will recognise that it is a matter of good faith. As we go into the election campaign, I implore us all to make the commitment, collectively, to deal with the injustices we are discussing. If he so chooses, the Minister can remove the uncertainty today, or he can at least give us an indication that the Government are prepared to do something about this issue.

A further 186,000 UK pensioners live in countries with which the UK has a historical bilateral agreement on social security, including the US. A total of 551,000 UK citizens live in countries in which their pensions are frozen, with the largest numbers being in Australia where there are 246,000, and Canada where there are 144,000. The all-party group has met members of the Canadian diplomatic community, and I can tell the House that they are less than impressed with the behaviour of the UK Government on this matter. We are offending our international friends with our failure to take action.

We often hear about a postcode lottery; this is a national lottery, but one in which 551,000 British pensioners are paying the price. I am glad that the motion has cross-party support, and hope that the Minister will recognise the nature of that support and that we are all appealing to the Government to signal that there is an obligation on them to see sense on this matter. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I hope we will hear from him that the Government are prepared to take action. It is about doing the right thing, and standing up and recognising that all pensioners, irrespective of where they live, deserve to be treated equally.

When we consider that the Government are lifting the limit on the period that UK citizens may live abroad but vote here from 15 years to their entire lifetime, we have to ask why the Government would want to confer voting rights on UK pensioners but deny them full pension rights? Perhaps the Government should reflect on the fact that more than 1 million UK pensioners live overseas. Those pensioners may have a reason to want to register to vote in this coming election campaign, given the infringement of their pension rights. As the hon. Member for Worthing West mentioned, there are 264,000 registered overseas voters—400 per constituency. Can Members imagine the threat to MPs up and down this country if frozen pensioners and others decided that they were going to exercise their franchise? With an election coming, a rise in registrations may just help focus the mind of the Government. What drives the decision-making process of the Government? Is it cost saving, or is it about accepting our obligations to meet a commitment to paying pensions regardless of country of residence?

I appreciate that the Minister will have been told by the Treasury not to offer anything. I know that he is a loyal Government servant and I understand his position. Let me, if I may, try to help him by strengthening his arguments with the Treasury. The right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, said during a debate on the Pensions Bill in the 2003-04 session, when acting as the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury:

“If the system worked in the way that most people think, it would not matter where a person lived.”—[*Official Report, Pensions Public Bill Committee*, 18 March 2004; c. 256.]

I have to say that, on this occasion, I agree with him; it should not matter where a person lives. I appeal to the Minister to reflect on the words of his friend, the

former Chancellor of the Exchequer. Those words were spoken when the right hon. Gentleman was in opposition, but each and everyone one of us should be judged by our deeds in government. It is not good enough to say the right thing when in opposition and then, when in government, claim that it is all about cost. We should be judged by our deeds, and today we have that opportunity. I implore the Minister to do the right thing on this issue today.

I have faith that the Minister will listen to reasoned argument and recognise that this is an injustice that needs to be corrected. Let me deal with the issue of affordability. The Government like to claim that the cost of unfreezing pensions is unaffordable. Ministers have sometimes cited numbers in the billions, but any such claim is highly misleading. The motion for debate proposes the withdrawal of the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations. That would include previously frozen pensions in this year's 2.5% increase, which would cost £30 million. Assuming that this inclusion continued in subsequent years, the total cost would rise by around £30 million extra each year.

The ICBP has historically campaigned for pension parity, bringing currently frozen pensions up to UK levels immediately, which would cost £580 million, but that is not what is being proposed today. Any higher number cited by the Government involves looking at the cumulative cost over a longer period, which is not how new policies are usually assessed and is therefore misleading. The additional cost of uprating at 2.5% over the next five years would have a cost in year one of £30 million, rising to £33 million by year five, by which time it would have a cumulative cost of £158 million. Let me put that in context: the bill for UK state pensions is currently £86.8 billion. Partial uprating is equivalent to 0.03% of current pension spending.

Let me assist the Minister again. We are all aware that there is a separate national insurance fund, and we know from the Government Actuary's Department that it is anticipated that that fund will have a surplus of £30.7 billion this year. Clearly, the cost of doing this can be met from the surplus that currently sits in the national insurance fund. Of course this is affordable. This is about our obligation to our pensioners and the human cost of not meeting those obligations. We need to listen to the voices of those who are discriminated against by our failure to pay full pension entitlement.

I will close now with some quotes. I know that the hon. Member for North Thanet has eloquently presented us with some human experiences, but let me just add to them, because at the end of the day it is the cost for the individuals that should concern us. Abhik Bonnerjee is 72 years old and now lives in Kolkata, India. After contributing to the British economy for 38 years, he is now scared of losing his home as he is struggling to survive on his frozen pension. He is considering moving to an unfrozen country. He said:

"The Government should be doing more, especially for Commonwealth countries, and MPs can't explain why they are not."

Bernard Jackson, 91, moved to Canada, but was forced to return to the UK in order to obtain his full pension. He said:

"I was brought up to believe that Britain was a fair country. It's a disgrace, it has to end. It's terrible to meet pensioners over here who say they have to come back to Britain because they can't manage."

Mr Virendra Sharma: This is an opportunity for the Minister to say today that Britain is still a fair country, so that the people can get social justice in other countries.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for that intervention. I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and it is up to us to demonstrate that fairness. Why should people who have emigrated from the UK be put in this position? They have a pension entitlement, but they have to return here to get what is theirs. That cannot be right. That is not something that we should support.

Joe Lewis, 90, lives in Canada and has recently lost his wife. He will be moving back to the UK as he can no longer cope with his frozen pension. After suffering a severe fall, Joe is increasingly struggling to afford living and medical costs. The only way he can make ends meet is to use up all his savings. Joe says:

"All I want is my full state pension, which I have paid into my entire life."

Why should Joe not get something for which he has paid? That is the salient point. Joe and everyone else we are talking about have paid national insurance. This is an entitlement.

George Gray, 77, now lives in South Africa. He paid national insurance for 48 years until reaching retirement at 65. He was completely unaware of frozen pensions until it came to applying for one. He states:

"I was even told that getting our state pension was not a right, but merely a benefit from the British Government that could be amended at any time - but I've paid for it all of my working life."

Anne Puckridge, 90, now lives in Canada. She worked in the UK up to the age of 76, paying mandatory national insurance contributions, and now has a frozen pension. She says:

"The Government should be doing more, especially for Commonwealth countries, and MPs cannot explain why they are not."

Jane Davies, 70, now lives in British Columbia, Canada. She worked in the NHS for more than 20 years, helping hundreds as she worked in rehabilitation and elderly care. She was unaware that pensions could be frozen. She has said:

"It's outrageous when you think that it's mainly Commonwealth countries that are affected, especially when Canadian pensioners living in the UK receive a full pension."

That is why the Canadian Government are so exercised about this. They pay a full pension to their citizens living here, and yet we fail to reciprocate.

Wendy Moss now lives in Australia. She moved there in 2002 and was completely unaware that her pension would be frozen. She says:

"I am looking into a potential return to the United Kingdom, but need to ensure that my family can make the journey back with me."

In conclusion, these stories are heartbreaking. Let this House show that we can deliver compassion and recognise injustice. Let the Government commit to fixing this issue before we go out and campaign. Let us show that we are prepared to do the right thing. When we are back, I will look forward to legislation being passed to fix this and to fix the injustices for the WASPI women as well.

2.9 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. I thank the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on frozen British pensions, for securing the debate and congratulate him on an excellent speech; he is a strong advocate for pensioners and I am sure that they are lucky to have him. He stated that this is a matter of moral responsibility and that today gives us a chance finally to address it. He highlighted the plight of many ex-pat pensioners and concluded that the Government cannot afford not to pay.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) made an excellent contribution, noting that successive Governments of all colours have failed these pensioners and making the important point that those people do not have an MP of their own, and that when they come to us with their cases we cannot take them on.

The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) talked about a personal situation and the disparity between countries. He made the important point that the number of people living abroad and registered to vote will only increase, so perhaps we will then take more notice of them. He said that these proposals are fair, logical and right. I also thank all Members who contributed through interventions.

Today's debate is yet another example of this Government's atrocious handling of state pensions, which is a typical representation of the disdain and contempt with which the UK Government hold our older citizens, whether they are resident here or overseas. The Tories have ducked their responsibility to pensioners too many times, sticking their heads in the sand and ignoring the backlash, whether from the steadfast WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—or the International Consortium of British Pensioners. It is time the UK Government faced up to reality: pensions are not a privilege; they are a contract, and the UK Government continue to break that contract.

It is clear from today's debate that the SNP is standing up not just for Scotland's pensioners, but for British pensioners around the world. Our track record in this Parliament speaks for itself: while the UK Government recklessly abandoned their obligations to the WASPI women, it was the SNP that rolled up its sleeves and did the work that the Government should have been doing, and it was the SNP that commissioned independent research proving that the Tories' figures are completely wrong, and that the UK Government can afford to right the wrong they have done to the WASPI women. We therefore call for a great injustice to end for British pensioners living overseas.

Around 7.5% of British pensioners live abroad. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) explained, entitlement to receive the state pension relates only to the national insurance contributions made during a recipient's working life, not to their place of residence. Despite that, the UK takes a wildly inconsistent approach to uprating state pensions. More than half a million pensioners—almost half of those living overseas—are excluded from uprating.

My hon. Friend also made the point that their pensions are effectively frozen at the level at which they first received them abroad. Worse still, the vast majority of those with frozen pensions live in the Commonwealth—around a quarter of a million of those affected live in Australia, and almost 150,000 live in Canada.

Those people are not immune from the effects of inflation, yet they are forced to cope with their rising costs of living on a static income. As we can imagine, that has a major impact on their lives. A pensioner who made the required national insurance contributions in order to be eligible for a full state pension, but who has moved abroad and had their pension frozen, stands to lose out on a substantial amount of money. A 75-year-old who retired in 2006 will have lost out on over £10,000. An 81-year-old who retired in 2000 will have lost out on an eye-watering amount—over £22,000. Those are substantial figures, which no doubt put great strain on the lives of those affected, yet this Government seem not to care.

That is hardly surprising, because this Government do not overly concern themselves with pensioner poverty at home, so how could we expect them to give a monkeys about impoverished British ex-pats? I recall that during the 2014 Scottish independence campaign pensioners were fed no end of nonsense about the risk to their pensions in an effort to panic them into voting no. The reality is that this great, fantastic Union, with its mighty broad shoulders, offers one of the most shamelessly pitiful and paltry pensions in the world. Only two countries in the OECD pay poorer pensions than the UK. The OECD 2015 report "Pensions at a Glance" showed that countries such as Turkey, Russia and Greece pay significantly bigger retirement incomes than we do. We should be utterly ashamed of our state pension system and, by extension, of how we treat our pensioners.

It is not just this Government who should shoulder the blame, because our pensioners have been seriously let down by successive Westminster Governments. When the OECD report was released, Tom McPhail, head of retirement policy at Hargreaves Lansdown, said:

"This analysis makes embarrassing reading for the politicians who have been responsible for the UK's pensions over the past 25 years".

I must admit that I cannot disagree with that assertion.

I am sure that current pensioners and those due to retire in the near future will have little faith in what is to come. I am sure also that they will be poring over party manifestos in the coming weeks, looking for a commitment to continue the pensions triple lock. The Cridland report will have worried many people, specifically because of its recommendation to drop the lock. Indeed, this Government have guaranteed it only until 2020. The upcoming general election provides an opportunity to guarantee it beyond that. However, that would be of little comfort to overseas pensioners suffering with frozen pensions.

Likewise, that guarantee will be of little comfort to British pensioners living in the EU, who simply do not know whether the same fate will befall them, with no guarantee that their pensions will be uprated following Brexit. When the UK leaves the EU and the single market, the Government will no longer have a legal requirement to uprate state pensions. Without a new and reciprocal social security agreement agreed as part

of the Brexit negotiations, almost half a million EU-resident British state pensioners could face a frozen pension. Those pensioners deserve to know where they stand.

The pensioners living overseas with frozen pensions deserve justice. Contributing to the state pension is compulsory. The Government are effectively discriminating against retirees, based solely upon where they live, despite their having made the same national insurance contributions. That discrimination is leading to pensioner poverty and a loss of independence, and it is even forcing pensioners to return to the UK without their family.

The International Consortium of British Pensioners informs me that most of the pensioners affected did not know that their pension would be frozen if they retired in some countries abroad. Just as we have seen with the WASPI women, sharing of information with retirees is lacking. As the hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned, the policy is also leading to discrimination against ethnic minorities. The frozen pension policy has a particularly significant impact on the life choices of those in British black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, who retain close cultural links to many Commonwealth countries where pensions are frozen.

The Government might claim that the cost of unfreezing pensioners is unaffordable. Ministers have sometimes cited numbers into billions of pounds. The motion proposes the withdrawal of the social security benefit uprating regulations, which would include previously frozen pensions in this year's 2.5% increase, the cost of which is just £30 million. Assuming that that inclusion continued in subsequent years, the cost would rise by around £30 million extra each year. When this Government are renewing Trident, at a cost of hundreds of billions of pounds, it is indefensible to say that this uprating is unaffordable.

It is time the UK Government started getting it right for pensioners. It is time that priorities were put right. Let us stop pouring endless amounts of public cash into weapons of mass destruction and start treating people with the dignity and respect they deserve in their later years.

2.18 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate and congratulate the hon. Members for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing it, and I thank all Members who have contributed.

I have spoken many times in this Chamber and in Committee about the injustice within our pensions system. On numerous occasions, I have highlighted how the Government have let down the WASPI women and vulnerable pensioners more widely in society. Today it is overseas pensioners. The upcoming general election gives us an opportunity further to highlight such issues and the need for greater transparency in the pensions industry. I hope that those issues, and the issue of pensions uprating for overseas pensioners, get plenty of attention over the next seven weeks.

Today, all pensioners, at home and abroad, want to know whether the Government will ditch the triple lock on 3 May, in line with the Secretary of State's answer to me on 9 January, when I confirmed that Labour's

commitment was for the longer term. Will the Minister confirm that the Tory triple lock is at an end, or is the commitment to 2020, as declared by the Secretary of State in November on "Peston on Sunday", and as was suggested to be the case by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier)?

The pensions of those living overseas are a hot topic for hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom have seen their British state pension frozen—in some cases, for decades. Like the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), I will not be writing a manifesto, but while he cannot guarantee that partial uprating will be in the Lib Dem manifesto, it will certainly be in the Labour party's.

As the law stands, there are 551,000 UK pensioners living abroad, in countries such as Australia and Canada, who have had their pensions frozen at well below the level paid to pensioners still living in the UK, according to the International Consortium of British Pensioners. While UK pensioners receive up to £155.65 a week, a person who retired in 2000 and moved to either Canada, India, Australia or one of hundreds of other countries receives just £67.50. That does not grow with inflation; in fact, it does not grow at all, leading to a continuous reduction in real-terms income, a loss of independence and, eventually, poverty for hundreds of thousands of pensioners across the globe. As we have heard from their champion, the hon. Member for North Thanet, all these people contributed tax and national insurance to the UK throughout their working life, and they are now penalised because they choose to live in a different country, perhaps to spend their retirement closer to their families.

Without uprating, recipients reliant on their state pension income could find themselves increasingly impoverished, leaving them unable to afford a basic standard of living and increasingly dependent on relatives, and they may be forced to return to the UK—we have heard many examples of that during the debate. Surely it is time that this country established a fair system to support our pensioners regardless of where they choose to live. Those who have spent their life working to contribute to the national economy should be supported in the manner they deserve.

Over recent decades, it has become increasingly clear that we live in a globalised world—a world that sometimes requires people of all ages to move across borders to Europe, the US or Canada, or sometimes further afield. As we look to our new future out of the European Community, but working in a more comprehensive partnership with the wider world, I ask the Pensions Minister to do what other Ministers, Labour and Tory alike, have failed to do, and start increasing overseas pensions now.

Why, in this globalised world, should the country in which a person retires—by choice or for other reasons—affect the pension they have worked hard to earn for 45 years or more? Why should the country a person collects their pension in affect their standard of living? Why should it affect their ability to enjoy their retirement and buy the essentials in life? That does not sound like a fair system; it sounds like a system that leaves hundreds of thousands of pensioners uncertain about their future, their financial position and, ultimately, their wellbeing.

[Alex Cunningham]

There are those who argue that overseas pensioners spend their cash in economies other than ours, that they no longer pay tax here—if they have the income to do it—and that they make no contribution to our society. However, some may remind us that our overseas pensioners do not access our national health service, and nor do they require support from social care and other services. As has been said, for the relatively small cost of £30 million this year, the UK could begin a system of partial uprating for pensioners living overseas. For 2018, that would cost £30.75 million, and the figure would continue to increase at roughly the level of inflation.

This is about not a costly backdating of pensions uprating, but a way to begin to rectify the injustice of the overseas pensions system. We should prove that we care about the wellbeing of UK pensioners abroad and care about the vulnerable in society. Our message to the Government should be that that should translate into a fair pensions system.

As others have said, the issue of overseas pensions is of even more pressing concern due to the recent invoking of article 50, with a lack of clear Government policy around much of the Brexit process. Many expats who have retired within the EU face an uncertain future, and I have heard nothing about the protection of British people's pensions in EU countries once we have left.

In addition to people being left uncertain about their immigration status, health benefits and many other issues, the Government's inability to commit to policy in Brexit negotiations has left 472,000 retired UK nationals living in the EU uncertain of what the future holds for them. We do not know whether a deal will be made to ensure that UK pensioners living in the EU receive the full pension they are entitled to. The Government will not tell us whether that is even on the cards. Perhaps the Minister can update the House today. Will British pensioners living in EU countries have their pensions protected after we leave? The right decision—to uprate overseas pensions now—would send the right signal to pensioners in the EU that the Government have a plan and that they will be protected.

The ambitions of the nearly 700 overseas pensioners who have emailed me directly go well beyond the proposal to start uprating pensions now. I recognise that restoring pensions to the levels of today would be a huge stretch for any Government, never mind one that has such a recent record of slashing everything from bereavement income to in-work benefits and of denying mentally ill people, among others, the personal independence payments they need, but we need to start somewhere.

We have always prided ourselves on being a caring country. We are one of the largest net providers of foreign aid in the world, and rightly so. We must, however, ask why we do not feel the need adequately support our pensioners who have retired abroad. An increasing number of modern countries uprate pensions to those living overseas in line with inflation, regardless of where those pensioners reside. Today, we must consider why the UK is not doing the same.

As a modern, compassionate nation, we must look to provide all our pensioners with enough financial support to allow them to enjoy their retirement, as they deserve. Labour has laid out its pledges to pensioners in the last few weeks—maintain the triple lock, compensate the

WASPI women and preserve the universal winter fuel allowance and free bus passes. Will the Minister join us in our other pledge—to protect the pensions of people living overseas? It is just the right thing to do.

2.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): I hope we would all agree—I know you have been in the Chair for only some of the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker—that we have had an interesting debate. Before I attempt to address the points that have been raised, I would like to thank those who have spoken. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and the hon. Member for—I have been practising this for quite a long time—Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for securing the debate, which has been wide and varied. It concerns an important subject, which I do not take lightly.

The hon. Gentleman was very kind in the comments he made about me, and I would like to say something about the way he has conducted himself while I have been Pensions Minister. I have disagreed with him and the Labour party spokesman, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), on a lot of things, but we have also agreed on a lot of things. However, when we have disagreed, we have discussed things properly in this Chamber, in Committee and personally, and I wish all Government and Opposition relationships were like that.

On this particular subject, however, I have to say that I disagree with a lot of things that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) have said.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I know that that remark may have been addressed to just some of the things we said, but one of the things we said was that what is happening at the moment is not fair, not logical and not right. Is the Minister trying to say that it is fair, logical and right?

Richard Harrington: Well, it is about the subjectivity of those words, if I may say so. I will try to address some of the points he made, but I cannot successfully answer his cricket team question. However, given that our civil servants will probably have less to do over the next few weeks than they have had to do over the last few weeks, I will formally write to him. As a child, with “Wisden” and everything else, I would probably have been able to answer his question myself, but I am afraid I cannot do that now.

As I was about to say before I was hit for six by that intervention, the United Kingdom state pension is payable worldwide, regardless of the recipient's country of residence or their nationality. I say that formally on the record because were I a member of the public watching the broadcast of this debate or reading it in *Hansard*, I could quite easily get the impression, when we talk about scandals and things like that, that people were leaving the country and not getting their pension at all. The state pension is paid to people who are entitled to it when they leave the country, but increased—“uprated” is the expression in this context—abroad every year only when the recipient is in certain areas: in the European economic area, Switzerland, or a country with which

the UK has a specific reciprocal agreement that allows for uprating. This is a long-standing policy that has remained consistent for about 70 years, and, as has been said, it has been the policy of consecutive Governments of all persuasions.

I recognise that this subject arouses strong opinions, and some of the language used is very concerning. Please do not think, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I think that the language used has been improper in any way, but it is very strong language about people suffering hardship and so on.

Ian Blackford: Does the Minister appreciate that there is clear evidence that people who have gone to live abroad have come back because they do not feel they can manage on a frozen pension? There is clear evidence that people feel that they have been affected quite significantly by that situation.

Richard Harrington: I do not disagree with that, but people also return for many other reasons. When people decide to emigrate and live abroad, they do it for a number of reasons. They take into consideration the cost of living generally and the cost of property, or food, drink and entertainment—whatever it may be—and the pension is part of that. Similarly, when they decide to return, part of the reason might be whether their pension increases by the rate of inflation, but I suspect that there are many other reasons as well—for example, ill health, getting older, and family issues. I could not dispute what the hon. Gentleman said—in fact, I would never try to dispute what he says—but it is part of the picture and it is not right just to pick out that particular point.

I felt it my duty when taking on this portfolio to speak to as many people as possible. In November last year, I attended a meeting at Lancaster House—a very grand venue—where there were leaders from the overseas territories. It was a big Joint Ministerial Council. I met many of the people mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet, from Montserrat, the Falkland Islands and elsewhere. They were very impassioned people who gave a series of speeches that were basically saying the same thing. That has been reflected in what has been said today. Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend, referred to people not having parliamentary representation. That point was made strongly by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland). I was born and brought up in that constituency, so I accept what he said about its minority communities; I was a descendant of one of them. I could only say to the people at the conference that I was there to listen. It seemed from what they told me that Ministers of all persuasions have politely declined such an invitation before. I know that this is a very impassioned debate. People do feel very strongly about it, and it is not something that I take lightly.

Several contributors, including my hon. Friend, said that because all workers pay their national insurance contributions towards their state pension there is a moral right that they should receive an uprated state pension wherever they live. Moral rights are very subjective, but I know exactly what was meant. However, the rate of contribution paid has never earned entitlement to the indexation of pensions payable abroad. That reflects the fact that the scheme overall is primarily designed for those living in the UK, and it operates on a pay-as-you-go

basis. Contributions paid into the fund in any one year contribute to the expenditure in that year. That is the way that public finance works. The contributions provide a foundation for calculating the benefits, but they do not pay for those benefits.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) mentioned the national insurance fund. It is convenient to bring this up in debates, but in reality there is no surplus in the national insurance fund because it is all used to pay contributory benefits. It is basically a system of public accounting. The £16 billion that was mentioned is two months' expenditure. It is just an advisory level for the fund suggested by the Government Actuary because it is a prudent working balance. It is not like having a bank account where we can say, "Oh, we've got a surplus—let's use it."

Ian Blackford: We all understand and accept that it is a pay-as-you-go system, but that does not detract from the fact that when someone pays national insurance, it is on that basis that they are earning entitlement from that mechanism. As for the national insurance fund, the surplus is actually £30 billion, and it needs to have—the Minister is right—two months' cashflow within it, which is £16 billion. So the point remains the same—the money is there to do this.

Richard Harrington: I think, as we do on many things, the hon. Gentleman and I will have to agree to disagree on that, but we both fully understand each other's arguments, I am sure.

The point about cost has been made very coherently. The Government generally take the view, of course, that the first priority is to ensure that older people in this country have an adequate income in retirement. Uprating all state pension payments in full to the rate currently paid in the UK, regardless of the recipient's country of residence, would cost about an extra £500 million a year, increasing significantly over time. While that may not have been specifically argued for in this debate, people in favour of the motion are talking about a moral argument, not a legal argument. Many of us are here because we believe in moral arguments generally in our political lives, and I hope in our personal lives as well. That is why many of us do the job, so please do not think that I am pooh-poohing the idea of a moral argument. However, both systems of calculating this could be seen as being based on a moral argument.

This debate has been predominantly about so-called partial uprating. I understand this to mean not to uprate fully but to uprate the current level of state pension that the person is receiving through the triple lock or equivalent from a future date, and only pay uprating going forward with no arrears. I had to look at that very carefully when I saw that we were having this debate, because partial uprating can mean different things in different contexts. It is superficially a very attractive argument to say, "We could do this because it's a few million pounds a year—tens of millions, not hundreds or billions." It is not like the cost involved in the case of the WASPI women; the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber correctly mentioned that some independent research has been done on that, which I have read very carefully. That would cost billions of pounds, but this is about tens of millions of pounds, which, on the face of it, sounds like small change within the full scale of Government expenditure.

Alex Cunningham: Spend the money!

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman rarely makes me speechless, but his plea from a sedentary position to spend the money has done so. Perhaps he thinks that I am already Chancellor of the Exchequer; it is nice of him to imply that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): It is only a matter of time.

Richard Harrington: Maybe not in this life.

To return to the serious point, on the face of it, tens of millions of pounds does not seem a lot, but the annual costs of the policy would converge with those of full uprating in the medium to long term. That compounds the situation, because if we changed the policy now to either full or partial uprating, in 25 or 30 years, the vast majority of pensioners—they would be new pensioners—would receive pension payments as if they had been uprated for the whole time. Everyone knows that, whichever Government are in power after the election—I think the hon. Member for Leeds North West suggested that they would be of a certain colour, although I may have misunderstood him—resources are scarce, and Governments have to make judgments about how best to use them. That is what government is about.

Although the proposed spend each year might appear to be small, it would soon add up to a much more significant £500 million extra each year on about 500,000 pensioners. That might look to others as though the Government were disproportionately favouring those who have gone abroad. Much of that spending would not in fact increase the money that a poorer pensioner living abroad would receive. In Australia, for example, the age pension is means-tested, with the Australian Exchequer in some cases keeping up to 50%. New Zealand, too, requires people with overseas pensions to claim them; they are then taken into account, and the New Zealand benefit or pension is reduced by the amount of UK pension. In addition, since most people who move abroad to those countries do so before they have reached pensionable age, most would have been able to build up decent pension provision in the country to which they emigrated, if they went when they are younger.

For most people, the decision to move abroad is voluntary; it remains a personal choice dependent on the individual's circumstances. The Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, said in her summing up that people may not have been aware that they were moving to a country with different pension arrangements. Others have mentioned the line and short distance between Canada and America. However, people who move abroad find out about so many things, including visas; they have to.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the Minister for not having attended this debate. I had intended to do so, but I had other commitments. As I shall shortly be leaving the House, perhaps I could put on the record my support for our overseas pensioners, who have been badly treated. Many of them have almost been obliged to move abroad for family reasons, so it is not the case

that they all made a voluntary choice. In many cases they felt obliged to move to support their families and they feel trapped. They also feel a sense of betrayal.

Richard Harrington: I perfectly accept that in some cases people have no practical choice, but many who emigrate decide to do so for a number of reasons, including personal ones. When people move away, pensions are, by and large, part of their calculations, as is the cost of living.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber was eloquent, as usual, in making his point about uprating the state pensions of people residing in the European economic area and Switzerland. It is a requirement of UK law that those payments be the same as those made in the UK. However, as everyone is aware, the article 50 process is under way, and in accordance with what happened in the referendum and everything that has been discussed in this House, the UK is leaving the European Union. The Prime Minister has made clear that securing reciprocal rights is one of the top priorities. The rights and entitlements that will apply following the UK's exit, such as those relating to the UK state pension paid to individuals living in member states, are subject to the wider negotiation on our future relationship with the EU. The Government have made it clear that we plan to strike an early agreement on the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and, obviously, vice versa. As the Prime Minister has said, it is in no one's interests for there to be a cliff edge when we leave the EU, so the current laws and rules will, wherever practicable, continue to apply, to give certainty to individuals and businesses.

Sir Peter Bottomley: We understand the limitations on the Minister, and I hope that anything we think will not be taken personally by him or anyone else. I remind him of the Old Age Pensions Bill debate on 10 May 1907, when the Member moving the Bill's Second Reading said that Chancellors always want to stop people getting "Money! money! money!" My hon. Friend has said that we are now likely to make decisions that will affect hundreds of millions of people, so surely now is the time make a small change for fewer than 500,000 people. I ask him to commit to revisiting the issue after the election and to looking at it properly.

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Perhaps he was present during that debate in 1907; I was not, but I look forward to reading about it.

Those who are eligible for a UK state pension can have their pension paid wherever they choose to live. The rules governing the uprating of pensions are straightforward, widely publicised and have been the same for many years. The Government's position remains consistent with that of every Government for the past 70 years. The annual costs of changing the long-standing policy will soon be an extra £500 million, which the Government believe cannot be justified.

2.46 pm

Sir Roger Gale: I am grateful to all hon. Members on both sides of the House who have contributed to this debate, which will have been watched by many people around the world. We are proud to live in a country that has a reputation for fairness and non-discrimination. There is an injustice, and my hon. Friend the Minister knows that. To say that the situation has been widely publicised and that it has been the same for many years

does not make it right. It has been wrong for many years, under successive Administrations. It will go on being wrong, and people like me and my colleagues will carry on until we get a resolution.

I understand that the Minister is not in a position to make a concession this afternoon, and I did not expect him to do so. I will ask him just one thing. When this debate was called, none of us had any idea that there was going to be a general election. To some extent, inevitably that has coloured some of the remarks made this afternoon. I have deliberately not pulled my punches, because that is not what I do. I just say this, in friendship, to the Minister. Will he please have a serious discussion with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—one of my Kent colleagues—about how we can put the matter into the Conservative party manifesto as an election pledge, so that we can resolve this issue on the very modest terms that we have proposed, into which great thought has been put? That would enable us, when we come back in June—I hope that we, at least, will be coming back—to put this issue to bed and allow half a million people living in retirement around the world to sleep more soundly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the detrimental effect that the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations 2017 will have on the lives of many expatriate UK citizens living overseas with frozen pensions; and insists that the Government take the necessary steps to withdraw those Regulations.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It would be helpful if the Pensions Minister remained in the Chamber. I am grateful to him for his kind words about our working relationship, and I agree that it has been constructive, even when we have disagreed. I hope that you or he can assist with the news given to my office today that the Department for Work and Pensions MP hotline is closing down at midnight tomorrow; staff claim that that is because of purdah coming into effect. That would have a hugely detrimental effect on MPs' ability to do their job effectively. I am sure that the wheels have moved since I raised the matter with a Government Whip earlier this afternoon, but can you or the Minister confirm the date for purdah and whether hotlines for MPs should close tomorrow evening?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): If the Minister would like to respond, he is welcome to do so.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington) I will have a go at responding to the hon. Gentleman's question. I do not know the answer to it, but I will find out straight away and communicate it to him. I suspect that this is a matter that is decided by the civil service based on previous protocols about purdah and so on, but I do not feel experienced enough to give him the answer that he wants and deserves.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister has been very clear and helpful. If the practice is for such helplines, which are for our constituents rather than for us, to be closed down before Parliament has stopped sitting—before we stop being Members of Parliament—may I suggest, through you, that those who are listening should change the practice and make sure that that happens when Parliament is dissolved, and not simply because an election has been called?

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister has made it clear that he will communicate with the shadow Minister, but can we ensure that there is communication with all Members of the House if this closure happens? We hope that it will not, because it will impact all our constituents in a very big way.

Madam Deputy Speaker: If the Minister would like to respond to that, it would be very helpful.

Richard Harrington I have taken on board the hon. Lady's point.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank all hon. Members for their points of order, and I thank the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for raising this point. It is important, and I am grateful to the Minister for having responded so positively to it. We will leave it there for now.

Tackling Infectious Diseases

2.51 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered research and development on tackling infectious diseases.

I am grateful for this comprehensive debate on an issue that is important for many people across the world. As the sponsor of the debate, I want to set out the issues that need to be raised, say a little about my area of greatest knowledge and allow as many Members as possible, on both sides of the Chamber, to raise the issues that matter most to them.

Tuberculosis, HIV and malaria are the world's leading infectious killers. In addition to those three big diseases, 1.5 billion people have a neglected tropical disease, and another 1.5 billion are at risk of contracting one. Such people are trapped in a spiral of ill health and debt that blights not just their own lives but those of the people who rely on them. Many of the diseases are chronic and endemic to some of the most deprived communities in the world. Sadly, there is no market for curing these illnesses, because there is no profit to be had from doing so. There is no will to eradicate them, because the value of doing so is considered to be too far away.

But the costs of inaction are far higher than the costs of action. Although globally about \$240 billion is spent on health research and development, almost none of that is directed at these diseases of poverty. Because there is no market incentive, procurement is likely to be carried out only by donor and philanthropic organisations, yet the UN has said that investment in treating these diseases can yield returns. For example, it says that every dollar invested in TB care yields a return of over \$30.

For many conditions, treatment is a complicated matter requiring a cocktail of drugs taken according to a strict regimen. For too many, that is not possible. New drugs have been slow to come to the market. Antibiotics represent a cure for millions, but since 1990 virtually no new antibiotics have been developed and we know that diseases are becoming resistant. Approximately 700,000 people will die this year because of anti-microbial resistance, known as AMR. By 2050, this could cost 2% to 3.5% of global GDP, or \$100 trillion of economic output. It will be a global catastrophe.

Our Government have already taken positive steps, replenishing the global fund with over £1 billion. Some 80% of the funding for the global fight against TB comes from that fund to which we are the second largest donor. I hope the Minister will restate his commitment to the fight. Prevention, diagnosis and treatment through the global fund cannot be the sole solution. It is clear that without new tools we will not meet the commitment made in the global goals to end the epidemics of HIV, TB and malaria by 2030.

At the current rate of progress, it will take at least 150 years to the end the TB epidemic. Moreover, the O'Neill review published last year made it quite clear that AMR will exacerbate this bleak outlook. I am a co-chair of the all-party group on TB. The group recently held an event on TB and AMR, which included contributions from the Minister and Lord O'Neill, who reiterated the review's conclusion that tackling TB must

be at the heart of any global action on AMR. TB already accounts for one third of AMR debts. If left unaddressed, it will by 2050 cost the economy over \$16 trillion. As Lord O'Neill said at our event, the cost of investing in new drugs is minuscule compared with the cost of doing nothing. At present, treatment for drug-resistant TB involves an arduous two-year course of 14,000 pills, which can have severe side-effects including permanent deafness, as well as eight months of intravenous injections. It is little wonder that less than half of those who start treatment complete the course. Concerns about AMR are not limited to TB and HIV; it is also an issue of serious concern for other infectious diseases, including malaria.

Of the annual half a million deaths from malaria, most are of children under the age of five in sub-Saharan Africa. Artemisinin combination therapies are currently the frontline treatments against the most deadly malaria parasites. Although the treatments are working well in many parts of the world, there is serious concern that malaria parasites are once again developing widespread resistance to this vital treatment. Artemisinin resistance is spreading in the Greater Mekong area. If it spreads to the African continent, there will be devastating consequences for global control efforts. At the beginning of this year we witnessed, with four patients, the first failed malaria drug treatment in the UK. That was swiftly followed by the detection by researchers in Africa of malaria parasites that were partly resistant to artemisinin.

The Minister will be aware that AMR is one of the topics being considered by the G20 this year. Last year, the G20 tasked the OECD and others with creating a road map on incentivising research and development in relation to new antibiotics. In line with the O'Neill review's conclusions that TB must be at the heart of the AMR response, will the Minister take steps to ensure that it is prioritised in the G20 discussions on AMR? Will he ensure that the Government push for agreement on new mechanisms to incentivise research and development to tackle AMR and, within that, drug-resistant TB, especially as half of all cases of TB and drug-resistant TB, as well as TB deaths, occur in G20 countries?

In February I was in India where I met Prime Minister Mr Modi, and I made similar representations there. Only by working with international partners can we make progress against the world's leading infectious killer and only major airborne AMR threat. In that context, let me say something about the impact that medical technology can have. According to a report produced by the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Access to Medicines and entitled "Promoting innovation and access to health technologies",

"Despite this noteworthy progress"—

the development of vaccines and dramatically improved outcomes for HIV sufferers—

"millions of people continue to suffer and die from treatable conditions because of a lack of access to health technologies."

It is all too easy to focus solely on pharmaceuticals in tackling infectious diseases, but without technology, even the most basic, tackling an outbreak is almost impossible.

I recently heard from representatives of Becton Dickinson, a company that manufactures diagnostic products and lab equipment here in the UK and exports it all over the world. They told me about the measures

that we could be taking right now to tackle AMR, including better use of blood testing. We must take steps immediately to improve diagnosis times, and to ensure that the most appropriate antibiotics are administered. BD has been leading research on the development of blood test bottles that counteract the effects of antibiotics so that they can be administered immediately in life-threatening cases. It has also worked on technology to control TB quickly, including new tools that enable the rapid testing and reporting of new second-line drugs for extensively drug-resistant TB. In the event of an outbreak of any infectious disease, timely treatment is crucial, and BD's work in the field of technology—not just pharmaceuticals—can contribute to the tackling of infectious diseases throughout the world.

I ask the Minister to look more closely at how better use of diagnostics, including blood cultures, can tackle AMR. Some targeted research and development has worked. In 2002, more than half a million children a year were becoming newly infected with HIV; that number has now halved. In 2015, the Government created the cross-departmental Ross fund to invest in research and development in respect of

“drugs, vaccines, diagnostics and treatments to combat the most infectious diseases”.

Although that was a welcome announcement, the fund must be used to complement, rather than to substitute, DFID's existing commitments on infectious disease research and development, particularly its historical commitment to not-for-profit product development partnerships.

At the APPG on global TB event for World TB day, we heard from Aeras and from the TB Alliance, which have both benefited from UK investment, but developing new tools is not a short-term project. The Minister should reaffirm the Government's commitment to these partnerships. We cannot afford to step away from them. For example, we currently have one vaccine for TB, the BCG, which dates back to the 1920s and is only moderately effective in preventing severe TB in young children. It does not adequately protect adolescents and adults, who are most at risk of developing and spreading TB.

There are also regulatory issues. It is expected that by 2020 some 70% of those living with HIV will be in middle-income countries and will no longer have access to affordable treatment. The British Government have been keen to come to arrangements that have allowed the countries with the greatest burden a longer time to comply with patent regulations. That positive attitude has not always been shared by the US Administration, and I am worried that the new President will be even less inclined to come to sensible arrangements.

Similarly, as the Government negotiate new trade agreements in the wake of our exit from the European Union, we must ensure access to medicines by protecting TRIPS—trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights—flexibilities. There is growing global momentum on the shortcomings of our R and D model and a number of solutions have been put forward, including the UN High-Level Panel report on access to medicines. The UK must prioritise and plan how to move such recommendations forward, particularly in the lead-up to the World Health Assembly in May. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline in his response whether the UK plans to develop a cross-departmental

code of principles for biomedical research and development. That should be based on the recommendations from the high-level meeting on AMR for research and development to be

“guided by principles of affordability”

and ready for the 70th World Health Assembly in May.

We should ensure that R and D leads to health technologies that are affordable and accessible to those that need them. The real game changer will be finding a way to encourage the development of more therapies, new medicines and innovative vaccines. Change will come from a change to the regulatory environment. That cannot be achieved by UK action alone. Could the Minister please commit to ensuring that encouraging DFID best practice is a key plank of future international efforts?

I thank the APPGs that have made this debate possible—those on TB, HIV and Aids, and malaria and neglected tropical diseases. I am keen to hear what my hon. Friends and colleagues have to say, so I will leave it there, although there is sadly so much more to say.

3.9 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my colleague from the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), on his comprehensive speech, which covered a huge amount of ground. I also declare my interest as a member of the boards of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and the Innovative Vector Control Consortium, which develops new insecticides to put on bed nets to counter mosquitos, and as chair of the all-party group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

I had the honour on Monday this week to chair a meeting in Washington, as chair of the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, with Madame Christine Lagarde of the IMF and Dr Jim Kim, president of the World Bank. Dr Kim spoke about infectious diseases and the threat posed by them. He pointed out that we had come together as a world with three countries in west Africa—Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone—to tackle Ebola. There was a huge cost of life there, particularly among medical workers, but the co-ordinated action enabled that epidemic to be curtailed; it could have been much worse. He talked also about Zika and the work done on it. He pointed out, too, that a major epidemic of an infectious disease, possibly a flu, which could affect as many as 30 million people resulting in a scale of deaths that we have not seen since Spanish flu in 1919, was perfectly possible and very much on the radar. That illustrates why this debate is so important.

The UK Government have been at the forefront in providing resources for research and development as to tackling infectious diseases and the deployment of those tools in the countries where they are needed, not only in the cases of Ebola and Zika, but, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, in terms of the rise in the resistance to drugs, particularly for tuberculosis, but also for malaria. Resistance has been growing to the artemisinin-based combination therapy drugs, or ACTs, in south-east Asia, and, as we know, it is always from south-east Asia that resistance grows to malaria drugs; it did for chloroquine and it did for sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine, or SP, and now it is for the ACTs. That is where the real threat from malaria lies: if resistance grows there and then crosses

[Jeremy Lefroy]

to sub-Saharan Africa, we face the prospect of yet another drug becoming less effective. ACTs have played a huge role in cutting the number of deaths from over 1 million in 2000 to less than half a million last year.

The UK Government have played a major role through the funding of, for instance, the Medicines for Malaria Venture and the Innovative Vector Control Consortium, which I mentioned earlier, and I welcome the announcements this week by the Secretary of State on additional funding to combat neglected tropical diseases. I hope some of that funding will go into developing new drugs in the area, because we have shortfalls in the pipeline for tackling some of those diseases; some have very effective existing drugs, but others do not. We must also not forget the role that vaccines play, as the hon. Gentleman also mentioned, in respect of TB.

As the hon. Gentleman made clear, these are not commercial propositions in most cases. They are not drugs that companies can afford to develop on their own; they need the support of Governments and foundations. It is tremendous how Governments and foundations such as Wellcome and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have stepped up, and indeed drugs companies in the case of neglected tropical diseases, where they have provided billions of doses free across the globe in the past 15 to 20 years.

I want to conclude by giving three reasons why we should be concerned about this matter and taking this action. First, that is absolutely the right thing to do: dealing with diseases that affect people across the globe, and not just the poorest people—the 1.5 billion who suffer from neglected tropical diseases and those who suffer from malaria, TB and HIV—but the people in our own countries who suffer from these diseases. Let us not forget that those people are right on our doorstep and in our midst.

Secondly, this is highly cost-effective. A ratio of about 40:1 has been mentioned, and I have seen that in many places. What we spend on international development has to be extremely effective. In many cases, what we spend on research and development and on treating these diseases is pretty much the best buy in international development, which is why I welcome the fact that the UK Government have concentrated more resources on these areas.

Thirdly, the UK is a world leader. That is even more important now that we are coming out of the European Union. We have institutions such as the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Imperial College London, the University of York, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, the University of Dundee and the University of Aberdeen. Many of our universities across the United Kingdom are world leaders in this area, and it is vital that, as we look to create a more global Britain, we do not neglect those areas in which we are already world leaders. That involves a number of things, such as investment in the form of Government support, primarily through DFID and in cash, but also ensuring that the best scientists such as the young researchers who want to come to this country because of our excellence can continue to do so and will not be blocked.

Let us not forget that researchers are often not well paid. If we set salary-based caps for immigration, we will automatically disqualify some of the brightest minds

on the planet from coming here, so let us ensure that that does not happen. If we are to have immigration rules, they should be based on the task and not on the salary. Setting a cap of £30,000, for example, would probably exclude half the PhD and other doctoral posts in this country. This is absolutely critical. We also need to encourage our own researchers to go and work across the globe in collaboration with others. This kind of research is not national; it is international, and it requires the widest possible collaboration.

I want to conclude by thanking my hon. Friend the Minister, who is absolutely committed and who I know will have played a major role in the decision on neglected tropical diseases in the past week. This is something we have been waiting and calling for, and the Government's announcement has exceeded our expectations. That is tremendous. It is great for the United Kingdom and, above all, for the people who are suffering from neglected tropical diseases.

That comes on top of a range of announcements on malaria, TB and HIV. As we come to the end of this Parliament, I hope that all the manifestos—particularly the Conservative manifesto—will contain a commitment to continue to spend 0.7% of our GDP on international development and a repeat of the commitment to make research and development on infectious diseases and the deployment of those resources a key priority for the new Government.

3.18 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on securing the debate, along with two other members of the International Development Committee. As always, it is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who always speaks from great experience and with great knowledge of neglected tropical diseases. I know that he has done a huge amount of work on tackling malaria.

Today's debate is timely. Last week, DFID announced a doubling of its support for the fight against neglected tropical diseases such as trachoma, Guinea worm and river blindness over the next five years. It was also announced that the UK would invest £360 million in programmes to tackle this type of disease. This week, the World Health Organisation is hosting a summit on neglected tropical diseases, and we have seen the coming together of Governments, non-governmental organisations, multilateral organisations, the private sector, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which many Members have mentioned. That highlights the importance of tackling those terrible diseases that strike at the heart of some of the most vulnerable people in the world.

As a member of the International Development Committee and a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development, I wanted to speak in what will be perhaps the last international development debate in this Parliament and to take the opportunity to highlight some of the incredible work that UK aid has delivered. I am sure that the Minister will tell us more about the Department's record over the past few years.

The UK is investing in research and development for new technologies to fight neglected tropical diseases with funding from the Ross fund, which is a £1 billion

fund aimed at developing, testing and producing new products—particularly for malaria. We often hear of the importance of bed nets in the tackling of malaria, but that is not the only answer to the problem; we also need to look at drugs, insecticides and diagnostics. The importance of working to tackle antimicrobial resistance has also been mentioned.

We must not forget the impact of Ebola in recent years—a topic that the Committee has done an inquiry on. It is a terrible infectious disease that affected people not only in Sierra Leone and Africa; we know of a couple of British citizens who were seriously affected by it as well. That highlighted the importance not only of looking for ways of testing for the disease and curing it, but of having adequate healthcare systems.

Tackling neglected tropical diseases is clearly good news for those countries that are most badly affected by them. It is also good news for our universities, pharma companies and many of our NGOs and charities; they have vital roles to play in this, too. That also keeps us as British citizens safe. Many of us travel around the world, so it is important for our safe and secure passage to seek protection from and find solutions to those diseases.

I have mentioned Ebola and malaria, and the Zika virus is another infectious disease; we do not hear about many diseases until there is an epidemic or a really serious outbreak. To me, it also illustrates why the UK aid budget really matters. When we spend it wisely, it can make a difference to people's lives—and it is in our interests to do that. We know that infectious diseases disproportionately affect the poorest people, exacerbate instability and put at risk our national security.

Last year, the UN high-level panel on access to medicines made a number of recommendations aimed at getting more medicines to more people who need them. It also recognised that research and development alone is not enough. Intellectual property law, competition law, procurement laws, drug regulations, public health obligations and patents are all part of this, as is price, which can be a major barrier to accessing treatment globally. For example, generic competition in antiretroviral medicines has led to the cost of first-line ARV drugs decreasing, but third-line ARVs remain prohibitively expensive—especially in middle-income countries. To make that even more pressing, by 2020 an estimated 70% of people living with HIV will be in middle-income countries.

Britain has a proud record in this field. We are leading the way in fighting these diseases through research, targeting and tackling the real root causes of avoidable infections and diseases. However, while we have achieved so much, as usual it is the case that much more can be done. I hope that the Minister will set out his Department's plans. We know that he is committed to this area. As I began by saying, I welcome the work that DFID has done.

3.24 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is a privilege to be able to contribute to this debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for bringing it to the House this afternoon. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who has done so much throughout this and the previous Parliament in the field of infectious

diseases. In the work he does not only in this country, but globally, he really is an effective champion for this country in this area.

Several hon. Members have already highlighted that infectious disease research and development is a real success story for the UK. It is particularly fitting that we should be having this debate in the last days of this Parliament the week before World Immunisation Week, which celebrates the progress that we have made in tackling some of the biggest global health threats through vaccination. Closer to home, as the Member of Parliament who represents Porton Down, I have campaigned over the past six years on Wiltshire's expertise in this area. I welcome the opportunity once again to focus the Government's attention on this unique asset to the UK and its potential to contribute to the global fight against infectious disease.

I want to make clear the importance of UK aid and leadership and discuss how effective the UK aid budget can be if it is used creatively against the risks that exist. We often hear criticism of our development assistance budget, and people legitimately question whether aid is always in our national interest, but this area is a clear example of where our security at home can only be achieved by investment abroad. Epidemics may start far from our shores, but diseases do not respect national borders, and this country and this Government must continue to show leadership.

The national risk register rightly identifies emerging infectious disease as one of the most serious threats that we face. With over 2 billion passengers travelling by air every year, it remains firmly in the interest of national security to invest in vaccinations that can prevent outbreaks hundreds of miles away. However, this is not an issue that Government funding or intervention alone can address. It requires intelligent collaboration between academia, industry and the public sector to identify new vaccines, license them, manufacture them and then get them to where they are needed. Too often they remain stuck in the pipeline as unproven concepts in research papers.

The Ebola epidemic in 2014 galvanised international efforts to quickly mobilise vaccines, but it also identified several critical problems in the chain of development. First, as others have mentioned, too little economic incentive exists for the private sector to invest in vaccine research for rare emerging infectious diseases. Secondly, licensing vaccines is challenging, which has a further impact on their commercial potential. Thirdly, the UK has a limited manufacturing capability that needs to be enhanced. The British Society for Immunology told the Science and Technology Committee that

“we lack a truly effective and co-ordinated platform for the research, development, and manufacturing of new vaccines and treatments against novel or emerging disease threats”.

It is welcome news that the Government are taking significant steps to address that deficiency with the creation of the UK Vaccine Network and the £120 million in overseas development assistance to develop vaccines for infectious diseases with epidemic potential.

It can cost more than £1 billion to take a vaccine through development from concept to market. In particular, smaller firms face challenges in the translational gap of taking products through licensing, where costs can easily reach £100 million. Targeted investment at the right stages of research can help bridge those gaps, but so too

[John Glen]

can the right facilities in the right location, which is where we come to my constituency and the opportunities that exist therein.

As early as 2014, before the Ebola outbreak, life science experts at Porton Down were advocating for it to become a national centre for translational vaccinology. Their judgment was based on the concentration of expertise that exists there and the natural synergies between Government agencies and the private sector. Porton Down is currently home to Public Health England's centre for emergency preparedness and response, the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory and a new £10 million science park that will be home to some of the most innovative biotechnology companies in the country.

Alongside those facilities, Salisbury district hospital and Southampton University, nearby, provide further complementary expertise in infectious diseases. Discussions are moving forward on how we can further strengthen that collaboration, perhaps through university status for Salisbury district hospital. Wiltshire has a large military footprint that will be further enhanced in the coming years, which could be of considerable benefit in tackling future outbreaks given the extensive involvement of our armed forces in the Ebola response. All those factors make Porton an ideal site for a Catapult centre for vaccine research and development.

Although the last Parliament took the decision to move much of the Public Health England footprint to Harlow, I am absolutely clear that we must maximise the significant potential that still remains at the facilities in my constituency. That is not merely about the interests of the local economy I represent in Wiltshire; it is about the effectiveness of the UK's world-leading life science research base. Let us use our assets and resources intelligently. Porton Biopharma was corporatised out of Public Health England in 2015 specifically to capitalise on Porton's long-established expertise in developing, manufacturing and bringing vaccines to market, and I am working closely with its leadership team to identify the best operating model for the company. I urge the Minister and his colleagues, as they consider the options for future vaccine development facilities in the UK, not to overlook the facilities and infrastructure that already exist and to build on them as far as possible.

Every year, existing vaccines avert an estimated 2 million or 3 million deaths globally. We all know that prevention is the best cure, and we must now ensure that the Government's financial commitments translate into meaningful improvements in vaccine research and development sites at Porton Down.

As all Members think about the election and their manifestos, and as they make representations to those who will put the manifestos together, I urge the Minister to think creatively about the often-discussed size of the ministerial budget for which he is in part responsible and to think carefully about how it can be maximised for international aid purposes while using this country's existing infrastructure. We can do so much more through such intelligent investment, and I hope there will be further opportunities for me to raise this issue if I am fortunate enough to be returned in the next Parliament.

3.34 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on securing this debate. He mentioned the three big killers worldwide—HIV, TB and malaria—and I will talk a little about them, too. The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) introduced the work on Ebola and Zika. He spoke about the possibility of a new worldwide killer disease, which could have devastating consequences, and how we might react to it. The increased UK Government funding to tackle neglected tropical diseases was mentioned by the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). Although that funding is very welcome, it is probably a drop in the ocean, given what is required to tackle these diseases properly. The hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) mentioned the Ebola outbreak, the difficulties in developing vaccines and treatments when there is no economic incentive to do so, and the lack of manufacturing facilities in the UK for such a huge programme.

Vaccination, antimicrobial drugs and improved hygiene mean that infectious diseases are not the massive killer they once were in the UK, but they are still a major health and economic burden for us. In other parts of the world, they are a major killer. We know that HIV and other forms of sexually transmitted infection are rampant just now in sub-Saharan Africa, but even in the UK 100,000 people are living with HIV. The number of cases of genital warts has decreased as a result of the increased use of the human papillomavirus vaccine, but rates of syphilis and gonorrhoea have significantly increased, with many cases being diagnosed late. Those conditions will have huge health implications, even here in the UK.

I wish to discuss the three diseases that the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall, talked about. Malaria is currently threatening half the world's population, and it claims the life of a child in Africa every minute, so 50 children will have died as a result of Malaria in Africa while this debate has been going on. That is a damning statistic. Tuberculosis has killed more than any other disease in history, and last year it killed 1.8 million people globally—5,000 people every day. TB—the world's leading killer—is airborne, which makes things difficult as it means it is hugely infectious. It is also increasingly resistant to drugs. TB does not just affect the developing world; we are seeing recurrences of it in major world cities, including London. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, our response to TB is chronically underfunded, but as he also said, for every \$1 invested in TB care, we have a yield of \$30, which means there should be an incentive—a moral and economic case—for increasing our efforts.

Alexander Fleming warned in 1945 that micro-organisms could develop resistance to his new antibiotics, and unfortunately that prediction has proven correct. A report published by the World Health Organisation in 2014 said that antibiotic resistance was now a global threat, on a par with other global threats. The inappropriate prescription of antibiotics affects our ability to tackle diseases. I found some statistics about Scotland, and the picture there reflects that in the rest of the UK. In 2014, 55,000—1% of our population—were taking antibiotics at any one time. The problem is that in up to 50% of those cases, antibiotics were unnecessary and the condition would have improved without them. It is essential that

we seek to educate people on the use of antibiotics, and that our GPs and others doing the prescribing use them far less.

Resistance is, of course, a natural biological phenomenon, but it is increased by the misuse of medicines and poor infection control. It is a particular concern with regard to antibiotics. Many of the medical advances we have made over recent years—such as organ transplantation and even chemotherapy—need antibiotics to prevent and treat the bacterial infections that such treatments can cause. Without effective antibiotics, even minor surgery and routine operations become high-risk here in the UK.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Members who secured the debate and apologise for having been unable to attend it from the start and take part more fully. I agree with a lot of the points my hon. Friend is making. Antimicrobial resistance is hugely important. I do not know whether she is aware of the antibiotic champion scheme, which encourages policy makers, decision makers and others in the professional field to sign up to promote the various steps we can take to tackle antimicrobial resistance. Those steps include completing the course of antibiotics, which is particularly important if people have taken them prophylactically when they have travelled in developing countries, to prevent malaria and so on.

Carol Monaghan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am an antibiotic champion and I have signed the pledge, but we need more people to not just be aware of that pledge, but take action and follow the steps that it includes.

Inaction on antimicrobial resistance will mean the loss of effective antibiotics, which will undermine our ability to fight infectious diseases, not only in the UK but worldwide. There are many challenges in the current antibiotic funding landscape. The expected returns and associated risks mean that antimicrobials are not competitive with other therapeutic areas. Innovative new antibiotics often have a low price, because society expects antibiotics to be available easily and to be economical, but that low price means that it is not in the interests of the pharmaceutical companies to go ahead and develop new antibiotics. We need to think about that. No new category of anti-TB drug has entered the standard treatment list since 1967—in 50 years—because although TB does occur in major cities around the world, it is still a poor-country disease and there is no economic incentive to provide new treatments. We should be pushing on that from a moral point of view, though, because there is a moral incentive.

When talking about development, we should not underestimate the effects of Brexit. As a couple of hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), have said, the EU nationals who work in research and development in the UK's world-leading centres must have their ability to remain here guaranteed. A large percentage of the staff at the University of Glasgow's Centre for Virus Research, which is in not my constituency but that of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), are EU nationals—postgraduate and postdoctorate researchers who are doing outstanding work in the field and advancing our knowledge and ability to treat disease.

Patrick Grady: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. I had the huge pleasure of visiting the Centre for Virus Research in my constituency just a couple of weeks ago. The staff there undertake world-leading work, so the point she is making about our need to continue to attract the best talent from the European Union is vital. She mentioned the moral case; does she agree that it is also vital that the funds, particularly those that come through the Government's commitment to the 0.7% aid target, are still available for research? I hope that when the Minister responds, he will be able to reinforce the Government's commitment to that 0.7% target, unlike some of his colleagues earlier today.

Carol Monaghan: I very much agree on the 0.7% target. That figure for aid is as important to tackling infectious diseases as guarantees for the EU nationals who are fighting infectious diseases worldwide.

3.44 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to reply to this debate on behalf of the Opposition. The debate was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). I congratulate him and the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) on their excellent work in this area. I declare an interest: my partner works in the NHS and higher education sector in research and diagnosis of neglected tropical diseases.

I will begin by addressing the Department for International Development's capacity for research and development to tackle infectious diseases, before turning to some of the international opportunities that lie ahead. The Labour party has a proud history of supporting international development. It created DFID and worked to bring development issues up the political agenda. We supported the Bill that enshrined our commitment to spending 0.7% of our gross national income on official development assistance, and I am pleased that, to date, the Government have adhered to that.

Earlier this month, Government figures projected that health would be the biggest spend of ODA over 2017 and 2018. That is the correct thing to do, as health is a public good and a building block of sustainable democracies and strong economies that work for all. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall, said, infectious diseases such as HIV, TB, malaria and neglected tropical diseases are all related to poverty and are often associated with stigma. Tackling them should be at the heart of our investment in global health. After all, the primary aim of ODA is poverty reduction.

Infectious diseases do not respect borders. In our increasingly globalised world, we must take steps, domestically and internationally, to address epidemics of infectious disease. That makes sense in the interests of global health security, too. Within the commitment to spend 0.7%, the Government have pledged to spend around 3% of the total on research and development. In last October's DFID research review, it was stated that this commitment, together with cross-Government investment in the Ross fund, would equate to £390 million over four years.

The Secretary of State has identified tackling infectious disease as one of the global challenges that her Department aims to address, but this challenge requires not only

[Catherine West]

revenue investments in healthcare programmes, but sustained investment in research and development to ensure that we have the right tools to take on the fight.

We have heard today about the inadequacy of current treatments, diagnostics and prevention strategies, and we are certainly not on course to meet the third global goal for sustainable development—to end epidemics of the major global infectious diseases by 2030. It specifically highlights the threat of HIV, TB, malaria and the neglected tropical diseases.

I have four questions for the Minister. First, will the Minister provide the House with a breakdown of resources allocated to infectious disease research and development? I hope that he will give us some figures today. The Ross fund, which is the £1 billion portfolio of investments mentioned in today's debate and announced in 2016, is jointly administered by DFID and the Department of Health. The fund was established to invest in research and development

“for drugs, vaccines, diagnostics and treatments to combat the most serious infectious diseases in developing countries”.

That Government commitment is correct, but there has been a lack of transparency on how exactly the fund is to be allocated, and as of last night, the website portal was still not live, and we are well into 2017.

Secondly, will the Minister provide the House with details of how the fund will be used to achieve its aim of combating the world's deadliest infectious diseases, namely HIV, TB and malaria? We want the details.

Members have mentioned product development partnerships, of which DFID has been a long-standing supporter under Governments of different political persuasions. These not-for-profit partnerships have proved to be a useful vehicle for bolstering DFID's research capacity; for gaining an understanding of the epidemics in communities most at risk; and for building research capacity in developing countries. With that in mind, may I pose my third question to the Minister? Can he reassure the House that DFID will continue to support product development partnerships and show the international leadership required to bring other donors back to the table and ensure that our investments to date are not lost? If my research is correct, we have lost some other donors to the programme. The question from the Labour Benches is: what are the Government doing to regain the leadership on that crucial question?

A vaccine for malaria has completed clinical trials and is due to be piloted in sub-Saharan Africa soon, but HIV is as yet without a vaccine, and although we might think that we are adequately protected from tuberculosis by our BCG—bacillus Calmette-Guérin—that vaccine actually dates back to the 1920s and is only moderately effective in preventing TB in young children, and it does not adequately protect adolescents and adults. We know that many people who begin courses of TB treatment in third-world countries do not complete them because of the cost. My fourth and final question is therefore this: will the Minister confirm that DFID will continue to support vaccine development in particular?

Let me turn to opportunities for international collaboration. Members have mentioned access to medicines. The recent report by the UN Secretary-General's high-level panel called for the cost of research and

development to be delinked from the price charged for medicines, and for pharmaceutical companies to reveal the details of their spending on research and development, marketing and drug promotion. That added layer of transparency would help to ensure fairness in drug pricing and assist international agencies more effectively to support drug and vaccine deployment in countries where they are needed.

The final, and perhaps most pertinent, issue that I wish to raise is drug resistance. We have talked at length about antimicrobial resistance, so I will not repeat what other Members have said. I hope that the Minister will speak about Lord O'Neill's report and his response to it.

In conclusion, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall began today's excellent debate by talking about the failure to address a number of these issues—not just antimicrobial resistance but TB, malaria and other tropical diseases. We have heard about the excellent work done by our all-party parliamentary groups. We have heard the commitment, at least across the Back Benches, to the 0.7% commitment on overseas development aid. I can certainly give an assurance on behalf of the Labour party on that front. I look forward to hearing the Minister respond to my four questions and share his knowledge—if he has any yet—of the manifesto commitment that his party will be putting forward in a few short weeks.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): What a pleasure it is to speak in this debate. Given recent announcements and national events, it is perhaps the last opportunity I will have to speak in a debate in my current role in the Department for International Development. Whatever happens, my interest in this work will certainly continue, even if my work itself does not, although of course I would like it to continue—it is hardly necessary for me to put that on the record. But it is subject to the will of the people and we will see what takes place.

In that context, let me start by recognising the tone of the debate and the approach taken by so many colleagues of different political persuasions, representing different parties and different parts of our country, to this important subject, and indeed to the range of issues that the Department covers. I have infrequently known an area of policy that has brought together so many people who care passionately about such important global issues, or about which there is so little disagreement or division across party lines. It stands as a testament to the sort of politics that many members of the public wish could be demonstrated more often, with Members bringing forward issues they care about in a constructive way, engaging with Ministers and getting a response that I hope they feel is equally constructive, because together we can make a difference to the lives of countless millions of people in some of the world's poorest countries facing some of the world's most challenging circumstances.

I was reminded of that not just this afternoon while listening to the contributions of hon. Members, but earlier this morning when I received a picture message from my sister, who this morning gave birth to Joy Megan Fiske, my new niece, at 10.54 am in North Tees hospital, which is just outside my constituency. It reminded

me how lucky we are to have such a good health service, to have it on our doorsteps, and to have all the advantages that living in this society brings. It stands in stark contrast to what I sometimes see when I travel in my ministerial role, given the challenges we have heard so much about today, and with which hon. Members are rightly concerned. Many people across the world do not have the safety and the advantages that we have, and they are, sadly, affected by many different challenges, one of the most significant of which is the topic of this debate: infectious diseases.

The scale of the challenge the global community faces is extraordinarily significant. In 2015, 10.4 million people fell ill with TB, and there were 1.4 million deaths. There were 212 million cases of malaria, with over 400,000 deaths. Some 2 million people were infected with HIV, and there were around 37 million people living with HIV and an estimated 1.1 million deaths from AIDS-related diseases. Neglected tropical diseases—a subject on which my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), like others, has been a passionate advocate and on which he spoke with great knowledge—affected 1.6 billion of the world's poorest people, causing disability, disfigurement and stigma, with an estimated 170,000 deaths.

As hon. Members recognised—they spoke about this in some detail—the situation is exacerbated by the global health threat of antimicrobial resistance, which is as real a threat to us here in the UK as it is to so many millions across the world. Antimicrobial resistance will lead to the greater spread of infections, longer illnesses, higher mortality, increased costs and greater economic impact from infectious diseases. It is a global challenge, and we all have a role in tackling it and an obligation to do so.

On that note, I would particularly like to congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), who has done sterling work in this area. I have enjoyed attending all-party group meetings with him, and I have enjoyed the constructive relationship we have had. He spoke with a great depth of knowledge and understanding about the scale of the challenges we face and about the need to continually develop and innovate and to ensure we do everything we can to find the solutions of the future. He spoke of his concerns about antimicrobial resistance, and he referred to a meeting he and I recently attended at which that very issue was explored at some length, particularly in the context of TB.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, although he has had to leave the Chamber for reasons that are perhaps related to other commitments. He has been a passionate advocate on these issues. He has been an excellent Member of Parliament, not just for his constituency but in terms of the topics he has pursued. He has been a great help to me in my role, as I try to take forward the portfolio for which I am responsible in DFID. He is a global leader in this area; he knows a great deal about that about which he speaks, and it is always a pleasure to listen to him.

Similarly, the sterling work of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on the Select Committee is always helpful and constructive, if sometimes a little challenging—but, then, that is what she is there to do. That work makes a real difference in helping the Department to shape policies in the spirit of the cross-party co-operation I spoke about earlier and

to ensure that we get the maximum value and benefit from the money we spend. That is incredibly important as we continue to make the case for a global Britain and for the work we do to help some of the world's poorest. That work makes a real contribution, and I congratulate my hon. Friend and look forward to working with her in the future.

I also congratulate, and recognise the comments of, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen). As ever, he was a passionate advocate for his constituency. He was able effortlessly—or at least with the appearance of effortless delivery—to weave constituency interests into an international debate, and he made some very good and valid points about ensuring that we use the assets we have to the best and maximum effect and utility to make a difference to some of the world's poorest and to retain our position as world leader in some of the areas of research about which he spoke. I thank him for his contribution, which was useful, and I look forward to continuing our discussions after the next seven weeks are over.

I also recognise the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), I thank her for her contribution. She spoke with great knowledge and insight about a wide range of topics, many of which hon. Members have taken an interest in over months, if not years, in this Parliament, and I am sure they will take an interest in them into the future. I hope to touch on many of those issues as I make my specific comments about some of the issues that have been raised in the debate.

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) who again demonstrated an understanding of the importance of the matters we are here to discuss. As always, she asked questions that were carefully calibrated to elicit the most helpful, useful and constructive responses. I always endeavour to respond to questions, even where I cannot answer them, and I will of course try to respond in my comments to some of the issues she raised.

Patrick Grady: Several Members have asked about the future commitment to the 0.7% aid budget target. As the Minister has said, the 2015 legislation was passed on the basis of cross-party consensus. Does he share my hope that that cross-party consensus continues into the next election and that all parties' manifestos will contain a commitment to the 0.7% target?

James Wharton: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that I am delighted to see cross-party consensus on any policy that the Government—whoever they may be, although I rather hope they will be of my party political colour following the next seven weeks of campaigning—might look to bring forward. I hope and trust that there will be cross-party consensus because I am sure that we will be doing the right thing.

Let me remind the House—not that it needs reminding—of the significant record of achievement and work in this area that we have demonstrated collectively in the UK over recent years. The UK pledged £1.1 billion towards the fifth replenishment of the global fund, including a commitment to double private sector contributions to tackling malaria up to a maximum of £200 million, making a real difference in key areas that affect the lives of countless millions of people—I mentioned

[James Wharton]

the huge numbers of individuals affected. The UK is one of the leading nations in tackling some of the diseases that have the most devastating effect on some of the world's poorest.

The UK will continue to use its position as one of the world's leading aid donors to challenge, change and reform the aid system, with our pledge to secure a demanding new £90 million performance agreement designed to push the already high-performing global fund to deliver even more. We do not just contribute to these organisations and make a difference through the money that we spend; we push them to reform and to be efficient, and we offer and share with them our expertise. That is something of which we should all be proud.

In November 2016, the Department for International Development launched its first ever research review highlighting Britain's global leadership in this field. The review set out how the UK will focus 3% of its budget per year over the next four years on research and innovation to help address the great global challenges of the 21st century. That 3% of our budget will be invested in high-quality, high-impact research. In addition, we will invest £357 million to fund research into infectious diseases through the Ross fund portfolio. This means that we are spending over £1.5 billion on research over the next four years, cementing and reinforcing the UK's place as a leading country in this field and delivering real change in some of the areas that hon. Members spoke about. UK-funded research is saving lives and changing lives all over the world. We have supported fast new tests for detecting tuberculosis, child-friendly malaria drugs now used in more than 50 countries, and a new rotavirus vaccine for preventing life-threatening diarrhoeal disease in infants. We are making a real difference to people who need this support most.

We are also a leader in neglected tropical diseases, which a number of hon. Members commented on. This week marked the fifth anniversary of the landmark London summit on NTDs and the high-level summit on NTDs in Geneva. At that summit, the UK made a clear commitment to continued investment that is both ambitious and focused on outcomes. We will invest £360 million in implementation programmes to treat and eliminate neglected tropical diseases between 2017-18 and 2021-22. That funding will provide 1 billion treatments for people in developing countries. We have played a leading role in tackling NTDs through our commitment to UK aid, through our leading NGOs, through our pharmaceutical companies' generous donations, and through our world-class universities and researchers all

working together. Since 2009, UK aid—working, for example, with GlaxoSmithKline and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine—has provided 217 million people with treatment against lymphatic filariasis. I apologise for my pronunciation; despite my mother's best intentions and desires, I did not make it to medical school. However, I do recognise the impact that much of this can have.

This week the UK also announced that we are investing in pioneering research to drive the development of drugs and diagnostics against neglected tropical diseases, including £48 million for the Drugs for NTDs initiative, £30 million for the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics, and £10 million for the Coalition for Operational Research on NTDs. That is making a difference.

Bill Gates said this week:

“UK aid and Britain's world-leading research institutions are playing a major role in protecting the world's poorest people from neglected tropical diseases and enabling them to live healthier, more prosperous lives...With our foundation, I am proud to partner with the UK on global health”.

The UK is leading on AMR, NTDs and global health challenges. We are making a real difference and all hon. Members should be proud of that.

4.5 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma: First, I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions, not only this afternoon but to the International Development Committee and other platforms whenever we have touched on these issues, which affect a large number of disadvantaged groups in poverty.

I also thank the Minister for his detailed response. I am sure that there is more to come—we have missed some issues—but I welcome the present Government's commitment to contributing 0.7% and look forward to that continuing under the future Government, whoever comes back after June. As has been said, the cross-party consensus was achieved many years ago and I am sure that it will continue.

It is unfortunate that this debate has come after the election announcement. When it was secured, a large number of colleagues on both sides of the House were willing to speak in it. Unfortunately they could not be here today, but their spirit and their contributions to other platforms have been recorded and have encouraged us. Thank you for your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered research and development on tackling infectious diseases.

Coty Manufacturing Plant (Seaton Delaval)

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

4.7 pm

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): I should have had this debate on the day of the terrorist attack, but unfortunately it was cancelled and I have had to wait three or four weeks for this replacement debate. That is a long time and things have developed in the factory since then.

It is always sad when a Member comes to Parliament to say that a lot of jobs have been lost in their constituency—in this case at least 450 and a lot of part-time jobs. The factory was built in 1962 by Shulton, which made beauty products and whose famous line at the time was Old Spice, which anyone who is as old as me will remember. To this day, it still does a line now and again, so it is still going. The factory's big product is Hugo Boss. I am told by some of the workers that they make it for 36p and sell it for about 40 quid, so there is a big profit to be made in this game.

But that was then. The factory has been a good employer. It was taken over in 1990 by Procter & Gamble, which made another success of it, and then came the merger—it is not a takeover—with Coty, an American company that does the same thing. It makes hair things for women and that sort of thing. I don't know everything it does, but it's all beauty stuff anyway. I think some of us need a bit of that as well.

I wonder why the merger was not a takeover, because as MPs we see takeovers all the time. With every takeover—no matter where the company is from, but especially if it is American—something happens to our companies. In the case of this merger, we have lost a factory. Then I was given a hint about reverse Morris trusts; I had never heard of them, but they are an American thing that can be used when an American company takes over a British one. In this case, we are talking about a merger, not a takeover. I have got the figures here, which show that the existing Coty shareholders own 48% of the combined company, while the Procter & Gamble shareholders own 52%. I gather from that information that Procter & Gamble is still the bigger shareholder. So this is a merger. I understand that the reverse Morris trust is a tax fiddle in America—not here, although we have got them—and it has something to do with a tax rebate on a factory that is going to shut. Of course, the factory that I am talking about is going to shut, so the company will get a tax rebate. I am a bit out of my depth, really, but there is information about it on Wikipedia, and some people might want to study it.

I am talking about a takeover—in my book—in the north-east of England, where unemployment is highest. The company has factories in Germany, France and Spain, and one in Ashford in Kent, but it has decided to shut the one in the north-east, in Seaton Delaval. That used to be a little village, but it has grown, and like the north-east it has a high unemployment rate. The workforce have argued that that decision has been made because it is cheaper to sack British workers than it is to sack German, French or Spanish ones, and the figures show that that is true. It is 20% more expensive to close a factory in Germany and 7% more expensive to close

one in France. I know that the factory in Ireland—it was in Tipperary, I believe—has been closed, but I do not know the figures for that. That is gone, and the factory in Seaton Delaval will go next year.

As far as I am concerned, this all boils down to the capitalist system and globalisation. Globalisation works for “them”; it does not work for the people. Globalisation has never worked for the people. The people are secondary, especially in a place such as Seaton Delaval, which has high unemployment. It is a question of balancing the books, I suppose. Coty is saying that now that it has merged with Procter & Gamble, it does not need the factory any more. So Coty has shut the factory, and 450 people are on the dole or looking for other work, just like that—with just a snap of the fingers. Fair enough, it will take a year to shut the factory, so people have a year to look for other work, but they have to wait to get their redundancy. They will be entitled to that, I suppose.

That brings me to the redundancy. There is a bit of con going on with the redundancy, and I wonder whether it is another way of making it cheaper to close the factory. When the factory in Ireland closed, the top earners—the ones who had been there the longest—were getting about £12,000, and they got a bonus of £5,000. That brought the average amount received by everybody in the factory to £9,500. I understand from the information from the Seaton Delaval factory that those who are made redundant might not get anywhere near that amount. Someone from the Coty factory in Seaton Delaval came to my surgery and said that he was quite satisfied with his redundancy—he had been there 18 years—but quite a few others have contacted me to say that they are not.

I wonder whether that is another chink in the armour that allows a company to close a British factory because it is cheap to do so, while they would not be able to do that in Germany or France. It is not a question of the European Union, although I did ask whether that had anything to do with it. The company said, “We export worldwide, so it is not a question of that,” and I am pleased about that.

The factory is run on a lot of workers on temporary and zero-hour contracts. We have to look at that as well. Factories in this country can be closed because they have temporary workers and workers on zero-hour contracts who are cheaper to get rid of. They are not employed by the factory but through agencies that will not give them any redundancy pay whatsoever. I believe that two agencies have been bringing people in. Anyone who has been working for them will receive nothing at all. It is all a bit of a mess as far as that is concerned.

It is always sad when these things are announced. It is always terrible when people lose their jobs. I went through it myself: I was at the coalmine before it shut in 1986. I got lucky a year later and got a better job—the one I am in now. I suppose I was one of the lucky ones.

I think it is a *fait accompli* that the plant will close. Coty has made up its mind to get rid of the factory in the north-east, an area with the highest levels of unemployment. It is not worried about the workers; it is just worried about balancing its books and making a profit. I hope the Minister can take a look at the factory. It is a big factory—it is not small—and it is going to be empty. The Germans do this better than us.

[Mr Ronnie Campbell]

When a factory is closed, they invest in it again. The first thing they do is invest in the factory and reopen it. They provide incentives.

I do not know what incentives the Government have to give when the factory eventually becomes empty—I cannot imagine it will be making Old Spice again—but it could be used and it could employ people. If the Government gave someone a big incentive, and I would like to hear what the Minister has to say on what incentives are available, if any, the factory could be started up again and reopened, giving back to the people working in Seaton Delaval their employment rights.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) on securing a debate on this important issue. I recognise the importance of the Coty manufacturing plant to his constituency and to the region as a whole. It has been part of the industrial fabric of the north-east, and the culture of this country, since the factory was opened by Shulton some 55 years ago. The announcement on 15 March that the company proposed to close the plant before the end of 2018 has clearly come as a bitter blow to the employees concerned, their families and the communities in which they live. I fully appreciate the uncertainty this will cause and its potential implications for the region.

The proposed closure is a commercial matter for Coty, but if the decision is confirmed at the end of the statutory consultation period the Government will ensure that those employees affected receive all available government assistance to help them get back into work as soon as possible. We will encourage the company to contact Jobcentre Plus as soon as possible to discuss appropriate support that can be delivered locally. The Jobcentre Plus rapid response service is delivered in partnership with a range of national and local partners. Where no partner support is available, there is dedicated funding that may be used to fill gaps in provision.

Decisions about appropriate support are made locally. This is because a decision that is based on the specific

redundancy situation, an individual's own transferable skills and experience and the availability of jobs in the local area is far more likely to be the right decision. Typical support for an individual might include matching to local known job vacancies, or helping to construct or improve CVs. Where there is scope to do so, support might be delivered on a group basis, for example by bringing redundant workers and employers together at a jobs fair.

My officials are part of a locally arranged and organised taskforce to ensure that the potential for continuing manufacturing on this site is maintained. The taskforce will be led by Northumberland's economic development company, Arch. We will work with it to explore opportunities for retaining manufacturing at this site. We will highlight the economic strengths and opportunities of the site and the workforce, as well as how to support economic growth opportunities. If closure is confirmed, I would expect the taskforce, working with the Department for Work and Pensions, Northumberland County Council and the North East local enterprise partnership, to support any affected workers to enable them to transfer as smoothly as possible into local growth sectors.

The Government are supporting the economy of the north-east by providing £380 million of local growth funding and improving infrastructure, skills, innovation and transport. That funding will lever in £300 million of public and private investment, and will create about 8,000 jobs. It forms a critical part of the newly refreshed strategic economic plan for the north-east, published by the local enterprise partnership last month.

We are also providing funding for the growth hub in the north-east in order to identify, target and support scale-up businesses more effectively. That will include the creation of a scale-up development model and the introduction of new systems to ensure robust measurement of impact on economic growth and productivity. It will have a significant impact in enabling companies that are ready to grow to expand quickly, and will ensure that there are more opportunities for those affected by Coty's decision.

Question put and agreed to.

4.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 April 2017

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

Emissions and Vehicle Type Approval

1.30 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Transport Committee, Volkswagen emissions scandal and vehicle type approval, HC 69, and the Government Response, HC 699.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

In September 2015, the American non-governmental organisation the International Council on Clean Transportation discovered that Volkswagen had been cheating on emissions tests around the world. The purpose of such tests is to ensure that vehicles comply with standards on nitrogen oxides—a poisonous emission. Volkswagen eventually admitted that its cheating started in 2006. Defeat device software was installed so that emissions were reduced only when the vehicle was being tested in the laboratory and did not reflect what happened on the road. The consequence was 11 million VW vehicles worldwide—1.2 million of them in the UK—pumping out poisonous gases at many times the acceptable level. This is an issue of consumer confidence and public health. Emissions standards exist to protect our health; each year, in the UK alone, nitrogen oxides cause 23,000 premature deaths.

The Select Committee on Transport was determined to find out what had happened. In October 2015 we first heard evidence from Paul Willis, the managing director of Volkswagen UK. It quickly became apparent that this was not just a case of one rogue company—it exposed deficiencies in the vehicle testing process. We launched our inquiry into VW emissions and vehicle type approval in November 2015. Our report published in July 2016 made findings in three major areas.

First, Volkswagen showed a cynical disregard in its treatment of European customers. We were astonished to hear Volkswagen apologise for what it had done, and subsequently deny that it had done anything wrong. Its continuing refusal to provide UK customers with any compensation remains deeply unfair. Secondly, the vehicle type approval process was not fit for purpose; riddled with conflicts of interest, its inadequacy meant that VW was able to cheat the emissions standards for years without detection. Thirdly, much needed to be done to improve the emissions tests overall. Like the type approval process, emissions standards have undergone review at EU level, but before the emissions scandal they had been allowed to become hopelessly out of sync with developments in vehicle technology.

We have continued to pursue this issue as regards Volkswagen's culpability for its deception and in pressing for fair treatment of its UK customers. Doing so raises the question of the adequacy, or inadequacy, of the action of UK authorities.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am listening carefully to the hon. Lady's impressive speech. Does she agree that the Government are out of pocket because a higher level of vehicle excise duty should have been paid? The vehicles were not as environmentally friendly as they were made out to be, so, in addition to the claims of individual consumers who were misled, the Government are short of tax revenue, which we desperately need for public services. Does she agree?

Mrs Ellman: I certainly do. Indeed, I will refer to compensation later, because it relates to the taxpayer, and the Government, as well as to individuals who had purchased vehicles. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

We have continued to pursue this issue both as regards VW's culpability for deception and in order to seek fair treatment of its customers and, indeed, the taxpayer. Let us look at what happened. Volkswagen's response to the uncovering of the scandal in the UK has been pitiful. I regret that the Department for Transport has so far been unable to convert its strong words condemning VW's behaviour into action that delivers concrete benefits for customers and the public, including fair compensation for both.

When Mr Willis first gave evidence to us, and when he came in January 2016, he told us that Volkswagen was committed to uncovering what had happened and making sure it never happened again, and the company apologised for its action. Indeed, if I recall, I do not think that Mr Willis and the company stopped apologising for what it had done for much of the session. We were told that it had hired the law firm Jones Day to investigate and produce a report that would be made public. We were told that the investigation involved 450 people looking through the equivalent of 50 million books. Great importance was attached to that; indeed, Mr Willis told us that he declined to answer a number of our questions because the issues would be dealt with in the Jones Day report that was to be made public and that we would clearly then have access to.

When we questioned the same Mr Willis in Committee two months ago we heard an entirely different story. He assured us that the Jones Day findings were contained in the statement of facts published by the United States Department of Justice as part of its deal with Volkswagen—a document that is 29 pages long—and told us that no other Jones Day findings would be published at all. He implied that a report might not even exist; it might just be this statement of facts—29 pages and not to be published. It stretches credulity that the findings of such an extensive investigation can be summarised in 29 pages. The statement of facts produced for the US Justice Department focuses on events in the USA, and Volkswagen itself repeatedly stated that the events in Europe are entirely different.

We pursued Mr Willis further to seek clarification of a number of points. One was that he appeared to speak in direct contradiction to the evidence given to us by the Minister, who followed him in the evidence session. We received a written response from Mr Willis. That response was not to my or the Committee's satisfaction; it did not clarify the issue. I have therefore written, on the Committee's behalf, to Hans Dieter Pötsch, chairman of VW's supervisory board, seeking further information and, I hope, clarification of where the truth lies.

[Mrs Ellman]

After so much effort, Volkswagen's refusal to release in full the findings of the report that we were told so clearly would be published is deeply suspicious. I wonder what the company has to hide and why it is doing this. Mr Willis had told us at an earlier point that it was "implausible" that a senior Volkswagen employee would have known about the defeat devices; indeed, we were told that the scandal originated with a few rogue engineers. Clearly, that view is not shared by the American and German authorities, which are actively investigating several senior VW employees. Oliver Schmidt, who gave evidence to our Committee last year, is among those now being investigated in the States—a situation that hardly inspires confidence.

If VW's position is that the scandal was caused by a few rogue engineers, it must release the full Jones Day findings to prove that contention. If VW refuses to do so, I ask the Department to act. I recognise that the Department has asked for the Jones Day report, but as far as I am aware, it has not been produced. Will the Minister update us on his efforts to secure the full Jones Day findings and place them in the public domain? Also, what discussions has he held with his American counterparts about the possibility of sharing the information already given to the US judicial system?

Compensation for UK customers is a critical issue. Mr Willis was full of apologies on the company's behalf when he first gave evidence in 2015, but since then, his tune has changed dramatically. In fact, it is now VW's position, as Mr Willis stated to us in Committee a short time ago, that the company has done nothing wrong in the UK or the rest of Europe and that therefore no compensation is due.

That is treating the UK with contempt. I remind hon. Members of the position on compensation in other countries. In the US, Volkswagen has agreed to provide each owner with between \$5,000 and \$10,000, while a deal agreed in Canada will give owners between \$4,000 and \$6,000 US. Here, they will get nothing at all. Why has no action been taken by the Department for Transport, the Serious Fraud Office or the Competition and Markets Authority? I have asked that question in the past and been told that the issues were being considered, but as far as I am aware, no action has been taken; I hope that the Minister can give me the latest information.

A few moments ago, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) raised the issue of compensation. Can the Minister update us on whether he has secured the additional £1 million that he demanded from Volkswagen? That is one of the issues over which we are in dispute with Mr Willis: the Minister told us that the company had not given the Department what it asked for, but Mr Willis appeared to tell us that it had. We are still trying to clarify that issue through correspondence, so if the Minister could help us on it when he replies, it would assist us very much.

I would also be grateful for an update on European Commission proceedings. The officials who appeared before the Committee in February spoke of an ongoing dialogue. What has that delivered, and what action will be taken? I am aware that the Commission proposes to take action against the UK Government for failing to act in relation to its responsibilities to enforce appropriate standards; it would be helpful to know the current position.

I will briefly address the technical measures implemented by Volkswagen in the wake of the emissions scandal. Again, Mr Willis recently told the Transport Committee that the fix had no impact on real-world emissions, and we were told that nothing was wrong. He was asked why, if nothing was wrong, the vehicles were being fixed, and we were told that the sole reason was to ease customers' minds about how vehicles had got through the testing programme—the company is spending money on so-called fixing, but the company did nothing wrong and is doing it only to ease customers' minds. I find that completely implausible. That cannot be the situation. We are also told that the technical measure had no impact on vehicles' performance. I said to Mr Willis that if that was correct, surely he would have provided a warranty to cover the technical measure. I know that the Department has been seeking that warranty, but as far as I am aware, the company has done nothing.

I receive numerous communications almost daily from members of the public who report that their vehicle has been impaired since they had the fix applied. A closed Facebook group bringing together people who have been affected now has 1,400 members. Many have told me about the stress of suddenly finding that their vehicle was not working after the measure was applied. They relayed instances of the vehicle going into limp mode, or not going above a certain speed; in one case, it happened on a motorway, and other cars had to swerve to avoid a collision. In many instances, when customers raised concerns, they were told that it was a coincidence and asked to pay hundreds or even thousands of pounds for the fault created by the so-called fix to be investigated and put right.

Mr Willis told the Committee that he would give us an assurance on that matter and said that it could not be the case, but that the company would investigate free of charge all reasonable concerns raised by VW owners after the fix was applied. I suspect that Mr Willis's definition of "reasonable" might differ from his customers'. Will the Department monitor what happens in that regard?

The scandal was not only a case of a rogue company; it could never have happened if the regulatory structures for vehicle type approval had been adequate. We must remember that the cheating was uncovered not by a regulator, but by a US non-governmental organisation, the International Council on Clean Transportation. European Community whole vehicle type approval is the process ensuring that vehicles meet the relevant environmental, safety and security standards. An approval authority—in the UK, the Vehicle Certification Agency—certifies that the vehicles meet the relevant standards. Approval authorities work on the basis of information collected by technical services organisations that witness the test and collate the information.

As well as being an approval authority, the VCA provides technical services to manufacturers. The Committee concluded that that constitutes marking one's own homework; it is a clear conflict of interests. In addition, the VCA competes with other European approval and technical services agencies across Europe for business from car manufacturers. The incentive to be unduly lenient on car manufacturers is clear. That conflict of interest works against consumers and ultimately damages public health.

In their response to our report, the Minister told us of various measures being considered to manage potential conflicts of interest, including more independent assurance

and audit and increased training for emissions engineers. We were also told that an end-to-end review of the technical service process was taking place. Can the Minister update us on the outcome of that review? What plans have been put in place for type approval as part of the Brexit negotiations? We currently use European standards; what will happen after Brexit? Is that part of the negotiations? Is it expected that the UK and EU countries will continue to accept vehicles type approved by one another? How will it work?

Our report emphasised the importance of in-service surveillance, or the process of spot-checking vehicles on the road to ensure that their pollution performance is still within an acceptable range. The Minister told us that a new, robust system of in-service surveillance was being implemented, which is to be welcomed, but in the first instance, that surveillance will focus on new vehicles entering the market. Can the Minister update us on the performance of the new market surveillance unit? What progress has been made in ensuring that that unit operates beyond new vehicles?

A gap exists between real-world emissions and those emitted in the laboratory; it is the result of developments in technology and flexibilities allowed in the test procedure. Can the Minister update us on the progress of setting the final requirements for Euro standards? Is he satisfied that they are sufficiently robust? The Department told us that it had written to the European Commission to press for further improvements. What has the response been?

A year and a half after the emissions scandal came to light, Volkswagen has still not been held to account. Instead of providing the information, compensation and warranties that have reasonably been requested of it, Volkswagen maintains that it has done nothing wrong. Surely it is time that the Minister committed to using the powers available to him.

The scandal goes much further than Volkswagen. In the course of our inquiry, it became abundantly clear that the type approval system and emissions standards were not fit for purpose. Their support for manufacturers at the expense of ordinary people, consumers and public health was well known, but nothing was done about it before the emissions scandal erupted. I ask the Minister today for clear information on how the situation has improved.

The Volkswagen emissions scandal was shocking, but it has shone a light on deficiencies in the testing process. UK consumers are being treated with contempt. What action is the Minister taking to correct this outrageous situation?

1.51 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I shall speak only briefly, because the speech by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), the Chair of the Transport Committee, was all-encompassing and forensic in its detailed examination of the issue.

The Minister, his Parliamentary Private Secretary—my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer)—and I all believe in free enterprise and salute what business does to pay for public services. However, that is not a blank cheque from the Conservative Benches. As the Prime Minister has said eloquently on a number of occasions, we believe in holding business to account and in holding it to high standards. Given what

the Chair of the Transport Committee said, there are genuine questions to be asked. Why are Canadian and American consumers already receiving compensation, while UK consumers are not? Indeed, in my view the Government are out of pocket because of the tax revenue they should have received.

We all know that there is a huge need for infrastructure investment for the ultra-low emission vehicles of the future. I know that the Minister is passionate about the subject. He shares my desire to roll out new-energy vehicles—as they are called in China—across the country. That roll-out will require considerable public investment. Volkswagen is Europe's largest car manufacturer; it is not a poor company. I would like to see UK consumers being put back in pocket, the Government receiving the tax revenue they have lost, and a contribution made towards the infrastructure that this country will need in order to roll out the clean-energy vehicles of the future.

I have great confidence in my right hon. Friend the Minister. He is indeed a friend; he is a fine Minister and cares deeply about his briefs. He will have been as concerned as I was to hear the report that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside put before the House in such an exemplary manner today.

1.53 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): It is a pleasure to appear under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) and her Committee on its excellent report. Her speech set out lucidly the problems that have been uncovered.

Clearly the actions of the company in this matter are utterly reprehensible and have seriously undermined confidence in a company that was previously a byword for reliability. In particular, the actions of Mr Willis before the Committee will have done nothing for Volkswagen's future reputation in the UK and probably further afield. Nobody would argue with the Government's response to the report when it states:

“The Government strongly agrees with the Committee that the actions of Volkswagen were completely unacceptable and is also concerned by Volkswagen's more recent statements that underplay the severity of its cheating.”

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) alluded to the fact that in Canada and the United States the company has come up with money and compensated consumers. He also mentioned the loss of tax revenue and perhaps vehicle excise duty, but I suggest that the impact on the public purse has been much wider. Because emissions have been much higher than we were led to believe, there will have been an impact on public health. Addressing that impact will have been funded by the taxpayer throughout the United Kingdom. Volkswagen's actions have put people's health in danger and caused greater Government expenditure, and the Government should take that into account in dealing with the matter. The same situation will apply in many countries throughout Europe that have a public health service.

The emissions scandal also feeds into the current debate about the future of diesel vehicles and their impact on air quality in our cities. Clearly, in order to have a rational debate on the matter, we need confidence in the data about the level, as well as the impact, of emissions. The actions of the company have destroyed much of the confidence about the levels of emissions

[Mike Weir]

that have actually been generated. Strangely enough, I received an email this week on that very subject from a constituent, Neil, who has a diesel vehicle:

“For the past two decades I have driven a diesel car, on the advice that this type of fuel was the best environmental choice. I am now in the position of being considered the demon of the roads owing to the pollution—particulates and nitrogen oxide—released by these cars. This is due to the car companies’ fraudulent use of pollution cheating systems... I would like to be sure that I will not be the one who ends up footing the bill to change my polluting diesel. Are there any UK schemes being planned to help people like me, who are victims of this scam?”

Perhaps the Minister might care to elucidate. That email illustrates that ordinary people who have tried to do the right thing and get vehicles that are less polluting have ended up with vehicles that appear to be even greater polluters than the petrol cars they drove before. That undermines public confidence and our efforts to reduce our emissions and clean up our air. Volkswagen cannot escape responsibility for what it has done.

I note that the Government response to the report states:

“We found no evidence that other manufacturers we tested were using a cycle recognition device like Volkswagen.”

That may be so, but it has become apparent since the Volkswagen scandal broke that many manufacturers have been using devices to similarly reduce or hide the true emissions of their vehicles. For example, *The Guardian* reported last year on concerns about Mercedes-Benz, Honda, Mazda and Mitsubishi, and the American magazine *Road and Track* reported on concerns about some of the same companies, as well as Opel, several American manufacturers, Fiat, PSA and Renault. It also reported that a class action had been instigated in the US against Mercedes-Benz. The scandal may go much wider than just Volkswagen. We have no idea what impact it has had on consumers in the UK or on air quality in many of our major cities.

All of that shows that we face a very large-scale and widespread problem with the data claimed by motor manufacturers, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside alluded to. Owners of diesel vehicles have been put in an impossible position. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s comments on whether the Department has looked at the wider issue and at manufacturers other than Volkswagen to ascertain the true extent of the problem. It seems to me that tackling Volkswagen is a start, but unless we get to the heart of the problem, find out how large it is and tackle it with all manufacturers, we will face an ongoing and serious problem for consumers and public health.

The Committee’s report and the hon. Lady’s speech have rightly drawn attention to the difference in the approach taken by Volkswagen in the US and Europe. Again, few would dispute recommendation 3:

“Volkswagen’s treatment of customers in Europe compared to its treatment of customers in the US is deeply unfair.”

The Competition and Markets Authority was alluded to, but the Government response makes the point that the CMA has no powers to intervene, as the vehicles concerned are mostly vehicles sold prior to the CMA getting appropriate powers. Given that all this apparently goes back to 2006, that is a heck of a number of vehicles on our roads that are affected.

The Government now talk of joint action with prosecutors across Europe. Can the Minister say whether that will continue? Obviously we are in the process of negotiating withdrawal from the European Union. Will that have an impact on any such action? I suspect that this is not going to be sorted in the next few months, so it may well have an impact in the future. Comment has also been made on the possibility of action under the Sale of Goods Act 1979.

Andrew Selous: Is there a reason why the United Kingdom and European legal systems should necessarily be so much slower than the American and Canadian ones? Drivers in those two countries have already received compensation. If that can happen in north America—somewhere that takes jurisprudence extremely seriously—surely it can happen in the United Kingdom and Europe in the same type of timescale?

Mike Weir: I see absolutely no reason why it cannot. Obviously the American consumer organisations are slightly different from our own and seem to be better at getting things into court and sorted out much more quickly than is the case under our system, but that should not be the case. Volkswagen, which clearly reacted quickly to the problem it had in the United States—presumably because of the damage to its reputation and market share in the US—should have done the same in Europe. That prompts the question as to why Volkswagen thought that it did not need to do that in Europe.

It is imperative that the UK, along with other European jurisdictions, takes action to show that they are not immune from what is happening in the United States. We must put consumer rights at the heart of this, as well as taxpayers’ rights, because the taxpayer faces a huge and ongoing bill, probably for many decades, due to what has happened over the last few years.

I was commenting earlier about the possibility of action under the Sale of Goods Act 1979. I was a solicitor before I came to this place—some years ago now, admittedly—and that is not an easy route for individuals to take. The Government note they are not privy to the terms of the contracts between individual owners and the company, but many individual owners will have contracts with the third parties who sold them the cars and will not generally have contracts directly with the company, although some may, depending on the type of contract.

However, the most problematic area is simply the impracticability of any individual car owner taking on a massive multinational such as Volkswagen in the civil courts. Such actions are not cheap at the best of times and when such a huge technical issue is involved, the costs are likely to escalate quickly. Also, whatever the sum that an individual may be claiming, there is an incentive for the multinational company to fight the case, because it is not dealing with just one such case but potentially thousands of such cases. There would be a real David and Goliath battle, and it is difficult to see how any individual would have any chance of success.

Mrs Ellman: The hon. Gentleman is making some very pertinent and interesting points. The change in Volkswagen’s attitude towards the Committee, from the first time they appeared before us to the last time,

two months ago, was dramatic. Initially, they were full of apologies, but on the last occasion they said they had done nothing wrong. I can only feel that that is because they believe that they have got away with this and will not be challenged. Does he agree that that makes it even more important that the Department for Transport considers its powers to challenge, so that individuals are not left isolated and vulnerable?

Mike Weir: I was just about to make that very point. It is not within the power of the individual to take on these companies. It seemed clear to me from Mr Willis's attitude when he last appeared before the Committee that Volkswagen would try to defend its actions, if it says it has done nothing wrong, which would leave the individual consumer in an impossible position. It will only be by Governments—not only in the UK but in other European nations—acting together and going after the company, and making certain that there is a compensation scheme akin to the one that has existed in the United States and Canada, to compensate ordinary victims of this scandal in the United Kingdom.

This is not an isolated case; there are other scandals in the motor industry. For example, there is the Vauxhall Zafira, which kept bursting into flames. The motor industry is an important industry in many parts of the United Kingdom and it may well become even more important as things progress. However, it must get its house in order, because if these scandals continue, there will be a great loss of confidence in many of these vehicles among ordinary consumers. I would ask the Minister to consider that and also to say whether he has discussed with other European jurisdictions the possibility of a joint and multilateral approach to getting a consumer compensation scheme to cover the European Union, or at least several countries together.

2.5 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr McCabe.

I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), who has pursued this issue with characteristic vigour in her role as the Chair of the Transport Committee. It is absolutely right that we are having this debate on the back of the Committee's report, because since the case broke back in September 2015 we have had Committee hearings, and the issue has been raised frequently at Transport questions; I am sure the Minister remembers those exchanges. Today, however, is a welcome opportunity to hear from the Government what they intend to do about it.

This issue is extremely important and we must ensure that our efforts to hold Volkswagen to account are not side-tracked, either by Brexit, which seems to be all-consuming for some parts of Government, or by the imminent general election. It is also important because the relationship between emissions and air quality is a fundamental issue—we discussed air quality in this Chamber only yesterday. It is increasingly clear to us that despite the Minister's warm assurances that air quality overall is improving, parts of the country are suffering an air quality crisis, which in some places is literally choking some of our towns and cities. I have no doubt that Members from all parties are looking forward to the Government publishing their third attempt at an

air quality strategy soon, particularly because a High Court judge described their last two efforts as “woefully inadequate.”

There are two distinct issues that we are discussing today that feed into the air quality crisis: first, the accuracy of emissions testing, and secondly, as we have heard, there is VW, which, despite the relative leniency of the EU testing regime, actively distorted its tests. I was greatly taken by the comments of the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) about how recompense could perhaps be made by one of these major companies so as to improve our air quality in the future.

It has been known for a while now that emissions tests are inaccurate. Given the challenges of technology and the importance of getting the variables as similar as possible for all tests, it should have been clear earlier that there was a yawning gap between the laboratory tests and the emissions produced in real driving conditions. Despite what the Government say, it is hard not to conclude that there has been significant dragging of heels in facing up to this matter.

I have been told that, prior to the VW case in July 2015, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was briefing Members of the European Parliament to oppose measures on real driving emissions testing, and it is still not clear to us whether the DFT was consulted on that issue. Perhaps we can be told whether it was consulted or not. It was only when the VW scandal became a concern for the wider public and attracted publicity that the Government were compelled to act and support the changes to the EU testing regime last year.

A highly critical European Parliament commission of inquiry concluded last month that EU member states, including the UK, strongly opposed the more ambitious proposal by the Commission for conformity factors for limits on oxides of nitrogen. The commission of inquiry also said that it remained “debatable” whether conformity factors in the new real driving emissions procedures were justifiable from a technical perspective, given that several independent tests on Euro 6 cars are already achievable under existing standards. The commission also recognised that there are standards in the world that are much stricter than those in Europe. We know that EU car manufacturers already place diesel cars on the US market that must comply with the NO_x limits in the US, which are much lower than in the EU, so it can be done.

It is crucial the Government are not complacent about any of this. For the sake of public health, we cannot afford to have open-ended emissions breaches. As well as advocating for research into measuring capabilities, there must be a constant review of the regime to ensure that manufacturers do not find ways of avoiding limits through other means, and that is putting it kindly.

In the longer term, the Government must be a leader outside the EU and press for a whole new approach that focuses entirely on real-life driving scenarios. Will the Minister set out his plans for reviewing the mechanisms? Will he commit to bringing down the conformity factor as soon as possible? Will he set out his plans on type approval outside of the EU and tell us what they are? The Government said in response to the Transport Committee report that they are “considering new research to develop ideas for real world testing of CO₂”

[Daniel Zeichner]

and other pollutants. Where has that research got to? Will he make clear his party's commitments on air quality domestically? I have to say, I felt he did not set out the full detail in this Chamber yesterday. Will the strategy include investment in greener buses and public transport? Will it include a review of plug-in grants and excise duty rates for electric vehicles? Will it include measures to reduce other barriers to electric vehicle uptake? Will it include extending clean air zones to more local authorities?

Of course, the public outrage is around the VW scandal. What VW did undermined not only trust in VW, but public trust in the whole automotive industry. A year and a half on since the case, we have seen a settlement of almost \$15 billion for mis-selling nearly 500,000 vehicles to US customers, but in the UK there have been neither financial nor legal penalties to VW for the deception of 1.2 million vehicle owners. The Transport Committee has rightly been damning of the Department for Transport's ambivalence towards the legality of VW's actions, despite the strong words in the media recognising that the Department took five months before seeking preliminary legal advice on a prosecution. I strongly endorse the demands made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside, particularly on disclosing the data that seem to have been available in America, but not here. It is very important that we know.

The Government still have questions to answer, particularly on what they knew before 2015, what they have done besides the type-approval changes and what their plans are to actually hold VW's feet to the fire, rather than just promising to do so. Before the scandal broke in the US, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre raised concerns over the possible use of defeat devices back in 2013. Why was such an allegation not followed up? The Government have since established a market surveillance unit within the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, but the European Parliament report suggests that failure to organise a surveillance system beforehand constitutes a contravention of EU law and maladministration. Does the Minister therefore expect legal proceedings from the Commission to continue? How is the Department for Transport progressing with introducing requirements for manufacturers to disclose their emissions control strategies? Will that be affected by any interventions by the European Union?

Despite talk of steely fists and velvet gloves from the Minister in previous debates and monthly meetings with the Department, it seems that VW has not budged an inch in recompensing drivers in our country. Any technical changes that VW is voluntarily carrying out are supposedly to remove any doubt from customers' minds and are promised not to affect vehicle performance, fuel consumption or driveability, but that is not the experience of some drivers, as we have heard. As my hon. Friend said, if nothing is wrong, why is VW doing that? What is the cost of letting VW sort out these problems in its own time? Can the Minister outline where we have got to with VW?

There are other concerns that the Government must address too. Despite years of false emissions data, written answers to shadow Transport Ministers suggest that the Treasury has found no miscalculation of VED rates. That point was raised by the hon. Member for

South West Bedfordshire. The Government are clearly out of pocket. Can the Minister confirm that that is the case and tell us what he is doing about it? What other avenues has he considered in seeking remuneration from VW? We know that he has been in touch with the criminal counsel, but he has so far chosen not to disclose advice in order to avoid undermining ongoing investigations. When was the last time he sought advice? Can he share with us any more on that? Finally, he visited Germany last month to discuss the matter with counterparts. What was the outcome of those talks?

In conclusion, we have a lot of questions, to which I hope we will get answers. The development of an accurate emissions testing regime is fundamental to improving air quality and public health and must be a priority for the Department. The Government must now give strong support to reducing conformity factors and strive for a better testing regime. They must also outline their plans on air quality and emissions reductions. On VW, it really is time for the Minister to assure not just this House, but vehicle owners and those suffering poor air quality that he has more than strong words to offer. We need action, and we need results. I trust he will not disappoint.

2.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), on securing this important debate and bringing this subject to our attention once again. Let me be clear—I apologise if this is repetition, but repetition from one's own mouth always seems like re-affirmation or re-emphasis; repetition only seems to come from other people's mouths—that the Government continue to take this matter extremely seriously.

As you would expect, Mr McCabe, I want to deal with a number of the specific points raised in the debate, but if I may, I will first address a couple of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) in his remarks, which preceded my contribution. I do not want to be distracted from the main subject of the debate, and you would not allow me to be, Mr McCabe, but air quality is relevant, and we debated it yesterday in this place. The hon. Gentleman asked a number of specific questions. He will understand if I am circumspect about the exact details of what the draft plan on which we will consult will look like, but I am prepared to say—it is right that I am open with him and this Chamber—that I think it is important that public transport is part of our response to the air quality challenge.

My view, which I have made crystal clear in the Department, is that if we can get fleet purchasing and public transport, including buses and taxis, in a better place in respect of emissions—by that I mean getting those kind of vehicles moving to a low-emission metric, although I have no fixed idea of exactly what that might look like—we can make quite a significant difference in the worst-affected areas in particular. He will know that we have taken a zonal approach in the past, and I see no reason why that should change fundamentally.

That is not to say that air quality is not a national concern. The policy will, of course, be a national policy, but it will be focused on the zones where air quality is at its worst, because we know that air quality is closely

related to wellbeing. It has a deleterious effect on health, particularly for vulnerable people—the sick, young children, elderly people and so on—and its effects are exaggerated in urban places, unsurprisingly, because of the density of traffic and population and the coincidence that that brings.

Similarly, the hon. Gentleman knows that that plan will be a matter for consultation. A draft will be published, and we will consult widely on that draft with Members of this House, local authorities in the worst-affected areas and others who have interests in this business. We are genuinely open-minded about that. I have worked very closely with my colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I have been meeting weekly with my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), which is a great pleasure in itself, but is also a productive, professional business. She and I have engaged our officials to ensure that we get a joined-up approach to this issue.

Of course, DEFRA leads on air quality, but as transport is so salient in finding the right solutions, we are very conscious that there has to be a close association between DEFRA's perspective and ours, and that of other Government Departments. We have been in close liaison and association with them too. It will be an open-minded approach, founded on a clear determination to do the right thing.

Mr McCabe, we did not enjoy the pleasure of your chairmanship yesterday, so I hope you will not mind if I inform you and others of what I said then. It is absolutely my view that we must not, in our determined efforts to tackle air quality, disadvantage those who are already worse off—I am thinking in particular of the less well-off drivers of older diesel vehicles. We have to be careful that an unintended consequence of any otherwise efficacious policy should not put those people into a very difficult position indeed. Yesterday, in the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), we talked about a targeted scrappage scheme, as that was the case he made. I say now what I said to him: of course, we always welcome contributions to the discussion. He made his contribution and that will be fed into our work and our thinking. If one is to have a genuine, open-minded consultation, one must take into account a range of views and opinions, ideas and schemes. Forgive me for repeating—but that did not sound any worse than it did yesterday, at least not from my perspective.

The other matter that the hon. Member for Cambridge raised, and quite properly so, was the upcoming changes to testing. It is important to be crystal clear about what the new emission tests are and why they matter. The changes introduce a compliance criterion that is defined as a conformity factor. The conformity factor is the ratio of emissions recorded during the real world test, which is the limit on the laboratory test that must not be exceeded during the real world, on-road testing.

In the proposal, the requirement for the real driving emission tests is phased in in a two-step process, to allow manufacturers time to bring compliant products to the market. Step one mandates a conformity factor of 2.1 for all new model types by 2017. Step two achieves full compliance with Euro 6 standards for all new model types in January 2020, with an additional conformity factor margin of 0.5 to take into account measurement uncertainties. That proposal means that after 2019 all new models brought to the market must

meet the Euro 6 limits in the real world tests. That is the bottom line, with a margin for measurement error of the test equipment. The hon. Gentleman asked what the UK's position had been on that. I can tell him, and I think he will be reassured, that the UK pushed very hard in the negotiations for the introduction of those changes on the timescale I have described. We were anxious to make sure that there was no delay in moving to those real world tests.

That point gives me an opportunity to deal with some of the specific matters raised by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside and others and to say a word about how we got to where we are on air quality and emissions. I do not see the air quality challenge as a partisan matter, taking it as read that Members across the House take it seriously. Bluntly, the challenge has been compromised, and I would go so far as to say worsened, by the failure of the EU vehicle emissions regulations to deliver the anticipated reductions in air pollution—we know that now—and by neglect and cheating by some diesel car makers to avoid reducing emissions as they were supposed to. The pollution limits in EU law agreed under the Labour Government in directive 2008/50/EC were based on the assumptions that improvements in vehicle technology were deliverable. Although it is true that in the UK we meet the majority of our air quality limits, it has become clear that, like 17 other countries, we breach annual targets for nitrogen dioxide.

Yesterday I committed to make available to those who were in the Chamber then—my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) is one of them, and the hon. Member for Cambridge is another—the breakdown of the sources of that gas by transport type, which includes shipping, trains and all kinds of other sources. I will make that available to other Members present today, as I think it will be helpful in informing future consideration. However, we are certain, and other Members of the House will be too, that diesel vehicles are a significant part of the problem. They are not the only part, but they are significant. It is right that the hon. Gentleman emphasised buses and other vehicles, because we often think that is about only cars. It is about not just cars but light goods vehicles, HGVs, buses and so on.

The failure of Euro standards and the failure therefore of the anticipated improvements to air quality are a pressing problem across Europe. I hesitate to say it is a scandal, but I would say that it is a fundamental failure of the approach of the EU. As in so many other areas of our national life, we have been injuriously affected by the European Union. How wonderful that we will not have to face that prospect in the future as we leave.

Mrs Ellman *rose*—

Mr Hayes: Oh, I have provoked the Chairman of the Select Committee to intervene.

Mrs Ellman: I am sure that the EU is not without fault, but national Governments are responsible for their own certification systems, and our certification system and the type approval process has been found severely wanting. I hope that the Minister will tell us in due course what he as Minister in this country is going to do about that.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is of course right, and I will say more about that. She will know that some of the work we have been doing domestically, as well as that which we have been doing to change assumptions pan-nationally, is born of the fact that we agree with her that we can and must do more. Although it is true that a contributory factor to the problem has been the failure of the standards, she is right to say that there are other things that we do and can do better.

Let me move to the substance of today's debate. A good starting point would be to begin where the hon. Lady began, which is with what Volkswagen actually did. Benjamin Disraeli said:

“Circumstances are beyond human control, but our conduct is in our own power.”

In our judgment, Volkswagen used a defeat device, as defined by EU regulation. The cycle recognition software that VW employed in the course of the albeit imperfect tests, which I described earlier, was a defeat device. We do not consider that any of the exceptions to the prohibition of defeat devices apply here, or that Volkswagen has established any justification for the use of that device. We do not think there is any get-out-of-jail card for Volkswagen, despite what it claimed or said to the Transport Committee. On that basis, the Department's view is that Volkswagen used a prohibited device. I have been consistently clear that Volkswagen must therefore face appropriate consequences for the manipulation of those emission tests, and I am confident that progress is being made in the jurisdictions where the major wrongdoing occurred.

A number of contributors to this debate asked me about the work we are doing across jurisdictions, including Germany, for obvious reasons, and the USA. We intend to discuss this further with US and German counterparts. We have also been working with the European Union, because a number of EU countries were affected by the consequences. We plan, wherever we can and at whatever point, to ensure that the action that is taken by others is consistent with the action we take. We will not be laggards. Far from it: we want to encourage that sort of joint approach at every opportunity. Those discussions are continuing, and I hope they will be productive.

The issue of EU-wide action was also raised. I have to say that, at this juncture, the EU as a body does not seem to have moved with any great enthusiasm, and certainly not with any alacrity. That is why we plan to engage particularly with German counterparts. That is where the wrongdoing largely took place and where much of the evidence lies, as the Secretary of State said when questioned previously. Action across national boundaries would be the most effective approach. To be clear, it is not the only action we should take, but it is an important part of the determined approach we intend to continue to adopt.

Andrew Selous: Does the Minister have an idea of the timescale for when consumers and even the Government might receive some form of compensation?

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend may have heard—I heard about it recently—that we are going to have a general election. The problem with that, in terms of the business of Government—he knows this well as a former very distinguished Minister with whom I worked very closely in office—is that it limits what Ministers can do and say.

I have to be cautious in setting out an immediate timetable, given the events that are going to take place over the coming weeks. While this House is sitting—I remain a Minister through the election process—I will press my officials very hard, not least as a result of this debate, to ensure that there is no hesitation or undue delay within the bounds that I mentioned.

My hon. Friend is right—I can see where his mind is going—that we must not have a couple of months in which nothing happens. That would not be right. As much as I can, I will continue the work and reinvigorate my officials—I do that every day, but I will do so with even more vehemence than I usually exercise—to ensure that the eventuality that he postulated would be unhelpful does not come to pass.

I have been very anxious and determined to press Volkswagen executives consistently in person and in writing to address many of the outstanding issues that were raised by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside. I have brought with me a list of occasions on which officials or Ministers have met or written to Volkswagen over recent weeks and months. It goes back to the very beginning of this sorry tale. I see no harm in setting out that chronology for Members. I will not read it out because it is quite exhaustive, but I will make information available about what we have done and when we have done it. Let it suffice to say for the purposes of this debate that the Secretary of State and I have met Volkswagen on many occasions and written to it on many more. My officials have been engaged with it steadily and determinedly to bring about many of the things that hon. Members call for.

It is right, as William Morris says, that “all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing”.

I think this is work worth doing, because it is in the interests of the consumers who were adversely affected by the means I have described, who bought cars in good faith believing one thing, and who found that they were dealing with a very different product from the one they imagined they purchased.

There is disappointment in this House—it was reflected in the comments of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside and is shared by the Government—about the lack of remorse and appreciation of the gravity of the deception that has been displayed by Volkswagen, not least in Mr Willis's appearance before the Transport Committee on the same day that I gave evidence.

Let me go back to the start of this sorry business to fully explain where we are now and the progress we have made. If I do not, someone, perhaps the hon. Member for Cambridge, will rise to their feet with speed and say, “It's all very well. You've had all these meetings, John”—well, he wouldn't in fact say “John”, because you wouldn't have it, Mr McCabe—“but what have you achieved?” Just weeks after Volkswagen's supercherie actions were discovered, the Department launched an emissions-testing programme to understand whether there was widespread cheating across the industry. Alongside the Vehicle Certification Agency, we tested many of the UK's most popular diesel cars. We were the first European country to publish a report of that kind in April 2016, with Germany, France and several others following shortly afterwards. The programme found no evidence that any manufacturers we tested other than Volkswagen had utilised prohibited defeat devices to manipulate emissions tests to gain a vehicle's type approval.

It was clear to me then and remains so now that taxpayers should not have to foot the bill for the testing programme. Volkswagen's actions cast doubt on the integrity of the whole industry and, following meetings and repeated requests, the company reimbursed my Department with £1.1 million. That was an important victory for the UK taxpayer. The money is being used for three important areas of work, which I want the Chamber to know about: first, to increase the UK's capacity and capability to test real-world emissions, which is a response to a question and a point made by the Select Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside, and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Cambridge; secondly, to increase the air quality fund, allowing us to provide funding for a city council's HGV fleet to be retrofitted with emissions reduction technology, to reduce emissions in that location; and, thirdly, further investment to encourage the uptake of ultra-low emissions vehicles.

But we are not stopping there. Mr Willis may believe what C.S. Lewis did not—that an “explanation of cause” is a “justification by reason”—but I too do not. I am therefore pressing Volkswagen for a further £1 million to fund the first year of the new market surveillance unit. The Department set up that unit in the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency in the wake of the VW scandal to source and test vehicles to ensure that they comply with the law. We will of course continue to be completely transparent on matters relating to that testing and, as I said previously but am happy to repeat, we will publish the results of this year's programme when we have fully analysed the results. It is right for us to be as open and transparent about that to provide the further reassurance that Members have sought in this debate.

The new unit will provide essential ongoing reassurance to motorists and the wider public, and useful information to the Government and the House. In all my meetings and correspondence with the Volkswagen managing director and management board, I have been absolutely clear that the Government expect that further £1 million. I have emphasised that we will be relentless in our pursuit of the money, because we would not have been spending it had it not been for Volkswagen.

Daniel Zeichner: On a point of clarity, given that the welcome reimbursement of the Government by Volkswagen presumably means the company has conceded that there is an error and a problem, why can there not be similar good news for all the vehicle owners who also need compensation?

Mr Hayes: I agree. I believe that the consumers affected by the scandal should be compensated. I have called on the company to offer UK consumers a similar package to that given to their US counterparts—the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire. The company will claim again, as it already has, that the United States has a different legal system with different requirements, and that that is somehow a justification for not doing what I have just called for. However, I think that the company has an ethical responsibility to do so.

We need a fair outcome for UK vehicle owners. To that end I have met legal firms that are considering taking action against Volkswagen on behalf of affected customers. I am now actively considering ways in which

we can support the firms to optimise the chances of their claims succeeding—those discussions are ongoing. My officials are speaking to vehicle owners' legal representatives, and I am happy to meet those people again. I encourage the owners of affected vehicles to look carefully at the actions the legal firms are taking and to consider whether it is right for them to join them. Compensation, far from being off the agenda, is still very high on my agenda for the reasons I have given.

Let us not forget that the issue has, as I said, left people with vehicles that they bought on one assumption but now know not to fit the bill. At the technical level, it is important that the consumers affected have their cars fixed. Volkswagen has developed technical solutions to remove the cycle recognition strategy for vehicles across their four affected brands. We have of course not relied on Volkswagen's opinion that the solutions are appropriate, but have performed our own checks to verify the accuracy of the company's claims and the efficacy of the devices.

As the original approval authority in the UK, the Vehicle Certification Agency has direct responsibility for signing off the Skoda technical solutions. The VCA checks that vehicle emissions, such as nitrogen oxides and carbon monoxide, and vehicle noise remain below the legal limits. As part of the testing, the VCA also checks for any adverse effect on CO₂ emissions and maximum rated engine power. I am aware that those factors have been of serious concern to affected consumers and I want to reassure people that we are closely monitoring the issue.

I have pressed Volkswagen to ensure that it implements those technical solutions as soon as possible. As of 10 April, Volkswagen had applied the fix to approximately 592,000 of the 1.2 million affected vehicles in the UK. It has put extra resources into the process as a direct result, in my view, of the pressure that I have exerted on it. I told the company I wanted that done quickly, properly, efficiently and conveniently for the customer. We are making progress, but the Department's officials are monitoring the process carefully. I asked Volkswagen for regular updates on progress, which we are getting.

Of the seven technical solution clusters that Skoda proposed to the VCA, we have so far signed off two. Since then we have been made aware of concerns that the durability of the emissions regulation system may be adversely affected by the technical solution. The Department's technical experts have frequently requested—I have been to meetings with Volkswagen about this—detailed information from Volkswagen, which it has often taken far too long to provide. As a result, we have had to delay the sign-off of the remaining vehicles while we continue to assess the evidence presented so far.

Separately, we are pressing Volkswagen to provide UK customers of the four VW brands that have the technical upgrade applied with a meaningful statement of its goodwill policy. Volkswagen must provide a meaningful statement of its goodwill policy—I repeat that for the sake of emphasis, though I do not want to become a creature of habit in employing the device of repetition. The company must investigate any complaints that arise from the service action, taking appropriate measures to rectify them swiftly and appropriately.

Andrew Selous: I am exceedingly grateful, as the Minister is being very generous in giving way. Obviously, Volkswagen sells cars all around Europe. Is the Minister

[*Andrew Selous*]

aware whether Volkswagen's dealings with France, Spain, Italy or Denmark are at the same level as ours? Are such countries managing to get a better deal from Volkswagen, or are we all chugging along at the same sort of level? If he does not know the answer now—it was a bit unfair to spring the question on him—perhaps he will kindly put a letter in the post to the Members present.

Mr Hayes: I have been a Conservative Front Bencher for 18 years and a Minister since 2010. I did not know this immediately, but it did not take me long to work out that when one does not know an answer it is better to say that one does not know; so, I do not know the answer. We are working with our counterparts across Europe, but I do not know specifically what questions have been asked in the particular area of concern my hon. Friend raises. I will happily check that speedily and let him, the Chairman of the Select Committee and the Opposition spokesman know. My hon. Friend is right that, as I said earlier, our work will be better if it is consistent with the approaches adopted by other countries in similar circumstances so that consumers here know that they are getting all that they should and so that we learn from one another about how we handle this matter. He can be confident that the answer will be provided to him with great speed, given the imminent events to which I referred briefly earlier.

I urge any consumers who are not satisfied with their vehicle or the service they have received to contact the Volkswagen customer services department immediately. I have had a personal reassurance from Volkswagen Group's managing director that he will investigate personally—I emphasise that strongly—any complaint about the technical solution on a case-by-case basis. I fully expect that commitment to be honoured. It is time for the company to demonstrate that it is serious about looking after existing customers, not just those who are about to purchase a new vehicle.

Of course I recognise that Volkswagen cannot be held responsible for everything, as I said to the managing director. If something goes wrong with someone's vehicle, they cannot first claim that it has something to do with the technical fix. If the issue was entirely unrelated, that would not be right or fair. But where there is any doubt about the origin of the issue, Volkswagen must definitively rule out that it could have been caused by the fix. The idea that Volkswagen knew nothing—that it had not the merest inkling—at the outset about the fact that there was a problem is just incredible, and “incredible” is the best way of describing the evidence that was given to the Select Committee. The burden must not be borne by consumers. I want to ensure that UK consumers are treated fairly and receive the service they deserve.

Volkswagen also continues to disappoint in its own investigation into what went wrong with the company. Given the governance and accountability that one would expect in a large multinational company, that should be straightforward. In answer to numerous questions from the Transport Committee, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside said, Mr Willis repeatedly responded that we will have to wait until the Jones Day report is published. I do not know whether Mr Willis is an imaginant, prone to ideas entirely at odds with what other people might conclude, but it is not unreasonable—

rather, it is entirely sensible, moderate and measured—to expect Volkswagen to publish the results of the Jones Day investigation. To claim that a report never existed is beyond incredible.

Volkswagen instead provided the Department with a copy of an agreed statement of facts drafted for the purpose of the plea agreement between it and the US Department of Justice. It suggests that that statement gives an overview of Jones Day's findings, which is of course impossible to verify without access to the complete report. That is unacceptable, and it has been a key issue in the three letters I have written to the managing director of Volkswagen since I gave evidence to the Transport Committee in February, to which I am still awaiting a full reply. Looking to the future, I reassure the hon. Lady and others that the Government are committed to taking action on vehicle emissions testing to restore consumer confidence and deliver our wider air quality and climate objectives.

The hon. Lady raised the VCA, which has more than 30 years' experience in testing and certifying vehicles and their systems and components for the UK Government. The VCA is striving to ensure that it continues to take a robust approach to the approval process that delivers the highest rigour and independence.

I have spoken about the changes to real driving emissions. I am happy to provide further information about that should any Member present wish me to do so. It may be worth my writing again to the Select Committee Chairman to re-emphasise the points that I made about that during our considerations.

As we come to the end of this short debate, I conclude by making clear that the Government continue to challenge Volkswagen's unacceptable view that it does not need to compensate British motorists who have been affected by its manipulation of emissions tests. Ruskin said that endurance is nobler than strength, and my enduring determination is to ensure that we not only closely monitor the progress of Volkswagen's implementation of technical upgrades and oversee that it deals appropriately with issues and complaints related to those changes, but press for it to do what it should have done all along: admit its failure and offer recompense for it. It is, in the end, as straightforward as that.

W. B. Yeats said that we should not “wait to strike till the iron is hot; but make it hot by striking.”

I believe that the introduction of the Government's market surveillance unit, the more rigorous approach that is being finalised for type approval testing and the implementation of real driving emissions testing will greatly improve our air quality and minimise the possibility of manufacturers doing what this large and, it seems to me, careless company did. As I said yesterday, Governments can be a force for good. The Government must, on this occasion, with a steely fist and an iron will, be a force for good and call Volkswagen to order.

2.56 pm

Mrs Ellman: All hon. Members have made important points about the scandalous behaviour of Volkswagen and the broken testing and type approval system. I am encouraged by the Minister's response about the work that he has done, and I urge him to continue it so that individuals and the taxpayer receive compensation and the promised fix. I ask him to keep pursuing the Jones Day

report and, so far as he is able to, to enable its publication, because it contains vital information. It is a shame on Volkswagen, a major international company, that it seeks even to deny the existence of a report that could expose the horror of its shortcomings.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Transport Committee, Volkswagen emissions scandal and vehicle type approval, HC 69, and the Government response, HC 699.

European Arrest Warrant

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

3 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the European Arrest Warrant.

Mr Evans, you will be aware that back in January this year, there was a debate on the issue of Brexit and security, and I was one of a number of Members of Parliament who raised concerns about the European arrest warrant. It is fair to say that people had widely different opinions, but I gleaned that a number shared my concerns, and I went before the Backbench Business Committee to ask if we could discuss the matter. The Committee was very kind and gave its approval, on the basis that quite a few people might want to speak.

Unfortunately, since then I have been rather overtaken by events, and there are not quite as many speakers here as I initially expected—it's a strange old thing, politics. However, quite a few Members of the House have feelings one way or another about this issue. We have known each other a long time, Mr Evans, and frankly, I could string out what I have to say for an hour or so, but there are one or two other people here who want to speak, so I will not do that. As a result, I suspect this may be a shorter debate than we originally expected.

The European arrest warrant was brought in following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, to ensure the safety of the public by enabling countries to swiftly bring criminals to justice within the EAW area. I would be the first person to acknowledge that criminals cross borders and that we need a system that enables us to bring them to justice if they flee overseas. The principle of the European arrest warrant marked a huge step forward from the days when parts of Spain were known as the Costa del Crime, with serious criminals living quite openly in the sun and avoiding justice.

I spent nine years as a special constable in London. During that time, I arrested quite a number of people, mainly for less serious, low-level offences. A high proportion of those people were foreign nationals. In general, as a proponent of law and order, I am instinctively supportive of the principle of a European arrest warrant. It is very efficient, and I wonder whether it is sometimes too efficient. Once the arrest warrant has been submitted by a country that is part of the scheme, it is almost certain that the individual named on the warrant will be extradited to the country that has issued it.

That is fine, and it is what was intended, but there is one obvious problem: in order for the European arrest warrant to be seen as fair, it is imperative that the standards of justice in all the countries signed up to it are of an equally high level. If that is not the case, it is irrefutable that we pay a price for judicial convenience. The price will be paid through an erosion of our own legal protections. That is a key point that I want to make to the Minister, and I would like him to hold that thought for a moment and try to answer this question. Does he accept that for the EAW to be fair, we must have equitable standards of justice in all the nations

[David T. C. Davies]

that are taking part? I suggest that we cannot be confident that standards of justice in all member states meet the standards we would accept in the UK.

Over the last 10 years or so—including while I served on the Home Affairs Committee, chaired at the time by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz)—I have visited various countries in Europe, through the police scheme and more recently through the Council of Europe. Overall, I have no doubt that standards are very high indeed. I have been a couple of times to Germany and the Netherlands and have been out on patrol with the police officers there. I have been into their detention centres. I must admit that in some instances, I thought the standards were rather too high, considering the people involved, but that is a subject for another debate. I am not suggesting that there are low standards across Europe—far from it. However, it is a slightly mixed picture.

There was a very high-profile case that resulted in a book, which Members may have seen. It involved Andrew Symeou, who is from Wales. He was extradited to Greece and spent time in prison there, facing 20 years for a murder he did not commit, following a completely unacceptable investigation against him. I recommend the book for more details about that. He was unable to avoid extradition and spending time in a Greek prison because, as I said earlier, once the EAW is triggered against a British citizen, a British court has almost no choice but to carry it through.

About three years ago I visited Greece with the Council of Europe. Among other things, I went into a police station in Athens that was being used to house foreign nationals—essentially, people who had committed immigration offences. I entered an area that was little more than half the size of the hall we are in now, and there were about 20 people in there. They were housed in there with little chance to get out and have exercise and no natural light at all; the conditions were absolutely appalling. I was told that they were being kept in there for up to a year, for immigration offences.

I am not soft on these things. I have spoken out many times in favour and support of strong controls on immigration and ensuring that the rules are followed, but I thought those were completely unacceptable conditions in which to keep people. I said so to the police officers who were with me, and privately they said they absolutely agreed; that is why they were showing me and an official from the Council of Europe those horrendous conditions. They said, “We want you to tell people about this, because we don’t think it’s right either.” In fact, some of the people in that cell asked if I could help them to be moved into a Greek prison. When people are asking to be put into a Greek prison because the conditions they are in are so bad, something is very wrong indeed.

Those conditions would be totally unacceptable in any sort of British institution or a police station. However, as things stand, a Greek court could issue a European arrest warrant against a British citizen without any standard of evidence that would be acceptable in the UK, and that citizen could be thrown into the kind of facility that I visited. The case of Andrew Symeou proves that I am not making a hypothetical statement; that situation has already happened.

Greece is not the only country about which I and many others have concerns. In Portugal there was the case of Garry Mann, who was arrested, tried and convicted within 48 hours for allegedly taking part in a riot. He had not in fact been involved. He was released, but there was subsequently a demand, which I think came through a separate court, for him to return to Portugal and serve a two-year sentence. He was not even provided with the basic facilities that we would take for granted—for example, the interpretation facilities that are standard throughout Britain, or having a lawyer; he was given access to a lawyer five minutes before his trial began.

In Italy there was the case of Edmond Arapi, detailed on the Fair Trials website. He was convicted of murder in his absence in 2006, even though at the time of the murder, he was working in a restaurant in Staffordshire. There were numerous witnesses to say that, and the court seemed to accept that on the day he was nowhere near the country in question. The murder was supposed to have taken place in Italy, but he was working in the UK, and yet he went through years of hell and faced a strong possibility that he would be extradited to Italy to serve a 16-year sentence. Italy, of course, is one of the wealthier countries in the European Union and one where we might expect higher standards to apply.

It is, however, Bulgaria and Romania that I think deserve much greater scrutiny. On this, I am at one with the European Commission, which is scrutinising those countries and has put them on to a monitoring procedure. I have copies here of the most recent reports on Bulgaria and Romania, which are widely available online, and I will sum up some of what is in them. Bulgaria has been subject to the European Commission’s co-operation and verification mechanism, and the Commission has said that the country’s justice system is failing in a number of areas.

On judicial reform, Bulgaria’s Supreme Judicial Council, which is tasked with ensuring the independence of the judiciary, is mired in in-fighting over allegations of a lack of objectivity, political interference and undue external influence. The report says that there has been “little progress in establishing fairness and transparency”

of the council’s decisions, and that there still needs to be a

“broader commitment of all state actors to judicial independence”.

The report goes on to say that

“criminal procedures in Bulgaria continue to present serious problems for the effective prosecution of complex cases”,

and that corruption remains a “significant challenge”, extending from the local level up to high-ranking officials. Those are the European Commission’s words, and one could read a lot into “significant challenge”.

There is a similar situation in Romania. The Commission stated that judicial reform and corruption are still a cause for concern. The process of selection of candidates for the employment of senior judges and prosecutors does not allow for a clear, open and transparent procedure, and there have been allegations of political appointees.

Romanian prison conditions are a persistent issue, with assurances that have been given to the British Government on the poor treatment of extradited prisoners being breached. I have not been into one of the prisons. Recently, there was the death in custody of an elderly Romanian newspaper owner, Dan Adamescu, who had

been critical of the Government in his newspaper. He was denied medical treatment after falling ill, in a process that was described by the former President of Romania as judicial murder. That should be setting alarm bells ringing for the authorities here in the UK.

There are several ongoing cases at the moment, which I will not mention, that involve European arrest warrants being issued against people who are either British or living in Britain and facing extradition to Romania. I think people will watch those cases very carefully. We have a situation in which *The Guardian*, the *New Statesman*, the Freedom Association and the Henry Jackson Society all agree with each other that what is going on at the moment in Romania is unacceptable. When we get four bodies and publications such as those in agreement on something, it is time to take notice.

If it transpires that under the current scheme the British Government are unable to ensure that British residents who have not been found guilty of any crime cannot be guaranteed British standards of justice, I respectfully suggest to the Minister that we will have a moral imperative to use Brexit to draft a new European arrest warrant system that will continue to allow people to be extradited if we are confident that standards of justice in the countries they are being extradited to match ours, but will recognise the importance of protecting the legal rights of British citizens and ensure that such rights are upheld at all times wherever citizens face criminal charges. That is all I want to say; I look forward to the Minister's reply.

3.12 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). We are taking part in a very important debate. He may have lamented the fact that there are so few Members here, but it is the quality of the debate that counts. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and I may be regarded as usual suspects at debates such as this, but the Minister and shadow Minister have to be here.

The hon. Member for Monmouth was missed on the Home Affairs Committee when I was chairing it. He went on to chair his own Committee with great distinction. I hope he will continue to do that in the next Parliament. He has raised an important subject. I fully support the concept behind the European arrest warrant. It was right that the previous Labour Government signed up to it. It was a mechanism by which those who had been responsible for criminal offences in one country could almost immediately be transported without question to another country, so the concept and the principle are right. The hon. Member for Monmouth gave examples of the Costa del Crime, as it was sometimes referred to in Spain, where people ran away to hide from the authorities in this country.

However, what I have seen in the operation of the European arrest warrant is that the current capacity of the warrant still causes concern, because in certain cases—the hon. Gentleman has talked about some; I will refer to others—it tramples on the rights of individuals. I accept the important principle of the European arrest warrant, which is an integral part of our involvement in the European Union, which, as we know, will come to

an end by 19 March 2019, if not sooner. It is a part of our being involved in the justice and home affairs agenda of the European Union.

The Minister has a task when he returns. I hope he will again return to the same post after the next election, because he has done the job extremely well in the time that he has been the Minister for Policing, although we still do not have a police funding formula, but we will leave that to another debate. The measures are complicated and they need to be dealt with carefully. We need the arrest warrant to be a critical part of our negotiations with the EU.

I am surprised that the hon. Member for Monmouth, who is one of Parliament's leading Brexiteers, did not put the issue at the forefront of his speech, because, if we come out of the European Union, as we will—the people have voted for us to come out—we will also have to come out of the European arrest warrant, unless a great deal is done by the Minister or the Home Secretary to ensure we remain a part of it. That is why this debate is so important. It sets a strategy as to what we expect Ministers to do. If they come to an arrangement whereby we remain part of the EAW—I do not know how they will do that under the current arrangements—and if we do a deal that gives us the benefits of the EAW, the problems with it, as eloquently set out by the hon. Gentleman, need to be addressed.

Of course there are benefits from the European arrest warrant. It enables us to track down criminals. In London, 28% of those arrested are foreign nationals, half of whom are EU nationals. We therefore commend the success of the European arrest warrant so far. When the shadow Minister for Policing comes to speak in this debate—I have heard her speak on this subject in the Chamber, and she made one of the best speeches that I have seen her give—I am sure she will tell us of all the successes, as will the Minister. However, the problem is that it is a disproportionate measure at the moment. The United Kingdom receives disproportionately more warrants than it issues. Not only does that undermine the credibility of the system, but it is extremely costly to the taxpayer.

In 2015—the Minister might have more accurate or up-to-date figures—the United Kingdom issued 228 requests for arrest to other EU member states. In that same year, 12,613 requests were sent by EU member states to the United Kingdom. Between 2009 and 2016, 55,838 requests were sent to the United Kingdom; 10,532 arrests were made in the United Kingdom; and 7,436 surrenders were made here. However, in that period 2009 to 2016, the United Kingdom sent only 1,424 requests; 916 arrests were made on our behalf; and only 800 surrenders were made to us. That therefore points to the disproportionate nature of the way in which the European arrest warrant has operated. That is why this is such a good opportunity for the Government to be able to negotiate a better deal with the European Union. I hope this will be very much a part of what is going to happen when we look at the justice and home affairs agenda.

The hon. Member for Monmouth gave us examples of individuals and miscarriages of justice. Deborah Dark, a British woman, was pursued across Europe because of an EAW issued by France, although she had been cleared of drug charges years previously. Other cases include that of Michael Turner and Jason McGoldrick, who were extradited under a European

[Keith Vaz]

arrest warrant in 2009. These men were ably supported by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) after being imprisoned in Hungary without trial in a process that continued for eight years.

There are other examples, but my point is that, if we have reached a situation in which the warrant is used against citizens conducting their lawful business because of mistakes in other countries, that really affects them. It is no good the other country's apologising at the end and saying "I am sorry; we got the wrong person," or "We should never have arrested this individual." The fact is that that damage remains with the individuals for years to come. Edmond Arapi, an Albanian chef, was arrested while arriving at Gatwick airport in June 2009. An EAW had been issued after he was tried and convicted in his absence by a court in Genoa for carrying out a murder in Italy. He was to face a sentence of 16 years in prison. He possessed documentary evidence to prove his innocence but he was held in Wandsworth prison for two weeks before being granted bail. He was subjected to 12 court appearances before the Italian court admitted that it had sought the arrest of the wrong person, following a brief check of Mr Arapi's fingerprints. That is a classic example of where the EAW has gone wrong.

David T. C. Davies: I agree with the points the right hon. Gentleman is making. Does he agree that another problem is that British nationals who are extradited to countries in the EAW area cannot get bail because they do not habitually reside in those countries? They are denied a right that would be almost automatic in the UK.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is right. Because of the different jurisdictions, legislation and applications of law in those countries, it is extremely difficult. The people who really benefit from the European arrest warrant are the highly paid lawyers—I declare an interest as a non-practising barrister, and I have never done an extradition case—who do well partly out of the uncertainty that people face. When they are told they are about to be arrested, obviously they seek legal advice. They may have to pay a huge amount of money and may in the end not even face charges.

What the issue boils down to is that the automatic transmission of people is the problem—the lack of a test allowing the courts in this country to look carefully at what is happening. I know, although I have not seen his speech, that in replying the Minister will definitely and correctly claim credit for the fact that, when she was Home Secretary, the Prime Minister introduced a bar that had to be reached before people could be extradited. There is no doubt that a court test is now applied, but it is not high enough and it does not give the protection required.

The hon. Member for Monmouth does a terrific job in his official capacity as a special constable—it is one of my dreams that one day on the tube I will meet him in his full regalia. He has visited places in the EAW area and says that some of them have better detention facilities than ours. I cannot believe that, because we are the best in the world, and I am extremely jealous to think that any other country's detention facilities are better.

David T. C. Davies: I had better gently point out that I was asked to resign a year or so ago because the rules had changed and the British Transport police decided they did not want a serving Member of Parliament as a special constable, so we shall not be meeting on the tube in that capacity.

Keith Vaz: That is a huge loss to British policing. I will not say it is because of the cuts, because obviously there was an ethical issue, but the hon. Gentleman will be missed, and I hope there will be an opportunity for Parliament to acknowledge his great success. We must put up a plaque or something to recognise his great achievement. He will be sorely missed by British policing and we will look carefully at the next set of crime figures to see whether they have gone up as a result of his retirement.

I have one final point—I hope the Minister will cover it because there is time—about foreign national offenders, including some in our prisons and some subject to the European arrest warrant. I cannot understand why that great invention that allows people to be transferred immediately before they have been convicted of any offence has prevented the European Union from taking back its own nationals from our prisons. The latest figures show that there are 4,217 EU offenders in the UK, costing £169 million a year to the British taxpayer. The top three countries are Poland, with 983, Ireland with 764 and Romania with 635. The EAW is a device by which nationals can be removed immediately, without any restraint, subject to the limited bar that the Prime Minister introduced when she was Home Secretary, but all those foreign national offenders are sitting in our prisons and cannot be removed to other countries, although they cost the taxpayer a huge amount of money. I hope that, at the very least, the Minister will tell us what is happening, and that it will be that there is light at the end of the tunnel with respect to offenders and those who have been arrested.

Unlike other Members present for the debate—I know that the Chair is impartial, so we will not mention how he voted—I did not see many opportunities in Brexit, but in the present instance we have a big opportunity to go into the negotiations and iron out the problems. I am for keeping the principle of the European arrest warrant, but we should iron out the difficulties that obviously exist, so that we can reassure parliamentary colleagues, many of whom have raised the matter of the EAW in the past, that, post-March 2019, we will have a good system that recognises the need to arrest criminals, but that also recognises the rights of people who have committed no offence and who, under the present process are, in all innocence, being arrested. Let us keep the benefits and reduce the burdens.

3.27 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and to follow the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who as ever speaks incredibly knowledgeably on such topics. I welcome the debate and thank the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) for bringing it to the Chamber. The Scottish National party is fully behind the idea of a European arrest warrant and wants the UK to continue to participate in the scheme if that is at all possible. However, the hon. Gentleman has done

us—all six of us—a favour by bringing the topic here for debate and highlighting important flaws in the scheme. I believe that there are key questions that the Government must address, about how they will seek to secure continuing participation in the EAW scheme or at least something similar.

The UK was of course hugely influential in shaping the EAW system. It has brought welcome benefits for law enforcement agencies and victims of crime. As the hon. Gentleman said, it does so by simplifying matters and speeding up the repatriation of suspects and criminals from other EU countries so that they can face justice. In the old days, when extradition proceeded under the 1957 European convention on extradition, it took an average of 18 months to extradite someone. Under the current system it takes 15 days in uncontested cases and 45 days if a case is contested. Today it takes three times as long to extradite from EU countries as from outside the EU. Some countries would previously have refused to extradite their nationals at all.

The hon. Gentleman is nevertheless right to remind us that, while the system often works perfectly well, it is not without flaws. There have been too many cases, some of which have been highlighted today, where the use of warrants has been frankly ridiculous. That stems from the fact that a proportionality test is not applied in some states as it is in others, such as the UK and Germany. That is behind quite a lot of the problems that the right hon. Member for Leicester East highlighted—I am talking about the imbalance between the number of requests that the UK makes and the number that it receives. The hon. Member for Monmouth highlighted differences in criminal procedures and standards across the EU. Those are also valid points.

From our point of view, the answer to the criticisms is to be part of the system but to seek reform, not to ditch it altogether and push for something else. We do not often say that any part of our criminal justice system is perfect, but of course we do not just rip it up and start again; we seek reform and improvement.

Keith Vaz: I am going to tease the hon. Gentleman a little. Let us say that Scotland became an independent country. Scotland would want to retain the European arrest warrant, because that is how it would be able to track criminals, but the Scottish Government and the Scottish people would want some kind of bar so that Scottish citizens would not automatically be transferred, especially if they wanted to appeal to the judicial system in Scotland. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is necessary to have some kind of bar before people are handed over?

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Yes, in an independent Scotland, we would seek participation in the European arrest warrant system. As I have acknowledged, it is not perfect, and we would push for reform, but from within the system; I will come to the issue of a bar in a moment. I cannot see how we are any more likely to be able to overcome the problems by starting again and trying to negotiate either 27 bilateral agreements or a new agreement in the way that Norway and Iceland have done. The easiest way for us to keep the benefits and bring about improvement in the system is from within, by continuing our participation.

There is evidence that continuing to participate and to push for reform and take part in dialogue can realise some progress. For example, raising concerns with Poland has brought about some change, including the introduction there of an “interests of justice” test. Before, it was almost automatic that a European arrest warrant would be sought. There is awareness and, I think, acceptance in EU institutions that more must be done to ensure proportionate use of the warrant system, although debate continues about exactly what measures are needed to make that happen. Meanwhile, changes to the Extradition Act 2003 mean that courts in the UK can apply a proportionality test and refuse to execute a warrant if the test is not passed, although I acknowledge the criticisms about whether it is appropriately robust.

As regards ensuring standards of justice, it is absolutely fair to say that more must be done to ensure that people extradited to certain EU states are treated fairly and that there are proper standards in relation to pre-trial conditions and detention. Again, however, change is possible. We have heard already that the 2003 Act does now set down a human rights bar, although I accept that there is also a debate about whether that test is robust enough.

Again, there is awareness at European level that there have to be improvements. For example, in February 2014, the European Parliament resolved to support proposals to include a ground for refusing an arrest warrant

“where there are substantial grounds to believe that the execution of the measure would be incompatible with the executing Member State’s obligation in accordance with Article 6 of the TEU”—the treaty on European Union—“and the Charter”, which is the charter of fundamental rights of the European Union. For its part, the European Commission has said that it would prefer to adopt legislation on minimum procedural rights standards and action on implementation of the judicial co-operation instruments such as the supervision order and European investigation order. I am not saying that more cannot be done, but it is fair to recognise that the door is open to making progress and resolving some of the issues highlighted today.

In short, we should continue to want the UK to be involved in the European arrest warrant system. We should work to find solutions from within the system rather than starting again from scratch. I say that because the alternatives would be very difficult. Negotiating 27 separate bilateral agreements would be a hugely significant task and almost certainly would not bring the same benefits, while retaining many of the same problems. A separate deal with the EU as a whole is possible, but we know from the experience of Norway and Iceland, despite their both being Schengen countries, that that can also be an incredibly long process and the resulting system could involve variations from the main system that would make it weaker than what we have as a member of the system itself.

The Government have said that they, too, see the benefits of the European arrest warrant process. However, we need to hear more about how they intend to get there. After all, the current Prime Minister warned when she was Home Secretary that Brexit likely meant no EU arrest warrant participation at all. Her fixation on excluding any involvement of the European Court of Justice seems to be the biggest barrier to continued participation in the arrest warrant system. The Government must get their priorities right and not allow that fixation

[Stuart C. McDonald]

to scupper the bigger goal. We need to ask these questions. What precisely are the Government seeking to secure? How will they do that? And will they let go of their fixation on the European Court of Justice if that is what is necessary to secure ongoing participation in the arrest warrant scheme?

3.34 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and to follow such distinguished and learned speakers. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) on securing the debate. It is no secret that my concerns about the way the European arrest warrant works probably come from a different starting place from his, but I was very interested in what he had to say. He raised really important issues about the human rights of UK citizens extradited to other countries. Those issues deserve to be debated and taken very seriously. I will address some of the human rights issues in my remarks. I must admit that I have no knowledge of the cases that the hon. Gentleman raised today. I look forward to learning more about them.

Labour's starting point is that the UK's membership of the European arrest warrant system is an invaluable and effective tool for the British courts to catch fugitives, both in the interests of our country's security and to provide justice for those of our constituents who have had the misfortune to be the victims of crime committed by those who can catch an easyJet flight and disappear. I know that the hon. Gentleman who instigated the debate would not forget that this mechanism—this warrant—enabled Hussain Osman to be brought to justice after he fled to Italy following the failed suicide bombing in London in July 2005. The most recent Home Office data show that the UK has used the mechanism of the European arrest warrant to bring some 2,500 individuals from outside the UK to face justice since the system was introduced in 2004.

I believe that the principle of the arrest warrant is right and that we should look to iron out any difficulties that exist. As the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who speaks for the Scottish National party, said, we should work from within the system—that is the better way to do it—rather than starting again from the beginning.

However, the most urgent issue for us to discuss right now is whether it is possible for us to maintain membership of this very valuable system when we leave the EU. One of Labour's key tests for the Brexit deal is whether it protects national security and our capacity to tackle cross-border crime. We know that as recently as a year ago the Prime Minister herself considered it necessary to remain in the European Union to retain membership of the European arrest warrant system, because she said as much. That was one reason why she concluded that

“remaining a member of the European Union means we will be more secure from crime and terrorism.”

The Prime Minister has been facing the challenge of proving herself wrong and ensuring that this country remains as secure as it is today. Perhaps the Minister can update us on that. I hope to see him back here in the coming months, but I look for promotion for him,

because I think that he has done a sterling job in this role and the one before, so I am not necessarily hoping, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) is, to see him back in this role, although he does do it particularly well. Perhaps the Minister can update us on the progress that the Prime Minister is making, in terms of ensuring that this country remains as secure as it is today, with the negotiations about our remaining in the European arrest warrant system.

As far as I can see, the Conservative party's real problem is that even if it were theoretically possible to negotiate continued membership of the European arrest warrant system from outside the EU—I think we all agree that that would be a tall order—that would mean accepting in principle the right of the European Court of Justice to arbitrate in cases of disagreement, and the Conservatives have made it clear that they seek to be outside the purview of the ECJ in all matters. Does the Minister agree with Labour that it is in the interests of our country's national security to accept the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the event of disagreement over the European arrest warrant? Can he give a specific answer to whether it is possible to have associate membership of the EAW system without being subject to ECJ arbitration? Perhaps he agrees with Mike Kennedy, a former chief operating officer of the Crown Prosecution Service and a former president of Eurojust, who said recently in evidence to the Home Affairs Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the European Union in the other place:

“Any sort of alternative to the court is going to be quite difficult to negotiate and agree. I just do not know how long that would take, but I suspect it would take longer than is available.”

We know from experience that negotiating third-country access to the European arrest warrant is notoriously difficult. Norway and Iceland spent 15 years attempting that, and both countries are in Schengen and the European economic area, but I understand that there are no plans for us to be members of either. Moreover, their surrender agreements are weaker in two ways. First, they require the alleged offences to be the same in both countries, thus losing the flexibility that comes from member states agreeing to respect the decision of one another's criminal justice systems. Secondly, they allow countries to refuse to surrender their own nationals, making it tricky, for example, if a national of another EU country commits an offence on UK soil and then jumps on the same easyJet flight back home.

In contrast, the strength of the European arrest warrant is not only that it allows suspects to be returned to the UK, even if the crime they are suspected of committing has a different legal basis from the law applying in the country they fled to, but it has strict timescales that are effectively enforced, so that fugitives are returned to face justice speedily. Those two factors make the European arrest warrant far more powerful than any other extradition procedure anywhere in the world.

I heard the concerns raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East and the hon. Member for Monmouth, and I am always up for better protection for human rights.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. The security of our country is so important, especially from terrorism. Does she agree that when we

are all back—if we are back, subject to the electorate, after 8 June—this should be a priority? The Government's stance on Brexit at the moment is very much to do with immigration, but security and protecting our people is the Government's first task. Making sure this agenda is pursued is extremely important. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Lyn Brown: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is a foremost priority. The major priority for any Government is to protect their citizens. Everyone in this Chamber will recognise that people will not forgive us if we negotiate away the very things that keep them safe if, God forbid, at some time in the future something happens that could have been prevented if we had remained within the European arrest warrant system and the basic constructs of the EU. They have meant that we have been able to share information and to have other partnership arrangements to keep people safe thus far. They will not forgive if we negotiate away their right to life, their freedoms and their security. They will not forgive.

If we leave the European arrest warrant system, the alternative is to fall back on previous extradition treaties, which are far more cumbersome and in some cases have become so out of date that they will require EU countries to change their own laws in respect of the UK, which is an unlikely prospect.

Labour's question to the Minister is simple. What guarantees can the Government give that the current benefits that we get from the European arrest warrant system will be maintained when we leave? While I am on the subject, can he reassure us that we will also retain access to the many pan-EU data and information-sharing systems and exchange systems, such as for fingerprinting, airline travel, foreign convictions and intelligence data, which our police forces routinely use? I look forward to his reply, given that he has quite a lot of time to entertain us.

I said that I would respond to some of the human rights issues raised by the hon. Member for Monmouth, who spoke passionately of the concerns about treatment of UK citizens who are passed over to other jurisdictions under the European arrest warrant, and the possibility that the system might be used to extradite political opponents. If we believe that an individual's human rights are being threatened during the process, that is absolutely a matter for concern, but it is fair to say that it is a concern for the European authorities as well.

I mention that because the hon. Gentleman spoke about the conditions in which people are being held. In a speech outlining her priorities on 25 April last year, the European Commissioner for Justice, Vera Jourová, stated that her priority was to improve pre-trial detention safeguards, because

“poor detention conditions can indeed lead to refusal of extradition under the European arrest warrant, as the European Court of Justice has recently made clear.”

It is therefore possible for prison conditions in the destination country to be taken into account when a European arrest warrant is executed. I am delighted that the European Court of Justice has played a useful role in clarifying that point.

If prison conditions in other countries are unacceptable, of course they should be improved, but I differ from the hon. Member for Monmouth, in that I see the European

Union structures as a good mechanism by which to achieve some sought-for improvements. There have already been some attempts to do so—for example through the European supervision orders, which are designed to reassure courts that they can release foreign nationals on bail without fear that they will abscond—but further action absolutely needs to be taken, not least because article 7 of the European treaty contains a commitment to protect human rights. My concern is that our position outside the European Union will undoubtedly weaken our opportunities to keep pushing for such improvements.

In conclusion, we must ensure that UK citizens accused of committing crimes in other EU countries are treated decently, and we should use whatever influence we have to achieve that result, but the priority today is for the Government to provide greater reassurance about how they will ensure that our security is not compromised by the decision to leave the European Union, because our constituents will not forgive us if they do not. I look forward thoroughly to the Minister's response.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. From the closing remarks of the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), I feel some pressure to perform at a high level. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) for the opportunity to discuss this important subject. I will come in a moment to the points that he raised, and to those made by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). To respond to the Chairman's comments about literature at the start of this debate, I think it was Alfred Tennyson who said, “Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers.” The quality of this debate highlights that that has possibly never been truer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth and I have had a number of useful discussions regarding the European arrest warrant, and I know that he shares the Government's strong commitment to practical co-operation on security, law enforcement and criminal justice. Over the next few minutes, I want to outline my response to his comments about how the European arrest warrant works. I will then move on to some of the points raised by other hon. Members, including the hon. Member for West Ham, about the future and where we are going as we leave the European Union and deliver what people voted for last year.

Members have referred to individual European arrest warrant cases. I am sure that they and the House will appreciate that I am not able to reflect on ongoing cases, although I will touch on a couple of specific points in relation to non-ongoing cases. It is also useful to note and worth putting on the record clearly that, as hon. Members will be aware, Ministers have no involvement in decision making in respect to European arrest warrants. Instead, it is left to our independent judiciary, which makes decisions following an initial decision by the National Crime Agency on whether to certify a case, as I will explain.

We believe that the European arrest warrant, with the stringent safeguards that we have implemented and the changes that we have recently made, which I will come to, remains an effective tool for co-operation with our European partners. I will outline what some of those safeguards are in light of the changes, to reassure

[Brandon Lewis]

anybody looking at what we say today. In the last Parliament, the Government reformed our domestic legislation to improve the European arrest warrant's effectiveness. We established new provisions to prevent extradition in prosecution cases where it would be disproportionate, and to ensure that dual criminality must be established in all cases where part of the conduct took place in the UK. As such, a case will not get as far as the court for a decision unless the NCA is satisfied, first, that the alleged conduct would be a criminal offence in the UK and, secondly, that proceeding with the extradition is proportionate. That is the certification process I mentioned.

Those safeguards work, and the National Crime Agency has refused to certify incoming cases that are obviously trivial or do not meet the dual criminality requirements. Colleagues have made points about the facts and figures, so I will give an example. Between July 2014 and May 2016, the NCA refused some 53 European arrest warrant requests for being disproportionate, and 249 for failure to meet the dual criminality bar.

Members also mentioned Andrew Symeou's case and the legitimate concern about people being detained for long periods overseas before being charged or standing trial. The new provisions ensure that individuals cannot be subject to lengthy periods of pre-trial detention when extradited under the European arrest warrant, because in general a decision has to be made by the issuing judicial authority to charge and to try the requested person before an arrest warrant is executed. That backs up the point made by the then Home Secretary, our Prime Minister, when discussing this provision in the House in 2014, when she said that the principle was that we would no longer see people being surrendered and having to wait months or years for a decision to be made on whether to charge or try them.

Keith Vaz: The Minister gave very interesting figures for the refusals by the NCA. Does he have the corresponding figures for other EU countries? Have they refused any requests that we have made, either directly to their courts or through their central enforcement agency—their equivalent of the NCA?

Brandon Lewis: I do not have those figures with me, but I will get them and write to the right hon. Gentleman before Parliament dissolves. I will ensure we get those to him and the hon. Member for West Ham over the next few days, so that they have a record.

When extraditing people from the United Kingdom, it is important to ensure that the conditions in which they will be held respect their human rights. That touches on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth in his reference to prisons—I am sure we would all like to see them and it sounded interesting. The UK works closely with member states to ensure that, when concerns arise, appropriate assurances are given to ensure that we are able to protect individuals' rights. On occasion it is correct to say that evidence suggests that member states would not meet the standards expected of them. If a judge is not satisfied that extradition is compatible with human rights, whether because of prison conditions or other reasons, they must, and indeed do, refuse the application for extradition. That is

an important protection afforded to individuals who would otherwise be extradited from the UK to EU member states or other countries.

A swift and fair extradition system is an important element of our UK law enforcement. It protects the UK by ensuring that potentially dangerous criminals are extradited, including those who are wanted for murder, rape, trafficking or child sex offences. It likewise enables us to have alleged UK offenders swiftly returned to face justice here at home, which is why police forces and law enforcement authorities throughout the country value the European arrest warrant. Respected law enforcement professionals have publicly highlighted that it is a cost-efficient and quick system compared with the available alternatives, and that it is seen as a vital crime-fighting tool.

When we think about co-operation tools such as the European arrest warrant, it is important to keep in mind the threats we face. The perpetrators of crime and terrorism do not respect borders. The threat they pose is becoming increasingly transnational—the borders and lines we draw mean nothing to them. We know that international organised crime groups exploit vulnerabilities such as inadequate law enforcement and criminal justice structures. Furthermore, in a technologically interconnected world, threats such as cybercrime and online child sexual exploitation are international by definition. When I have been with police forces looking at this work, I have seen at first hand how quickly and easily people can move around the world online. We need the ability to deal with crime globally.

In the face of these common threats, it is difficult to see how it would be in anyone's interest for our departure from the EU to result in a reduction in the effectiveness of security, law enforcement and criminal justice co-operation. In debates in the main Chamber over the last few months, the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and I have been clear that we want, and believe it is right, to deliver what the British people voted for last year. We will leave the European Union, but nobody voted to be less safe. Our job as the British Government is to continue to ensure that our public, our residents and indeed our friends and partners around Europe remain safe.

David T. C. Davies: I do not disagree with anything the Minister says, but does he believe that the standards of justice applied in all countries that have the European arrest warrant match the standards that we would apply in the United Kingdom?

Brandon Lewis: I do not profess to be an expert on the justice system of every European state. That is why it is important, as the right hon. Member for Leicester East outlined, to have a high bar in this country to ensure that cases meet the standards that we would require and, more to the point, that our judges—our independent judiciary—would look for.

That leads me neatly to my next point, which is about what happens next for law enforcement and the European arrest warrant as we leave the European Union. Leaving the EU will of course mean that our relationship with it will have to change. We are now examining the mechanisms currently in place to support practical co-operation in the fight against crime and terrorism, to help to identify potential options for working with our EU partners in the future.

Keith Vaz: In answer to the very good question from the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), is the Minister telling the House that his understanding is that a judge in an extradition warrant case will have access to a report about the standards of justice in the country where the warranted has been requested? We realise that this is a matter for judges, not for Ministers, but is he telling the House that his understanding is that judges will have such a report and will make their decision based on it?

Brandon Lewis: No, that is not what I was saying at all. I was saying that I am not an expert on other systems and that it is the independent judiciary who will take a view in an individual case. They will look at the evidence in front of them and make a judgment that they feel is appropriate, looking at a range of issues including human rights and proportionality, as I said earlier. That is a matter for the independent judiciary. I will not prejudge what a judiciary that is independent by definition would do—that would be wrong.

Looking ahead, we will need to negotiate the best possible deal with Europe. I absolutely support the Prime Minister as the best person to get the right deal for our country with our partners in Europe, including thinking about the tools and mechanisms for co-operation with EU member states to help all European citizens, including our own, to remain safe. The hon. Member for West Ham asked me to outline how we are progressing with that work. I am sure that she appreciates—she has a twinkle in her eye—that she is tempting me to give a running commentary on our negotiations with the European Union, which is a temptation I will resist just for a little longer.

Lyn Brown: The Minister is generous and kind to give way, but what about the ECJ? Perhaps he could just give us a soupçon on whether or not he believes we will be able to allow the ECJ to arbitrate in matters where there is disagreement. Does he think there is any likelihood of that being accepted at all?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady's intervention anticipates the point that I was just about to make. In a few of her questions, including the one she has just asked, she is asking me to prejudge the negotiations, which I will not do. We will go through some complicated and, no doubt, at times difficult negotiations in the months and years ahead.

Stuart C. McDonald: We are not pushing for a “running commentary” on negotiations. All that we are asking for is a reassurance that if the best deal for securing safety and participation in the warrant also involves participation in or operating under the jurisdiction of the ECJ, we will not say no to such a deal purely because we are so set against being under the ECJ's jurisdiction.

Brandon Lewis: I say to the hon. Gentleman that in saying I will not prejudge what the negotiations may bring, I mean that I am not going to prejudge what the negotiations may bring. My own experience of negotiations—in Government, as an MP and before that in my life—is that it is always difficult to prejudge a negotiation. That is not only because we do not want to give away to our opposite numbers in those negotiations what we are

looking for, what we want to do and what our position is, but because things develop and change. We have to be able to consider what the right situation is.

What we have been very clear about—the hon. Member for West Ham touched on this, and I think that the right hon. Member for Leicester East also mentioned it—is the priority when the House returns. I would gently point out that one of the very first debates we had, some months ago—I opened it and I think the hon. Lady responded to it—was on law enforcement, linked into us leaving the European Union, and there will no doubt be more such debates. Those debates, which include today's debate, all feed in comments and views from hon. Members and hon. Friends, which will form part of the work we are doing as we consider what is possible and what is right for our country and our European partners, as we negotiate to make sure that we keep everybody safe.

It would be wrong to prejudge where we will get to, however, for all those reasons and not least because these negotiations are yet to start and we must ensure that we get the best deal for this country without prejudging what that may be.

Keith Vaz: The Minister is being incredibly generous in giving way again. The shadow Minister has opened up a very important area. Of course we cannot have a running commentary, especially in the middle of an election—I would imagine that there are currently no negotiations going on. The reason we are pressing the Minister is that I am sure he will be clutching his copy of *Hansard*, with the marvellous reference that the shadow Minister has given him—that he should be promoted—and saying to the Prime Minister, “I need a better job.” That is why we are pressing him. Is the Government's position, “We like the principle of the European arrest warrant and therefore we will fight hard to try and keep it,” or is this part of the all-or-nothing arrangement—“If we don't get a deal on the European arrest warrant, we're happy to come out”? What is the Government's overarching position? I am not asking for the detail, but is it, “We like the European arrest warrant and we want to keep it, but we will have to negotiate around it”? If he could set that out, most of us will be able to go back to our constituencies and go to bed tonight feeling very happy.

Brandon Lewis: Whenever I am speaking in the Chamber, it is always my aim to ensure that colleagues are able to go to bed happy in the evening, so if it helps the right hon. Gentleman, I will repeat something I said a few minutes ago. We do believe that the European arrest warrant, with the stringent safeguards that I have outlined and that we have implemented, remains an effective tool for co-operation with our EU partners. However, we have got to go through these negotiations.

The Prime Minister is right to want to have a clear and strong mandate to have those negotiations—I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that my view is that she is the right person to handle those negotiations to get the right deal for our country—and part of that process is about ensuring that we keep our people safe and that we have a strong relationship with our partners overseas as well, in all countries. Indeed, one of the things we need to think about as we leave the European arrest warrant—it is one of the opportunities

[Brandon Lewis]

we have with all these law enforcement structures—is that crime is becoming more global. That is why our relationships with our European partners are so important and why they work, but it is also why we need to have those relationships with more countries than just our European partners.

When extraditing people from the United Kingdom, it is important that we ensure that we can show our citizens that those who should face justice do, but with their rights properly respected. As the Minister responsible for extradition, I am very clear that our position as a Government is that the European arrest warrant assists the United Kingdom in meeting its commitments to strong practical co-operation with EU partners on security, law enforcement and criminal justice, but that that is not at the expense of human rights. Our current processes, with the specific safeguards, meet both those important legitimate points.

4.5 pm

David T. C. Davies: May I add my thanks to you for how you have chaired this debate, Mr Evans? In closing, let me briefly say that there is a surprising amount of agreement in the Chamber, considering that we are on the verge of what I suspect will be a rather fiery election campaign. Representatives of various different political parties have spoken in agreement with the general principle, but with concern that human rights should be adhered to. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald)—my old friend, if I may put it that way—the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and the Minister. We have an opportunity to make some changes—if the right

hon. Member for Leicester East is right, we have an obligation and will have no choice.

I absolutely support the principle that anyone who has committed a crime—whether they are a UK national who has committed a crime abroad or a foreign national who has committed a crime in the UK—has to face justice. I absolutely accept that we live in an age where terrorism is sadly an ever-present threat, and we need to be able to protect ourselves. I also think we have a duty to balance the protections we all need with protections for human rights. I am not absolutely convinced that we have the balance right at the moment.

I would press the Minister on this: I noticed that he was unable to say clearly whether he believed that the standards of justice in all the countries that are part of the European arrest warrant match the standards that apply in the UK. He may not be able to say what he thinks about that, but the European Commission has said that in two instances—Bulgaria and Romania—it is not satisfied with the standards of justice that apply there. Various MPs have given different examples and different cases, some involving those countries and some not, which back up that contention.

All I would say in closing is that it is important that we get the balance right. I very much hope that the Minister will be back. I hope he continues in some capacity to use his expertise of Home Office matters to develop a new partnership with the European Union that will protect the safety and the human rights of UK residents.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the European Arrest Warrant.

4.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 20 April 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

BEIS Arm's Length Body

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government are announcing today the sale of the UK Green Investment Bank plc (GIB) to Macquarie Group Ltd (Macquarie), with a £2.3 billion deal which secures a profit on the Government's investment in the bank, provides value for taxpayers and ensures GIB continues its green mission, in the private sector.

GIB has been a real success story since it was created in 2012—the world's first dedicated green investment bank, established to accelerate private sector investment into the UK green economy. It has fulfilled that mission, supporting almost 100 green infrastructure projects in the UK so far, and attracting £3 of third-party funding for every £1 it invests. It has shown, as it set out to do, that green investment can be both green and profitable. Having demonstrated its success, the Government decided to move GIB into the private sector where it can continue its success on an even greater scale.

The deal, secured through a competitive process as set out in a report to Parliament on 3 March 2016, will meet the objectives outlined by Government of securing value for money for the taxpayer while ensuring GIB continues its green mission, free from the constraints of public sector ownership. It has the backing of GIB's independent board.

Under the ownership of Macquarie, one of the largest infrastructure investors in the world, GIB will invest more into the green economy than ever before, with £3 billion of new investment targeted over the next three years, exceeding GIB's track record of committing £3.4 billion of investment over the four and a half years since it was founded. GIB will become the primary vehicle for Macquarie's renewable energy investment in the UK and Europe, allowing GIB to expand internationally.

Macquarie has today published a series of commitments over the future of GIB under their ownership, including that GIB's green purpose and green objectives will be maintained. This is in line with the "special share" in GIB to safeguard GIB's green purposes, which will be held by five independent trustees who will have the power to approve or reject any proposed change to GIB's green mission.

Macquarie has also committed to continue GIB's investment approach, targeting investments across all areas of the green economy and across all stages of the project lifecycle, including the critical phases of development and construction. This will ensure GIB remains a specialist green investor supporting renewable energy investment and emissions reduction in the UK.

Macquarie is committed to maintain the GIB platform and brand, and to utilise the skills and experience of GIB employees in Edinburgh and London. GIB's

Edinburgh office will be home to a new revenue generating project delivery business providing services to the green energy portfolios of GIB and Macquarie in the UK.

The transaction value of around £2.3 billion ensures that on completion, all taxpayer funding invested in GIB has been returned with a substantial profit. This comprises proceeds from the sale of around £1.7 billion, with a further £0.6 billion of GIB's current outstanding commitments which will be met by Macquarie and its partners, rather than by taxpayers.

As part of the transaction, a number of GIB's offshore wind assets will be moved into a new offshore wind investment vehicle, which GIB will manage and hold a 25% stake. Investors in this investment vehicle will be long-term institutional investors Macquarie European Infrastructure Fund 5 (MEIF5) and the universities superannuation scheme (USS). This type of transaction structure matches GIB's existing approach to asset ownership, providing a mechanism for long-term institutional investors to invest in low-carbon projects while ensuring GIB can recycle its capital into new green investments.

The Government will continue to hold a £130 million portfolio of a small number of GIB's existing investments. This portfolio will continue to be managed by GIB until these investments can be sold on in a way which returns best value for taxpayers' money.

The Government would like to put on record their gratitude to GIB management and staff, who have all played a key role in GIB's success, and who have worked tirelessly and professionally to support the sale process while continuing to source and finance green projects across the UK.

The sale proceeds will be received on completion of the transaction, which is expected to take around two months. The transaction is conditional on certain regulatory approvals including EU merger clearance. Under the Enterprise Act 2016, the Government are required to provide a full report to Parliament on completion of the transaction.

[HCWS600]

CABINET OFFICE

Conduct Guidance for General Election

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): The Prime Minister will write to ministerial colleagues providing guidance on the conduct of Government business during the general election period. The Cabinet Secretary has issued parallel guidance to civil servants on their conduct during this period. The guidance comes into force on 22 April 2017.

Copies of the documents have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and on the Cabinet Office website at gov.uk.

[HCWS605]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Economy Bill

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): I have placed in the Library of the House the Department's analysis on the application of Standing Order No. 83 O of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons relating to public business in respect of the Lords amendments to the Digital Economy Bill.

[HCWS601]

DEFENCE

Contingent Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I have retrospectively laid before Parliament a Ministry of Defence (MOD) departmental minute describing the contingent liabilities within the Astute boat 5 and 6 whole boat contracts with BAE Systems Marine Ltd.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that the MOD will hold as a result of placing the Astute boats 5 and 6 whole boat contracts, which will provide production, test and commissioning of the fifth and sixth Astute class submarines, HMS Anson and HMS Agamemnon. The maximum contingent liability against the MOD is unquantifiable and will remain until the respective out of service date of the submarine.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide Members of Parliament an opportunity to raise any objections. I apologise, but on this occasion, it was not possible to do so.

For boat 6 the Department was faced with exceptional sequencing from the completion of difficult negotiations. The Department faced the prospect of losing the deal and its associated £110 million savings, due to new changes to single source contract regulations introduced on 1 April 2017. As such the Secretary of State for Defence decided to proceed with the agreement, following scrutiny of the contract by the Department's investment approvals committee which confirmed that the contract offered best value for money for the taxpayer, and subsequent approval by HM Treasury.

As a result of detailed work in connection with the boat 6 contract it has been recognised that contingent liabilities arising from the boat 5 contract, which has hitherto been considered not to require notification to Parliament, are in fact the same as those for boat 6 and should therefore have been notified, notwithstanding the fact that that no credible scenario has been identified in which a claim could exceed contractual limits.

Within both the boat 5 and 6 contracts, BAE Systems Marine Ltd limited their exposure to product liability to £1 billion per incident and £300 million in any 12-month period. This limits the contractor's exposure for claims by the MOD for losses associated with the product being defective or deficient, and creates an exposure for the MOD for third party claims against the contractor

for losses associated with the product being defective or deficient. It is the view of the Department that the likelihood of any claim is remote.

[HCWS602]

HEALTH

Department of Health Arm's Length Bodies

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): The Department of Health has completed its triennial reviews of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, the Human Tissue Authority and the Committee on Mutagenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment and is today publishing the associated reports. A copy of each review report can be found online. Additionally, the review of the NHS Pay Review Body and the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration will be subsumed within a cross-cutting review of the classification of the Department of Health's advisory non-departmental public bodies.

Each review, which took place during 2015-16, consulted with a wide range of stakeholders and concluded that the organisations perform necessary functions effectively. The reports contain recommendations intended to support each organisation's future performance, efficiency, and governance.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-04-20/HCWS599/>.

[HCWS599]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

International Development

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): In a world of serious threats to UK and global stability, Britain's leadership on the world stage is more important than ever. When we look around the world today, people are drowning on perilous migration routes. Children are dying from preventable diseases while drug-resistant infections are brewing that threaten us here at home. Violence and conflict are pulling people back into poverty.

As we exit the EU, Britain will be more, not less, outward-looking and engaged on the world stage. Intensifying our efforts as a global leader in international development is a crucial part of this. A safer and more prosperous world, supported by our international development work, is firmly in the UK's interest.

Our humanitarian leadership helps Britain stand tall in the world. Since the beginning of the year we have faced the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the United Nations. Now, more than 20 million people across four countries face starvation and famine.

The UK is a world leader on humanitarian responses and today I am announcing that the UK will increase funding to tackle humanitarian crises in both Yemen and Nigeria for this coming year. We will lead the world in supporting famine stricken areas by stepping up our emergency assistance.

The UN has described the situation in Yemen as “the largest food security emergency in the world” and last month declared that the country is now on the brink of famine. We will provide £139 million for Yemen for financial year 2017-18, an increase of £27 million on the £112 million delivered by the UK last year.

UK support will provide life-saving aid to hundreds of thousands of desperate people, in recognition of the scale of the current crisis which has left some 19 million Yemenis—two thirds of the population—in urgent need of humanitarian aid.

Nigeria is one of the world’s largest humanitarian crises. More than 20,000 people have been killed there since the start of Boko Haram’s violent insurgency in 2009 and millions more are in need of food, water and shelter. The UK was one of the first on the ground to respond to the humanitarian crisis in north-east Nigeria. Last year alone we reached over a million people with food and provided 34,000 children suffering from malnutrition with life-saving treatment.

We continue to lead this challenge by increasing our support this year to £100 million, making the UK the largest donor in 2017. Last year (2016), we provided around £70 million for emergency food, shelter and health care for hundreds of thousands of people displaced by Boko Haram’s violent insurgency. The funding will assist the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross and international NGOs to reach the most vulnerable people displaced by Boko Haram:

- Over 1 million people will receive food assistance.
- 60,000 children will be treated for severe acute malnutrition.
- Clean water will be provided for over 530,000 people.
- At least 100,000 children will gain access to education.

The humanitarian needs in 2017 are unprecedented. More than 20 million people across four countries face starvation and famine. In Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, we see ambulances being used as car-bombs; girls stolen as sex slaves; children made to conduct executions; barrel bombs being dropped among civilians. The UK will continue to speak out against these outrages, and stand up for respect for the rules of war and for basic humanitarian principles.

This is why Britain pledged £110 million of UK aid to provide up to 1 million people in Somalia with emergency food assistance, over 600,000 starving children and pregnant and breastfeeding women with nutritional help, 1 million people with safe drinking water, and more than 1.1 million people with emergency health services. In South Sudan, where 7.5 million people are in need of assistance after famine was declared, the UK was one of the first major donors to confirm our response to a UN appeal, announcing £100 million of support less than 24 hours after the appeal was launched. This will provide: food for over 500,000 people; life-saving nutritional support to more than 27,500 children, and safe drinking water for over 300,000 people.

The UK is at the forefront of the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis, providing life-saving support to millions, supporting refugees to remain in countries in the region and enabling their hosts to accommodate

them. The crisis in Syria is the UK’s largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

The £2.46 billion provided to Syria and the region since 2012 has provided nearly 25 million food rations, over 9.5 million relief packages and over 7 million health consultations.

We co-hosted the “Supporting Syria and the Region” conference in London in February 2016, which secured the largest amount of pledges ever in one day for a humanitarian crisis. On 4 and 5 April this year, we co-hosted the Brussels conference on the “Future of Syria and the Region”, which secured pledges of \$9.7 billion.

I am pleased to announce the UK will pledge an additional £75 million, as part of our Brussels commitment, to help kick start economic growth and create jobs in Lebanon and Jordan over the next three years. These funds will leverage up to £250 million of concessional finance from multilateral development banks, including through the global concessional financing facility.

As the global migration crisis has made clear, the challenges facing the international development system in the 21st century go beyond anything witnessed before. More than ever, the world needs strong global institutions and leadership for today and for the future. The UK is a founding member of many of the world’s leading international organisations and we remain deeply committed to the spirit and values of the international system.

The UK will continue to champion an open, modern and innovative approach to development and will use our leading position to build a coalition for reform of the global aid system so that it is ready for the challenges of the 21st century. We are promoting investment in the poorest countries, helping them to get on the road to industrialisation. We are driving progress on economic development and working with businesses to stimulate investment in the world’s most difficult frontier markets, where jobs and economic opportunities are desperately needed. In the long run, it is sustainable growth, trade and investment that will provide a sustainable route to poverty reduction. Defeating poverty is a joined-up effort across the whole of Government including using the opportunity of leaving the EU to free up trade with the world’s poorest.

I also would like to update the House on how we are reforming UK aid to maximise its impact by driving new standards and outcomes. DFID’s economic development strategy sets out how Britain will establish new trade, investment and economic links and end global poverty. The multilateral development review spells out how we are raising the bar, requiring more of our partners, by following the money, people and outcomes. The bilateral development review confirms how DFID is reforming the entire global development system to tackle the global challenges of our time.

As a key part of this, my ministerial team and I have conducted a detailed line-by-line review of every programme in DFID’s portfolio, either already approved or in design phase. Each of these programmes has been scrutinised on the basis of their value for money and their strategic fit with the Government’s priorities for global Britain. The savings from programmes which will not continue will be recycled to fund better value programmes aligned to our priorities, while still delivering our planned results and commitments.

In the 2015 spending review the Government announced plans to make over £400 million of efficiency savings by 2019-20. DFID will save closer to £500 million in this period, through reform of procurement and commercial practices, estates, IT and departmental pay. These changes are included in the Department's ambitious new value for money "Agenda for Action".

In addition, a comprehensive review of DFID's management and relationship with suppliers is under way. This review will drive greater transparency and efficiencies from DFID's suppliers through new codes of practice and contractual obligations; more competition, innovation and choice in our supplier market; and increased transparency of fees and costs throughout our supply chain.

These bold measures will drive value for money without compromising our commitment to being a global leader in international development. In 2015-16, it is estimated that DFID supported:

The immunisation of approximately 20 million children, saving 250,000 lives; we are on track to meet DFID's commitment of immunising 76 million and saving 1.4 million lives.

Reaching 13.3 million children under 5, women of childbearing age and adolescent girls through our nutrition-relevant programmes; on track to meet DFID's commitment of 50 million.

5.9 million women from 2012 to 2015, and 1 million women in 2015-16, to use modern methods of family planning. This gives a total of 6.9 million for the period 2012-16; on track to meet DFID's commitment of 24 million between 2012 and 2020.

3.1 million children to gain a decent education; on track to meet DFID's commitment of 11 million.

11.3 million people to access clean water and/or better sanitation; on track to meet DFID's commitment of 60 million.

UK taxpayers can be equally proud of our record on humanitarian response: in 2015-16 we reached 5.1 million people, including 1.6 million women and girls.

Our support has been life-saving and life-changing, as shown by DFID's leadership of the international response to Ebola in Sierra Leone. The British response to Ebola in 2015 was an example of Britain's development impact and influence. Experts from DFID co-ordinated a joined-up effort across Government, bringing together the best of British expertise to defeat that disease.

UK aid is being focused on where the need is greatest—from fragile and conflict-riven states that need help the most urgently, to protecting lives, reducing poverty, and working with Governments who receive our aid to get them to step up and take responsibility for investing in their own people. When we invest in stability, jobs and livelihoods, and sound governance, we address the root causes of problems that affect us here in the UK. It is not in our national interest to simply sit on our hands and wait until these problems reach breaking point or find their way to our doorstep.

This is where our aid budget, along with our world-class defence and diplomacy, acts not only in the interests of the world's poorest, but also in Britain's long-term national interest.

[HCWS606]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt):

Extending the Motability lease (following reassessment from disability living allowance (DLA) to personal independence payment (PIP))

The Motability scheme plays a vital role in the lives of many disabled people and their families in supporting their mobility through the provision of a car, scooter or powered wheelchair. Motability has no role in determining who should receive disability living allowance or personal independence payment.

In September 2013, the charity put in place a transitional support package, which includes up to £2,000 as a lump sum for those disabled people who are not entitled to the enhanced rate of the mobility component of personal independence payment following reassessment from disability living allowance to personal independence payment in order to help them remain mobile.

Over the last few months, DWP and Motability have been working closely together to explore further ways of helping disabled people.

A key focus of this work has been how best to support Motability customers who are in the process of any reconsideration or appeal.

Today I am able to announce that Motability has kindly offered to enhance their disability living allowance-personal independence payment transitional support package to allow scheme customers to retain the car for up to eight weeks after their disability living allowance payments end, a significant increase from the three weeks they are allowed today.

In addition customers who are eligible for a transitional support payment will be able to retain their car for up to six months, including during the processes of reconsideration or appeal. For those who take advantage of this option, the level of transitional support payment will be reduced.

Once the full guidance for claimants is available, I will place a copy in the Library of the House.

PIP rapid reclaim

Currently, entitlement to personal independence payment ends after 13 weeks for most claimants when they go abroad. On returning to the UK they must make a new claim from scratch and may need to undergo a face-to-face assessment. We will shortly be implementing a new, rapid reclaim process that will enable eligible former personal independence payment claimants who are returning to the country to start receiving their personal independence payment payments much more quickly.

Eligible claimants will be those who:

were in receipt of personal independence payment prior to their absence abroad;

were out of the country for more than 13 weeks but returned within 12 months of when they left;

have not have reached their award review date of their previous claim (typically 12 months prior to the claim end date);

can confirm that their needs have not changed since before their absence abroad.

This new process will be implemented within the next two months. We estimate that eligible claimants will be able to access the benefit within two weeks of making a new claim on their return. By accessing financial support more quickly, where relevant, claimants will have faster access to the Motability scheme.

[HCWS603]

Labour Market

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): The UK labour market is a great success story for this country. The latest labour market statistics have shown that the UK employment level has risen to a near record high of 31.84 million, with the employment rate achieving a joint record high of 74.6%. In particular, the female employment rate is at a near record high of 69.9% while for older workers (50-64) the employment rate has reached a joint record high of 70.9%. The overall unemployment rate has fallen to 4.7%, the lowest rate in over a decade, alongside inactivity which is at a near record low of 21.6%. The employment rate of 16-to-24s who are not in full-time education is at 75.4%,

the highest in over 12 years. The proportion of 16 to 24-year-olds year olds who are not in full-time education or employment is down to 5.1%, a joint record low.

Two planks of our approach to continuing to support people into work have been to enable older people to stay in the labour market for longer, and to support disabled people and people with long-term health conditions to move into and stay in work.

In February this year the Government published “Fuller Working Lives: A Partnership Approach”, which set out the ambition to support individuals aged 50 and over to remain in and return to the labour market and tackle the barriers to doing so. Through a combination of headline measures, Government will continue to monitor progress on “Fuller Working Lives”.

In October last year we published “Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper”. This set out the action we intend to take to bring about change across welfare, employers and health systems and invited views on a 10-year strategy for reform. Since publication we have run a 15-week national consultation, which closed in February 2017. We received a great response to the consultation from a wide range of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions, and organisations with an interest.

[HCWS604]

Petition

Thursday 20 April 2017

OBSERVATIONS

WORK AND PENSIONS

Proposed closure of Annesley DWP office

The petition of staff of Annesley DWP office, and their families,

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are proposing to close Annesley DWP office within the next year (2017/18); further that the DWP are proposing to do this without consideration of the potential loss of 100 plus jobs by compulsory redundancies; further that there has been no consideration of the disproportionate impact on those who work at Annesley by not conducting an Equality Impact Assessment; and further that there has been no consideration of the economic hit on the area because the closure could mean a loss of £1 million and this loss will inevitably impact on a number of businesses in the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that Annesley DWP office is kept open, so that there are no job losses.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Gloria De Piero, *Official Report*, 28 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 220.]

[P002030]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):

On 31 March 2018 DWP's PFI PRIME (Private Resource Initiative for the Management of the Estate) contract with Telereal Trillium expires. This 20 year contract covers the majority of DWP's current property portfolio of over 900 sites including Waterfront House, Annesley. This has given us a unique opportunity to review which offices we will need in the future, taking account of the increased use of our online services, the impact of Universal Credit and the anticipated demand on our services.

Waterfront House is a small back-of-house processing office currently housing 131 highly skilled and dedicated staff who deliver important services to the vulnerable and those in need. The site is currently 28% underutilised based on the number of full time equivalent staff.

We have a clear set of requirements for our future back-of-house estate which focuses on larger, high quality offices supporting new ways of working and enabling increased use of digital services. While our colleagues at

Waterfront House are delivering important services for customers across the UK, the building itself, being small, does not meet our strategic requirements.

We carefully considered the wider impacts on the local community that this proposal, which is part of the department's continued drive to deliver public services in more innovative and cost effective ways, would have. However, while we fully understand and appreciate the potential local impact of this proposal, we must ensure that the estate from which we operate continues to meet the changing needs of our business and our claimants while delivering value for money for the taxpayer.

We would also add that the back-of-house services undertaken at Waterfront House are not specifically linked to claims made by people in the surrounding area and is part of a national network of processing sites. Therefore, there would be no impact on face to face services to claimants as a result of this proposal.

While we appreciate that this is an unsettling time for our colleagues, we are fully committed to supporting them. Our first priority is our people and the need to minimise the risk of redundancies. We will be identifying options for relocation in the local area, to other DWP offices and other Government Departments within Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

Our track record on previous redeployments suggests that we will be able to relocate or offer alternative roles to the vast majority of those potentially affected. However, we do recognise that in a small number of cases relocation and redeployment will not be reasonable or achievable and exits may be required.

With regards to undertaking an Equality Analysis, throughout the development of these proposals, the Department has been mindful of its duties under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. Consideration of the potential impact on colleagues and customers has been informed by statistical analysis of population data, local knowledge and consultation. The consultation, including a recently completed Equality Analysis, is being undertaken with colleagues and trade unions to consider any changes with those who may be impacted by future proposals to discuss their individual circumstances.

In addition to gathering information about their personal circumstances and individual needs such as caring responsibilities, these discussions also provide an important opportunity to discuss where people can travel to and potential travel costs they may incur.

Should the final decision be to proceed with the proposal, colleagues will, depending on their employment terms and conditions, have access to assistance under the department's excess fares policy.

We would also point out that DWP will continue to be a very significant employer in Nottinghamshire with excellent opportunities in both jobcentres and back-of-house functions.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 20 April 2017

WORK AND PENSIONS

Child Maintenance Service

The following is an extract from the winding-up speech given by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery on 18 April 2017 in the Westminster Hall debate on the Child Maintenance Service.

Caroline Nokes: I am very conscious that some non-resident parents hide assets and income within the bank accounts of other family members. We desperately need

to address such abuses, which will form part of our arrears strategy, which we will publish later in the spring, notwithstanding my earlier comment about this morning's announcement.

[Official Report, 18 April 2017, Vol. 624, c. 250WH.]

Letter of correction from Caroline Nokes:

An error has been identified in my closing speech. The correct statement should have been:

Caroline Nokes: I am very conscious that some non-resident parents hide assets and income within the bank accounts of other family members. We desperately need to address such abuses, which will form part of our arrears strategy, which we will publish later in the **year**, notwithstanding my earlier comment about this morning's announcement.

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Thursday 20 April 2017

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not later than
Thursday 27 April 2017

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