

Tuesday
27 June 2017

Volume 626
No. 7



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 27 June 2017

House of Commons

Tuesday 27 June 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make. I would like to draw Members' attention to the fact that the book for entering the private Members' Bills ballot is now open for Members to sign in the No Lobby. It will be open until the House rises today and when the House is sitting on Wednesday 28 June. The ballot itself will be drawn at 9 am on Thursday 29 June in Committee Room 10. An announcement setting out these and other arrangements, and the dates when ten-minute rule motions can be made and presentation Bills introduced, is published in the Order Paper.

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

*The Secretary of State was asked—
North Sea Oil and Gas*

1. **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with trade bodies and companies involved in extracting oil and gas from the North sea. [900016]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): My Department is in regular contact with the oil and gas industry. As hon. Members will be aware, my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), met industry representatives regularly, both in London and in Aberdeen. On 23 March the Oil and Gas Authority awarded licences for 111 blocks to enable exploration and production across frontier areas—the first licensing round to focus on frontier areas in two decades. I look forward to continuing this relationship, which is very important for jobs and the wider economy. Indeed, in my first week in post I attended a reception at Imperial College London and met several companies and trade bodies in the field.

Kirsty Blackman: I thank the Minister for that answer and warmly welcome him to his new post. In 2016 the Chancellor announced that action would be taken to improve the tax regime for late-life asset transfers. In the 2017 Budget he re-announced the same policy, but now an expert panel is to be set up. Can the Minister let me know how many times the expert panel has met so

far, and when we can expect the outcomes of its deliberations to be made public, as it says they will be on the gov.uk website?

Richard Harrington: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. She and I have worked together in previous roles, and I look forward to visiting Aberdeen, where hopefully she will be able to explain this further. As far as late-life assets are concerned, we realise how important it is to get this right, and not just for the jobs and tax revenue, but for generating further investment. The discussion paper and the panel of experts are considering this. We look forward to hearing a wide range of views and will report our findings at the autumn Budget.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Minister will be aware that over the past decade Qatar has become an increasingly important source of gas for the UK, not least from imports of liquefied natural gas through my constituency. What steps is he taking to ensure that the current diplomatic crisis in the Gulf affecting Qatar does not lead to any disruption of energy supply into the UK?

Richard Harrington: As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the Government are monitoring the situation very carefully, and we do not believe that it will make any difference whatsoever to liquefied gas supplies.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his new post. Getting back to the North sea, the kind of action described by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) is vital, especially to help along the return optimism. The Scottish Government have invested £5 million to explore decommissioning opportunities in oil and gas that could grow many new jobs. When will we get action from the UK Government, and when will we see a robust and comprehensive future energy strategy from the UK Government?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Government have been very actively involved in funding seismic surveys and the 3D visualisation centre at Heriot-Watt University. I am looking forward to the next licensing round and to dealing with the strategy he mentioned. I should mention the Kraken development, which the Government have supported, because the first barrels of oil were produced last week, and we look forward to there being 50,000 barrels a day at peak.

Drew Hendry: The fact is that the UK Government have been slow to realise the potential of decommissioning, pulled funding from vital carbon capture and storage pipeline projects, failed adequately to address the drop in renewable energy investment and plunged public funds into risky and poor-value nuclear power projects against the advice of experts. When will this Government wake up and take our energy opportunities seriously?

Richard Harrington: I am afraid that I must completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman's view of things. We are committed to supporting the development of a decommissioning industry. I think that there are significant opportunities. We are currently considering options for

the delivery of a port and yard, and we will continue to engage closely with all relevant stakeholders as we develop our options.

Leaving the EU: Business Consultation

2. Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What steps he has taken to consult businesses on the process of the UK leaving the EU. [900017]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Since the referendum, I have held discussions with businesses, workers and local leaders across the UK, and investors all around the world. These will continue over the coming months, including my weekly meetings with the directors general of the five main business organisations. The Government are creating a new EU exit business advisory group to ensure that business is not only heard but is influential throughout the negotiations.

Jo Churchill: My particular interest is in the UK's life science sector, which is worth some £30 billion to the economy and involves nearly half a million jobs, many of which are in my constituency of Bury St Edmunds. Will the Secretary of State tell me how he will ensure that there is continued support to this vital leading research and science sector as we leave the EU?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. My hon. Friend is a great champion of the sector. In our negotiations, we want to ensure that we can continue these successful collaborations, as well as making further investment in the future of research through our industrial strategy. The House may be interested to know that I can announce today that the Government's commitment to underwrite the UK's fair share for the Joint European Torus costs—the leading nuclear fusion facility in Oxfordshire, supporting 1,300 jobs—will be made. The facility is funded through a contract between the European Commission and the UK Atomic Energy Authority. In making this commitment, the Government hope to provide the certainty and reassurance needed for a mutually beneficial extension of the contract.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): All the five business organisations to which the Secretary of State refers have come out against the Prime Minister's extreme and damaging Brexit. What is he personally doing to ensure that the Prime Minister not only hears what they are saying, but listens to it?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman will know that the five business organisations have put forward a sensible set of principles to govern the transition and the shape of a final agreement. Those suggestions seem very sensible. Part of the point of engaging with business, as I do rigorously and frequently, is to ensure that that voice is heard.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): One of the important principles that those business organisations have stressed is the essential nature of having contractual and legal certainty for those who are entering into legal obligations so that they know that that will continue to be enforceable once we leave the EU. Will the Secretary of State therefore ensure that particular regard is had to the need for transition periods to be based on the reality of business practice, rather than on arbitrary considerations?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. If he has the continued privilege to chair the Select Committee on Justice, I am sure that it will provide some help in this.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Many businesses are particularly concerned about additional checks on trade imports and exports if we leave the customs union. Can the Secretary of State give businesses any reassurance at all that there will not be additional checks if and when we leave the customs union?

Greg Clark: I have always been clear, as have the Government, that we want not only no tariffs, but no bureaucratic impediments of the type described by the hon. Lady. That is one of the objectives set out by the business organisations. As she knows, the negotiations have just started, but we are clear that that is our objective.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend be asking businesses to list the most egregious and restrictive EU directives that may be removed once we leave in order to make British business more competitive and efficient?

Greg Clark: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be an assiduous contributor to the scrutiny of the repeal Bill. The approach is to transfer into UK law that which was part of EU law precisely so that this House can scrutinise and consider what should be continued.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Government said yesterday that EU citizens will be able to apply for what they called "settled status", so that they can continue to live and work in the UK. Application processes can be time-consuming, not to mention complicated, expensive and off-putting, especially when this Government are involved. How can the Secretary of State guarantee that all EU nationals working in the UK will be allowed to stay not just in theory but in practice, to the benefit of the many businesses that rely on EU workers?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Gentleman back to his place. In fact, I think that Labour's whole Front-Bench team has been reappointed. It is nice to see loyalty rewarded. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I thought that he would welcome the Prime Minister's very positive statement. It is important that the process is implemented with no bureaucracy so that people can apply with confidence.

Construction Industry: Cash Retentions

3. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What his policy is on the non-release or late release of cash retentions in the construction industry. [900018]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Unjustified late and non-payment of a retention payment or any amount owed is unacceptable. These practices cause particular problems for small businesses in the construction sector, and the Government are committed to tackling them. We will shortly be publishing research into these issues, alongside a consultation document.

Stuart C. McDonald: The system of cash retentions has been wreaking havoc in the construction industry for decades. Can the Minister assure us that there will soon be radical action to overhaul the system, and can she explain why it has taken so long?

Margot James: There is, indeed, far too much abuse of the system of cash retention, and it has been going on for too long. The burden of administrative time spent securing payments and the drain on working capital weigh far too heavily on smaller firms in the supply chain, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will be taking action.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): If the Government had only listened in 2015 to the amendments the Labour party tabled to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, we would already have a solution. We were told then that the Government were going to take action. We were told again a few months ago that they were taking action with their proposals about naming and shaming businesses that did not publish their late payments. We now have yet another consultation. Research from Crossflow Payments shows that 74% of small businesses do not believe that the Government's recent changes will make any difference. Can we have a policy that actually enforces action on late payments, rather than the series of consultations that we have had?

Margot James: I agree that action is needed, but it is important that we take the right action. We have undertaken a consultation, the results of which will be published shortly. That will be followed by a consultation on the 2011 changes to the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996, which will consider the merits of ring-fencing retentions and the extent to which contractors are making the payment of retentions conditional on the performance of obligations under other, completely separate contracts.

Electric Cars

4. **Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** What steps he is taking to ensure that the electric grid is able to support the charging of the number of electric cars estimated to be in use by 2020. [900019]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his pathfinding work in this area. I understand he is a proud owner of a Nissan Leaf—an electric vehicle made in the UK. He will therefore know that this is an exceptionally important point for us. I am very proud of the Government's ambition for almost all cars on our roads to be zero-emissions by 2050, and also of our success in positioning the UK as a leading destination for the manufacture of and research into these vehicles. He will be reassured to know that good progress is being made with grid-readiness, and the upcoming smart systems plan and the automated and electric vehicles Bill will ensure that electric vehicle demands are managed efficiently, and the roll-out of electric vehicles is accelerated.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister for her response, and I am glad to hear that, because a study of the impact of electric vehicles on the UK's distribution network has estimated that "voltage imbalances, coupled with overloaded distribution transformers could...impair power lines."

How quickly can we have a report on that, given that the usage of such vehicles is likely to rise substantially in the coming years?

Claire Perry: I think my hon. Friend is right. With policies to really accelerate the usage of electric vehicles, this is a critical thing. He will know that Ofgem has approved business plans for the local network companies, which already bake in billions of pounds of investment, to ensure that the expected demands on the grid can be met. But, equally, it is not just about raw investment in cables; it is actually about changing consumers' behaviour to ensure they can charge their vehicles at a time that puts least demand on the grid and perhaps saves them money. I refer back to our plan and to the Bill, which will enable smart charging and help people to charge their vehicles at a time when it puts least demand on the network.

Mr Speaker: It all sounds very exciting, I must say.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister ever worry that the country looks like investing £100 billion in High Speed 2, which will open at the earliest in 2033, but that, by that time, we will be able to use our phone to call to our home a driverless Uber-type vehicle powered by electricity that can take us anywhere in the country? Is that £100 billion not wasted money?

Claire Perry: I would define seeing you in an electric vehicle, Mr Speaker, as a success in my new role. We can have a conversation afterwards.

The hon. Gentleman will know that I think that upgrading our rail and road networks is one way to reduce congestion on the roads and to open up business opportunities and create potential new capacity for things such as electric rail freight, which has been severely neglected by successive Governments over many years. That is why we want to position ourselves not only as a leading manufacturer of electric vehicles—one in five electric vehicles sold in the EU are made in Britain—but as a hub for innovation. We are putting millions of pounds into innovation studies and research, to see how those new technologies can work together to ultimately achieve the aim of zero emissions by 2050.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Electric vehicles are a vital part of meeting our climate change commitments. Can the Minister update us on further action to tackle climate change after the USA's repudiation of the Paris agreement?

Claire Perry: I thank my hon. Friend for that valuable question. I was delighted to be sent, on almost the first day in the job, to Luxembourg to meet our EU counterparts to discuss the fact that we are all very disappointed with Mr Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the Paris agreement, and accept that more work needs to be done by the remaining countries to emphasise that Paris is non-negotiable, although we would like him to come back to the agreement. I was also personally able to increase the level of UK funding for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change trust fund, across the board with other European friends and neighbours, to ensure that any reduction of USA funding can be met.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): May I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position and, indeed, Front-Bench Members, new and old, to their roles? Can we have

proper local accountability and ownership of local community grids, so that we break the monopolies of the distribution companies, which make masses of money and do not always reinvest?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly valuable point about how we start to move ourselves away from generating emissions in the heating and lighting sector. He will be pleased to know that I was able to put more innovation funding into trials that are doing exactly that.

Albert Owen: Already!

Claire Perry: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I like to do these things seriously. We are already funding pilots to see how peer-to-peer exchange of power can work, and how further to improve community generation and storage of energy.

Thames Gateway: SMEs

5. **Gareth Johnson** (Dartford) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the growth of small and medium-sized businesses in the Thames Gateway. [900021]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Supporting small business is a crucial part of our industrial strategy. The Government are investing in the Thames Gateway, including through the local growth fund and the new lower Thames crossing. We will continue to work with industry and local authorities in the Thames Gateway to create the conditions for all businesses to thrive.

Gareth Johnson: The lack of connectivity between Kent and Essex frustrates commerce between those two counties. The lower Thames crossing will help with that, but it will take some years for it to be built. Will the Minister use that time to work with local businesses in the area to unlock its huge potential, which has yet to be fully realised?

Margot James: The lower Thames crossing is due to open in 2025. In the meantime, local growth hubs will continue to deliver support services to help businesses in the area to grow over that period. In addition, almost half of the South East local enterprise partnership funding of £274 million is directly supporting growth in north Kent and south Essex by improving transport infrastructure, addressing skills needs and creating new business spaces.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister will know that one of the strengths of the Thames Gateway is the closeness of connections elsewhere in Europe, and one of the worries that small and medium-sized businesses have is whether they will be able to continue to recruit staff from other EU countries after Brexit. Will she acknowledge the strength of concerns of firms in the Thames Gateway, and can she offer them any reassurance about the prospects after Brexit?

Margot James: Having travelled around the country talking to many businesses over the past year, I acknowledge those concerns in the Thames Gateway area. However, I was reassured—I hope the right hon. Gentleman was,

too—by the Prime Minister's opening contribution to the negotiations last week and the reassurance she offered many hundreds of thousands of EU citizens currently residing in the UK, including those working in the right hon. Gentleman's area.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)
rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is an estimable fellow, but West Dunbartonshire is a considerable distance from the Thames Gateway. Knowing the intellectual eclecticism of the hon. Gentleman, I think he may have a pertinent inquiry and I am absolutely fascinated to discover whether that is the case.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Businesses—those in the Thames Gateway, along with those in West Dunbartonshire—require confidence in those who form Governments and in those who support them. Does the Minister agree that that requires transparency? Will he call on every political party in Northern Ireland to publish fully everything in terms of the political donations and campaigns they are involved in?

Mr Speaker: No, that is manifestly out of order. The hon. Gentleman, I think, was more interested in what he had to say to the Minister than in anything the Minister might have said to him.

Gas Storage Facilities

6. **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate his Department has made of the future level of investment required in the UK's gas storage facilities. [900022]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): There has been significant investment in the UK's natural gas supply infrastructure over the past decade. It is highly complex, because we benefit from highly diverse and flexible sources of natural gas. They include: indigenous production from the North sea; six international gas pipelines with Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands; three liquefied natural gas terminals that can bring supply from anywhere in the world; and a number of modern, responsive gas storage facilities. We are confident that market-led investment will continue to deliver secure gas supplies, but I will continue to monitor the position.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for his answer. The ceramics industry is a major employer in my constituency. It is very energy-intensive and heavily reliant on a secure supply of gas for business continuity. In the light of the announcement that the Rough gas storage facility is to close, what assurances can the Minister give the ceramics industry that the gas it needs will not run out or become unaffordable?

Richard Harrington: As I explained in my answer to the hon. Gentleman's first question, we have a very diverse range of sources. Analysis conducted by the National Grid and others confirms that the closure of Rough will not cause a problem with security. I give the hon. Gentleman an undertaking to monitor this, with my Department, on a weekly basis.

Business Confidence

7. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps he is taking to improve business confidence. [900023]

14. **Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to foster a positive environment for business growth. [900030]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The industrial strategy Green Paper was launched on 23 January and has been warmly received across the country. We have received over 1,900 responses to the consultation, with respondents from every part of the United Kingdom. I look forward to taking our modern industrial strategy forward, with the involvement of all Members of this House, in the months ahead.

Gavin Newlands: In a damaging blow to business confidence and the wider economy in Renfrewshire, Chivas Brothers announced that it was moving operations from Paisley in 2019. The workforce have voted to strike over a pay offer that Chivas Brothers itself admits does not meet commitments it made to the workforce. Will the Secretary of State join me in urging Chivas to offer a deal that prevents industrial action and recognises the contribution the Paisley workforce have given to Chivas over many, many years?

Greg Clark: Of course we want to avoid industrial action. I am not aware of the particular circumstances, but I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman so he can inform me of them in more detail.

Liam Byrne: Does the Secretary of State agree with the Secretary of State for Defence, who spoke this morning about the need to provide extra investment in those areas that are left behind—even if the bill comes to something like £1.5 billion? When is he going to open talks with other hon. Members about the needs of their areas, so we can ensure that those left-behind regions are not left behind and left out?

Greg Clark: I am very surprised to hear that question from the right hon. Gentleman. Of all the people in this House, he was a great proponent of a city deal and a devolution deal for Birmingham and the west midlands, the value of which is over £1 billion. Looking around the Chamber, there are many Opposition Members who have made precisely such a case that we should invest in areas of the country, outside of national programmes. It seems to me to be reasonable to continue that programme.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I took soundings from small businesses in Rugby at a small business expo run by the Federation of Small Businesses on Friday. Their single biggest concern related to the recruitment of staff, in that the skills they are looking for often are not available among local jobseekers. Given those instances, will the Secretary of State reassure us about the training of young people and the ability to recruit staff from the EU moving forward?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. One of the big findings, which has been reinforced by the consultation on the industrial strategy, is that we need to ramp up the level

of skills and technical education and training in this country. We will respond to the consultation in the weeks ahead, but my hon. Friend can rest assured that that will be one of its key pillars.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): The Kingswood Lakeside business park in Cannock is home to many leading businesses, and the new developments there will create hundreds of new jobs. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those developments are evidence of business confidence, and show that Cannock Chase is well and truly open for business and is a great place to do business?

Greg Clark: I do indeed. Having visited Cannock Chase with my hon. Friend, I know that she is a great champion of the businesses there. It is fair to reflect that the confidence of manufacturers and employers in other sectors is high. As the CBI attested this week, it is high across the country, including in Cannock Chase.

Euratom Treaty

8. **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues and other key stakeholders on the potential effect of the UK leaving the Euratom treaty on energy suppliers and on the availability of radioisotopes for the NHS. [900024]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We have discussed the UK's exit from Euratom across the Government and with key stakeholders. Our objective is to ensure that leaving Euratom has no adverse impact on energy suppliers or on our international commitments on nuclear non-proliferation. Medical radioisotopes are not special fissile nuclear material, and are not subject to international nuclear safeguards. Therefore, their availability should not be impacted by the UK's exit from Euratom. As the hon. Lady will have seen, the Queen's Speech announced the Government's intention to legislate to establish a domestic nuclear safeguards regime.

Layla Moran: Yesterday *The Times* reported that officials from the Minister's Department estimated that it would take seven years to negotiate equivalent terms to this treaty. Given that experts have warned that, above all, we must avoid a cliff-edge withdrawal, does he not agree that leaving on the current timeline is infeasible and that it would be in the UK's best interests to stay in Euratom and avoid this mess?

Joseph Johnson: I should have welcomed the hon. Lady to her place in the House. Our objective in these proceedings is clear: we want to maintain the UK's leading role as a responsible nuclear state, with world-leading nuclear research and development and a flourishing nuclear power industry. We will establish a regime that ensures that nothing changes in that regard as we leave Euratom.

Zero-hours Contracts

9. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What the Government's policy is on zero-hours contracts. [900025]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House, along with the considerable expertise he brings on labour market issues from his former employment.

Zero-hours contracts allow people to access the labour market who cannot or do not want to commit to standard, regular work. The Government recognise the concerns about employers who may be breaching the rules or otherwise exploiting their position. We want to make sure that everyone is paid properly and receives the employment rights to which they are entitled.

Alex Norris: I thank the Minister for her response and for her kind words. Given the ease with which, just yesterday, £1 billion was found to protect only one job in Westminster, will the Minister please say what actions the Government are taking to encourage business to offer genuine financial and personal security to the nearly 1 million workers on zero-hours contracts?

Margot James: The Government believe that people are entitled to be treated fairly at work, regardless of what type of contract they have with the company for which they work. The Prime Minister commissioned Matthew Taylor to undertake a review of the rights of employees. He will report on the ways in which employment regulations need to keep pace with changes in the labour market very shortly.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement that the Government are determined to ensure that employees get their employment rights. Why, then, did the Government introduce the huge fees for access to employment tribunals? Will they now abolish those fees?

Margot James: Employment tribunals are a matter for the Ministry of Justice, but I am in discussions with it over the review of employment tribunals that it has undertaken and we keep a watching brief on the matters the hon. Lady raises.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): What does the Minister have to say to the young dustman who said to me, "Jack, I've just got married. We're about to have a baby. We're paying a fortune in rent. We'd love to buy our own home, but no chance, because I'm on zero-hours contracts"? Is not the truth that he and millions of workers like him have seen through the pretence that the Conservative party is somehow the party of the working class, and the false claims and the phoney promises, and have simply had enough of falling pay, squeezed living standards and insecurity in the world of work?

Margot James: I think we should have perspective on these matters, because less than 3% of the UK workforce are actually on zero-hours contracts, and according to the most recent research 70% of those people are content with the number of hours they are working. I do accept the hon. Gentleman's point about his constituent, however, and that is precisely the scenario that Matthew Taylor has reviewed and will report on very soon.

Leaving the EU: Small Businesses

10. **Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP):** What safeguards the Government plan to put in place to protect small businesses as part of negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [900026]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Ministers in the Department for Exiting the European Union and I are in regular discussions with small and medium-sized enterprises and their representatives, and we are arranging a joint ministerial roundtable with SMEs to ensure that their voices are heard throughout the Brexit negotiations. Only last week, the permanent secretary of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and I held a roundtable with small businesses on the negotiations.

Carol Monaghan: A survey by the Federation of Small Businesses found that 92% of exporting small businesses trade in the EU single market. How does the Minister predict those small businesses will be affected by the loss of our membership, and how will she ensure that the sector continues to be represented in any future negotiations?

Margot James: The Government are committed to negotiating a full and open trade agreement with the European Union on our departure. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, we are aiming for a situation in which no tariffs are applied to SMEs that export into the single market and there is no unnecessary bureaucracy.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Many SMEs in my constituency are part of European and global supply chains. Does the Minister understand that those businesses, as well as larger financial services businesses, need clarity and certainty? When will she and the Government be in a position to give those businesses certainty about the transitional arrangements that will be put in place? As she knows, businesses are already making investment or de-investment decisions.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman's points are valid, but they are part of the ongoing negotiations, which, as he knows, have some way to go. However, we are defending our position as the No. 1 destination for foreign direct investment, and we will ensure that SMEs have a strong position in global supply chains into the future.

Energy Price Cap

11. **Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab):** What plans he has to implement an energy price cap. [900027]

22. **Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab):** What plans he has to implement an energy price cap. [900039]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our manifesto said that "we will introduce a safeguard tariff cap that will extend the price protection currently in place for some vulnerable customers to more customers on the poorest value tariffs." I stand by that commitment.

Emma Hardy: The lived experience of many people in Hull West and Hessle is that the Conservative party has done nothing to fix the energy market for the past seven years. Although I welcome the Government's move and transformation from calling an energy price cap Marxist and extremely dangerous to copying it, is the Minister facing calls to water down that policy either from the big six or from his own Back Benchers?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Lady to the House; she follows a distinguished predecessor. I would perhaps invite her to reflect on her own party's history in this matter—the former Leader of the Opposition was the Energy Secretary and failed to do anything whatever about it. I have been clear about the commitment that we have made, and we will see it through.

Chris Ruane: Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. To misquote Caroline Aherne's question to Debbie McGee, what first attracted the Secretary of State to Labour's financially astute, socially just and politically responsible energy price cap?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Gentleman back. What he describes as an energy price cap was launched as an energy price freeze. The problem with that was that as energy prices fell, consumers would be paying more than they needed to. That would have been disastrous for them, which is why the proposal that we have made, in response to the Competition and Markets Authority analysis, is a much more sensible approach than we got from Labour.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): As we have heard, various media outlets have reported recently that senior Cabinet members were lobbying for the Conservative price cap manifesto commitment to be dropped. Indeed, the Secretary of State's recent letter to Ofgem was silent on the price cap element and, when questioned last week, the Prime Minister refused to confirm unambiguously that the price cap would be upheld. Will the Secretary of State confirm for the avoidance of doubt that he will implement the promised price cap, and not just stand by it, to deliver to 17 million customers the £100 saving that his Prime Minister promised?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Lady back. It is very good to see her back in her place. I did not hear her name chanted at Glastonbury and it is probably unparliamentary to do it here, but I warmly welcome her back. I have been very clear and the Queen's Speech is very clear. It said, in terms:

“My government will ensure fairer markets for consumers, this will include bringing forward measures to help tackle unfair practices in the energy market to...reduce energy bills.”

Rebecca Long Bailey: I am afraid it is not clear. The Secretary of State's recent letter to Ofgem simply asks it to advise him of the action it intends to take to safeguard customers on the poorest value tariffs. It was not a direction to implement a price cap. Can the Secretary of State confirm that should Ofgem not take directions to implement a price cap, or if it directs a price cap that is narrower than the Conservative manifesto commitment, he will legislate to uphold his party's manifesto commitment and, if so, when?

Greg Clark: The powers that I have are to ask Ofgem to move in this way, not to order it; Ofgem is independent. As there is a strong body of opinion on both sides of the House that the detriment that consumers have been suffering should be put to an end, I would have thought that the hon. Lady welcomed it being put to an end as soon as possible, rather than waiting for legislation to pass through the House. Ofgem has those powers and I believe it should use them.

Industrial Strategy

12. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that all regions benefit from the Government's industrial strategy. [900028]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (**Greg Clark**): The importance of our regions is a core pillar of our industrial strategy. We will build on successful clusters, of which the Humber Energy Estuary is a perfect example, as the hon. Lady knows. The Humber's leading position in marine engineering has been further strengthened by the opening of factories around the offshore wind industry, including at Siemens, where 1,000 new skilled jobs have been created. This is the industrial strategy in action.

Diana Johnson: Ministers recently blocked Hull's privately financed initiative to deliver rail electrification all the way to Hull, an important part of our infrastructure that is needed in east Yorkshire. Are people in Hull right to now believe that the £1 billion that was found for the Northern Ireland powerhouse comes at the expense of the northern powerhouse?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows as well as anyone in this House the commitment that this Government, and I in particular, have made to devolving funds to Hull and the Humber. They have benefited considerably, first from a city deal and then from a growth deal. That has contributed to the increased prosperity in her city, which I would have thought she would welcome.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Notwithstanding what my right hon. Friend has just outlined, and despite the fact that business confidence in the region is high, as outlined by the most recent Hull and Humber chamber of commerce's quarterly report, there are still further initiatives that could be taken to advance the northern powerhouse. What further plans does my right hon. Friend have?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the aspects of the progress made around the Humber is the close working relationships that have been established by businesses and council leaders north and south of the Humber with the Government. I look forward to visiting the area again—I am a regular visitor—so that we can have further devolution of funds and powers there.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Over the last seven months nearly 2,500 job losses have been announced in York, including some at Nestlé, as well as the closure of two company head offices. There are clear challenges to York's economy. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me, along with his senior officials, so that we can address those serious challenges and ensure that the industrial strategy reaches York as well?

Greg Clark: I should be very happy to do that. Nestlé is, of course, a major employer, and there is a cluster of food and drink and agriculture businesses in and around York. It has been identified in the industrial strategy as an area of real potential, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady to realise that potential.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know, expanding Torbay's manufacturing sector is a key part of diversifying our economy for the future, but a lack of skills may hold us back. Will he confirm that the Government are still seeking to deliver institutes of technology throughout the regions in England?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. As I said in an earlier answer, the importance of upgrading our skills education is vital in all parts of the country, including Torbay, and institutes of technology are a way of making sure that industries can benefit from the particular skills that they need.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Having abolished the regional development agencies, the Conservative party has refused to invest in growth for good jobs across the country. Ours is now the most unequal economy in western Europe. If every region produced at the same rate per head as London, we would all be one third richer, but instead working people have not had a pay rise for seven years. Will the Secretary of State commit himself to matching the specific proposals for investment for jobs that are laid out in Labour's industrial strategy, or does his new-found largesse end at the shores of Ulster?

Greg Clark: Again, that was a disappointing response. The hon. Lady knows, and the leaders of her local councils know, how important initiatives such as the city deal and the growth deal have been in the north-east. If she looks around the country, she will see that, whereas in past years most jobs were created in London and the south-east, that situation has been transformed, and the north-east of England is one of the areas that have created jobs at a more rapid rate than anywhere else in the country. She should commend that development.

Carbon Reduction Plan

13. **Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab):** What the reasons are for the time taken to publish the Government's carbon reduction plan. [900029]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry): I welcome the hon. Lady to her new job. I also have a new job, and, since taking on the role I have been incredibly impressed by the progress that the United Kingdom has made, both in meeting its own climate emissions targets and in exercising international leadership in that regard. I want the carbon growth plan to be as ambitious, robust and clear a blueprint as it can be, so that we can continue to deliver on this hugely vital piece of domestic and international policy. I am therefore taking the time to ensure that the draft could be extended to become more ambitious, and I intend to publish the plan when Parliament sits again after the summer recess.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have been on the edge of my seat while listening to the hon. Lady, as has always been the case, but I think I am right in surmising that she was seeking to group Question 13 with Questions 15 and 19. So carried away was she with the excitement of her new responsibilities that I think she neglected to inform us of that.

Claire Perry: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall group Question 13 with Questions 15 and 19.

15. **Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab):** What the reasons are for the time taken to publish the Government's carbon reduction plan. [900031]

19. **Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** What the reasons are for the time taken to publish the Government's carbon reduction plan. [900035]

Ruth George: I thank the Minister for her words. Will she join me in commending the work of the Moors for the Future partnership in my constituency in the Peak District for the purpose of carbon reduction? It is revegetating the large areas of bare peat that exist there, thus fixing carbon emissions. Will the Minister also please let us know what effect the new timeframe of the carbon reduction plan, which was due in 2016, will have on industries and other partnerships that are relying on seeing the plan?

Claire Perry: I am, of course, delighted to welcome that incredibly innovative partnership, which was launched in 2002 and is making real progress in working out how we can naturally store carbon in the peat environment that the hon. Lady now represents. As I have said, I intend to publish the clean growth plan when Parliament returns from the summer recess. I look forward to cross-party discussion and, hopefully, consensus on a document that is hugely important both for Britain's domestic future and for our international leadership.

Paul Blomfield: The publication date that the Minister mentions is almost a year after the date originally intended by the Government. Does not this reflect a lack of commitment to tackling climate change? What is she doing to engage with other Departments to ensure that they carry out emissions impact assessments so that we can see a real commitment to tackling climate change across the whole of the Government?

Claire Perry: May I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that, as the proud MP for the constituency that has Britain's leading carbon capture and storage research facility, he ought to welcome the progress that successive Governments have made on this agenda? We were the first country in the world to set binding carbon budgets, and we have over-achieved on the first and second ones. Our full intention is to engage the whole of Government and industry in delivering on the upcoming budgets.

Mike Amesbury: Again, we do not seem to have a date for publication. The Minister talks about a date after the recess, but what specific date is that? Does she not agree that this delay is creating considerable uncertainty for the business community, and that it has the potential to increase energy bills?

Claire Perry: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. He will know that we are talking about setting a trajectory of budgets from 2022 and beyond. The progress we are making is absolutely exceptional, both domestically and internationally. Perhaps he is new in his place, but he could look in his diary and check when the House returns from the summer recess. My intention is to publish the plan when the House returns from the summer recess.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Single-sentence inquiries are now required.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister spoke of peer-to-peer exchanges of energy. I have no idea what they are, but given the enthusiasm she has brought to her brief I believe that we all deserve a tutorial. Could that be arranged?

Claire Perry: It would be a pleasure to educate my right hon. Friend. Let us think of it as a lot of hot air being generated by one particular point and being shared around many other data points. It is part of our future, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Lady's ministerial peers in other countries—to whom I think she referred earlier—must have felt keenly conscious of their great privilege in meeting her.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I would like to applaud this Government's record on tackling carbon emissions. Our carbon reduction plan, alongside investment in new technologies and ratification of the Paris agreement, will make us world leaders in this field and create many more jobs—particularly, I hope, in Taunton Deane, with spin-offs from Hinkley Point, the lowest carbon energy development in Europe. Can the Minister give any further indications of how the Government are responding to the United States' withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement?

Claire Perry: Even those who do not think that this is a pressing international issue must surely welcome the fact that there are now more than 400,000 people employed in this industry—more than in the aerospace sector. Britain has shown, in the G7 and the Environment Council meetings, that we are absolutely prepared to stand shoulder to shoulder with our European and international partners to make up any deficit caused by Mr Trump's withdrawal.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We were promised the publication of this report in the middle of 2016. In October 2016, the permanent secretary promised that it would be published by February 2017. In January 2017, the then Secretary of State promised that the report would be published in the first three months of this year. Now we hear that it might be published this autumn. A year and a half on from the original promise, we are now clearly defaulting on our commitment under the Climate Change Act 2008, which requires that the plan is published as soon as is reasonably practicable after the order has been laid. Is not the Minister ashamed of this lamentable failure to act on

that legislative requirement to produce a report that is important to the future of climate change activity, and will she apologise to the House for the delay?

Claire Perry: I would have expected more from the hon. Gentleman. Let me just remind him what has happened since the Committee on Climate Change's report was produced. We have had Brexit, we have had a general election and we have had the withdrawal of the USA from the Paris climate change agreement. I want to take the time to ensure that this report exceeds his expectations. I will take no lessons from those on the Opposition Front Bench, who have consistently failed to welcome this country's progress, which the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—who is, sadly, not in his place—was sensible enough to kick off in 2009. I believe in delivery, not promises, unlike the Labour party's manifesto.

Topical Questions

T1. [900041] **Rachel Reeves** (Leeds West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): As outlined in the Queen's Speech, our industrial strategy will drive prosperity across the country, and in the past month we reached an important stage in that process. While we analyse the nearly 2,000 responses, we continue to make decisions that help UK-wide industries. We have announced £1 billion over the next four years for our most innovative industries, such as artificial intelligence, medicine, and autonomous vehicles. We have boosted investment in UK bioscience, such as by providing the University of Edinburgh's Roslin Institute with some £20 million, which will not only support its research on infectious diseases but create more highly skilled jobs and cement the UK as a world leader in science and innovation.

Rachel Reeves: Energy security is essential for national security and for family finances. The essential Moorside energy project in Cumbria is key to such security, but with Toshiba now predicted to lose £7 billion and the French firm backing the project pulling out will the Secretary of State tell us if and when the project will go ahead and provide the assurances that industry, workers and consumers desperately need?

Greg Clark: We have inaugurated a new era of nuclear power through the approval of Hinkley Point C. The NuGen consortium, the membership of which has changed from time to time, is confident that that investment will be able to proceed.

T5. [900045] **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment in the Queen's Speech to the new industrial strategy. Will the Secretary of State update the House on his plans to support new, cutting-edge technologies that will help Britain to lead the fourth industrial revolution?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend was a great champion of the strategy in the previous Parliament, and I hope that he will be here. One of its early fruits is the industrial strategy challenge fund, which is already making resources available for research in healthcare and medicine, artificial

intelligence, clean energy, driverless cars, advanced materials, and satellites and space technology. That is exactly in line with what he and his group have been urging.

T2. [900042] **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): The Conservative manifesto pledged to deliver a country “where wealth and opportunity are spread across every community in the United Kingdom”, and I see that Northern Ireland has just had its share. Will the Secretary of State tell me how the Government’s industrial strategy will bring wealth and opportunity to places such as Blackburn, where the national average wage is far less than it is in Maidenhead, for example? Blackburn has seen too many cuts from this Government and it is time that we had some investment, so how quickly can the strategy be delivered?

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. She will discover over time, I hope, that a key part of the industrial strategy is to drive growth in all parts of the country. My Department and I have looked to get funds out of Whitehall and into local places in every part of the country, including £320 million in Lancashire for the funding of the growth deal. She will also be aware that it is necessary to have an economy that is prospering, and one thing that would stand in the way of that is the record peacetime taxation with which the manifesto on which she stood was threatening the country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are very short of time. We need to speed up.

T8. [900048] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Our emerging technology and universities sectors welcomed our manifesto commitment to increase R and D spending from 1.7% to 2.4% of GDP, but it was not in the Queen’s Speech, so what has happened to that commitment?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): Fear not, Mr Speaker, legislation is not required to deliver on that commitment. It remains a priority for the Government and for the delivery of our industrial strategy. We want to get to 2.4% of GDP for our R and D spend, and we have a longer-term ambition of 3% after that.

T3. [900043] **Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Research by Citizens Advice found that half the people on zero-hours contracts, and two thirds of people on temporary contracts, worryingly believe that they are not entitled to paid holiday. Kirklees citizens advice bureau has found employers deliberately misleading workers about their rights. What steps is the Minister taking to make sure that workers are aware of their rights to a fair holiday? What repercussions will there be for companies that mislead staff? Can the Minister confirm when the Taylor review will be published?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to workers who are misled and workers who believe erroneously that they have fewer rights than they do. We are absolutely committed that any individual, whatever contract they are on, is

entitled to their rights. We have increased the powers open to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to enforce those rights.

T9. [900050] **Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Market towns are vital to the rural economy, and they are the heart of rural communities, drawing people together across the 531 square miles of my constituency. Modern shopping habits, however, can mean that it is difficult for businesses in market towns to survive. What are the Government doing to support our much-needed and much-loved market towns?

Margot James: Market towns, such as the ones in my hon. Friend’s constituency, will have all the support we are giving to the retail sector and high streets so that they can flourish.

T4. [900044] **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The National Audit Office recently published a report on Hinkley Point C that is nothing short of damning, describing it as “risky and expensive”. When will the Government listen to the experts and scrap this costly expenditure, and when will they invest instead in carbon capture and storage?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): If ever you decided not to be Mr Speaker, a career as chairman of the BBC Radio 4 programme “Just a Minute” would be appropriate. In answering the hon. Lady’s question, I will try to keep to your one sentence rule.

The Hinkley Point contract is entirely designed so as not to get the Government involved in expensive capital expenditure, and the nuclear power produced by Hinkley Point will be an excellent part of a mix of power for decades to come.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Having access to the next generation of skilled workers is vital for business confidence and growth. Will the Minister consider promoting the opportunities of our ambitious apprenticeship programme through the annual business rate mailer to increase awareness?

Joseph Johnson: Significant attention was given in the Queen’s Speech to commitments to roll out new institutes of technology, to the extra £0.5 billion of spending that will be given to further education and to our target to deliver 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020. High-quality further and technical education is an absolute priority for this country and this Government.

T6. [900046] **Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The British ceramics industry owes its current success and future survival to the innovation and development of breakthrough technologies. With funds such as Horizon 2020 potentially disappearing along with our EU membership, will the Government assure me that domestic projects such as the advanced manufacturing research centre will receive support to keep us at the cutting edge?

Joseph Johnson: We remain committed to ensuring that the UK remains the go-to place for science, innovation and tech investment in the years ahead. We want to remain open to collaboration and research partnerships with institutions across the European Union and around the world as we negotiate our departure from the EU.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the Government's industrial strategy for Scotland?

Greg Clark: It has been warmly received in Scotland, and we have had a positive response from businesses there. I had an enjoyable roundtable in Aberdeen, which was described by one local business as a "breath of fresh air." I look forward to continuing that engagement with everyone in Scotland, and I am sure my hon. Friend will play a big part.

T7. [900047] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): While other countries, including our EU partners, have over the years used public purchasing to support their own industries, Britain often has not. As Brexit approaches, what are the Government doing to ensure that Government Departments, local services, emergency services, councils and other public bodies back British industry and British jobs by buying British first?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman will know that we have already changed the procurement guidance so that local value can be taken into account. We have anticipated the issue he mentions and this is being done.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): The Secretary of State is aware that I have long campaigned for parental bereavement leave, and I was delighted to see this policy in not only the Conservative manifesto, but the Labour manifesto. On that basis, will he kindly set out what steps the Government will take to introduce this important benefit?

Margot James: I agree that bereaved parents should have the opportunity to grieve away from the workplace, and we will seek to provide for that. I am willing to meet my hon. Friend to discuss further how we might make such provision.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked repeatedly today about the discussions he has had on Brexit. Which trade unions has he met, and when?

Greg Clark: I regularly meet trade unions: I met Frances O'Grady of the TUC last week; I spoke to Roy Rickhuss of the steel union yesterday; and I spoke to Len McCluskey a few weeks ago. My contacts cover both sides of the employer and trade union mix.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Earlier this year, 116 MPs signed a letter I wrote to the Secretary of State urging him to implement the recommendations of the Hendry review for the world's first ever tidal lagoon. When will a decision be taken?

Richard Harrington: The Hendry review also said that there are significant questions as to whether tidal lagoons can be cost-effective, and very complex issues are involved. We are fully aware that a Government decision is needed in order for anything to proceed, but it is absolutely right that we take the necessary time to consider this carefully.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Now that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) has reached the midpoint of his parliamentary career, I had intended to call him if he was standing, but he is not and so I will not—but if he does, I will.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I have listened to the questions and answers for the past hour, and I hear about the city deals and all the rest of it, but why does the Secretary of State not answer the specific questions about the trade unions? If he wants to give the impression that he is on the side of working-class people, why do not the Government drop the trade union Bill and all the rest of it?

Greg Clark: I could not have been clearer about the regular discussions I have with trade unionists. My concern, which I hope would be the hon. Gentleman's concern, is to make sure that in all parts of the United Kingdom we generate the jobs and growth to ensure that all working people have a prosperous future to look forward to. That is the purpose of this Government, in contrast to the manifesto on which he stood.

Mr Skinner: Answer the question!

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Skinner: I did not get an answer.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that on the strength of his 47 years' experience of this place he knows that not receiving an answer is not an altogether novel phenomenon in the House of Commons, irrespective of who is in power at the time.

NEW MEMBERS

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Jonathan George Caladine Lord, for Woking

Adam James Harold Holloway, Gravesham.

Mr Speaker: As we are about to hear the first urgent question of the Parliament, I think it right to remind the House, particularly the Front-Bench teams, of the conventions on time limits. Colleagues will understand that I do so because they have not been adhered to with any religiosity in recent times. For urgent questions, the Minister may speak for up to three minutes; the person asking the urgent question and the official spokesperson, where different, a maximum of two minutes; and the third-party spokesperson a maximum of one minute.

For oral statements, the Minister is usually limited to 10 minutes; the Official Opposition spokesperson to five minutes; and the third-party spokesperson to two minutes. Members wishing to take part in statements, urgent questions and business questions must be in the Chamber, in accordance with a very long-established convention, before such events begin, and colleagues should not expect to be called to ask a question if they are not in their place as the statement/urgent question/business questions begin.

In a moment, I shall call Jonathan Ashworth, but it might be helpful if I indicate to the House that, as there are not far short of 70 Members wishing to take part in the continued debate on the Queen's Speech, I would like the exchanges on this question not to go on much beyond half an hour.

NHS Shared Business Services

12.41 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on NHS Shared Business Services.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As the House knows, on 24 March 2016 I was informed of a serious incident involving a large backlog of unprocessed NHS patient correspondence by the company contracted to deliver it to GP surgeries—NHS Shared Business Services. The backlog arose from the primary care services' GP mail redirection service that SBS was contracted to run. No documents were lost, and all were kept in secure storage, but my immediate concern was that patient safety had been compromised by the delay in forwarding correspondence. A rapid process was started to identify whether anyone had been put at risk.

The Department of Health and NHS England immediately established an incident team. All the documentation has now been sent on to the relevant GP surgery where it was possible to do so, following an initial clinical assessment of where any patient risk may lie. Some 200,000 pieces were temporary residence forms and a further 535,000 pieces were assessed as low risk. A first triage identified 2,508 items with a higher risk of harm, of which the vast majority have now been assessed by a GP. Of those 84% were confirmed to be of no harm to patients and 9% as needing a further clinical review. To date, no harm has been confirmed to any patients as a result of this incident.

Today's National Audit Office report confirms that patient safety was the Department and NHS England's primary concern, but as well as patient safety, transparency with both the public and the House has been my priority. I was advised by my officials not to make the issue public last March until an assessment of the risks to patient safety had been completed and all relevant GP surgeries informed. I accepted that advice for the very simple reason that publicising the issue would have meant GP surgeries being inundated with inquiries from worried patients, which would have prevented them from doing the most important work, namely investigating the named patients who were potentially at risk.

A proactive statement about what had happened was again not recommended by my Department in July for the same reasons and because the process was not complete. However, as I explained to the House in February, on balance I decided that it was important for the House to know what had happened before we broke for recess, so I overruled that advice and placed a written statement on 21 July. Since then, the Public Accounts Committee has been kept regularly informed, most recently being updated by my permanent secretary in February. The Information Commissioner was updated in August.

In July 2016, I committed to keeping the House updated once the investigations were complete and more was known, and I will continue to do so.

Jonathan Ashworth: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, but is it not an absolute scandal that 709,000 letters, including blood test results, cancer screening

appointments and child protection notes, failed to be delivered, were left in an unknown warehouse and, in many cases, were destroyed? Does not the National Audit Office reveal today a shambolic catalogue of failure that took place on the Secretary of State's watch?

As of four weeks ago, 1,700 cases of potential harm to patients had been identified, with this number set to rise, and a third of GPs have yet to respond on whether unprocessed items sent to them indicate potential harm for patients. Does the Health Secretary agree that this delay is unacceptable? When will all outstanding items be reviewed and processed?

The Secretary of State talks about transparency, but he came to this House in February because we summoned him here. In February, he told us that he first knew of the situation on 24 March 2016, yet the NAO report makes it clear that the Department of Health was informed of the issues on 17 March and that NHS England set up the incident team on 23 March, before he was informed, despite his implying that he set up the incident team. Will he clear up the discrepancies in the timelines between what he told the House and what the NAO reported?

The Secretary of State is a board member of Shared Business Services, and many hon. Members, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), have warned him of the problems and delays with the transfer of records from SBS. Given that those warnings were on the record, why did he not insist on stronger oversight of the contract?

The cost of this debacle could be at least £6.6 million in administration fees alone, equivalent to the average annual salary of 230 nurses. Can the Health Secretary say how those costs will be met and whether he expects them to escalate?

Finally, does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the NAO that there is a conflict of interest between his role as Secretary of State and his role as a board member? Further to that, can he explain why his predecessor as Secretary of State sold one share on 1 January from the Department to Steria, leaving the Secretary of State as a minority stake owner in the company, and never informed Parliament or reported that share in the Department's annual report—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but sooner or later the discipline of sticking to the two minutes has to take root. I am afraid that it is as simple as that and I am sorry, but he has had two and a half minutes.

Mr Hunt: Let me respond to those points. First, what happened at SBS was totally unacceptable. It was incompetent and it should never have allowed that backlog to develop, but before the hon. Gentleman gets on his high horse, may I remind him that SBS and the governance arrangements surrounding it were set up in 2008, at a time when a Labour Government were rather keen on contracting with the private sector? I know that things have changed, but the fact of the matter is that throughout this process our priority has been to keep patients safe. Transparency is nearly always the right thing; I am the Secretary of State who introduced transparency over standards of care in hospitals—*[Laughter.]* It is interesting that Opposition Members

are laughing, as Labour was the party responsible for sitting on what happened at Mid Staffs for more than four years, when nothing was done.

Transparency is incredibly important but it is not an absolute virtue, and in this case there was a specific reason for that. If we had informed the public and the House immediately, GP surgeries would have been overwhelmed—we are talking about 709,000 pieces of patient data—and they would not have been able to get on as quickly as we needed them to with identifying risk. That was the priority and that is what today's report confirms: patient safety was the priority of the Department and NHS England. I put it to the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) that if he were in my shoes, and faced with advice that said that it was wrong to go public straight away as that would compromise the very important work GPs had to do to keep patients safe, he would have followed exactly the same advice. That is why, while I completely recognise that there is a potential conflict of interest with the Government arrangements, I do not accept that there was an actual conflict of interest, because patient safety concerns always overrode any interests we had as a shareholder in SBS.

The NHS is a large organisation. It has a huge number of contracts with both the public and private sectors, and no Government of any party can ever guarantee that there will be absolutely no breach of contract. However, what we can do is ensure that we react quickly when there is such a breach, which happened on this occasion, and that we have better assurance than we had on this occasion. I assure the House that the appropriate lessons will be learned.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): While Members from across the House will be relieved that so far no patients are identified as having been harmed by this appalling incident, will the Secretary of State set out what steps he is taking to ensure that this can never happen again?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. There is a short-term and long-term lesson. The short-term point is that it is unlikely this would happen again because it was paper correspondence, and we are increasingly moving all the transfer of correspondence to electronic systems. The longer-term point is exactly that—*[Interruption.]* An Opposition Member mentions cyber-attacks; they are absolutely right to do so, because of course we have different risks. This clearly indicates that we need better checks in place, so that when we trust an independent contractor with very important work, we know that the job is actually being done, and that did not happen in this case.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The NAO's findings are deeply concerning for the families of patients caught up in this chaotic shambles. For those involved and the wider public, this will only deepen their mistrust and misgivings in how the Tories are running the NHS; we can be grateful that they are not in charge in Scotland. Surely it is simply astonishing that a company partly owned by the Department of Health failed to deliver 500,000 NHS letters, many of which contained information critical to patient care. Not only were 1,700 people potentially at risk of harm, but thousands of others were put at risk. Was this SBS

[*Martyn Day*]

contract properly scrutinised by the Secretary of State? Was patient care or cost-cutting at the forefront of that decision? Why did he publish a vague written statement in July 2016 when he actually knew what was going on four months earlier?

Mr Speaker: Splendid—the hon. Gentleman was within his time. He gets an additional brownie point.

Mr Hunt: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that it is totally inappropriate to try to make political capital from this incident. The facts of the case are that the NAO today published a report saying that patient safety was the primary concern of both the Department of Health and NHS England throughout. There were some problems with the assurance of that contract, but the contract and the relationship with SBS in particular dates back to 2008. Both sides of the House need to learn the lessons of properly assuring NHS contracts, and I dare say the same is true in Scotland.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I fully support the Secretary of State's actions, which were quite right in the difficult circumstances in which he found himself, but what action will be taken against the executives who presided over this shambles? Is there any enforcement mechanism under the contract against the other owner of the company?

Mr Hunt: The company has been stripped of that contract; it was relieved of the contract back in 2015. We are very clear that it will have to fulfil all its contractual requirements, including paying its fair share of the costs that have been incurred as a result of this wholly regrettable incident.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Patient confidentiality and safety must be treated with the utmost seriousness at all times, and the NHS fails if it loses the trust of its patients, so how did the Secretary of State for Health come to the conclusion that risk to more than 1,700 patients was merely due to an issue of mail redistribution?

Mr Hunt: I did not come to that conclusion. The hon. Lady is right, as a doctor, to say that patients' trust in the way we hold their records is very important. In this case, the correspondence concerning patients was not forwarded, but it was not lost either. It was held securely, so no patient data were put at risk, but it should have been forwarded to another part of the NHS, and it was not; it was effectively stockpiled. That is what caused the concerns. We have been going through the high-priority cases. So far, the vast majority of cases have had two clinical reviews, and the ones we are still concerned about are having a third clinical review. We are taking this extremely seriously.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned Mid Staffordshire and patient safety, which is absolutely critical, but may I point out that the County hospital in Stafford now has an excellent record? It is currently seeing 27 patients in A&E with a waiting time of not much more than one hour, according to the app that I have on my phone. Will he confirm that the situation has been transformed because of the fantastic work of the staff in that hospital?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to confirm that. I am also happy to say that the problems in the old Mid Staffs, which I am afraid we had in many parts of the NHS, are being addressed much more quickly because of an independent oversight regime—the new Care Quality Commission inspection regime—and the appointment of a chief inspector of hospitals, who is independent in law and gives his judgment independently in law. That is something the Labour party regrettably tried to vote down.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): May I commend to the House the record of the debate I secured in November 2011, in which I warned the Government in terms about the very poor record of SBS and urged them not to part-privatise what had been an excellent NHS service? Ministers said at the time that the new contract would save £250 million. Will the Secretary of State now tell the House how much this scandal has cost, rather than saved, the taxpayer? Will he apologise both to the staff and the patients affected?

Mr Hunt: The costs are in excess of £6 million, and we are seeking to recover as much of that as we can from the company involved. I know that the regime in the Labour party has changed, but to try to turn this into an issue of privatisation when under the right hon. Gentleman's own party's Government—and indeed, during his own time as Health Secretary—we had problems at Mid Staffs that were squarely in the public sector is wholly inappropriate. This is about proper assurance of what is going on in the NHS, and both sides of the House need to learn the lessons.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): In order to reassure my constituents, will my right hon. Friend confirm that NHS SBS no longer provides this mail redirection service, that all backlogged correspondence has now been delivered to the relevant GP surgeries for filing and that no patient harm has been found in this case?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Of course we welcome the fact that no patient harm has been identified to date. We have to wait until the process of the third clinical review is completed on at-risk patients' records, which will happen by the end of December. She is absolutely right to say that SBS is no longer performing this contract; it has been taken in-house. Other parts of the SBS contract not related to what we are discussing today were given to another supplier.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that this is a very straightforward case? It shows a woeful lack of transparency, is a good example of why so many of us have concerns about too much private sector involvement in the NHS and, bluntly, there is a conflict of interest for the Secretary of State.

Mr Hunt: I acknowledged in my statement that there is, or was, a potential conflict of interest when the contract with SBS was in operation, and the National Audit Office talks about that today. In reality, as the National Audit Office confirms, patient safety was always our overriding priority in all the decisions we took. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman, as I do to the shadow Health Secretary, that he would have taken exactly the same decisions had he been in my shoes.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend has confirmed that the contract has now been taken in-house. Can he also confirm that it is a totally different operation and that none of the people who were involved in making the decisions is now involved in making the decisions on the current service?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely confirm that.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that the Secretary of State at least acknowledges that this was incompetent but, crucially, does this not run deeper? Problems were first raised in January 2014, and then again internally by an administrator in June 2015. He found out, as Secretary of State for Health, only in March last year, and the Public Accounts Committee found out and was able to look at this only in September, because information was released on the final day that Parliament sat last summer. He talks about transparency, but does he not think there are deeper lessons to be learned here not only about transparency but about how the NHS supports whistleblowers?

Mr Hunt: There are two big lessons that we need to learn. First, why did the company have no internal systems in place to deal with the fact that from 2011 the mail was building up into a backlog? According to the NAO report, the situation was not escalated to the chief executive's level until the end of 2015. That is wholly unacceptable. Secondly, it is also unacceptable that we did not have the assurance systems in place that would have allowed us to know that a backlog was building up. That is why it is so important that lessons are learned.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Who drew up the contract for the redirection service that omitted any key performance indicators?

Mr Hunt: The original contracts with SBS went back to 2008, which is when it started providing mail redirection services, but they were renewed in 2011, which is why I think Members on both sides of the House need to reflect on this.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Over 700,000 pieces of sensitive medical information went missing, and the situation was allowed to escalate over a five-year period without being discovered, which I think shows gross incompetence. What has been done to set right this wrong, especially for the families left behind who have been affected by this worrying incident?

Mr Hunt: There has been a huge operation to deal with this. As the hon. Gentleman will know, there were 709,000 pieces of correspondence. We did an initial clinical triage to identify which ones were low risk, such as notifications of change of address, and which ones were higher risk, such as test results. We identified 2,500 that had a high priority, and 84% of those have so far been identified as being of no clinical risk, but we are continuing to do more thorough clinical risk assessment.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As I am sure the Secretary of State is aware, for many patients the image created by the media is one of documents being lost. Can he

confirm that at all times the correspondence was kept either in secure conditions on NHS premises or in secure archive facilities?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to confirm that. I think that in such situations it is important to allay public concerns about what might have happened. What happened was unacceptable, but no patient data were lost.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that no patients were harmed and that the documents were securely stored, but 35 sacks of mail were destroyed. How does he know that he made the right call in every situation?

Mr Hunt: Just to be clear, what I said was that to date there is no evidence of any patients being harmed, but the process of proper clinical review, with multidisciplinary teams, will take until the end of the year. We have to do this properly to get to the answer. We hope that it remains the case that no patients were harmed, but we will not know that until the end of the year. However, throughout this whole process we have prioritised the highest risk cases and made sure that they get the most urgent attention.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Following this failure, I welcome the Secretary of State's decisive action in bringing in the national incident team. How will we learn the lessons and share the best practice, as discovered by that team?

Mr Hunt: The NHS is extremely good at responding to crises and emergencies, as tragically we have found out in recent months. This is an example of the NHS doing a very good job when it realises the scale of the problem. For me, the lessons that really need to be learned are about not the response to the issue but the assurance processes that allowed the problem to happen in the first place.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The National Audit Office says that the review of the backlog of correspondence has found 1,788 cases of potential patient harm, so what action is the Secretary of State taking to support those patients?

Mr Hunt: All those cases have already been looked at by two sets of clinicians, and so far, on the basis of those two reviews, no patient harm has been identified. However, because we want to be absolutely sure, we are having a third clinical review that will be even more thorough, potentially with more than one set of clinicians, so that we can get to the bottom of this and find out.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I understand that the inquiry has focused on patient risk, but has there been any analysis of the impact on patient waiting times, which are also extremely important for patient care? Exactly how many patients have waited longer than they should have for treatment?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right. That is one of the most critical questions when it comes to trying to understand whether there was any actual patient harm. Ordinarily, if a patient was waiting for a test result that

[Mr Hunt]

did not arrive at their GP's surgery, the GP would chase it up and get a copy, so there would be no delay in treatment. However, only by looking at the patient's notes can we understand whether any harm is likely to have happened. So far we have not identified any patient harm, but we will continue to look.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The Secretary of State told the House in February that all correspondence was kept safe and secure, and he has repeated that claim today, so when did he know that 35 sacks of mail had been destroyed by staff, and why has he not mentioned it since?

Mr Hunt: As the hon. Lady knows, I was informed at the end of March 2016. The issue with the correspondence that was destroyed relates to procedures around what it is legitimate to do when patients have been dead for 10 years. At the moment we are not aware of any specific risk to patients as a result of those sacks of mail being destroyed, but we will continue to look at the issue very closely.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State was made aware of the failings of the contract and warned about the dangers in the House in 2011, yet he did not take up two places on the company's board. Would that not have added to the overall scrutiny of the contract? Is he not guilty of being asleep at the wheel?

Mr Hunt: I have been Health Secretary for a long time, but not since as far back as 2011. However, the hon. Gentleman asks an important question. It is true that the Department was entitled to three seats on the SBS board but took up only one, but I do not believe that would have made a difference in this case, because the board directors were intended to represent the Department as SBS shareholders. What we needed was better assurance of the implementation of the contract. That needed to happen with the NHS as a contractor. That is the lesson that needs to be learned.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about the need to learn lessons, but we have seen a pattern across Government—not just in the Department of Health, but in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Home Office, for example—of companies being awarded contracts and then failing miserably. Those companies have the contract taken away but are then awarded another one. Clearly the lesson to be learned across Government is that some companies are simply not fit for purpose when it comes to delivering public services.

Mr Hunt: We do need to be robust when companies fail in their contracts with the public sector. I do not think that this affects only private sector companies, because we contract with people in the public sector and are let down. Equally, we need to be robust when the right things do not happen. Most importantly, the lesson from what happened with SBS is that we need to understand much more quickly when things are going wrong, so that we can nip problems in the bud. That did not happen in this case.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): How many more times is the Secretary of State going to come to this House, as he has done on countless occasions, when he personally is at the centre of a controversy? Even a cat has only nine lives.

Mr Hunt: I am not sure that I have as many lives as the hon. Gentleman.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) was absolutely right when she suggested that the Secretary of State is trying to downgrade 1,788 cases of potential harm and a potential conflict of interest to no more than an administrative error by a contracted-out service. In my constituency, a tender for cancer care was ended prematurely, costing the taxpayer millions of pounds. Are these not examples of where the Conservative party's ideological agenda to contract out our NHS services is failing and patients are suffering as a result?

Mr Hunt: Quite the opposite. Those examples show that we take the contracts off the private sector when it lets us down. That is what happened in the case raised by the hon. Gentleman and with SBS.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Shared services in my constituency saved £120 million in four years. When the system was privatised under Steria, it lost £4 million and goes on being inefficient. Can the Government escape from this paralysis of thought that is costing the country so much—that everything private is good and everything public is bad? Will they look to not outsourcing but insourcing services from the inefficient private sector back to our wonderful, efficient civil service?

Mr Hunt: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that the last Government who had an active policy of increasing private sector market share in the NHS were the last Labour Government. This Government legislated to stop the Government nationally prioritising the private sector and made that a decision for individual doctors at a local level.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a doctor, I understand the importance of ensuring that results and letters are reviewed in a timely manner. There will always be opportunity for error in any system relying on bits of paper being sent around. Hospitals such as Peterborough City hospital, where I have worked, provide results electronically, which is quicker, as well as having a back-up paper form, which provides for patient safety. Will the Secretary of State reassure us that good practice such as this is being rolled out elsewhere?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right to point out that we are in a different world from the world of 2011. The future is to transport patient records securely over electronic systems. It is much quicker and there is much less room for error, but we do need the back-up systems that she mentioned.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I wrote to the Secretary of State in January on behalf of a GP practice in my constituency that is concerned about the potential impact on staff working at the

practice. I raised the matter again four months ago during the previous urgent question, and the Secretary of State promised to look into the impact on staff. Can he report back to the House today?

Mr Hunt: I will relook at the situation in that surgery to ensure that we are learning any lessons that need to be learned. However, this is a complex process. There have already been two clinical reviews in the vast majority of the high risk cases, and we want to have a third review to really establish whether there was any actual patient harm. That takes clinician time, which is one of the reasons why we have not been able to complete the process by today. It will take until Christmas to do that because we have to balance the other responsibilities that clinicians have in their daily work.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Earlier, the Secretary of State assured the House that the individual directors who are responsible for this catastrophe are no longer in a position to cause similar damage. Is he aware that the briefest of searches through Companies House records shows that the same three or four names associated with Shared Business Services come up time and again?

There are about a dozen companies, many of which come under the Sopra Steria Ltd group of companies, and most of which advertise the fact that they do a lot of work for the NHS right now. One is titled NHS Shared Employee Services Ltd, which suggests that, far from having been removed from any influence, the individual directors who were legally responsible for this disaster are still very much in a position to make money for themselves while presiding over similar disasters in the future.

Mr Hunt: I note the hon. Gentleman's comments, but he will understand that I am not in a position to pass judgment at the Dispatch Box on the behaviour of individuals. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has respected and well-established systems in place to ensure that people who are not fit and proper to be company directors are not able to continue with their duties.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My constituents are served not by the SBS contract, but by the Capita contract. I have raised problems with that contract to the Secretary of State on many occasions. There are still problems with the helpline, which appears incapable of logging and following through with complaints. Why is this contract, which is clearly failing, not taken back in-house by the Government?

Mr Hunt: Just to be clear, this is a different contract, as I know the hon. Lady understands. We have been working hard, and I know that the hon. Lady worked

hard with my Department in the previous Parliament to try to get to the bottom of the problems with the Capita contract. My understanding is that the situation is improving, but I will happily look into the individual situation she mentioned.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State said that this takes time and, if I heard correctly, that a third of GPs have failed to respond. What steps is he taking to ensure that patient care is not being compromised by the extra admin burden on already overworked GPs?

Mr Hunt: We are paying GP surgeries for the extra admin time that this is taking. That is designed to ensure that, where necessary, they can buy in extra resources to deal with the extra admin. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we have to ensure that GPs' core work is not compromised by the issue.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I used to work as a clinical scientist in the NHS, so I know only too well the harm that can be caused by the non-arrival of a test result. If a diagnostic test is performed and the result goes nowhere and is not seen by a clinician, as in this case, it is the same health outcome as if the test was not done at all. Will the Secretary of State stop trying to downplay the situation and own up to the seriousness of this scandal?

Mr Hunt: No one listening objectively could possibly say that I am, or that anyone on this side of the House is, downplaying this very serious situation. Since the issue came to light, we have instituted a review of 709,000 pieces of patient correspondence. We have identified the high-priority ones, of which there are 2,508. Two, and sometimes three, clinical tests have been done on all of them. No patient harm has been identified to date, but we are not complacent. We will continue the process until we have been through every single patient record with that thoroughness.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I too will mention the Capita contract. This is not an isolated case. A pattern is occurring. The Government are failing in their governance over patient records. Will the Secretary of State now review that governance and bring it back in-house? It is so urgent that we oversee the safety of patients first.

Mr Hunt: As I confirmed to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), I will look into the outstanding issues with the Capita contract for GPs that are not related to the delivery of patient records. My understanding is that things have got better, but we were very unhappy with the initial performance from Capita.

Confidence and Supply Arrangement

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.17 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I rise to propose that the House debates a specific and important matter for urgent consideration—namely, the Government’s confidence and supply deal with the Democratic Unionist party and the associated funding arrangements.

Yesterday morning, the Government confirmed a confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party to secure a working majority in this Parliament. The central part of the deal involved a funding arrangement that would see Northern Ireland benefit from more than £1 billion of extra investment, while the other nations of the United Kingdom would secure next to nothing. The full details of the deal must be fully debated and all the issues properly scrutinised as quickly as possible, certainly ahead of Thursday’s votes on the Humble Address. Yesterday there was an hour-long statement, with little notice, from the First Secretary of State, who took questions from hon. Members. That cannot be considered satisfactory, given the significance and importance of the deal. Members must be given a chance to debate all the issues fully.

The normal arrangements for the funding of the nations of the United Kingdom have been turned on their head with the disregard of the Barnett formula. Had the Barnett formula been applied, Scotland would have been entitled to nearly £2.9 billion of additional funding and Wales would have got an extra £1.7 billion. The First Secretary yesterday claimed that the deal was to be compared to allocations made under city deals. That is not the case and that assertion must be tested. City deals in Scotland are match-funded by the Scottish Government and local authority partners; and Northern Ireland is not a city.

There are also questions about the role of the Scotland Office in all this. On Sunday, the Secretary of State for Scotland noted he would not support any funding that, “is deliberately sought to subvert the Barnett rules”.

This deal clearly does—it fails that test. We and all the new Scottish Members of Parliament need to know whether the Scotland Office made representations to the Prime Minister in advance of this deal being announced, and whether it did anything at all to protect Scotland’s vital funding interests in this deal.

While we welcome the increased funding for Northern Ireland, we believe there are serious questions regarding the relevance of the Barnett formula in the light of this new deal. If this represents a relaxation of ideological austerity, all regions and nations of the UK should benefit. This matter requires more attention from the House, and I humbly request an emergency debate to get the answers that this House and this country need.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the DUP funding deal. I have listened carefully—it was my decision to allocate to the hon. Gentleman three minutes in which to make his case—to the application from the hon. Member. However, I am not persuaded that this matter is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24.

I do realise that that will disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but he is a persistent terrier, and I feel sure that he and other Members from his Benches will raise this matter in all sorts of ways in days to come, and they will not be deterred in any way by the thought that they might be repeating themselves. [*Interruption.*] They will very properly return to this matter as and when they wish—preferably, however, when they are on their feet, rather than, as exemplified by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), from the comfort of their seat. We will leave it there for now.

Points of Order

1.21 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, I raised the lack of clarity from the Communities Secretary on the Government's plans to introduce local retention of business rates to replace the revenue support grant to local authorities. In reply, the Secretary of State indicated that today's Queen's Speech debate may be an opportunity to raise the matter. Has the Secretary of State given you, Sir, any indication that he intends to make an oral statement on these matters during the forthcoming debate? How might Members with an interest in this matter adequately question him if they have not put in to speak in the debate?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The relevant Minister will, I think, be making a speech to the House. That, of course, does not constitute a statement as such, but it is nevertheless a full treatment of the issues of which the Minister wishes to treat.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman's second inquiry—how do Members probe the Minister if they have not put in to make a speech?—the short answer is, by intervention. It is not for me to try to set myself up as an executive coach, and the hon. Gentleman would not wish me to do so, but the idea of Members proceeding collectively with the same line of inquiry is not entirely a novel idea, and if the hon. Gentleman wishes to encourage his colleagues to focus on a particular theme or point and to keep repeating that theme or point until they are satisfied, it is perfectly open to him to do so. I feel sure the hon. Gentleman's followers, or his disciples, will listen to his advice with the very closest interest and respect at all times. We will leave it there for now.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: A separate and unrelated point of order, I feel sure, from Mr Paul Flynn.

Paul Flynn: With your prodigious memory, Mr Speaker, you might recall that the final point of order in the last Parliament was about a worry that the electoral system in this country is more open to corruption than at any time since 1880, and it is possible now to buy an election.

I do not know whether you saw the Channel 4 programme about the activities in Wales of a call centre that was employed by the Conservative party throughout the election to concentrate on my constituency, among others. It was not carrying out any kind of market research; it was being used to give information that was damaging to the Labour party to as many voters as possible. One hundred people were employed to do that, and they were paid to do it. The allegation was also made—I can confirm it from what happened in my constituency—that canvassing was also done from this call centre on polling day, and I had many complaints about people getting repeated calls.

We have an electoral system that is not fit for purpose. We are in an age where neither the Electoral Commission nor the Information Commissioner can handle the election. To restore integrity to our electoral system, we need major reforms, and I am sure you will use your office to ensure that that is accelerated.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I think he invests me with powers or influence that I might not currently possess, but I am very grateful to him for encouraging an increase in the said powers or influence.

As it happens, I do recall the last point of order of the last Parliament, and it is very reasonable of the hon. Gentleman to draw my attention to it. My pithy advice is that if he has ongoing concerns about what might constitute an offence, he should notify both the Electoral Commission and, indeed, the police.

I did not see the Channel 4 documentary to which the hon. Gentleman refers, although I have a feeling that he will exhort me to view it sooner rather than later. What I would say is that if there have been egregious activities taking place in his constituency—I do not suggest that this invalidates his concern, because it does not—manifestly those activities have not been successful if they were directed against the hon. Gentleman. That is not altogether surprising, as he has been a consistent presence in this House for three decades—he might not yet have reached the halfway mark in his parliamentary career attained by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), but he is getting a bit nearer to it. We will perhaps leave it there for now.

Debate on the Address

[4TH DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 26 June).

Question again proposed,

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Education and Local Services

1.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening):

It is a pleasure to be able to open this Queen's Speech debate this afternoon.

Since 2010, this Government have been focused on the pursuit of higher standards in education, higher standards in our schools, higher standards in our universities and higher standards in technical education—in fact, higher standards across the board—to unlock the talents of every single one of our young people.

We have made significant progress. Thanks to the energy of our great teachers and leaders, nine out of 10 schools are now good or outstanding, with 1.8 million more children in those places since 2010. Thanks to the energy of our thriving universities, more young people are going to university than ever before, including more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thanks to the energy of businesses, we are well on our way to achieving our target of 3 million apprenticeships by 2020.

Perhaps more than most Departments, the legislation we need to drive up education standards and opportunity is already in place. In the last parliamentary Session alone, we passed the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, creating the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to oversee our bold new reforms; we passed the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the most significant legislative reform of the past 25 years in higher education, to give students better value and more choice, information and opportunity; and we passed the Children and Social Work Act 2017 to better protect and safeguard the most vulnerable children in our society.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned the Children and Social Work Act, and an important provision the Government put into it was making relationship and sex education compulsory. What progress is being made on regulations to bring that into force?

Justine Greening: I am grateful for the cross-party support that enabled us to do that, and we are determined now to push on with the issue. We will shortly be setting out our plan for how we take the review forward and how we continue to get the overall support we need to make sure relationship and sex education in secondary schools, and relationship education in primary schools,

are age appropriate and effective for children growing up in a very different Britain from the one many of us grew up in.

Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: If I could make a little progress, that would be appreciated. I am sure there will be plenty of opportunities for interventions.

As I was saying—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, but there is a fly buzzing around. We are determined to build on that strong platform of success, to create an education system that works for all our children and all our young people. Equality of opportunity for everyone—wherever they are, whatever their background—is in the end unlocked only by education.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The North Shore Academy in my constituency faces a spending cut of several hundred thousand pounds. It serves one of the areas that the Secretary of State is talking about—an area of high deprivation. How on earth can that be fair funding in an area of high deprivation?

Justine Greening: I will come on to funding later, but suffice it to say that it is important we make sure that all our schools are fairly funded. That challenge is recognised across the House. Clearly there are difficulties in doing that.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady feel that education and local services in England would be helped in any way by the large part of £30 billion that would be the Barnett consequential of money for England as a result of the deal in Northern Ireland, given what the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) just said about the North Shore Academy in his constituency?

Justine Greening: Our manifesto pledged to increase education funding. The challenge that the hon. Gentleman's part of our United Kingdom faces is the real issue of its standards lagging significantly behind those of England in relation to scores on the programme for international student assessment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: I will make some progress. We want equality of opportunity for everyone. In her speech, Her Majesty the Queen set out that we will work to ensure that every child has a good school place and that no young person will be left behind, in part by making sure that this country possesses world-beating technical education and, of course, by maintaining our world-class higher education.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab) rose—

Justine Greening: I will give way to the hon. Lady, who is a near neighbour of mine.

Siobhain McDonagh: On the issue of a good school place for every child, the Secretary of State will be aware of the proposal that the local mental health trust

in our area should no longer diagnose children with autism. Without a diagnosis there is no chance of an educational care plan, and without an ECP there is no opportunity for a child with autism to get a good school place. Will she personally intervene to stop that?

Justine Greening: Work on making sure that children can be in mainstream schools has been a key focus for this Government. That is why we have introduced educational health care plans—the correct term is EHCPs—which are holistic plans to make sure that children get not just their educational needs but their broader health needs assessed. I am always happy to look at specific issues raised by hon. Members. It is exceptionally important that our education system works for all children, whatever their challenges, not just the majority of children.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justine Greening: I am going to make a little progress. Under our education reforms, we are determined that no person, community or group should be left behind, because in reality no person, community or group has a monopoly on talent. Talent is spread right the way across our country, and this Government will create an education system that unlocks that talent in everyone and in all parts of the country. That is how we will succeed in finally shifting the dial on improving social mobility in the UK.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Conservative manifesto proposed introducing primary school breakfast clubs. Given that research commissioned by Magic Breakfast, the Educational Endowment Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that a good, nutritious breakfast can improve educational attainment by about two months in any given year, may I urge the Secretary of State to stick to that part of the manifesto and make sure that it is fully funded, so that all children can go to school without being too hungry to learn?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that we already had plans to scale up the sorts of programmes undertaken by fantastic charities such as Magic Breakfast. We all recognise their benefits, particularly for disadvantaged children, who can get into school a bit earlier, have time to settle and start their classes ready to concentrate and learn.

In the election, people were faced with choices. Indeed, the Opposition set out their alternative plan. It was very big on rhetoric, but the question is what it will actually mean for people in reality. Of course, we do not have to go far to find out. It is clear what Labour would mean for education standards as we only have to go across to Wales and look at its education performance. Instead of high standards for children in schools, Welsh children are faced with low and falling standards. Indeed, according to the OECD it is the lowest-performing country in the UK, and it is run and overseen by the Labour party. In fact, its performance is now significantly below that of England in maths, reading and science. That is Labour's legacy for Welsh children and it would import it for English children, if it ever got the chance.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The Welsh Government are quite open about the fact that we need to get better scores in relation to the PISA results, but what I will not accept is how, yet again, the Tory

Government are trying to demonise Wales. They did it before on health, calling it a line between life and death. It is a disgrace. Will the Secretary of State apologise to the people of Wales?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady's comment shows the reality, which is that Labour needs to pull together a strategy to improve education in Wales in the same way as our strategy of reform has improved standards in England. It has not been easy, but Labour has dodged it in Wales. Labour will never be credible to parents in England until it sets out why it feels it is failing children in Wales, including on opportunity.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady rightly talks about the need for Government strategy to be credible in the eyes of parents, but what credibility does she think her Government have with parents when schools are sending home letters requesting donations so that they can afford to buy books and computer equipment so that their children can have an education?

Justine Greening: I think that what most parents are interested in is the fact that independent school inspections by Ofsted say that nearly nine out of ten schools in this country are now good or outstanding. The hon. Gentleman's intervention shows very clearly the difference between Members on each side of the House. On one side, there is a genuine intent to see standards rise; on the other, it is all about politics, not outcomes for children on the ground. We heard that in the intervention by the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), who had nothing to say about the standards in Wales, other than calling for an apology for raising the issue of falling standards for Welsh children. That is a disgraceful response from a party in government in Wales.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justine Greening: I am going to make more progress. This was not the only area on which the Labour party made proposals. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that its plan on university and higher education funding had a £2 billion black hole. In fact, the IFS estimates that the proposal could cost as much £13 billion by 2020.

Inevitably, that Labour higher education black hole would mean cutbacks for universities. It would mean lower teaching standards or the introduction of an emergency cap on student numbers. If we look at how that £2 billion black hole would be plugged, we see that it would be the equivalent either of cutting 40,000 lecturers or of a cap that would mean 160,000 fewer students going to university, based on the average student grant for fees and maintenance loans. There just would not be the money. In fact, we know that if a cap were reintroduced because of a black hole in our higher education funding, it would be disproportionately likely to hit students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Labour's higher education black hole could force universities with lower student numbers into significant financial trouble.

On equality, what is the evidence that no tuition fees mean that more disadvantaged students can go to university? Again, we do not have to go far to find the evidence. In Scotland, the policy of no tuition fees goes side by side with lower equality of opportunity for disadvantaged young people to go to university. That is

[*Justine Greening*]

because the policy benefits children who are more likely to go to university. However, the people more likely to go to university are children from better-off families. We all know that: it is not a surprise to the Opposition.

What benefits disadvantaged children is having more places at university for them overall. The imperative therefore is not having a cap on the numbers. In Scotland, there are no fees. In England, where there is no cap, more disadvantaged young people go to university.

Wes Streeting: Clearly, the right hon. Lady's party had no offer whatsoever for students and young people at the election, so perhaps she might like to reflect on the terrible mistake that was made in the previous Parliament? Non-repayable grants targeted on the poorest students were scrapped by the Government. Is it not time to deal with the real funding crisis facing students, which is the one in their pockets?

Justine Greening: I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not answer my question. [*Interruption.*] There will be plenty more time to dig into the Labour proposals for higher education and what they mean for the most disadvantaged children in the country.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order, rather than merely a point of frustration.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is it in order, Mr Speaker, for Front-Bench Government spokespeople to put questions to Back-Bench Members of the Opposition? They are there to defend their record; it is not for the Opposition to do so.

Mr Speaker: There is nothing disorderly about it. It is not in that sense, I must tell the hon. Gentleman, narrowly analogous to Question Time. At Question Time, I have said now and again to Ministers that it is not for them to ask questions; they are there to answer questions. A debate is a more seamless enterprise, as I think the hon. Gentleman, who is an experienced denizen of the House, must know. It is perfectly in order for the Secretary of State to pose an inquiry to a Member, just as it is perfectly in order for another Member wholly to disregard it. I call the Secretary of State.

Justine Greening *rose—*

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) *rose—*

Justine Greening: I should be delighted to give way to my hon. Friend.

Rebecca Pow: Am I not right in saying that there has not been a fall in the number of students going to university since fees have had to be paid? Indeed, I have two daughters who have recently completed university. They both paid fees, but on different rates—one the high rate, one the low rate. They both agree that it was right that they should pay fees for the advantage they have gained, because they should earn more money than someone who does not go to university. Is it right

that someone who does not go to university should fund people who do and who have the potential benefit of earning more money?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend asks some important questions not just about equality of opportunity but about equality more generally and why we are prioritising technical education. The approach in England has benefited students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who now go to university at a record rate. In 2009, the rate was 13.6%; it was 19.5% in 2016.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way? I have been very patient.

Justine Greening: I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), and then to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown).

Mr Harper: I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said. He asked what we had to offer young people, and I will tell him, although I will say that it would have been better if we had mentioned it during the election campaign. Unemployment for young people is now six percentage points lower than it was in 2010, whereas in the eurozone it remains at 20%. Under this Government, young people have a very, very good chance of getting a job, which is an excellent route to prosperity. That is what we have to offer.

Justine Greening: My right hon. Friend is right. Under the Labour Government, youth unemployment went up by just under 50%. It was not just young people from lower income backgrounds coming out of the education system often without basic skills. It was graduates who came out of the system and could not find a job. We are determined to make sure that never again is there a lost generation of young people in our country coming out of the education system wanting a career but not even being able to find a job.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I congratulate the Secretary of State on giving way to me. May I commend her on the increase in standards in education? To improve those standards still further—the current funding formula is unfair and depends on a lottery code—does she agree that every pupil and every school deserves fair minimum funding?

Justine Greening: As my hon. Friend knows, we are absolutely committed to making sure that we have fair funding across our schools. We had an extensive consultation that received 25,000 responses, which we have gone through. We are pulling together what that means for the right way forward. He is right to point out that many schools in his local community have been systematically underfunded, which is not tenable in a country where we want all children to receive consistent investment and a consistent opportunity to make the most of themselves. We are determined to introduce our plans to ensure that schools are fairly funded, wherever they are.

Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: I am going to make a little more progress, because I was pursuing an argument on access to higher education, which is hugely important in relation to how we drive social mobility.

The Labour party has proposed a policy that will lead to more inequality. It would benefit the young people most likely to do well: university students from better-off, richer backgrounds. However, the policy would be paid for by everyone, including lower-income workers and pensioners. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that Labour's policy does not seem to be an effective use of £11.5 billion to £13.5 billion if the aim is partly to aid social mobility for the most disadvantaged students. I am not sure what the Labour party thought was its *raison d'être*, but clearly it is no longer lifting up the children growing up in our most disadvantaged communities that are furthest from a level playing field on opportunity.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the incredibly important role that primary education plays in the preparation of young people for secondary and further education, will the Secretary of State explain how the proposed funding cuts in Sandwell, which will amount to nearly £600 per pupil over the next three years and lead to a reduction of seven teachers per school, will help that process in one of the most socially deprived areas?

Justine Greening: I have made it clear that we are going to introduce proposals on fair funding. There is record funding in our schools, and we have set out a commitment to increase that further in our manifesto. We will introduce those proposals shortly.

To conclude on higher education, the £2 billion higher education black hole would mean an emergency cap on student numbers. Young people would miss out on university. They would almost certainly be from disadvantaged backgrounds: young people hoping to be the first in their family to get the chance to do a degree, as I was. It is literally a cap on aspiration. Labour are not being honest and up front with young people about the implications of their proposals for higher education funding. It is simply snake oil populism.

It is vital to ensure that higher education remains accessible, is affordable and provides value for money. We need to listen to the voices of young people at the last election and we are committed to doing so, but our approach must reduce inequality and the lack of access for disadvantaged young people, not increase it as Labour's policy would.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I remind the Secretary of State that the last Labour Government expanded higher education and had a cap on fees. She talks about 1 million young people being unemployed. In the first Parliament under the Tory Government, youth unemployment was at 1 million and the Work programme was a disaster, wasting billions of pounds. I ask her to reverse the £3 billion of education cuts being proposed by her Government, which will devastate aspiration in schools around the country. It is time to act, Secretary of State, not attack the Opposition. You are in power—deal with the cap on aspiration now.

Justine Greening: I can set out for the hon. Lady exactly what we have been doing. We have been reforming our education system and standards have gone up; we have taken away a cap on the number of students going to university, which is why a higher percentage of disadvantaged young people are going to university than ever before; and, of course, our economic policies have led to 2.8 million jobs being created in our economy, which has provided opportunity for young people who would otherwise have been sat at home getting unemployment benefits, with their careers on hold until they were able to get them kick-started. That is what we have been doing.

The final thing we have been doing is tackling the huge, huge deficit left by the Labour party when it left office. *[Interruption.]* The Opposition are bored with hearing about it, because clearly—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry they are in such uproar at being reminded that when we came to power, the country was living £151 billion a year beyond our means—borrowing that was due to be passed on to young people. Clearly, the Labour party has learned nothing from this at all. Its only answer to every single question it faces in any policy area is, "Spend more money, but don't worry about where it comes from because"—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a cacophony of noise. I have told the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) before that he should not yell out from a sedentary position. I had great aspirations for him to obtain the level of a statesman, but his apprenticeship has some distance to run if he is going to conduct himself in that manner. The Secretary of State must be heard, and the same goes for everybody else in the Chamber.

Justine Greening: We are focused on raising social mobility and on levelling up opportunity for people who do not have it. That is why we have made investment in technical education a priority, as Her Majesty set out in the Queen's Speech. For too long, there has not been parity of esteem between technical and academic routes in education. That has cost our country dearly. It has also created inequality between those who go to our world-renowned universities and those young people who do not have the chance to do so. That inequality stretches across communities and regions. It has cost us dearly in the loss of the human capital and productivity that high-skilled people in a high-skilled economy provide. We are determined to continue our work to recover the legacy of Labour's lost generation of young, unemployed, unskilled people coming into the labour force. Those young people have been let down—

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State cannot hear that the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) is seeking to intervene. It is up to her whether to accept the intervention; I am merely offering a helping hand.

Justine Greening: I give way.

Trudy Harrison: I congratulate the Government on the annual £500 million increase in technical education. In my constituency of Copeland, a practical skills

[Trudy Harrison]

community, it is essential to continue the legacy of world-class trades if we are to deliver a modern industrial strategy.

Justine Greening: That is absolutely right. It is critical that we take advantage of two opportunities. The first is the kinds of businesses and industries in my hon. Friend's area that are creating jobs and opportunities. The second is a generation of young people who want opportunity and want a career. We should be investing in generating our home-grown talent to take advantage of those opportunities, which we all see in our local communities. Exiting the European Union provides new impetus to the focus on developing our home-grown talent.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State referred to world-class universities. We are proud of them in this country, but it is important that they are able to attract students from all around the world. Why do the Government persist with the ludicrous idea that we must cut net migration to the tens of thousands, including cutting the number of international students coming to stay in this country? They pay their own way, they improve their relationship with this country, and when they go back home they want to continue doing business with us. It is ludicrous!

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that he is entirely misinformed, because we do not have a cap on the number of international students. That will save him from having to ask that question again. We are determined to ensure that our universities sector remains open to the best and brightest talent around the world. He can scaremonger and raise fake issues all he likes, but it will not change the position. The much bigger threat to universities lies in decimating the funding going into them. That is the biggest challenge they would face if they ended up with the kind of higher education funding black hole that the Labour party would present them with.

We are shaping the curriculum for young people going into technical education into 15 technical routes, each culminating in a so-called T-level, which will become the gold standard qualification for technical excellence. That reform is matched by investment, as the Chancellor announced in the March Budget—a Budget that the CBI called

“a breakthrough Budget for skills.”

That investment would be at risk under a Labour Government because of the black hole in post-16 funding for higher education. Our new institutes of technology will also provide a path to develop excellence in higher technical skills. One problem we have had with technical education is that there has not been a ladder of steadily more challenging qualifications so that young people can better themselves.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline how the technical qualifications will meet the needs of employers? After all, we need to ensure that the skills that are being developed meet business requirements.

Justine Greening: Part of the plan we set out in the manifesto was to establish what we called skills advisory panels. In other words, local employers within regions

will look at what the needs are in their skills pipeline, consider them in relation to the 15 skills routes that we have set out and understand how that maps on to the provision in the education system locally. Across the country, that is exactly what we will need, to make sure we have the right number of people coming through with the right skills in the right places; to have an understanding of what is needed in the years ahead; and to know the risks in provision so that we can tackle them early. This is common sense and I think it will bring a significant step change in our ability to have a successful industrial strategy that benefits young people.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Justine Greening: I will make a bit of progress because many colleagues want to speak in this debate once I have sat down.

The Government are committed to having the best lifelong learning for adults in the developed world. We will achieve that by setting up a national retraining scheme.

All these reforms represent real support for people across the country, real opportunity and real ways to tackle inequality. We recognise that access to equality of opportunity—social mobility—is what will lift our country, not some kind of snake-oil populism from the Labour party, backed up by a fiscal black hole that will mean cuts in the very areas that are most important in improving opportunity.

Of course, throughout those reforms we will work hand in glove with British businesses, relying on their expertise, knowledge and leadership—businesses that the Labour party continually castigates as being part of the problem that our country faces, as Labour sees it. We see businesses as critical in driving opportunity and social mobility.

We know that good schools are the engines of social mobility, and they are not just about individual success. Schools are at the centre of every single community. Last week I visited the Kensington Aldridge Academy, in the shadow of Grenfell Tower. I am sure the House will join me in paying tribute to the teachers and staff of all the schools in the area, and indeed those in Manchester affected by what happened after the Ariana Grande concert. They were met with a terrible situation but helped the young people caught up in it with absolute professionalism. Leaders, headteachers and teachers in those areas have been the unsung heroes over recent weeks, along with our emergency services, and I want to put on record again my thanks to them for all the work they have done to make sure that our children are back in school but also getting the support that they need to deal with the experiences they have had. We are committed to ensuring that that support stays in place as those schools continue, when the cameras have gone, to help their students deal with what they have been through.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): With the news today that 95 tower blocks have failed the cladding test, it is clear that hundreds of children across the country, not just in Camden but in other local education authority areas, will experience the disruption of being moved out of their home. What will the Secretary of State's Department do to help to support schools in areas where that disruption is occurring?

Justine Greening: We have been clear that we are getting in touch with schools that we know are being affected by such challenges. We did a huge amount of work in response to the Manchester atrocities, stretching far beyond Manchester into the broader north-west region, and in response to Grenfell Tower. As a result, the Government will have a much better, more systematic understanding of how to respond quickly so that not only are the right links in place between my Department, regional schools commissioners, local authorities and schools, but we can work in a streamlined fashion with local NHS services and educational psychologists. All those things have worked effectively, but we have had to work hard to identify emerging problems and tackle them quickly.

I would also like to take this opportunity to say a big thank you to the mental health professionals who came from all over the country to offer their support following the Manchester attacks in particular. It was much appreciated and enabled us to deal much more effectively with the children who had been affected by the tragedy. Such responses provide the blueprint on which the Government can continue to develop emergency response.

The Queen's Speech made it clear that the Government are determined to introduce a fairer distribution of funding for schools. We will set out our plans shortly, but, as we outlined in our manifesto, we will make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula. We have, of course, given our schools record levels of funding, and in our manifesto we committed to increase funding further. Now that the consultation has finished, we will explain our plans for the fair funding of schools shortly.

More broadly, school improvement and great teaching and teachers are, in practice, the same thing. I had the chance to meet many inspirational teachers and leaders at the *Times Educational Supplement* awards last Friday. It was a fantastic evening, and it emphasised to me that teaching deserves to be thought of as a high-status profession. We will continue to work hard to crack down on unnecessary workload, and we will ramp up the quality of continuing professional development, centred around a new college of teaching. We will continue to invest in the profession to ensure that we attract the best people. Alongside continuing our reforms on academies and free schools, we are making sure that headteachers get the support they need to improve their schools through the £140 million strategic school improvement fund.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment that no school will see any reduction in funding because of the Government's fairer funding formula, which is extremely welcome. Will she condemn the propaganda that is still going out from schools and the unions, claiming that there will be vast reductions in expenditure on a per pupil basis?

Justine Greening: I think all parents expect teachers and headteachers to behave professionally. There is space for an important political debate, but I question whether some teachers have pursued it in the right way, given the high status that I want the profession to have in the public mind. There is absolutely a place for debate on the funding going to schools and the reform strategy that will see standards get better, but I agree

with my hon. Friend that it has been concerning to see what many people have felt are utterly political messages being put out inappropriately.

We are also committed to ensuring that the whole education system, including independent schools and universities, works together to drive up standards for all our children. Of course, the Government's 12 opportunity areas are there to deal with complex and entrenched challenges in education in areas such as Blackpool and Norwich. We are backing local leaders in those areas—teachers, businesses, civil society and local authorities—to come together to find solutions to long-standing problems and plan for future skills needs. We want to ensure that home-grown talent plugs the skills gaps. To confront that challenge, we need a powerful alliance of employers, civil society and Government, working hand in hand in every corner of our country. I welcome the huge number of businesses, charities and ordinary people stepping forward to help us to do better for our young people.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Although we all recognise the need to address deprivation, does my right hon. Friend also recognise the need to address the historical injustices for underfunded areas? Will she confirm that she will increase the age-weighted pupil unit block in the funding formula and help to reduce the costs that some schools are facing through the apprenticeship levy?

Justine Greening: As I said, we are committed to introducing fair funding. It is right that we hold all schools to the same standards and the same accountability framework, and it makes sense that we should ensure that children with comparable needs are funded comparably wherever in the country they are. I will set out shortly the details of how we will do that following the consultation.

I will finish my speech. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hooray!"] In many respects I was just getting started, but I am sure the rest can wait for future debates. The Government have done sterling work in narrowing the gender pay gap and advocating having more women on boards, but those efforts cannot slacken and need to be stepped up. We will bring forward new approaches to supporting women in the workplace. The 30-hour childcare offer will help families with the cost of childcare, and our returnship pilots will explore new ways of supporting mothers—it is overwhelmingly mothers—to get back into work. We know from some of the work that is already under way how powerful they can be. Of course, inequality is not confined to gender, and the Government will bring a renewed focus to the ethnicity gap in our workplaces.

The Government have an ambitious agenda for this Parliament: creating world-class technical education, ensuring that there is a good school place for every single child, wherever they are growing up, and tackling inequality in educational opportunity in all its forms. To achieve those goals, we will be resolute in our pursuit of high standards. We are building on a firm foundation, although there is more to do and more to deliver. Our young people deserve nothing less. This nation contains a wealth of talent just waiting to be unlocked, which will create opportunity and success for individuals and a strong and prosperous country that can take on, and succeed in, any challenge.

2.9 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Let me first welcome you back to the Chair, Mr Speaker, and also the many new Members to the Chamber for today's debate. I am sure we are all looking forward to hearing some excellent maiden speeches.

I also welcome the Secretary of State back to her place and her new Ministers to theirs. I suspect she may have found herself debating education issues quite a lot during the campaign, not least in her own constituency, but a lot has changed in these few short weeks, so today's debate might be rather different. In fact, the Secretary of State concentrated more on the Labour party today than on her own Government and the Queen's Speech. There are more than 2,500 words about education in the manifesto on which the Prime Minister stood those few weeks ago, but barely 50 in the speech we heard last week. Maybe that is why the Secretary of State concentrated so much on the Labour party manifesto. What we have heard is not so much a programme but a Post-it note. Although I listened carefully to the right hon. Lady's opening remarks, I do not think we know much more about her policy now than we did before she stood up.

Let us start with the obvious points. The centrepiece of the new Prime Minister's education policy was meant to be new grammar schools. I will not rehearse the arguments, but I will just put this observation on the record:

"When people talk about the grammar school issue, I never get people asking the question, 'Why don't you bring back the secondary modern?' And in fact...most children would go to a secondary modern school...if we brought back selection".

Of course, that is not an original observation. In this case, it is the argument made by the Minister for School Standards, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), when explaining why he opposed new grammar schools, when that was the Conservative policy under the last Prime Minister. I do not think it was said in this election campaign, so let me be the first to say it: #IagreewithNick. Perhaps the Secretary of State can explain what a hashtag means to her Home Secretary. I also agreed with the Minister for School Standards when he said:

"Now our job is to improve the standards in the three thousand comprehensive schools in this country and I believe it's not getting rid of the grammar schools that was the issue."

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Perhaps the shadow Secretary of State could shed a little light on her own policy by responding to a question that has been asked in most of these debates but never properly answered. Would a Labour Government abolish existing grammar schools?

Angela Rayner: I think I have been quite clear that we would concentrate on standards and not structures, unlike this Government, who are ideologically obsessing and wasting billions of pounds—not my words, but those of the National Audit Office about the Government's fixations.

The question is, will the Government now get on with the job and does the Prime Minister now also agree with Nick? Will the Secretary of State make it clear that there will be no attempts to lift the ban on new selective schools? Will she finally concentrate on solving the real

problems—those that we hear about time and time again and that we heard about throughout the general election: the crisis in funding and in the teacher workforce—instead of creating more problems for herself?

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Labour party manifesto talked about a lot of funding for many areas, but does the hon. Lady recognise that making unfunded promises and putting a huge amount of funding into the system has an impact on the economy and on schools? That impact was seen in Greece, which went bankrupt, with 8,500 teachers losing their jobs and schools having no teachers to teach in them.

Angela Rayner: I am absolutely astonished by that, given what has happened over the last 24 hours and the magic money tree that has suddenly been found for a coalition of chaos. I will take no lectures from the Conservative party, especially when the only numbers I saw in its manifesto were the numbers of the pages I was reading.

The Prime Minister also threatened to end universal infant free school meals during the general election. I hope the Government will now confirm that that policy has been abandoned, as part of their full-scale retreat from their own manifesto. Ministers claimed during the election that free breakfasts would be more cost-effective. Their costings left a bit to be desired, though: the original plan would have allowed only 7p per breakfast. I remember that when Labour was in government we got our school meal recipes from Jamie Oliver. The Conservatives must have been getting theirs from Oliver Twist. Even then the new costings were based on take-up of just 20%, so I look forward to hearing a full explanation of their policy on free school meals.

On a similar note, one thing that the Secretary of State has announced today is the Government's new policy on mental health first aid training in schools. They said they would train the first 3,000 staff for £200,000—£66 per member of staff. At the same time, the charity delivering the policy said it would cost at least £117.25 per person, so the Secretary of State's figures were out, but only by about £150,000. Having realised that her numbers do not add up, she has now rushed out another U-turn, saying that the £200,000 is for only the first year of the policy. Can Ministers finally tell us how much the policy will cost per year, how many teachers will be trained each year and how she managed to get the policy announcement so badly wrong? It seems a long time ago since the Conservatives were talking about strong and stable leadership. Only one day after the deal for the coalition of chaos was signed, and this Government are even weaker and wobblier than ever before.

Now let me turn to the words that the Secretary of State did get into the Queen's Speech, which promised reform of technical education. However, she has already legislated for reform of technical education earlier this year, in the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, so can Ministers tell us whether there will be another new Bill on technical education in this Session? Or is the reality that this Government have come to the House with such a threadbare programme that they have been reduced to announcing Bills that they have already passed, in the last Parliament?

The Government had nothing to say on higher education. No wonder they wanted to talk about our policies. It is just weeks since they used a statutory instrument to sneak through their latest rise in tuition fees, while freezing the threshold at which graduates begin to repay their debts. The election came before the scheduled debate and vote on that rise, so I hope the Government will now provide time for that debate on the Floor of the House.

Nor did the Government have anything to say on the even more critical issues of early years education and childcare. At the end of the last Parliament they left early years education and childcare in disarray. They promised an early years workforce strategy but have given no indication of how they will implement it. Providers across the country have told the Government time and time again that the funding they are providing is inadequate, and hundreds of thousands of working parents have been denied the service that they were promised. How many words were there about that in the Queen's Speech? None whatsoever.

Let me also touch on another issue, which is perhaps more important than any other this week: the safety of our school buildings. The Government had been planning to change the regulations on fire safety in schools contained in "Building Bulletin 100". Funnily enough, those proposed changes have now been removed from the Department for Education website, but luckily we have a paper copy. The proposed new draft no longer included an expectation that most new school buildings would be fitted with sprinklers, on the basis that

"school buildings do not need to be sprinkler protected to achieve a reasonable standard of life safety."

Perhaps the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government could take the opportunity later to confirm that these proposed changes have now been abandoned for good.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to carry out a thorough and comprehensive check on the fire safety of every school building in the country? We cannot put too high a price on the safety of our children. In view of the likely costs, does my hon. Friend think that the Government should set up a contingency fund to cover all those costs, as a matter of urgency, so that local authorities do not have to consider cutting other already shredded budgets to find the money to pay for the necessary work?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree—indeed, I was intending to deal with that point later in my speech. I hope that the Secretary of State will take my hon. Friend's comments on board. We know that local government in particular has been hit by the Government's so-called austerity agenda. The cuts that our local authorities face need to be looked at.

Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government told the House that the Government had ordered safety checks to be carried out to ensure that flammable cladding was not used on school buildings. Will he update the House on the results of that survey as soon as possible? If there are schools that use flammable cladding, can the Secretary of State for Education give a clear assurance that the costs will be covered by the Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has requested?

It would also be helpful to know what action is being taken in student halls of residence. Can the Communities Secretary confirm that they are classed as "other residential buildings", and are therefore subject to weaker requirements for sprinklers? If so, will the Government consider closing that loophole? What action will the Government take to ensure that both university and private halls are checked for flammable cladding?

Let me now turn to the subject of school funding. Yesterday, the First Secretary of State came to the House to announce the Government's deal with the Democratic Unionist party. Fortunately for them, they seem to have located the magic money tree about which we heard so much during the election. The package included £50 million for schools, to "address immediate pressures". That is £150 for every pupil in Northern Ireland.

Of course I welcome the Government's acknowledgement that they were not properly funding schools in Northern Ireland, and the money is to address that; but can the Secretary of State explain why, as schools face billions of pounds in cuts, the Government are doing nothing to address the immediate pressures on schools in England?

The Conservative party manifesto said that the new funding formula would be introduced, and that no school would lose funding as a result—in fact, the Secretary of State said it herself. Achieving that will require an increase in school funding over and above current plans, so, again, it is time for clarity. When will the Department publish a response to the second stage of the consultation on the fair funding formula, and when will the new funding formula be introduced? Will the Secretary of State provide a cast-iron guarantee today that no school will be worse off, in real terms?

If the Secretary of State has been talking to parents and teachers in her own constituency—let alone across the country—she will know that schools are facing severe cost pressures, and that head teachers are being left with impossible choices. I absolutely agree with what she said earlier about the staff and workforces in our schools and public services, but I must say to her that they need more than words. Even given the money that the Government found by scrapping school meals, the Institute for Fiscal Studies—which the Secretary of State likes to quote so often—has found that the implementation of their plans for school spending would mean a real-terms cut of nearly 3% in per-pupil funding.

The Gracious Address referred to a highly skilled workforce in high-wage jobs, but in-work poverty is at a record high, and the UK has the second lowest wage growth in the OECD since 2010. The only country where wage growth is lower is Greece, and that is a direct result of the failure of this Government. Their failure to invest in education will lead to a generation of children not getting the education they deserve, and not getting on in life.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. [HON. MEMBERS: "Shadow!"] Give us a couple of months.

My hon. Friend has talked about the failure of a generation. Does she know that, at the University of Chester academy in Ellesmere Port, a generation of schoolchildren are now being failed because of a second failed Ofsted inspection—the second in four years? The multi-academy trust has also had a damning Ofsted

[Justin Madders]

inspection, but we heard nothing from the Secretary of State about what she intends to do to improve performance in academies.

Angela Rayner: During the general election campaign, I had the honour and privilege of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency, and he is absolutely right: those concerns are real. I think we saw that played out in the election. We saw that young people came to the Labour party because we had an offer for them. We also saw the direction in which the Secretary of State's majority went. It certainly did not go in the same direction as mine. I think she needs to take heed of that.

We see the same picture of cuts in public services across the country: budgets cut, services lost and communities losing out. For instance, since 2010, nearly a third of designated Sure Start children's centres have been lost. Funding for early-intervention services has been cut again and again, and it is the working families of Britain who will pay the price in the end.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The hon. Lady has mentioned both Greece and cuts. She must be aware that, according to the House of Commons Library, Government spending in 2010 was £715 billion and this year it will be more than £800 billion. That is an increase, not a cut, and it includes record spending on education. In so-called anti-austerity Greece, Government spending is down by 30%, so it is not exactly a model.

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman will also note that we are in trillions of pounds of debt, and that the debt has doubled on the Government's watch. They like to talk about the economy, but they failed on every single one of the fiscal rules introduced by the previous Chancellor. I will take no lectures on the economy from Conservative Members.

The Secretary of State seemed to suggest that Labour's record in power was not one to be proud of. Of course, there are a number of aspects of our record that she failed to mention. Perhaps she will tell the House which party delivered record levels of investment in our schools; or perhaps she will tell us which party, during 13 years in power, slashed the attainment gap, and saw children from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds do just as well as their more affluent peers. It certainly was not her party.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Perhaps it is the hon. Lady who is guilty of not telling the House that under the last Labour Government one in three children left primary school without the expected levels of numeracy and literacy, and there was a 3,500% increase in "equivalents to GCSEs" which were certainly not equivalents to GCSEs. That was conning children that what they were learning in schools was fit for purpose.

Angela Rayner: Again, it is clear that Conservative Members like to talk more about the Labour party than about their own record book. [Interruption.] Let me answer the question. Let us just be clear about the position. Where are we now in the programme for

international student assessment tables? We are slipping again. It was the previous Secretary of State who said that the Government would be judged according to their standing in the PISA tables, but its status is falling continually, so I will take no more lectures. When the Government talk about, for instance, their free school programmes although they cannot even get the buildings up and running and are spending billions, I think we are seeing a record of shameful waste under the Conservatives.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and others have mentioned standards. Perhaps it slipped some Tory Back Benchers' notice last summer that the number of pupils at key stage 2—those who were leaving primary school—who met the requirements in the standard assessment tests had fallen from more than 80% to just 53%. That was absolutely shocking. It was not because the standard of teaching had fallen, or because pupils had become less capable, or because head teachers were not performing well; it was because the Government have been meddling with every bit of curriculum that they can their hands on. That is making standards fall and setting children up to fail.

Angela Rayner *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. From now on, interventions should be brief. A very large number of colleagues wish to contribute, and I am keen to accommodate as many as I can.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend has said.

On the Secretary of State's point on tuition fees, she seems to have misunderstood the way in which the policy was costed. That is hardly a surprise, given that her party is not exactly used to costing its commitments. The extra £2 billion that she calls a black hole would only be a black hole if all universities charged the highest fee level. Under her Government that number is rising again, with no end in sight. But based on actual outlay by the Student Loans Company, we have fully costed an end to tuition fees. Frankly, it is ironic to hear the Secretary of State who scrapped the maintenance grant complaining that we would not be able to undo her policy. This, too, is fully costed, and I am happy to send her a copy of our manifesto to show her just how we will do it. I will even get the next Prime Minister to sign it for her.

The Secretary of State talks about prioritising technical education. Does this mean that the 14% real-terms cut to the further education budget or the billions of pounds cut from the adult skills budget will be reversed? We can all guess the answer to that one. And may I remind her that our manifesto pledged to reverse her cuts to Sure Start? Sure Start and other early intervention programmes have the greatest impact on boosting social mobility for the most disadvantaged. How can she possibly justify cutting hundreds of millions of pounds in Sure Start funding, and the loss of a third of designated Sure Start centres under the Conservatives?

Finally, on helping the disadvantaged, the Secretary of State conveniently ignores the fact that new research shows that students from low-income backgrounds are

most likely to be deterred by higher levels of student debt. Under Labour, there will be no barriers to young people pursuing whatever education they want, be it further or higher, academic or technical. It is only her party that, by slashing school budgets while tuition fees skyrocket, is capping aspiration.

Another way is possible. It is the plan set out in the Labour party manifesto—a plan that will invest in our young people to ensure that everyone, whatever their background, can fulfil their potential. It is a plan in which we reverse the cuts to school funding and then protect their budgets in real terms for the lifetime of this Parliament, and in which we provide free lifelong learning so that everyone can retrain and reskill when they need to, free from the fear of a lifetime of debt. It is a plan in which aspiration is encouraged, not taxed, and in which we invest in early years education and childcare, making sure that every child gets the best possible start in life, because social mobility does not start at 11 but in the early years, when interventions make the greatest impact.

This is what Members of this House must ask themselves. Do they stand for cuts to schools and local services, or for investment? Do they stand for the managed decline of further education, or do they support lifelong learning? Do they stand for taxing the aspiration of our young people, or do they stand for allowing every child to fulfil their potential? I know where we stand on this side of the House, and the choice has never been clearer.

2.33 pm

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): In the past eight weeks we have seen a series of major terrorist attacks in this country. We saw the attack here in Parliament in which a police constable was killed. We saw the bombing in Manchester, and then we saw the atrocity in London. I was, until the general election was called, a member of the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee, and I want to speak briefly on the subject of that Committee because it is very important and, if precedent is anything to go by, a new Committee will not be established until the middle of October. That will mean that there will have been no scrutiny of the intelligence and security services for between five and six months.

The Committee, of which I was lucky enough to be a member—I hope that I might be put back on it when it is reconstituted—forms an important part of the oversight and scrutiny of our intelligence and security agencies. It is a peculiar Committee, in that it is a Committee of the House but it is not like a Select Committee. It was first established in a very narrow technical sense in 1994, at a time when we had only just publicly admitted that the Special Intelligence Service and the Security Service existed. Its remit now stems from the Justice and Security Act 2013, which set out the organisations that the Committee was to look at, monitor and comment on. It was established that the Committee should report not only to the Prime Minister but to this House. The Committee has nine members: seven are selected from the House of Commons and two from the House of Lords. Unlike Select Committees, there is no public election involved. Names emerge, and the Prime Minister—after consultation with the Leader of the Opposition—formally puts them to the House, where they are voted on.

I would be the first to admit that it is a strange Committee, in the sense that we have to get the balance right between freedom of expression and the right to know, on the one hand, and on the other, the need for the intelligence and security agencies to maintain secrecy. More and more has been put in the public domain, and I like to think that, over the past 18 months, we have produced a series of good reports. There were no minorities; they were all agreed upon. Those reports were based on the evidence that we received from the intelligence and security agencies and from Ministers. We meet in a secure building, and there are no performances as there are in Select Committees. There are no cameras there. The questions that we put to the officials and Ministers in front of us are not easy, as they would be the first to admit. Our task is to hold them to account on behalf of Members and of the public.

I put it to all Members, particularly those on our Front Bench and the Whip on duty, that we can no longer continue with a system in which it takes three to four months to reconstitute the Committee after a general election. In this modern day and age, that is ludicrous. The usual argument is that we have to go through all the same procedures and elections as a Select Committee, but that is incorrect. I urge the Government, and the Leader of the Opposition, to think about reconstituting the Committee before 20 July when we go off into recess. The secretariat of the Committee is drawn from civil servants all across Whitehall, and they are carrying on with their everyday work—they are not sitting there twiddling their thumbs—but they cannot get on with the task of helping the Committee to head in the direction that we, or our successors, would like to take it in.

This is a matter of crucial importance to the House. At the end of the day, it is based on an element of trust. In the past, there have been those who wanted the Committee to take on a similar role to that of a Select Committee. The trouble is that that would cause all kinds of problems because of the desire on the part of the agencies to maintain the secrecy element, although I fully accept that that might change. If we do not go ahead and reconstitute the Committee, it will be failing in its remit to scrutinise the work of the intelligence and security agencies.

As the House knows, all kinds of questions have been raised, particularly after Manchester, about whether the agencies and the police knew about the individuals involved, and whether they had ignored them. I do not know, but my experience of being on the Committee is that the agencies work hard to monitor and find people who wish to carry out terrorist attacks in this country. It is not a question, as one of them put it to us, of trying to find a needle in a haystack; they are trying to find the haystack. This Government and the previous Government put a lot of extra resources into the agencies to make certain that they could recruit more people, but that takes time. In *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday, the former director general of GCHQ talked about the role of the private sector, and the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have raised the whole business of social networks and whether such companies are prepared to allow the intelligence and security agencies the kind of information that they require when they are trying to find and monitor terrorists. My plea to the Front-Bench team is

[Mr Keith Simpson]

that they think very seriously indeed about reconstituting our Intelligence and Security Committee before the summer recess.

2.40 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Scottish schools finish this week for the summer holidays, and it is only fitting for me to start my remarks by paying tribute to the thousands of teachers, not just in Scotland, but throughout the UK, whose dedication in often difficult circumstances ensures that our young people have the best possible start in life. I want to give a special mention to my friends and former colleagues at Hyndland Secondary School who are watching this afternoon's debate from The Rock—enjoy your afternoon.

This Queen's Speech was arguably one of the most important that Members of this House will experience. We sit on the Brexit cliff edge with the UK's constitutional future under question, and how we proceed will determine the future economic success of these nations. I was expecting bold statements, a clear direction and some reassurance to those working in our higher education sector. Unfortunately, however, we heard none of that. Higher education is often used to describe how great Great Britain actually is. Our universities are the best in the world and our scientists are the most innovative. However, those hard-fought positions did not arise from great British researchers and innovators, but as a result of the free movement of staff and students, of collaboration, and of rich and diverse ideas from a rich and diverse community. As in other sectors, great uncertainty hangs over our universities, and particular policies have made things difficult in recent years.

I have spoken in this place on many occasions about the need to reintroduce the post-study work visa, which is a particular issue in Scotland. Scotland has been blighted by depopulation for centuries. Emigration is our problem, not immigration. While numbers of international students have held relatively steady recently, the countries of origin are changing, with a now much narrower range of countries represented in this community. We have a large Chinese student community in Glasgow, and while we of course welcome those students and are delighted that they have chosen to study in Scotland, they generally return to China at the end of their course, taking with them their newly gained expertise. We get economic and cultural benefit from those students while they are here, but how much better would it be if we were able to have their expertise at work in our towns and cities? More worryingly, when we rely on only one group of international students, what happens to the sector if political or economic changes mean that they suddenly cease to come? That could have an impact on not only the university sector, but the wider local economy.

I have been told repeatedly that if a graduate's salary is of an acceptable level, they are able to remain and work, but in Scotland and other areas of the UK salaries are much lower than in the south-east of England. The reinstatement of the post-study work visa will allow greater economic growth and encourage entrepreneurship. However, with this Queen's Speech, immigration targets and xenophobia have overruled common economic sense and net migration targets are

more important than creating a climate for economic growth. Maybe it is time for immigration powers to be devolved to Scotland.

Mr Harper *rose*—

Carol Monaghan: Is the right hon. Gentleman intervening?

Mr Harper: On that point, the hon. Lady said that one of the problems facing Scotland is people leaving, and although we have not been as successful as we hoped in reducing immigration to the United Kingdom, it has been running at a couple of hundred thousand, so will she explain why so few of those people have actually wanted to go to Scotland? Could that be connected to the mess that her party is making of government?

Carol Monaghan: The hypocrisy is outstanding. We have heard the leader of the Tory party in Scotland tell us simultaneously that there is too much immigration, too little immigration, and just about the right amount of immigration. The Tory party is completely confused. If immigration powers were devolved to Scotland, we could make choices based on our economic needs.

Another point that I have raised numerous times relates to the fee status of EU students post-Brexit. I am astounded that we still do not have answers to that most basic question. It has been hinted that these students will be considered international students and will pay fees accordingly. It was also suggested to me by a Government Member that EU students will continue to come in the same pre-Brexit numbers after Brexit. I often wonder what planet Tory looks like, but it appears to have little connection to reality. If EU students are asked to pay international fees, this market will almost entirely disappear. It will become the reserve of the rich and privileged of Europe. In Scotland, access to higher education is based on ability to learn, never ability to pay, and we apply that to our EU students as well. In her discussions with the Prime Minister and the Brexit Secretary, I urge the Secretary of State for Education to be an advocate for our European students and push for a deal that will not preclude young Europeans from studying in the U.K.

Turning to funding, and Horizon 2020 funding in particular, the Prime Minister has offered some assurances to the research community, but that misses the point of Horizon 2020. EU funding ensures collaboration across multiple institutions. It means that a tapestry is woven, with each institution able to provide its particular expertise in an area. The funding is important, but the collaborations are what make the magic happen. To lose that will be a great blow to our research base. It would be like having an orchestra made up of only one drummer but with the expectation that it continues to produce a symphony. Whatever happens during the Brexit negotiations, our research community, their collaborations and their free movement must be protected.

People could be forgiven for thinking that the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 was about education and raising skills, particularly in the much-needed STEM area. Indeed, many employers are hoping that that is the case. However, technical education in that Act means general skills training. Of course, I have no problem with young people training in particular trades; the

issue is that it is being billed as a breakthrough in tackling skills shortages. We know that we have massive shortages in STEM, in construction and in the digital and information and communications technology industry, and Brexit will deepen those difficulties.

Although there is no doubt that some of the Technical and Further Education Act's intentions appear to be positive, why not be honest and call it "skills education" or have a vision for technical education that centres on actual technical education and goes some way to addressing the skills shortages in specific areas? This seems like a missed opportunity.

I am delighted that grammar schools appear to be off the table for the moment, but I wonder whether the new coalition will bring them back into discussions with the Government. I wait to see what will happen on that front.

Regardless of the Secretary of State's comments earlier, Scotland is one of the most educated nations in Europe, with only Luxembourg having a higher proportion of people educated to tertiary level. In Scotland we provide routes to higher education through our further education—*[Interruption.]* New Conservative Members might learn something if they stopped shouting. In Scotland we provide routes to higher education through further education, and many of our young people from disadvantaged backgrounds take full advantage of that. Those numbers are not captured in the UCAS figures that the Secretary of State enjoys referencing.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady still has not answered the question. Why has the number of students from less-advantaged backgrounds going to university plateaued in Scotland, in contrast to England? Why is it that, because of Scotland's tuition fees policy, Scottish students are finding it increasingly difficult to find a place at Scottish universities and are having to come to English universities instead?

Carol Monaghan: Maybe the hon. Gentleman missed what I have literally just said. When we consider alternative routes into higher education through further education colleges, in Scotland more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds access higher education than anywhere else in the UK.

It is interesting that the Secretary of State referred to a £2 billion black hole in the Labour party's costings for higher education, but I can point to a £1.5 billion fund that appeared to become available only yesterday. Brexit is now a serious threat to our higher education, our research and our science community. We now need to take major steps to ensure that they are protected in all the negotiations.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. In order to accommodate as many Members as possible, I will now impose a time limit of five minutes. It may need to be brought down even further later in the debate, but for now it will be five minutes.

2.53 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): At the heart of giving every citizen the opportunity to succeed is the need to ensure that they have access to the best education, and I commend the Secretary of State for the clear vision she set out today, which the Government are

following, to ensure that education remains at the heart of this Government's social mobility policy. We should never forget that good schools are the engine of social mobility.

I slightly take issue with the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), because in my constituency we had to wait for a Conservative Government to get record levels of investment. We did not get it under Labour.

Critical to the role of good schools in social mobility is their delivery of academic excellence. Again, it is good to hear the Secretary of State talking about our education system, which is now on a par with the best in the world in what it is delivering academically. I urge her to stress that that should be at the top of the agenda for every headteacher in this country, regardless of their area.

The Minister for School Standards has done a tremendous job of ensuring that academic excellence is translated into reality through our curriculum and through the Government's focus, from the start, on using phonics to ensure that we get away from the unacceptable situation in which one in three young people leaves primary school without the basic ability to read. We now have far higher standards. I recently went into Marnel Community Infants School to see the inspiration that young people are getting from their teachers because those young people are able to read fluently much earlier.

The other part of the Government's focus on academic excellence has been the introduction of the EBacc. I was particularly pleased earlier this year to see the New Schools Network report, which laid to rest some of the myths about the introduction of the EBacc, particularly that it might be reducing young people's ability to follow arts subjects. The excellent research showed that although young people focus on English, maths, science, a language, history and geography, they are able to include other arts subjects in their GCSE choices. It is important for us to continue that as a country, as our creative industries are world-renowned and we must ensure that that continues.

I will not go into detail on the importance of the other part of the curriculum that the Government will be addressing in this Session—relationship and sex education—although I look forward to hearing more about how that will be developed with the input of the very expert groups that advised me when I proposed amendments to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 on Report.

The Secretary of State touched on technical education and the importance of parity of esteem. I congratulate the Government on their work with the technical sector to provide supported internships for some of the most challenged young people in this country—those with special educational needs. I was privileged to go into my local Basingstoke College of Technology last week to celebrate the first anniversary of supported internships. BCOT is working with local employers to give young people with a learning disability the opportunity to get the sort of supported work experience that will make an enormous difference to the rest of their life.

This is probably the final point I will be able to raise in my short remarks. Hampshire has the third lowest education funding in the country, and we need to see the Secretary of State's proposed changes, which will mean £14 million of extra funding for our county to try to put right some of the inequities that built up in the past. In Basingstoke 90% of our primary schools are

[Mrs Maria Miller]

good or outstanding. We have 1,300 new primary school places, with more than £30 million of extra investment, but we need fairer funding to ensure that the historical inequities are addressed.

2.58 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome all colleagues, including many new colleagues, to the House—many of those new colleagues will want to give their maiden speech today. I also welcome the Secretary of State, who was re-elected only by the skin of her teeth.

The Prime Minister called the election to offer the country strong and stable leadership, and what has been left is a complete and utter mess for the country. It is an indictment of a terrible general election campaign but also a reflection of the Conservative party's time in government. School funding was undoubtedly a key issue in the election, as was, latterly, funding for the police and security services. Those issues highlighted a similar concern, which is that the public are fed up to the back teeth with cuts to vital public services—services that are precious to the public—with the same rhetoric coming from this Government.

The school gates campaign was a particularly successful and effective part of the general election campaign, and I pay tribute to the headteachers, the unions, the staff and others for their work in highlighting these issues over many months. It is pretty pathetic of Conservative MPs to blame headteachers for their loss of seats at this election.

Mrs Miller: Does the hon. Lady regret that parents were inadvertently left with the impression that funding for schools might be cut, particularly in my constituency, where we were going to see an overall increase in school funding? That was not necessarily always the message that her party gave.

Lucy Powell: I do not, because the exchanges we saw earlier today reflect the ones in the election, which showed that Conservative Members had their fingers in their ears about the facts of the matter. Let us just go through some of those facts: before we even get into the fair funding formula, every school in this country will lose between 8% and 9% of its budgets over the course of this Parliament—or this new Parliament and two years of the previous one—because costs have gone up. Although the Government say they are protecting budgets in cash terms, they are not protecting them in real terms, so even the winners from the fair funding formula will still lose 3% of their budgets, whereas the losers will lose more than 11%. Every school in the country is a loser, and Conservative Members still have their fingers in their ears, even after the general election disaster they have just overseen. Those are the facts, and I do not blame any headteacher for telling them to parents.

The Conservatives should blame themselves, because those cuts mean that headteachers are having to make some of the most unpalatable cuts to school budgets. They are having to cut back on teachers, teaching assistants, school trips and extra-curricular activities. Those are the unpalatable cuts that the Government have overseen, which is why at the general election

parents around the country said, “Enough is enough.” Perhaps that is why the polling has shown that since the election nearly 750,000 people have said they changed the way they voted in that election because of cuts to school funding. Perhaps it is time now that the Government actually started to listen. Persisting with the failed lines they used during the general election campaign will not cut it, so it is about time that the Secretary of State used her reappointment to go to the Chancellor and the Prime Minister and say that she needs to find the money to meet that shortfall. This is a funding crisis and she needs to deal with it quickly.

Having dug themselves in on school funding, the Government found themselves in the same rhetorical malaise on police resources as they also took centre stage in this election. I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Greater Manchester police and their response to the Manchester terror attacks; to Manchester City Council, whose response was exemplary; to the whole city; and, as the Secretary of State said, to the teachers, headteachers and the staff in our schools who supported the many, many children who, having been at that concert that evening, went and did their GCSE exams the very next day. They all did a great job.

However, the current plans for cuts in police numbers are just too much for Greater Manchester police to bear—they are unsustainable—which is why our chief constable has asked the Government urgently for extra resources for 800 police officers. I hope the Government can find the money from somewhere for that extra resource, because the new threats our country now faces mean that we need them. Again, the Tories' arrogance and inflexibility during the campaign meant that police cuts were undoubtedly another vote loser for them. What an irony it is, then, that they have now managed to find £1 billion from their magic money tree for their grubby deal with the DUP. Had they found that money a few weeks ago for schools and the police, perhaps they would have had a majority here today—a bigger majority even. Perhaps they will finally learn some of the lessons of the election.

Finally, let me say that it is not all bad news, because one good thing to come out of this election—I know the Secretary of State will share my view on this—is the end to the bringing back of grammar schools. I know it was a policy she was not all that keen on. We are glad to see the back of it and I am sure she will welcome that. However, I urge her and her Government to learn the right lessons of this election and make sure that our public services and education system have the funding they need.

3.4 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I know the Minister of State, Department for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), was not able to stay for the rest of the debate because she had an urgent meeting to go to, but I was very pleased to see her in her place earlier; the former Deputy Chief Whip will make an excellent addition to the Secretary of State's team.

I am also pleased to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who speaks for the Scottish National party, because while she was on her feet the First Minister caved in and accepted that there will not be a referendum on Scottish independence until after Brexit. The credit should go

both to the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition in Scotland; they can share the credit for having helped to save our Union, which is incredibly important.

It is also a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who, in her five minutes, spent a great deal of money but did not take a second to explain how our economy can generate the money to spend on our important public services. I am going to spend my remarks dealing with that now. First, let me say that it is still incredibly important that we keep living within our means, as countries that do not do so find that, over time, they are not able to pay for any important public services. That is why it is worth reminding the House that when we came into office in 2010 the deficit was 10% and we were spending £150 billion more than we were bringing in in tax revenue. By the time of the election, we had reduced the cash deficit by 70% and the deficit as a proportion of the economy by three quarters, and the debt will start falling as a percentage of GDP from this period. [*Laughter.*] I have to say to Labour Front Benchers who are laughing that they opposed every single spending cut we made, so the deficit and the debt would have been higher—incredibly so—had they been in government.

One thing we hear from the Opposition is that living within our means did not work, but the important things like growth and jobs have demonstrated that it did. Between 2010 and 2016, of the G7 countries our growth was second only to that of the United States; we grew almost twice as fast as our nearest neighbour, France. In 2014, ours was the fastest growing G7 country, we were joint top in 2015 and again the fastest growing in 2016. What does that mean for jobs and opportunities for our young people when they leave school? Three million more people are in work than there were in 2010; we have a record high employment rate; we have a better performance than others in the G7 and the OECD, and almost double the performance of our Eurozone colleagues. When we came to power, the unemployment rate among young people in Britain was just under 20%—the same as in the EU and the euro area.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman is making a point about youth unemployment. Does he agree that it is scandalous that the work of a young person is so undervalued by the Conservative party that the living wage does not kick in until someone is 25? How is it right that a young person doing a job should be paid less than their counterparts who are over 25?

Mr Harper: It is partly to do with skills and experience. Someone who comes straight from school into a job has to get some training, experience and skills. If the hon. Gentleman talked to businesses in his constituency, he would find it interesting to ask them how someone coming straight from school with no experience and no work skills should be on £10 an hour. He would find either that that young person would not get the opportunity to work or that the business would not be viable. If he does not believe me, he should talk to some of those businesses, as that is what they will tell him.

Let me return to the Government's performance on unemployment. When we were elected, the unemployment rate among young people was as bad as it is in the EU

and the euro area, at about 20%. Seven years later, in the EU and the euro area the unemployment figure has increased, whereas in Britain, under a Conservative-led Government, it has gone down by six percentage points. There are millions of young people who have the opportunity and social mobility generated by having a job, either when they leave university or when they leave school and college and train in an apprenticeship. Even more impressively, and despite what the Leader of the Opposition keeps saying—it is not true—during our period in power income inequality has fallen. The country has become more equal, not less equal, which says a lot about the opportunities that this party delivers in government. This party makes opportunities for our young people and gives them the chance to succeed.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a number of good points about the opportunities for young people. Does he agree that, in Gloucestershire in particular, we have seen a rapid rise in the number of apprenticeships? There have been 7,000 in the city of Gloucester alone over the past seven years. Does he absolutely support another great opportunity, which is to have a health university technical college serving the people of the whole of our county and beyond?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. Before Mr Speaker left the Chair, he did point out that interventions needed to be brief. If anybody finds themselves using the word “and”, it means that they are making one point too many.

Mr Harper: What excellent advice, Mr Deputy Speaker. I agree with my hon. Friend. He has led a number of successful job fairs and apprenticeship opportunities in Gloucester. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has also helped to introduce a cyber training centre in Cheltenham to deliver those extra opportunities for our young people in the industries of the future.

Finally, let me touch briefly on local services, particularly social care. Too often when we talk about social care, we refer only to older people. I want to remind Ministers that almost half the social care spending in England is on working age people between 18 and 24. That social care spending is incredibly important, as it ensures that those people can be independent and that they have the opportunity to work, but we need to think about how we can fund it. It cannot be funded in the same way as social care for older people, as younger people are not likely to have accumulated assets. Any form of means-testing sets up another barrier to work, and I want to ensure that more of those young people can get into work.

In our manifesto, we pledged to get a million more disabled people into work. As chair-designate of the all-party group on learning disability, I want to ensure that more people with learning disabilities have the opportunity to get into work and to succeed in the years to come. I hope that the Minister will bear that in mind as the Government make their plans for the future. We have a proud record. The only thing that I regret about our record is that we did not talk about it enough during the election campaign. If we had, the Leader of the Opposition would not have got away with his irresponsible over-spending manifesto that would have

[Mr Harper]

bankrupted our country. I am glad that the people of Britain saw through it and made sure that they returned this Government to office. We will continue to deliver for Britain as we have done over the past seven years. We have a record of which we can be proud.

3.12 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Prime Minister has endured a torrid few weeks—she has gone from Wonder Woman to the Joker in one spectacular electoral pratfall. We see the parlous state of her diminishing authority and of her Government's capacity to govern in this damp squib of a legislative programme. Apart from the preparations for implementing our exit from the EU, for which almost half the country did not vote and which is a major cause of division and rancour in Britain today, there is little to it, and there is to be no legislative programme at all next year.

When a Prime Minister at the apogee of their power writes the Queen's Speech immediately after a general election, they should be writing about the big policies and ideas that will take the nation forward and improve people's lives, but this speech is more about what the Government Whips think they can get away with and about trying to limit the damage to our economy, future prospects and international influence following the UK's vote to leave the EU—something the Prime Minister does not believe in and did not vote for.

I want to discuss what the Prime Minister could have done in the Queen's Speech to help my constituents. I am talking about keeping them safe from gun crime, and educating their children. Merseyside police have faced a cut in resources of almost £87 million since 2010, and on current Government plans are being forced to cut a further £18 million over the next three years. They have lost a quarter of their staff—more than 1,000 officers and civilian personnel—and are due to lose 540 more. The challenges they face are great, as neighbourhood policing is largely gone. The Matrix unit, which tackled organised crime so successfully on Merseyside is gone as a single unit, yet we on Merseyside are facing a surge in gun crime, which has seen more than 100 shootings in the past 18 months, including five murders. Chief Constable Andy Cooke blames the impact of these cuts for the increasingly reactive policing his force is having to adopt as a replacement for the highly successful proactive policing for which they are so well known.

There are now more guns circulating on Merseyside, and the injury rate is becoming more serious, with firearms incidents up from 33% to 50%. The community safety initiatives that Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Borough Council provided to divert young people from involvement in crime have dwindled away thanks to a lack of money. Liverpool City Council has lost 58% of its resource, rising to 68% in three years, and Knowsley will have lost 56% at the end of another three years.

In January, I wrote to then Minister of State for Policing, Fire and Criminal Justice seeking a meeting about this worrying increase in gun crime, and it took place on 9 February—indeed, you were there, Mr Deputy Speaker, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd). Although the Minister did not bother to turn up, we were assured by the Under-Secretary of

State that a bid for extra resources would be considered sympathetically. The chief constable has recently revealed that the bid has been turned down, yet I have not had the courtesy of a letter from Ministers following up on the meeting of 9 February, or a letter explaining why the bid that was invited has been rejected, which is disgraceful.

Andy Cooke said:

“Have I got sufficient resources to deal with gun crime? No I haven't...If I had more staff, would I put them to deal with gun crime? Yes I would.”

This Queen's Speech could have done something about that, but it has not.

As you well know, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is now no academic A-level provision in the borough of Knowsley, part of which is in my constituency and the rest of which is in yours. Since the closure of the sixth form at Halewood academy, young people in Halewood have to leave the borough to access opportunities that should be readily available for every child in their own local community. In areas such as south Liverpool and Halewood, we have a constant battle to increase educational attainment. The Queen's Speech could have tried to do something about that, but it did not. It does not even guarantee that no school will have its budget cut, as the Tory manifesto purported to do.

I have been asking local headteachers what the new funding formula will mean for their school. Some have already cut teachers and support staff. One of my schools has lost 26% of its teaching staff. Others see redundancies next year as inevitable. Schools are cutting back on the curriculum; one has removed drama and cut back on modern foreign languages and music. All are now having to use school budgets to pay for shared support services, such as special educational needs outreach, educational psychology and family support services, which were once provided by Liverpool City Council. Others are forced to ask parents for money to make their budgets work. This is a catastrophe and will further disadvantage those pupils who already face barriers. This Queen's Speech will do nothing to help my constituents who need to be safe from gun crime or who want their children to have a fair chance in education. It is the last desperate effort of a Government who seek only to cling on to office. We will make sure that they do not.

3.17 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and thank her for her contribution. I have had the great privilege of representing the city of Aberdeen, its communities and its people over the past five years—first as a councillor and then as a Member of the Scottish Parliament for the North East Region. I am truly humbled and honoured that the people of Aberdeen South have placed their trust, faith and confidence in me to represent them in this very special place.

I give an unwavering commitment to my constituents that no matter which party they voted for, if they voted at all, I will work hard and tirelessly for all of them to make Aberdeen's voice heard. In 2014, the people of Aberdeen South voted overwhelmingly to stay within the UK, and at this election they have sent the clearest possible message that they do not want a second independence referendum. Although the First Minister

may have paused her plans, she failed to take them off the table. The people in my constituency want the divisions in our country to be healed, not exacerbated, which is why Scotland's First Minister must get back to her day job of improving our schools and hospitals and supporting our economy to grow.

I would like to thank my predecessors for their contributions to this place. For the past two years, Callum McCaig represented Aberdeen South with enthusiasm and energy. I first met Callum when we were elected to Aberdeen City Council. At that time, his friendly, helpful advice was greatly appreciated. He is extraordinarily capable and I have no doubt he will continue to contribute to Scottish public life. I genuinely wish him all the best for his future.

It would be remiss of me if I did not pay tribute to Dame Anne Begg, who represented the constituency for 18 years with dignity and compassion. Her tireless and passionate advocacy for the rights of disabled people helped improve the quality of life of many people across our country.

Aberdeen is a global city with a global reputation, known the world over as the oil capital of Europe, and as a centre of excellence for innovation and technology. Aberdeen has long made an impressive contribution to the prosperity of the UK and it is the engine room of Scotland's economy. However, there is far more to Aberdeen than just oil and gas. It is the silver city with the golden sands. Its beauty is unparalleled when its wonderfully sculpted granite buildings sparkle in the sun—when we get to see the sun, that is.

Aberdeen is a vibrant city that is also alive with culture, music and the arts. My constituency takes in the west end communities such as Queen's Cross, Harlaw, Ashley, Mannofield and Ferryhill. It incorporates the tightly knit communities of Craigiebuckler, Seafield, Airyhall and Braeside. The constituency stretches further westward, following the mighty River Dee to take in the villages of Cults, Bielside and Milltimber and right on to Peterculter. In the south, it includes Garthdee and Kincorth and goes along to the coastal settlement of Cove. In the former royal borough of Torry, the iconic Girdleness lighthouse, built in 1813, stands tall.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in the debate. I want to thank my constituents for electing me to this place and I look forward to being a strong voice for them here. I want to conclude with the city of Aberdeen's toast: "Happy to meet, sorry to part, happy to meet again—Bon Accord!"

3.21 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I am so honoured to be here to deliver my maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for Colne Valley. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my predecessor, Jason McCartney, for his work for the constituency over the past seven years and I wish him well for the future.

The beautiful valleys that are my home hold an important place in Labour's radical history and are closely associated with the luddites, chartists and suffragettes. Colne Valley is in fact the oldest Labour constituency in the country, and celebrates its 126th birthday next month. One of our greatest and wisest Prime Ministers, Harold Wilson, was raised less than a mile from my home and attended local schools. His words when he spoke about Labour:

"This party is a moral crusade or it is nothing",

ring so true for me now as a newly elected Labour MP. More recently, the honourable Lord David Clark and Kali Mountford have served as outstanding representatives of my community.

The beautiful Pennine landscape that many Members saw as the Tour de France cyclists scaled the heights is something to be proud of, but it is not just the place but the people who make Colne Valley so distinctive. It is about their creativity, compassion and dry wit. My constituency has a rich diversity, with a vibrant Asian community. Since the second world war, such diversity has enriched our economy and our culture. As a former teacher and headteacher, I took part in the Kirklees schools twinning projects, where black Muslim children and white working-class children shared lessons, food and play. Those children saw no difference in colour or faith but just enjoyed friendship and the joy of one another's company. Such an experience reminds me of Wordsworth's words:

"The Child is father of the Man".

In these testing times of terrorism and radicalisation, young children can give many adults the lessons of forgiveness, tolerance and compassion.

Within the discussion and debate about what is a "good" school, my experience of education and of how children learn and thrive tells me that a culture of targets and tests does not result in a happy, clever or creative child. A whole child approach that cares for their emotional, physical and intellectual wellbeing is needed. Our own head of Ofsted has recently spoken about the need for an education that meets the child's needs, not the school's targets.

Colne Valley has some of the best schools and sixth form colleges in the country. The professionals who work there deserve to be supported through adequate funding and ownership of a broad and balanced curriculum. Huddersfield University has just been awarded a gold standard for teaching and leads our areas economic and cultural success. We are well proud of our flagship university.

As a country our media and creative arts are the envy of the world, and in our own Colne Valley, we have hosted filming for "Last Tango in Halifax", "Happy Valley" and other peak-time popular programmes. Our valleys are vibrant with creativity and we have a vision for not just a northern powerhouse but, more specifically, a Colne Valley powerhouse, leading in technology, culture and arts initiatives. The vision for the valleys is real, but the cuts to our local services are impacting on the most vulnerable in our communities and will make the vision harder to achieve.

Having taught in one of the most deprived areas of the country, I know the impact of poverty on a child's physical, intellectual and emotional wellbeing. I know the child who will not let go of my hand at the end of the day because there is no heating on at home or food in the fridge. Cuts to our local frontline services are hurting our children and devastating the most vulnerable in our communities. I am committed to campaigning for appropriate funding for our schools, our hospitals and our local services. Such services are the people of Colne Valley's right and not a privilege.

On a personal note, I am glad to see the increased number of women MPs seated in this Chamber. I do hope, however, that when my granddaughter, Iris, who

[*Thelma Walker*]

is four years old, reaches maturity, she will not view it as unusual for there to be a majority of women MPs fairly representing the population of our country. I am also delighted that we now have four—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr George Howarth): Order. I call Tim Loughton.

3.27 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow two such accomplished maiden speeches and it is a great sadness that the time constraints mean that hon. Members trying to give an account of their constituencies and of their predecessors and also to talk about education do not get enough time to do so. Both were polished, accomplished, witty and gracious contributions and both Members will be great advocates for their constituents. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (*Thelma Walker*) will, I am sure, be no luddite in the progressive way in which she will represent her constituents, and my new hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (*Ross Thomson*)—one of 12 new Scottish Conservative hon. Friends, I am delighted to say—will be a great advocate for the people of Aberdeen and the majority of people of Scotland who want to stay in the Union that is the United Kingdom we value so much.

Much has been said about what is not in the Queen's Speech, so I will break that habit and talk about some things that are in it. I certainly commend the eight Brexit Bills. They will give us many opportunities to talk long into the night, so I will not go into any detail here. I will, however, praise the inclusion of the domestic violence and abuse Bill. The Prime Minister in particular has long championed such legislation, and the record of this Government on domestic violence is second to none.

I particularly hope that we make progress on the disproportionate number of young women who are victims of domestic abuse. Some 12% of young women aged 16 to 19 were victims of domestic abuse in the last two years. Domestic abuse is prevalent in teenage relationships. It is an intergenerational blight that affects many young women in particular. Women who were brought up in households where domestic violence was the norm expect it. They think, "Well, that's what will happen to me, isn't it?" but it must not. We need legislation and much greater vigilance to drive out domestic abuse wherever it occurs. I saw, as a Children's Minister, the impact that it has on child abuse, which is nearly always linked with some form of domestic violence. I welcome the inclusion of that Bill in the Queen's Speech.

I also welcome the mention of mental health, and in particular that of school-age children. Approximately 200,000 young people aged 10 to 17 are referred to specialist mental health services each year. They are just the ones lucky enough to be referred. It is often too late, and too much of the additional funds that this Government have dedicated to mental health does not end up going to deal with mental illness issues, particularly among young people. We have a lot more to do in that area, and I am pleased that the Prime Minister flagged it up as such a priority issue at the beginning of the election campaign.

My main focus today is on the fair funding of schools, which was probably the single largest issue in my constituency during the election. West Sussex, where

my constituency lies, is the worst-funded county authority in the country. A pupil in my constituency gets under £4,200 per year, which is way down the bottom of the list. I welcome the additional £4 billion that the Government have offered, but there will still be a shortfall, given the cost pressures coming along the line from pay increases, national insurance and the apprenticeship levy. The cumulative effect of being underfunded for so many years in West Sussex is that many of our schools do not have any further slack that they can take up; they are running on empty. That has to be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

West Sussex MPs have taken our headteachers to see the Minister, and I have invited all the heads in my constituency to a roundtable meeting next month, to see the exact impact of the funding situation at the moment. I obviously welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has consulted on a fair funding formula. Only this Government have done that. We had a second consultation on the fair funding formula, which ended on 22 March, but the general election interrupted it. We must urgently get a resolution through a fair funding formula that does not just tinker with the deprivation figures, rural sparsity figures or prior attainment figures. We must come up with a formula that means schools in my constituency have the basics they need to operate.

We can argue the toss about the pupil premium and all the extras for deprivation on top of it, but this cannot wait any longer. I hope that the Ministers present will take back the message to the Secretary of State that we need, as a matter of urgency, a resolution to this consultation and a meaningful settlement, so that schools in my constituency have fair funding, to give our children a fair start with the rest of the country.

3.32 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have listened to those on the Government Benches trying to have a go at Labour Members about the cost of our manifesto, but, very interestingly, during the general election they certainly did not give us any figures or cost their manifesto. They must have had a premonition that they would not have a majority after the election; that is the only reason I can think of. The message has not got across to them yet that people are fed up with austerity.

I have visited a number of schools in my constituency, and the message has been the same at each one: they may have to make teachers and classroom assistants redundant. I believe that every child should receive every possible opportunity to succeed in life, regardless of their background. I am therefore disappointed that no clear education legislation is outlined in the Queen's Speech. There are only vague commitments to allow children to attend good schools.

I hope that the Government have finally dropped their vanity project of introducing more grammar schools. That policy would have served only to increase the divisions in society. Instead of trying to create new schools, we should be focusing on our existing schools to ensure that they are sufficiently funded. That is what will give our children the best opportunities in life. However, despite having pledged to ensure that every child gets the education they deserve, the Government proposed in their manifesto to remove free school meals. I am pleased that that policy has been scrapped, but we must not forget that they tried to introduce it in the first place.

It is under proposals from this same Government that schools are having their funding cut for the first time in 20 years, which will mean teachers losing their jobs and our children being taught in supersized classes. In Coventry, over £29 million will be cut from the local authority's education budget, which will mean, on average, £600 less per pupil. One school in my constituency is facing a reduction of £1,600 per pupil. That is simply not good enough. Our children deserve better.

We have seen time and again that this Government are failing the people of this country, whether children at the start of their lives or people at the other end of their lives—for example, by threatening to scrap the pensions triple lock, or by letting down the women who have seen their state pension age increase but received inadequate transitional arrangements.

I will now move on to local services. We have seen a shift in focus, with responsibility moving from central to local government. It is important that local authorities can shape their service provision, but they are having to do so in the face of constant budget cuts. Since 2010, Coventry Council has lost £106 million a year, which represents a 50% cut in Government grant funding. By 2020, the Government will have cut £655 million from the council's budget. When people have increasingly complex needs, especially in areas such as adult social care and mental health services, Coventry and Warwickshire local authorities expect a deficit of £33 million by 2020-21 in social care. Although we have, I hope, seen the back of the Government's proposed dementia tax, more must be done urgently to tackle the crisis in social care, and there was no specific mention of that in the Green Paper.

The Chancellor said in his Mansion House speech that,

“people are weary of the long slog”

and that the Conservatives are listening to people after the election. But is he really hearing what the people of this country need? It is simply staggering that the Government are continuing to pursue an agenda of austerity. Other vital local services are still being cut. The Department for Work and Pensions has announced the closure of 108 sites by March 2018, including the Tile Hill jobcentre in Coventry, which means that claimants will now have to travel for up to an hour to get to a jobcentre. That will be incredibly difficult for many of the more vulnerable users of the jobcentre.

At a time when the gap between rich and poor is widening, it is more important than ever to ensure that we are caring for those who need it the most. Therefore, while I welcome the mention in the Queen's Speech of the very important issue of domestic violence, let us not forget that 17% of specialist women's refuges have closed since 2010. That means that women will have been unable to get the help and support they so desperately need. Some 20,000 police officers have been cut, and much has been made in the national press of the consequences. While the Government say one thing, their policies seem to do the exact opposite.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir David Amess): Order. In order to accommodate the large number of colleagues who wish to speak, the time limit is being dropped to four minutes with immediate effect, although I will use some latitude for Members making their maiden speeches.

3.38 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Unfortunately, Mr Deputy Speaker, this is not my maiden speech. I am happy to welcome you to the Chair. It is 34 years since you and I arrived in this place—some would say too long—but we are still surviving. It is my great pleasure to congratulate, as I am sure all Members wish to do, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), who made a speech that was witty and to the purpose. I am sure that the good people of Aberdeen, like those of Lincolnshire, which abuts Grimsby, will welcome our taking back control of our fisheries, which will be a vital part of the Brexit negotiations.

I think that what people want, particularly young people, is for us to be positive, aspirational and honest. If there is any fault with our Prime Minister, it is that during the general election we were almost too honest in explaining the level of the national debt, but in these debates we have to keep making the point. We have heard many calls for more public spending, but it all comes from hard-pressed taxpayers. I make no apology for reminding the House that the national debt stands at £1.7 trillion. In the five minutes that it was going to take me to make this speech, the national debt will have risen by £443,000—it will rise a bit less in four minutes, but it is still going up. There is no point in talking about cutting the deficit if the national debt keeps rising remorselessly every year.

The job of the Conservative party is to speak up for business, for wealth providers and wealth creators, and for taxpayers, because all this national debt has to be provided by our constituents. Sometimes that is not a popular message.

I have been asked to speak today on behalf of the headmaster of Queen Elizabeth's High School, a grammar school in my constituency that is providing the scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs of the future. It is a high-performing school, but its budget has been cut by £600,000 in the past five years. Of course I support a fairer funding formula, but we need some equality of fairness throughout the country. It is simply not good enough for us to argue continually for higher levels of public spending to accommodate this or that interest group.

The first honest debate this country needs to have is about our ageing population and the cost of social care. Full marks to the Prime Minister for trying to talk about it. At the moment, we are apparently committed to maintaining the triple lock. We have not yet had a full debate in this Parliament about a future adult social care cap or floor, but we must have that debate. We have to be able to convince our ageing population that we have the resources to care for them, and that we will be humane and honest. The same argument surely applies to the NHS. Sometimes, I am the only person in this place who argues that we have not only to put more money into the NHS, but to be honest about where it is coming from. There is a limit on how much we can pay from general taxation when the top 1% pay for 25% of all spending, so let us be honest in these debates.

Let us be honest, finally, in our Brexit negotiations. Let us not talk about a hard or a soft Brexit. I am afraid that we have to stick to the Prime Minister's Lancaster House speech. It is not hard or soft Brexit; it is inevitable Brexit. We are leaving the EU. If we leave the EU, we have to leave the single market. So let us be positive, let us be aspirational and let us, as a party, be united.

3.42 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Everybody happy? Welcome to Westminster. It has been a privilege to start work here and to represent the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill who have sent me here.

I offer some sympathy to Phil Boswell, the man I have replaced, and to his staff. No doubt, Phil and his staff expected a longer time down here than they received. Politics can be risky, as many hon. Members in this House will know better than May—sorry, I meant me. I follow the footsteps of many good people like “Mr Coatbridge”, the right hon. Tom Clarke, who served here for 33 years. I would also like to recognise another Lanarkshire man, the late Labour leader John Smith, who was the best Prime Minister we never had. However, the man I have come to follow was a working man who recognised that workers had no voice inside Parliament. This man was also Lanarkshire born and he gave birth to the Labour party. His name lives on today through the Keir Hardie Society, of which I am one of the founders.

Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, along with the other communities I represent—Stepps, Moodiesburn, Glenboig, Bargeddie, Birkenshaw, Tannochside and Viewpark—were once part of the industrial landscape of coal and steel, like many other communities. But sadly, that is all gone. What is left is not enough. We have poverty and not enough housing. Our generation of children today and tomorrow have no real vision. They are kept on low pay with zero-hours contracts and are told to be grateful if they have a job. There is no opportunity for a house, as they cannot afford it. Our society is failing them, and the gap between the rich and the poor widens every day.

My day job was with Royal Mail Parcelforce, delivering and collecting parcels every day. It was also my privilege to represent my workmates from Glasgow Parcelforce, to whom I was grateful. I represented those workers as a trade union representative of the Communication Workers Union. To workers today, I recommend you join a trade union movement—our strength is in unity. I represent the CWU, and I am proud to be part of the trade union movement.

I will also declare an interest. Royal Mail was not for sale; it was stolen, and I aim to return this great public service to its rightful owners—the residents of the UK. Today, I can tell this House and the private profiteer hedge funders that I am coming to take back my sons’ and daughters’ money, stolen by people who have no interest in Royal Mail, other than the pounds for profit.

I come here as a working man, just as proud as my father, Matt Gaffney, and my mother, Helen Gaffney, who both worked every day, and who will be watching on the telly back home in Uddingston to witness my moment. Love you both, and thank you! To all my family and friends who know me, I say enjoy this moment—it is yours.

My new job starts now. With the help of my family—Anne, Matthew, Christopher and Paul—and the CWU, my feet will stay on the ground. I am here to represent all my constituents, and I will aim to change society for the better.

There is enough wealth in this country to close the poverty gap and close down food banks. As we enter Brexit, we could build a new United Kingdom—one

that cares for all walks of life, one that cares for humanity, and one that shows equality for all. No matter our race, colour, religion or sexuality, we are all equal, and everyone, from cradle to grave, deserves dignity and respect.

I know I have finished, but I am going to make one more point. We have a motto in North Lanarkshire Trade Union Council:

“The past we inherit, the future we build”,

and this I will apply as I stand here for unemployed workers, disabled workers and taxpaying workers, of whom there are many more than the privileged few.

3.47 pm

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on that speech. It was passionate and intense, and he was quite right: it was his moment to enjoy, and so it should be. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), who was articulate and informed—that city has an excellent representative. It is a great pleasure to have so many Scottish colleagues around me on the Conservative Benches.

We have only a short time, so let me canter through some of the points I wanted to raise. Rightly, one of today’s themes is education. After all, if we look back just seven years, to 2010, one in three children leaving primary schools was unable to read, write or count properly. What that tells me is that, in too many schools under Labour, the standards just were not good enough. Seven years on, the number of children in schools classed as good or excellent has risen by nearly 2 million. That is nearly 2 million young minds now able to flourish, where previously they were struggling under poor standards.

Education is important to the individual, but it is also crucial to the economy. As we leave the European Union, all of us need to rethink what we mean by education, skills and training. That brings me to how we can best strengthen the economy as a whole. There are good measures in this Queen’s Speech on agriculture, fisheries, and spacecraft and other emerging technologies, but we face a broader challenge, which is that productivity in this country is persistently weak. Unless we address that, all our hopes for public services and other matters will simply come to nought.

At the beginning of this debate last Wednesday, I listened to the Leader of the Opposition tell us that the most effective way of increasing pay was strong trade unions and effective collective bargaining. That showed me that his thinking is out of date and blinkered, because the best way to achieve sustained growth and higher incomes is to raise our productivity. If we add 1% of productivity to our economy each year, that will be another £240 billion over the next 10 years—£9,000 per household. That is the way to grow the economy, lift people’s wages and pay for public services.

In the minute or so that I have left, let me touch on one aspect of productivity, namely trade. In recent months we have seen the pound fall and a resurgence in manufacturing, which is welcome. However, as the excellent economist for *The Sunday Times*, David Smith, has pointed out, we now need to liberalise the trade in services. After all, services are 80% of our economy.

The Bills on trade and customs are good and I welcome the fact that we have a dedicated trade Department focused on that task, but the liberalisation of the global market in services, which is so important to our economy and to jobs, will need a sustained and cross-Government approach if it is to succeed. Clearly, the EU-Brexit process will affect that most immediately, but there is a wider opportunity and I believe that this country should take up the mantle as the champion for open, global markets in services and pursue that through whatever means possible. Get that right and the chance to grow our economy—and, yes, lift people's living standards—will be all the greater.

3.50 pm

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in today's debate.

Before looking forward, I want to take a few moments to pause and reflect on the maiden speeches made by Members of Parliament who have represented Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath before me. My predecessor Roger Mullin served the constituency from June 2015 to May 2017, and in his maiden speech he quoted Kirkcaldy's famous son, Adam Smith, who said:

"No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable."

That same line was also used by Dr Lewis Moonie, another predecessor, who served this fine constituency from 1987 until 2005. What strikes me about that is that, while so much may have changed in our society, the fundamental challenges remain the same.

It would of course be remiss of me not to mention Gordon Brown, who served the Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency for 10 years from 2005 and who also served this country as Chancellor and Prime Minister—a true and sincere public servant for his constituency and this country. Dr Brown made his maiden speech in 1983, representing the then constituency of Dunfermline East. On that occasion the debate was about social security and proposals to reduce benefit levels—an issue still relevant in today's society.

The constituency that I am honoured and privileged to represent is Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, and I thank the people of that resilient constituency for giving me the opportunity to represent them.

What repeatedly strikes me about my area is that it is full of talent and as yet untapped and unfulfilled potential. That potential deserves to be unlocked. My constituency is an area that has known the highs of industrial prosperity through mining, manufacturing, linoleum and shipping, and that now knows poverty and hardship as those industries have slipped away and never really been replaced. It is an area that offers so much in terms of skills and spirit, and it remains a hidden gem in terms of the contribution that it could make to our economy and society. It has character and resilience, shown so strongly through the towns and villages of our mining communities and beyond. Those attributes have seen it continue to hold its ground—and its head high—but it deserves to make better progress.

So I ask myself: what can we all do differently in this House to stop repeating history and that quote and sentiment from Adam Smith? Are we really saying that the many talents in this House cannot turn the tide for

our most deprived communities? Are we really saying that our political will does not match the spirit and resilience of the communities we represent?

Today we are discussing education and local services, two enablers that help people in my constituency and others achieve a better life for themselves and their families. For the past five years, I have been an elected councillor in Fife and I know at first hand the life-changing and life-saving services delivered by local authorities. Yet these life-bridging services are being systematically dismantled and eroded, leaving investment in people, communities and infrastructure flawed and fragmented.

It was Winston Churchill who expressed concerns for "the harsh excess of accumulated capital"

and the

"gaping sorrows of the left-out millions".

As we discuss these life changing issues today, I put it to the House: is it therefore not our duty to try something new? And what would be the harm in that? So back to the start: the issues discussed by my predecessors in Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath are the issues we are debating today. Are we accepting of the notion that the poor are always with us, or are we prepared to take a different path? Again, what would be the harm in that?

Let me close today by once again quoting Sir Winston Churchill:

"The state must increasingly and earnestly concern itself with the care of the sick, the aged and the young. The state must increasingly assume the position of the reserve employer of labour."

For the sake of the people of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, and communities across the country, I sincerely hope we all seize this moment to stop repeating the mistakes of history and look to find new ways to regain a sense of society and opportunity for all.

3.55 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I start by paying sincere tribute to the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird). I can see from her demeanour that she will sincerely and diligently represent her constituents. I also pay tribute to my new hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson). It is great to have both Members in this House: it sends a clear message to the people of Scotland that a referendum to divide this united nation is most unlikely to happen. I am grateful to see them both in this House.

I would like to start where the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) started, and pay tribute to the teachers and governors in my schools. They do a great job on behalf of our children. I was delighted that the Conservative manifesto pledged an extra £4 billion for education over the course of the Parliament. That is an increase in real terms, so there is no reason why any school budget in England and Wales should decrease. Before I am reprimanded by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), let me say that I am with him absolutely: we have to live within our means. Austerity only means living within our means.

We in this House have been struggling for too long with an unfair education funding formula. In Gloucestershire, the key stage 3 funding differential means we receive £3,700 per pupil, while the highest spending London authority receives £7,200 per pupil—a difference of

[*Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

£3,400. That cannot be fair. The new funding formula announced in our manifesto will go a long way to ending that unfairness. I was very encouraged by the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education. It seems that she is well on top of this problem. When she publishes the proposals, I believe they will be fairer to less well funded areas like Gloucestershire. Under the proposals published in the previous Parliament, I heard from one of my head teachers that they were going to have to cut £400,000 from their budget, meaning the loss of 14 teachers. That is unacceptable for the children of our county.

I want every child in this country, from nursery school to postgraduate training university course, to have the very best education in the world. That is how this country will succeed in the world, and how we will increase productivity and trade. I pay sincere tribute to both my constituency neighbours in Gloucestershire for two things they have done—one each. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has secured the real prospect of bringing a cyber-park to Cheltenham, which will bring huge opportunities for our talented and bright youngsters. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) has brought university-level training for nurses to the University of Gloucestershire—another real prospect for our youngsters. These are the sorts of opportunities I want to see in our country today.

There is a lot to do in education and there is a lot to do to explain how the money for our schools will be raised, but we owe it to our children. We want to be the world's best when it comes to education. We welcome the new technical institutions, we welcome the new T-levels, and we want workplace visas for the brightest and best foreign students who come here from around the world.

3.59 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) on magnificent speeches—far more magnificent than that of the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), but I congratulate him too in the generosity of the day. No, it was a magnificent speech, but we saw in the completely different way in which the three of them presented their cases that Parliament is at its best when it is diverse, and it is more so in this Parliament than we have ever seen before.

I truly worry about this country. We face probably the biggest challenge since the second world war, yet we have a Prime Minister who has shown herself to have a tin ear. Her authority, frankly, is in tatters, she has no mandate and she patently cannot carry the country. She is like a massive oil tanker holed beneath the water line. She cannot proceed at pace, she cannot turn around and everyone knows, in this Chamber and in the country, that she is doomed to sink. It is just a question of when.

Could there be any clearer sign of the vacuum at the heart of the Government than this Queen's Speech? This is not a Queen's Speech; it would barely qualify as a Queen's intervention, it is so thin. It's not worth the vellum it's not written on.

We seem to have become a country that believes we can have our cake and eat it. We want Swedish levels of healthcare, but US levels of taxation to pay for it. We want cheap coffee and fruit, but we are not prepared to have migrants come to this country to serve it or pick it. We want our offices cleaned, our bedsores dressed and our grandparents cared for, but we are not prepared to pay cleaners and carers properly, nor to build homes for them to live in.

In Grenfell we saw the horror of leaving everything to the market. Cost-cutting has a human price. Every single one of us has a housing estate we feel ashamed of. Let us hope there will never be another fire like that at Grenfell, but in every sink estate and in every miserable flat with black mould growing on the walls, children grow up undernourished and unable to achieve their full potential, and people die before their time. It is not a tragedy that will ever get on the front pages of the newspapers, but it is a daily tragedy that we could all prevent. Let us hope we never again hear those words, "Health and safety gone mad."

We simply cannot get a properly functioning modern society on the cheap. Look at the NHS: Ministers now say that it is all the fault of the public and that we expect too much. I am sorry, but all that my constituents want is a functioning local surgery where they can get an appointment. Unfortunately, the Government's relentless assault on the NHS has meant that fewer and fewer doctors consider working as a GP in deprived areas or even in the UK at all. France spent \$4,959 per head on healthcare in 2014; we spent only \$3,935. The point is that we cannot have our cake and eat it. You cannot get a first-class flight if you only pay for economy. We cannot get a Scandinavian NHS if we only pay US taxes.

And let us end the biggest fib of all. We cannot get our national finances back in order by slash-and-burn economics. The Government should know that. After all, they have repeatedly failed to meet their own targets on the deficit and on debt. Deliberately attempting to get the proportion of national income down—deliberately creating a smaller state—is a wrong-headed ideological chimera. It leads to false economies, it has a terrible human cost and it will never get our house back in order.

4.3 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak today. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—I think. I congratulate the Members who have made such passionate maiden speeches today, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) on his excellent maiden speech.

As a strong advocate for vocational and technical education, including apprenticeships, I welcome the major reforms of technical education included in the Queen's Speech. With that in mind, I am disappointed by the decision of South Staffordshire College to shut the Cannock campus. Once the Cannock Chase Mining and Technical College, the college has been at the heart of Cannock town centre and served many generations. Despite the millions of pounds spent on a revamp in 2013, which meant that it was one of the best sites in the country, with state-of-the-art technology, year-on-year falls in student numbers have meant that the decision has been made to shut it.

However, I welcome the college's commitment to proceed with a retail training facility at the new Mill Green designer outlet village, which will help to train a new generation of retailers. In the meantime, I hope that the college will look at ways of maintaining a presence in the town centre as plans for the campus are developed. Given the level of investment in the campus, it is essential that any future plans make the very most of the excellent facilities there, and, given its position, the plans for the site need to be part of a wider regeneration plan for the town centre.

Similarly, we need to look at the opportunities that the redevelopment of the Rugeley B power station present for the regeneration of Rugeley town centre. As I have said many times before in the House, I want to ensure that we have ambitious, bold and visionary plans for the future of Rugeley and that it can have a really prosperous future.

I turn my attention briefly to the electric vehicles Bill. I welcome moves to increase the number of charging points, and I hope that we will see an increase in Cannock Chase. Although Staffordshire County Council has installed charging points in Stafford in partnership with the local sustainable transport fund and the plugged-in places programme for the west midlands, I am afraid that my constituency is lagging behind. If we want a step change in the adoption of electric vehicles, we must make public charging points more readily available.

Finally, with 69% of voters in Cannock Chase having voted to leave the EU, I very much welcome the legislation that will be brought forward to deliver on the referendum result as the Government set out to get the best possible Brexit deal and build a new relationship with our partners in the EU.

4.7 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a great honour to make my maiden speech following so many eloquent and passionate speakers across the House. It is an even greater honour to do so in an education debate, as a teacher and educationalist and my party's spokesperson on this issue.

I was reminded by Mr Speaker himself at my swearing-in that some very clever people indeed have represented Oxford West and Abingdon before me. Nicola Blackwood is a capable, generous advocate, and while we disagreed on much, there is one point on which we agree absolutely—that the people of Oxford West and Abingdon deserve and demand the highest level of constituency representation. I pay tribute to the former Member for her genuine, heartfelt commitment to the area, and I promise my constituents that they will always be at the centre of my heart while I am here.

I am sure that Members all remember, before Nicola, the inimitable Dr Evan Harris, who inspired me through his fearless advocacy of progressive, evidence-based arguments, which many others would have avoided. I am now proud to call him my friend. Both of those predecessors were also enthusiastic proponents of science, and as a maths and physics teacher I intend to be just the same.

I may just be the luckiest woman in the world, representing the beautiful, historically important constituency of Oxford West and Abingdon. To the north sit Kidlington and the surrounding villages. Indeed, Kidlington is one of the largest villages in England and

proud of this status. Then we have the stunning North Oxford, the home of 10 Oxford colleges and the haunt of many Oxford Brookes students as well. The community there is passionate and active, and I very much look forward to receiving numerous emails and letters replete with footnoted references.

Then we go to the villages further south, large and small, each with its charm and strong community spirit, and last but not least to the ancient market town of Abingdon—some say a contender for the oldest town in England. “Rubbish!” I say. It is the oldest town. Colchester, go away and try harder.

My constituency is a very special area, full of remarkable, talented people, but like all communities we face our fair share of challenges. Flooding, unaffordable housing and under-investment in public transport, notably cycling and buses, feature frequently, but none features more than the A34. Many here will know of the cross-party fight to secure the funding for the Lodge Hill junction. I promise that I will never let up on these local issues or any other. The most recent grassroots campaigns were on the children's centres in the constituency and the crisis in schools funding, led by parents in the Oxfordshire fairer funding group, which brings me neatly back to the theme of this debate.

I am here because I have a burning passion: that every child, no matter their background, should have a fair chance of making the best of this world. This passion was ignited when I was shocked and ashamed to learn that in this country—this great nation, a member of the G7—that is not the case. I have lived in countries such as Ethiopia, Jamaica and Jordan, where such inequalities might be more understandable, but here we have no excuse. Such inequality is simply wrong, which is why I am so concerned by the Government's interpretation of fairer funding. I have been a primary school governor for the last two years and have seen the figures for myself. There is a funding crisis—make no mistake—and unless more real-terms funding is found, the next thing to go will be teachers. With fewer teachers there will be fewer of the one-to-one interactions with that struggling student that we all know will make all the difference to them.

I end by asking the House this: is there anything more important than the support and the love that we give to the youngest in our society? After all, one day they may well be sitting here looking after us. I beseech the Government: in this time of great uncertainty, let us make sure we give them everything we possibly can to help them—and by extension all of us—succeed.

4.11 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on making such a powerful, gracious and eloquent speech. It was a powerful reminder, if any were required, of the great talent that exists in our teaching profession, which I am pleased to say is now in this House.

I am sure the hon. Lady would agree with Benjamin Disraeli, who said:

“Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of this country depends.”

What applied then applies now. There is no better vehicle for social mobility, social cohesion, cultural appreciation, tolerance, prosperity or, indeed, quality of life. As a nation we can take pride in acknowledging

[Alex Chalk]

that there are now a total of 6.6 million young people in good or outstanding schools. That is up by 1.8 million since 2010—an increase of more than 35%. There are now 147,000 more six-year-olds on track to become fluent readers than in 2012. What a remarkable achievement by schools, teachers, parents and governors.

I want to pay particular tribute to teachers in my constituency. They work immensely hard. They follow their calling and give a huge amount of themselves. They include teachers in schools such as St Gregory's, which takes an increasing number of school children from eastern European backgrounds and in doing so fosters a tolerant and unified society in Cheltenham; Balcarras, which now sends 50% of its pupils to Russell group universities; and Pittville, which successfully addressed challenges in the past and is now going from strength to strength.

What is so remarkable about those achievements is the funding context in which they have been made. For decades now, Cheltenham schools have been significantly underfunded compared with the national average—and not by a small sum, either. In 2014-15, the block allocation for Cheltenham schools was £4,195. The England average was £4,545—a difference of £350—and yet we have Opposition Members such as the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who made a very eloquent speech last week, complaining that funding in her constituency is planned to rise from just over £5,400 to £5,500. Those are figures that in Cheltenham we could only dream of. They amount to just under 30% more. If I turned up to a meeting of my headteachers in Cheltenham with a promise of an additional 30% in funding, I would be welcomed like Moses.

All that might be tolerable if the cost pressures were manageable, but they are not. Schools are facing increasing cost pressures—salary increases, increases to employers' national insurance contributions and so on. It is so welcome that the Government are facing up to that injustice. Unravelling the formula and starting from first principles is a task of almost unimaginable complexity. Lesser statesmen than my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education would have run a mile, but she has taken up the challenge and has already delivered meaningful improvements, with £390 million put into the baseline.

However, it is also the case that the current proposal that officials have come up with needs some surgery. Let me deal first with the impact. Although Cheltenham gains overall from the proposals, albeit modestly, the way in which the cake is divided creates distorted outcomes and risks fostering resentment. Some schools, such as All Saints' Academy and Pittville, do very well, but others actually lose—and those are schools that are located near to each other. All that poses the risk that regional geographic inequity will be replaced by neighbourhood geographic inequity.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is making a good point about the way in which the funding system was going to work, but during the general election the Government made it very clear that no school would receive less money than it was currently receiving. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should give all our schools, in Gloucester and elsewhere, enormous confidence in the future?

Alex Chalk: That is precisely the point, and it was a welcome point that was included in the manifesto. I entreat the Government to ensure—as I know they will—that there is no risk of potential resentment that might lead schools to retreat to the core subjects that they are statutorily required to provide; other subjects might suffer.

What we need is a funding settlement that allows all schools to provide a full and rounded education, not just those that are able to satisfy the criteria for funding uplifts. The core funding element must be sufficient to achieve that goal. We need a funding settlement that consolidates the extraordinary progress that has been made over the last seven years, and lays the ground for still more progress. The prize is great. If we get this right, the future for education in Cheltenham and in our country, based on the work that has already taken place, can become even brighter.

4.16 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for the eloquence of her maiden speech. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) for the enthusiasm and commitment that they will clearly bring to the task of representing their constituents, and I congratulate them on their success.

The Queen's Speech did not contain a single mention of local government or the services that it provides. Since 2010, local government has experienced bigger cuts than any other area of public service—in real terms, there has been a 40% cut in local government spending—but there was not a single mention of the issues. During the election campaign, my constituents expressed concern to me about longer waits to see GPs, about cuts in school budgets, and about delays in police attendances because there are fewer police officers. They also expressed concern about highway safety schemes and improvements that cannot be enacted—there are now more than 500 on Sheffield City Council's list—and about playground equipment that cannot be replaced because there is no money. They mentioned that about two thirds of the libraries in Sheffield are now run by volunteers; in many instances they are run very well, but the permanent staff are not there any more. Of course, they also expressed concern about the crisis in social care funding. The message that we are receiving appears to be "Austerity continues"—unless, of course, you live in Northern Ireland.

There was also no mention of devolution in the Queen's Speech. There was not a single word about it, although under the previous Chancellor it was a flagship policy, was it not? Are the Government committed to deepening the devolution arrangements that are already in place? Are they committed to extending arrangements to other areas? In that context, I am thinking particularly about the issue of Sheffield City Region. I accept that it is the region's fault that we have not got further than we have so far, and the last Minister for the northern powerhouse was extremely helpful in that regard, but are the Government still open to new deals?

I have to mention the 100% business rate retention scheme, which features in the Local Government Finance Bill. On Second Reading, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government—who is

present—described it as a “revolutionary measure”. I always thought that he was an unlikely revolutionary, but he does seem to run away rather quickly at the first sound of electioneering gunfire. What has happened to the measure? Are the Government still committed to it, or have they given up on fiscal devolution as well?

Let me return to the subject of social care funding. Before the election, the Government promised a Green Paper; now they are promising consultation. I think they have probably worked out now that quick fixes in the middle of an election do not work for social care funding. Will they come back to the idea, raised by the Select Committee before the election, of having a cross-party attempt to bring about an agreement that we can all sign up to, so that we can put a permanent solution in place for the future?

I raised the issue of tower blocks yesterday. What are local authorities and housing associations supposed to do if they suddenly find themselves facing great new bills because of the need to carry out urgent and essential work on tower blocks? Local councils and housing associations cannot raise rents; they are restricted by the Government’s rules to control them. They cannot borrow more, because they are restricted by a Government cap. Local authorities facing new bills have no mythical reserves to turn to; all they can do is cut the maintenance programmes for other parts of their housing stock. What an awful position for us to get into. We are trying to deal with an urgent problem in tower blocks, and we end up cutting the maintenance for all the other social housing stock. For heaven’s sake, Government, come forward with a comprehensive funding arrangement to deal with this problem!

4.20 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is with enthusiasm and humility that I rise to make my maiden speech representing the constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire. My enthusiasm is founded on the opportunity provided by being the first Conservative and Unionist representative for my constituency, and the first Conservative or Unionist to represent Clackmannanshire since 1931. My humility is based on the faith that the constituents of Ochil and South Perthshire have placed in me and my party to deliver progress for them during this Parliament.

I pick up the baton from Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh. I pay tribute to her work on equality and international issues and hope to continue raising awareness of those issues in this Parliament. I would also like to pay tribute to Gordon Banks, the first MP for Ochil and South Perthshire, who worked tirelessly on constituents’ issues and achieved such success that his dedication is still talked about on the doorsteps of Crieff, Alloa and Kinross today.

Ochil and South Perthshire is a large and diverse constituency formed of three distinct communities: South Perthshire, Kinross-shire and Clackmannanshire. It is right to start at Loch Leven in Kinross-shire, with its breathtaking views best observed from the villages of Kinnesswood and Scotlandwell, before moving to Kinross and Milnathort, home of fine local businesses such as Hunters, Unorthodox Roasters and Heaven Scent, as well as Rachel House, Scotland’s first children’s hospice. Furthermore, Kinross-shire plays host to the current Grand National winner, One for Arthur, so you know who to back in a tight race.

South Perthshire is renowned for its agricultural heritage, boasting crops, livestock and a fine, growing collection of distilleries—namely, Glenturret, Tullibardine and Strathearn. However, it is not just farming and whisky; South Perthshire has also provided one Prime Minister and two “Star Wars” actors. I will let Members of the House decide who provided the greater service to the United Kingdom. South Perthshire’s scenery not only wins affections but boasts the Crieff Hydro and the Gleneagles Hotel, providing relaxation and world-class golfing, so colleagues have more than one excuse to visit our constituency. Moreover, with Highland Spring based in Blackford, we can provide not only your whisky but your water too.

As you cross the stunning Ochils, you will reach Clackmannanshire—the wee county with a big heart. Clackmannanshire has a proud industrial past in mining, paper manufacture, mills and breweries. While some industries have now moved on, the Harviestoun Brewery, Diageo and the United OI glass works continue to complement the whisky and water from the north. From the Hillfoots villages to the towns of Alloa and Clackmannan, Clackmannanshire may have earned its name, the “wee county”, from its boundary lines, but it has the landscape, the people and the ambition to show that it is not size but what you do with it that counts.

In such a diverse constituency as Ochil and South Perthshire, connectivity is a key issue. I therefore intend to use my time in this House to improve connectivity for residents, whether it be in the form of rural broadband, mobile phone signal or greater infrastructure investment to better connect our constituency with the rest of the UK. But it is not just roads, rails and wires that my constituency needs; it also requires more social connectivity. We must look to combine inward investment with initiatives to build social capital in areas of deprivation, so that we can in turn improve social mobility.

More and more, our politics seems to be calling on anger and outrage to solve our problems. That is understandable. Anger is an easy emotion, but it masks fear. The rapid changes in 21st-century Britain can make people afraid, but rather than calling for a “day of rage”, I hope to call for “days of courage”. We need courage to face the tests of globalisation and to recognise the opportunities that they provide; courage to face the challenges of identity and nationhood, while recognising the strength of our United Kingdom; and, finally, courage to stand by our political convictions, but to know when it is best to stretch our hands across the aisle to work together for the betterment of our communities.

Clackmannanshire has recently adopted the motto “more than you imagine”. I hope to hold true to that motto, though lofty and perhaps naive, and to work with others in this House so that we can achieve more than we, and certainly the public, have come to expect.

4.25 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). From his maiden speech, his constituents will recognise that they have a worthy champion, and we were all interested to hear about his knowledge of the area. I was also interested in his knowledge about the Grand National winner. If he has any racing tips before the races are run, perhaps he can let me know and I will not tell anybody else, so that we can keep the price down. I also congratulate all the other Members who

[Vernon Coaker]

have made their maiden speeches, especially my hon. Friends the Members for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird). Along with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), they demonstrated their interests, their enthusiasm, and the knowledge that they will bring to our debates.

At a time when our country is divided and crying out for a vision for the future and when people are looking for policies that address some of the real concerns in their lives, we have a vacuous Queen's Speech that contains little to address the country's real needs. The Government are unclear about how to move forward on Brexit. They have come forward with several Bills, but no clear strategy for this country's exit from the European Union. They still argue about whether immigration should be the main priority when the country has clearly said that jobs and the economy should be at the forefront of our negotiations. We have a Government that know little about how they should proceed.

Today's debate is about schools and local government services, but where in the Queen's Speech is the vision for our schools or our local government? There is none. We can argue about whether we have moved forward and about whether the pace of progress has been as quick as we want—nobody stands on a manifesto that says, "Let's make our schools worse"—but where is the Government vision for teacher retention and recruitment? Schools are really struggling to get maths and science teachers. Where are the policies to address the need for ever-better school leadership? Where are the policies to ensure that parents of children with special needs do not have to fight for a statement to get the support that they need in school? All of that is non-existent.

I repeat to the Minister the great plea that I have always made on technical education. For 50 years, Governments of all colours have wrestled with the problem of this country's skills shortage. It is not just a policy problem; it is a cultural problem in our society. Whatever the rhetoric and whatever anybody says about parity of esteem, skills and vocational education are still seen as second rate. Until we address that as a nation, we will not overcome the problem. I say to the Government and to Parliament that there is a real education crisis in this country, and we should have a national cross-party campaign to deal with it.

I only have 20 seconds left, but the same can be said of local government. It has had its money slashed, but the expectation to deal with the needs in various areas is ever greater. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the deal with my friends from the DUP, let no Minister ever again come to the Dispatch Box and say that there is no money to meet the needs of constituents in my constituency and throughout the country. What we needed was a Queen's Speech with real policies and real vision; what we got was a vacuous, empty noise of nothing.

4.29 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to be in the Chamber and to hear so many eloquent, powerful maiden speeches. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who clearly showed that he will be a powerful advocate for his constituents in this Parliament.

It is a tremendous honour to have been re-elected by the people of Eddisbury to continue representing our area's best interests in Parliament. During the campaign, my constituents were concerned about questions of school funding and of our economic prosperity in the light of our changing relationship with the EU.

Since first being elected in 2015, I have campaigned tirelessly for fairer school funding settlements for both my local authorities, which are members of the f40 group of the country's 40 worst-funded councils. I was optimistic that the Government would finally address a source of deep unfairness to pupils in my constituency that has been entrenched for 30 years. Unfortunately, the published formula is not sufficient to address that historical unfairness. I am encouraged by our manifesto commitment to boost schools funding by £4 billion by 2022, and I urge the Government to target that extra funding at areas such as Cheshire, which are undoubtedly underfunded, and to ensure that pupils funded at the very lowest levels in the country receive a fairer funding settlement that brings them in line with those funded at far higher levels.

My teachers are used to delivering more for less, as they have been doing it for the past 30 years. I urge the Government to realise that now is the time to reduce that historical unfairness. It cannot be said enough that investment in education is imperative. The wider benefits for the individual and for society of providing a world-class education system are innumerable, and necessary if we are to equip our young people with the skills and knowledge to work in a global world.

It must be stressed that, to manoeuvre ourselves into a position in which we can properly fund our schools and other public services, we must achieve a well structured, well thought out and orderly exit from the European Union. In that regard, transitional arrangements are imperative and would reduce the economic turbulence that arises from falling off the cliff edge of EU membership.

Last year's vote to leave the EU can be analysed in a number of ways, but the Chancellor is right to say that the British people did not vote to make themselves poorer, which is why our economic interests must be at the heart of our approach to the negotiations. We need a strong economy in order to invest in education, other local services and our NHS, and to maintain fiscal responsibility. If we are to fall into World Trade Organisation rules, we are very likely to see extremely difficult economic circumstances. Even if we manage to secure a free trade agreement within the two-year period ahead, we risk major shocks to the economy if we do not negotiate an appropriate transitional arrangement.

The importance of providing certainty to business was rightly mentioned in the Queen's Speech. Whether it be access to markets across the EU, having confidence to invest or the ability to recruit skilled workers, giving business more time to prepare for the significant shift in the economic landscape will give greater stability. It will allow us to retain a close relationship with Europe, with frictionless trade, while we seek to find those new trade deals that others are so optimistic will appear.

4.34 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I also thank the people of North West Durham for allowing me to be here at all. It is apt that I should be called in this debate because, before entering the

House, I worked with schools, colleges and teachers for nine years and my predecessor, Pat Glass, dedicated her professional and then political career to education. If I can be half the friend and ally of schools in North West Durham that Pat Glass has been, I will be doing very well.

Pat Glass leaves a brand new secondary school as one important legacy of her time here. Even in opposition, she managed to prise funding for a school from the former Education Secretary, which took the energy of a lion hunting a gazelle. I and others are truly grateful for all that she did for the constituency, and I wish her well in her retirement.

North West Durham is the most magnificent of places, and I am truly blessed to represent such a beautiful part of our country. The green, lush countryside is simply breathtaking, peppered with arable, dairy and upland hill farms; the richness of our culture and history is astounding; and the people are hard workers, proud and strong. Some in here would have us in the north painted as uncultured and without finesse—as savages—but people only think that or say that because they do not know our communities or our people. My constituents are the real wealth creators, and they are people who make this nation great. If anyone wants to see one of the world's finest cultural traditions, they should look no further than Durham miners gala, which, although not in my constituency, is an annual pilgrimage for many of my constituents and is the biggest trade union gathering in Europe. It celebrates the best of solidarity, born of struggle.

North West Durham has a long and proud tradition of industry and skilled work. Consett was dominated by steel production and became renowned for the thick red dust that covered the town—airborne iron oxide from the plant. At its peak in the 1960s the steelworks provided jobs for some 6,000 people. We had lead mines and hundreds of jobs in a thriving textiles industry in Crook. That industry was unfortunately left to decline. Jobs and communities were not invested in and unemployment rose exponentially. Many are still living with the scars of that period today.

Turning to this place, this building is intimidating. It reeks of the establishment and of power; its systems are confusing—some may say archaic—and it was built at a time when my class and my sex would have been denied a place within it because we were deemed unworthy. I believe that the intimidating nature of this place is not accidental. The clothes, the language, and the obsession with hierarchies, control and domination are symbolic of the system at large. But the most frustrating thing has been to sit opposite those people who tell me that things are better, and that suffering has lessened for my constituents. I would like them to come and tell the people who have been sanctioned that things are better. I would like them to tell that to the teacher in my constituency who was recently made redundant. I would like them to talk to the 16,500 people in County Durham in receipt of food parcels. I would like them to talk to the nurses, the junior doctors and the firefighters—come and tell them that years of austerity have improved their practice or their profession.

I will end with this: we can choose, in this place, to be self-obsessed, to perpetrate fear and greed, to be a monument to injustice, or this can be a place that

elevates equality, facilitates the power of the people, and esteems and properly funds a rich network of public services so that nobody is left in the indignity of poverty.

4.38 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), who will be a powerful advocate for her constituents and the whole country. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) on excellent maiden speeches, along with all the others who have made their maiden speeches today.

I also wish to thank the electors of Stafford for returning me and, even more so, for turning out in such numbers; at 76%, our turnout was one of the highest in the country. One thing I was disappointed about during the election was that the economy was hardly mentioned, and nor were those hard-working people up and down the country who are not on great salaries—perhaps they are working from home, trying to juggle a small business and looking after their family. Yet they, along with all others, are the wealth creators in this country; they are the people on whom we rely in order to have the taxes out of which public services are funded. I hope that in this Parliament they will hear many voices, from all sides, speak on their behalf.

As we have a two-year Parliament, I hope that some of the concerns my constituents put before me on the doorstep can begin to be sorted out. In particular, I am talking about long-term funding settlements for health, social care and education. As I have said many times before, we need to work across parties to sort this out. We have two years now to start to do that—hopefully we will have longer.

Health and social care in my constituency is under great pressure. We are being asked to tackle deficits that are insupportable. Of course efficiencies can be made, but the funding is insufficient. We are asked to remove, potentially, one A&E out of three in Stoke and Staffordshire, but that cannot happen, because the other two could not cope.

In education, we have had a bit of an arms race to say which is the poorest funded county in England. I can say that Staffordshire is one of the poorest. I will not say whether it comes first, second or third, but we are down at the bottom. That has to change. It is a matter not just of a new formula to juggle the numbers around, robbing Peter to pay Paul, but of putting more money in real terms into education. I am not advocating that we increase borrowing to a substantial extent to cover both those areas; we must have additional revenues—potentially slightly higher taxes—to pay for these things. The Liberal Democrats were at least honest in their manifesto, saying that we would have to raise taxes to pay for increased investment in health.

On a constituency point, I will have to oppose one measure in the Queen's Speech, which is phase 2a of HS2, which goes directly through the villages of Great Haywood, Ingestre, Hopton, Marston and Yarlet. It is unnecessary that it does so. I know that there is a need for capacity. I am not averse to a new line, even one that goes through my constituency, but the way in which this line has been designed is dreadful, and it is because it

[Jeremy Lefroy]

has to go at 400 kph. There is no reason for a design to go at 400 kph; it could be cheaper and better and have less impact on my constituency and elsewhere in the country if it went at 300 kph to 320 kph.

On the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) has said most of what I would like to say, but let me make just a few points. First, we want a smooth and sensible transition, with the economy and jobs put first, as the Chancellor has said. Secondly, let us look at working together with others to form a new common market, perhaps based on the European Free Trade Association. Thirdly, let us welcome the generous offer from the European Parliament regarding associate European citizenship—why not? Finally, we want more student exchanges and more modern languages.

4.42 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): First, may I express my gratitude to you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to give my maiden speech during this important debate? It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

I feel so truly honoured and humbled to stand in this great Chamber—the mother of all parliaments—to represent my beautiful constituency as a Unionist Member for Belfast South. From the banks of the Lagan as it weaves through my constituency, we pass the wonderful people of Botanic, Malone and Stranmillis, the striking architecture of Queen's University and Stranmillis college, the hills of Castlereagh South right up to Carryduff. With communities in Ormeau, Ballynafeigh, Belvoir, Taughmonagh, Finaghy and right across, South Belfast has the most diverse community in Northern Ireland.

I represent a constituency of great depth and beauty, of arts and academia and of community, history and celebration. We have many areas of relative wealth, but also communities with challenges, including educational underachievement. I promise that I will do my utmost to represent all within my constituency to the very best of my ability.

I stand here not just in my own stead, but in the stead of so many generations of loyal Ulstermen and women who loved the Union. I think of my ancestors, particularly of my great grandfather James Sandford who, not just for his love of Ulster, but for his love of king and country, went over the trenches of the Somme to the horror that awaited. So many of my relatives fought for this country as proud Ulstermen—for freedom and democracy. Those are the very same freedoms and country that I will fight and defend with all that I have.

I am very proud to be part of this incredible Union. I feel not just proud but hugely privileged to be part of this great democracy that defends our right to private belief, public opinion, and the sacred and protected ability to argue, discuss and persuade. Our democracy is one with the right to all beliefs and views, and the right to have none at all. I believe that that is the very thing that makes us great.

I want to take this opportunity to send my sincere best wishes to my predecessor, Dr Alasdair McDonnell. He served his constituents well for many years and helped to make south Belfast what it is today.

Just recently, this House unveiled the coat of arms in remembrance of Jo Cox. My thoughts are with her family and friends, who undoubtedly still feel the pain so acutely.

I also look to my left, and above the door I see the coats of arms of three more of our colleagues who were murdered—murdered by terrorism. The one closest to me is that of the Rev. Robert Bradford, who represented my constituency of Belfast South and was murdered by the IRA while serving his constituents in Finaghy youth centre. I am reminded of the words of the poet:

“History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be un-lived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.”

There is a warning in that sentiment; we must be always be vigilant lest we regress back to the horrors of our recent past.

I want to stand for all those who feel that they have no voice, while promoting those determined to build our economy and improve lives. Let us build on the strong foundations of the Union, of duty, sacrifice and service, to celebrate and grow our great and glorious Union. I look forward to being a champion for south Belfast and playing what part I can in building a peaceful, better and brighter future for the Union and for all her citizens.

4.46 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for her maiden speech, which was made in the finest traditions of the House, and to my colleagues on the Government Benches as well as those on the Labour Benches who have made their maiden speeches with great passion and conviction. It has made me think about my maiden speech, in which I talked about education, saying:

“Education holds the greatest hope for a life rich in promise.”—
[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 646.]

I stand by those values today. We see the failings of education exposed in our economy in some parts of our country and, indeed, in our prisons and our hospitals. We should always redouble our efforts to ensure that education is better tomorrow than it is today.

I was very lucky. I went to a local school in my constituency, a good comprehensive in North East Hampshire, but not everyone has the chance to do that. Not everyone has the chance to go to a school where excellence is encouraged. Although 1.8 million more children are in good or outstanding schools, we must also recognise that 1 million are still in inadequate schools or schools requiring improvement. That means that we must do better and I am pleased that this Government, through this Queen's Speech, will do just that.

It is not just about money, which was referenced—fairer funding is absolutely right. It is also about the freedom to lead, and leadership skills themselves. That is why I am delighted that more than 69,000 places are being created in free schools, because across the country we need to diversify the ability of local communities to set up schools that are right for them. That is part, of course, of an overall commitment that I hope will be honoured to create 600,000 more places by 2021. Some 50 schools will be open by September of this year, and the Budget earlier this year set out that 110 new free schools will be opened. I hope that North East Hampshire

will be granted one of these new free schools in due course, because even in our most lovely of constituencies, that which I represent, we need an improved education system. We need diversity in our education system, because some children are still going to schools that are just not good enough. In free schools, we see a way forward. We see that they can be the impetus for change—high-performing schools with almost a third rated not just good but outstanding. This is what we need to drive for.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that no type of school is a silver bullet? What makes the difference is who the teachers are and, particularly, who the headteacher is. Just as council-run schools can be poor, so can free schools and academies. That is a very important lesson to learn.

Mr Jayawardena: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment. Indeed, I said at the beginning of my remarks that leadership skills are critical.

I am pleased that 80% of free schools are being set up due to parental demand or in areas that need new school places—including, I hope, Hampshire in the future.

We need to move further on fairer funding. The Government consultation is a good start. It awarded North East Hampshire £1.1 million more for our local schools, which is excellent news and will deal with the historical underfunding by the Labour party when it was in government. It is wrong that children in Hampshire receive less than those elsewhere in the country. It is wrong that teachers in North East Hampshire get less than those just next door in Surrey, where housing costs and the cost of living are lower.

It is right that the Government continue to strive to make funding consistent and to make it go further, to ensure that everyone gets a fair share. It is right, lastly, to focus on how we get there, which is by ensuring that our economy succeeds in the years ahead. Only with a growing economy can we put the funding into the services that we deserve and that the next generation should be able to expect.

4.51 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I start by congratulating Labour and Conservative Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I remember how intimidating it was when I made mine, and it is a great source of pride to see so many Labour Members giving their maiden speeches today.

In the Queen's Speech, the Government revealed a threadbare legislative programme, with no majority, no mandate and no legitimacy, propped up by a self-serving deal with the DUP costing at least £1 billion. I welcome the absence of flagship Tory manifesto commitments such as grammar schools, cuts to the winter fuel allowance, cuts to pensions, cuts to universal free school meals and much else. The Conservative party knows that it cannot get that legislative programme through this Parliament.

However, the Queen's Speech has not gone far enough in shelving Tory manifesto pledges that would damage our country. Nowhere is that clearer than in the squeeze on local services such as schools, nurseries, hospitals, GP surgeries, policing, housing and youth services, as well as local authority budget cuts.

Take the national funding formula, for example. The Government have yet to rule out the £3 billion of cuts to our schools budget. Schools in my constituency stand to lose £905 per pupil—891 teachers across the borough and a cut of £33 million by 2020. Where is the fairness in that, when we face some of the worst child poverty and inequality in the country? Despite the challenges, teachers, the local authority and parents have worked together to transform our schools, since inheriting the worst schools in the country back in 1997, so that they are now the best in the country.

This Government's vindictive proposals, which seek to take away crucial resources, will set back that achievement and put at risk years of painstaking work to improve educational attainment and promote social mobility. I urge the Government to reverse that proposed cut. Nurseries also face severe funding cuts. Early years education is crucial, yet a number of nurseries in my constituency face closure. I appeal to the Government to think again.

Our police, fire and emergency services deserve not only our praise for their bravery in the light of recent terror attacks and the fire in Grenfell Tower but our recognition through increased pay and investment in those crucial services. That is why I appeal to the Government to reverse the cuts they propose, including the £400 million of policing cuts in London. Despite having lost 20,000 police officers around the country and many police community support officers, we stand to lose many more.

I want to end with an urgent appeal to the Government to make an unambiguous commitment to invest the necessary funds to ensure safety checks in our schools, housing and hospitals and all buildings that require it, in the light of the recent fire in Grenfell Tower where lives were lost needlessly. The Government must act now to strengthen the powers of the housing regulator so that residents never again feel voiceless, as the Grenfell Tower residents did when they warned of the likely dangers to their tower block.

4.55 pm

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I would like to start by congratulating our new colleagues on their outstanding maiden speeches, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham).

During the six-week general election campaign, Members on both sides of the House will have had the opportunity to listen to thousands of people. We have all heard their disappointments, hopes and fears. I value the long conversations I have had with many people who provide our outstanding public services, including our nurses, policemen and teachers, and I wish to feed back their thoughts.

One issue that came up consistently was education. I think we must first acknowledge how far we have come in recent decades. I recently read, with some amusement, a Government report that my grandfather, who was a headmaster, had contributed to. It sought to tackle head-on the importance of education for women. It stated:

“For girls, too, there is a group of interests relating to what many, perhaps most of them, would regard as their most important vocational concern, marriage. It is true that at the age of fourteen

[Lucy Frazer]

and fifteen, this may appear chiefly as preoccupation with personal appearance and boy friends, but many girls are ready to respond to work relating to wider aspects of homemaking and family life and the care and upbringing of children.”

We have come quite far since the 1960s, but there is further to go.

A significant priority must be a system in which every child has equal access to education, and that involves a system of fairer funding. That is why I am pleased that the Queen’s Speech included a commitment to fairer funding. It must mean that those schools that have historically been underfunded for years have their funding increased. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) has just said, funding is not the only mechanism to ensure future success. We need to ensure that we have enough teachers in training, especially in STEM subjects, and when they join the profession we need to ensure that they feel respected, supported and trusted. In an age when technology is so fast paced, would it not be brilliant if those STEM teachers were linked to businesses that are at the cutting edge of technological innovation in industry, and to businesses that ultimately might give jobs to the students they train?

I think that one way of doing that is staring us right in the face, because businesses are now paying the apprenticeship levy. For the first time, businesses will be actively required to think constructively about their role in training their workforce. The apprenticeship levy potentially goes further. It currently proposes that from next year 10% of the apprenticeship levy can go to a business’s supply chain, and what is the start of that supply chain, if not students and thus teachers? If businesses were allowed to use their 10% on supporting teacher training in STEM, that could forge important links between businesses and teaching. It could ensure that teachers had up-to-date knowledge of their sector and subject and were ready to relate that to the workplace. It would enable teachers to train without further increasing their student debt. Now is the time, if ever there was one, to properly engage businesses with learning, and innovation and technology with schools, and to rise to the challenge of how to help to build the next generation, because it is our future.

4.59 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): May I say how glad I am to be back in this place after a very close and hard-won general election campaign? It is wonderful to hear so many brilliant maiden speeches from colleagues in all parties; they are certainly going to give us old-timers a run for our money. I am particularly thrilled to welcome my hon. Friends the Members for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who will make brilliant additions to the House.

In the general election, people in Wakefield rejected the planned cuts to our public services—our schools, hospitals and police. I am delighted that the Government have dropped their mean-spirited plan to cut free school meals for infants. Parents in Wakefield told me how worried they were for the children in our city who rely on that as their only hot meal of the day. It is interesting that although the Secretary of State for Education

declined to answer questions from Members on this side of the House, while we have been debating she has slipped out a written answer stating that there will be no new grammar schools during the term of this Parliament. Labour’s ban on those drivers of inequality remains in place.

Education has the power to change lives. Most of us here know that because we know that it changed our lives. I am proud to have spent seven years working as a lecturer in entrepreneurship at Cranfield School of Management, which is a brilliant institution. I want every child in this country to get a decent education, no matter where they were born, but the odds are stacked against far too many children in Wakefield. A quarter grow up in poverty and are eligible for free school meals. That is double the national average.

Wakefield Council and our local enterprise partnership have taken steps to tackle the low levels of tertiary education locally with a new £6.9 million advanced innovation and skills centre opening in Wakefield this summer, and Wakefield College has just received a silver award in the teaching excellence framework. Wakefield is on its way, but the planned cuts are making life hard. The area has lost 11 Sure Start centres since 2010, and every 16-year-old who was eligible no longer gets the education maintenance allowance to help them to stay on in college.

I pay tribute to Wakefield headteachers, who are doing so much for our young people despite the £21 million of funding cuts that they will see over the next two years. There will be fewer teachers, bigger class sizes, fewer choices for students taking GCSEs and A-levels, a reduction in vocational courses, less support for children with special educational needs or mental health problems, fewer extra-curricular activities and enrichment opportunities, and less money for textbooks and computers. That is what the headteachers in Wakefield wrote in a letter to parents, asking them to campaign against the Government’s cuts.

I pay tribute to our brilliant headteachers. I visited Clare Kelly at Dane Royd Junior and Infant School in March to present her with a British Council award for the amazing work she does with our local children on languages. They come out learning not just French and Spanish but Chinese, putting those of us who like to think of ourselves as old-school linguists to shame. Another example is Miriam Oakley at Horbury Academy. When I was making a film to go on Facebook about the cuts that her school faces—16 teachers and £550 per pupil—she came out and said, “I thought you were a truant.” That was one of the lighter moments of my campaign; no one has called me a truant for the past 30 years. I also pay tribute to Rob Marsh at CAPA College, which is waiting for a response from Education Ministers on what is going to happen to its award-winning performance arts provision.

I urge the Government to look again at these cuts; they are harming children in Wakefield.

5.3 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Mr Speaker, thank you for calling me to make my maiden speech in such an important debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friends and hon. Members who have made such eloquent and passionate speeches today.

I am a former supermarket manager: only time will tell if my audience this afternoon is as receptive as my customers were to my prices or, indeed, whether my constituents will now ascribe my performance and contributions as being as fresh as my produce was, although I hope I am not past my sell-by date by the next election.

It is a great honour and privilege to be here as the new Member for Southport. I pay tribute to my predecessor, John Pugh, who retired at the last election. John was a diligent Member for the constituency for 16 years and is understandably held in high esteem. He quickly developed a reputation as a capable constituency MP and I hope to be as well regarded by my constituents as he was. I wish him and his wife, Annette, a happy retirement.

John was a perennial rebel in the coalition Government—he rebelled against the Whip over 30 times. Whether I will have the bravado of my predecessor only time will tell, but be assured that my constituency and my constituents will be at the forefront of my mind whenever I consider parliamentary affairs.

Although Members will have to cast their minds back some time to recall him, I would be remiss not to mention Sir Ian Percival, who served as the hon. Member for Southport between 1959 and 1987. He, too, gained a reputation for being an excellent constituency MP, as well as serving as Solicitor General between 1979 and 1983. I hope that I am able to emulate his civic pride, his dedication to his constituency and his astonishing longevity as Southport's representative in Parliament.

Southport is far from being the quintessential seaside town. It has a fascinating history, and at one point hosted the exiled Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, scion of one of England's greatest antagonists, who would go on to be emperor of the French. Legend has it that he was so impressed with the tree-lined boulevard of Lord Street that he would later instruct his architects to make Southport a model for the grandiose Parisian boulevards that are the envy of the world today. Southport's tree-lined central avenues, arcades and pavement cafés often lead to it being referred to as the Paris of the north, but with this explanation for modern Paris's provenance in mind, maybe Paris is really the Southport of the south.

Historically part of the county of Lancashire and the royal Duchy of Lancaster, Southport today is on the fringes of Merseyside. In truth though, it is a unique town, which has its own special identity, and its citizens have a strong sense of civic pride. It is famous for its great sands, which stretch far out into the Irish sea, leading to the joke among its residents that, in England, you are never more than 70 miles from the sea—unless, of course, you live in Southport.

Today, Southport's diligent and hard-working residents find themselves part of Sefton Council, and many of them feel they have too often been taken for granted, as their income is diverted into other parts of Merseyside. Southport's public services have not been the beneficiaries of Sefton Council's coffers, much to the chagrin of the town's citizens. The people of Southport are egalitarian and charitable, but too often they have been taken advantage of, and the town has suffered as a result. I can assure my constituents that Southport will no longer be a soft touch, and I will solicit investment into the town every day I have the privilege of representing it.

Although I will shortly return to a sedentary position, I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that I will often be on my feet championing my constituency and engaging with esteemed colleagues in this Chamber. It is the honour of my life to represent Southport in this House, and I hope to make a notable contribution to its future success.

5.7 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) on a great speech, and I hope he gets as much pleasure from representing his constituency as I have from representing my own over the last 20 years.

It seems like a lifetime ago, but just before the general election I was given the privilege of asking the Prime Minister a question about my constituent Amy, who was being made homeless and who, with her young daughter, was being housed away from south-west London, in Birmingham. Her daughter represents one of the 118,000 children who are currently placed in temporary accommodation miles from their homes, their schools and the opportunity to have a good education.

Merton is a small borough, and Mitcham and Morden is half of it. Mine is a small south-west London suburban constituency, currently with 9,712 families on its housing register. In the last year, it has had 260 housing vacancies—less than 3% of that number—with almost half of those being one-beds. In the last year, the council has had one four-bedroom property to offer, and one five-bedroom property. As with most Members, housing is the single biggest issue people come to see me about. The Queen's Speech includes fine words about letting agency fees, which is an honourable thing to legislate on, but the issue that all parties need to address—it is being voiced loud and strong—is the need for more building and more homes at rents that people can afford.

In the just over a minute that I have left, I want to tell Members about just one of the 21 families who came to see me on Friday to talk about housing issues. Southwark Council, which is currently responsible for just under 2,000 homeless families, has accepted that it has a responsibility to house Mr and Mrs Rogas. It said that it would place them in Mitcham, in a flat above a motorbike shop that is accessible via 30 steps. Mrs Rogas is dying. She is under the care of the hospice. She cannot walk. She is confined to an electric wheelchair. To breathe, she needs an oxygen cylinder. I ask right hon. and hon. Members: how can she get up and down those 30 stairs? I could not believe it when I saw it on Friday.

I spent 30 years in the housing industry, including housing associations and councils, but I see people like Mrs Rogas every Friday. I do not blame Southwark—it cannot meet the demand—and I certainly do not blame Mr and Mrs Rogas, but we in this House have a responsibility to those who are most excluded and most poor to redress these ills. We need to do something and we need to do it quickly for Mr and Mrs Rogas, because she does not have a lot of time left.

5.11 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who told a heart-rending story about housing in London. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore).

[Bob Blackman]

My only recollection of visiting Southport is from when I was a student, but perhaps we should gloss over that particular time.

I am delighted to have been returned as the Member for Harrow East for the third time. I thank my constituents for placing their trust in me once again, with an increased vote for the third time in a row. I have the pleasure of representing the most diverse constituency in the country, with three Hindu temples, two synagogues, an Islamic centre, a Sikh centre and a Buddhist centre across the road, and 24 churches, including the only Greek Orthodox church built in this country for more than 100 years. I can therefore claim that my constituency is a real melting pot.

Education is at the heart of that, and I am delighted that the Government saw fit to invest in increasing the number of school places across the piece in Harrow. Fifteen schools have expanded dramatically to meet that demand. We will also shortly open the first state-sponsored Hindu secondary school on a new site, which has been warmly welcomed by the diverse Hindu population across the constituency.

There has been a disgraceful campaign during which the teachers' unions in particular have claimed—they carried on with their propaganda even after the release of our party manifesto, which increased the amount of funding pledged for education—that there will be a reduction in pupil funding of £543 per head. That is clearly a lie and it should be nailed as such.

Will the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who is sitting on the Front Bench, confirm three particular issues? First, I ask him to confirm that we will press ahead with the local government finance scheme, which will allow local authorities to retain business rates. That is especially relevant to London, where it will become a devolved issue; Government funding will, in effect, cease and London will raise its own money for its own spending.

Secondly, will my hon. Friend confirm that we will press ahead with our plan to build 245,000 homes a year for the next five years—that figure is greater than that contained in the Labour party's manifesto—so that a range of homes are made available for social rent, private rent and to buy?

Finally, I was delighted that my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was almost the last Act to receive Royal Assent before Parliament dissolved for the general election. The Act, however, requires substantial secondary legislation and the commitment of the Government to make it happen. This is truly a revolution in the way local authorities treat homeless people. It is an absolute disgrace that people are still sleeping rough on our streets.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm in his wind-up speech the Government's commitment, contained in our party's manifesto, to ending rough sleeping once and for all over the lifetime of this Parliament? We have to do far more to build far more homes to give people the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Without proper housing, people cannot find proper employment or provide a proper base for their families. I look forward to that great achievement happening under this Conservative Government.

5.15 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am very grateful for the opportunity to give my maiden speech in the House today.

I start by paying tribute to my predecessor, Natalie McGarry. During her time in this House, Ms McGarry clearly had a heart for international relations—in particular the situation in Kurdistan. I am sure I speak on behalf of all hon. Members when I wish her and her husband all the very best for the future, and for the impending arrival of their first child. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

Being elected to serve the people of Glasgow East in the House of Commons is the greatest honour of my life. As the son of a single mother growing up in the shadow of the Cranhill water tower, I never imagined in my wildest dreams that one day I would be standing here speaking on behalf of my friends, my family and my constituents.

It is customary in a maiden speech to take hon. Members on a tour of one's constituency. I have the pleasure of representing an incredibly diverse constituency stretching from Barrowfield out to Swinton, Steps down to Carmyle, and everything along the way, including my native Cranhill. It is a constituency that has also had some influential and notable former MPs, including the former Labour Health Minister John Wheatley, who pioneered an enormous expansion of social housing with the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924.

On being appointed Health Secretary, John Wheatley sought to draft a piece of legislation to remedy the social housing crisis. The Act that would become known as the Wheatley Housing Act allowed central Government to provide subsidies to build public housing. That created employment at a time of a depressed construction industry and provided homes at affordable rates for low-income working class families. By 1933, over half a million council homes had been built in the UK. It was a small but influential effort that originated in Glasgow's east end. Unfortunately, even now, housing remains a burning political issue in our community due to the ineptitude of Margaret Thatcher's disastrous right-to-buy policy.

As a community, we are not without our challenges, but equally we are not lacking in spirit, humour and passion. Our greatest asset is our people and their ability to see the good in every situation. It is the humour of Glaswegians that inspires us and drives us on even in the midst of tough times. That humour is demonstrated by the likes of the Barrowfield's rising star Kevin Brannigan, otherwise known on stage as Big Angie.

I have said that much has been done to regenerate Glasgow East over the past decade, but we continue to work with one hand tied behind our back. Stark health inequalities and poverty still overshadow the east end, with eye-watering austerity from the Conservative party leading to painful social security cuts and an enormous reduction in household incomes. It is simply unacceptable that in Glasgow East 6,234 children are deemed to be living in poverty. That is the burning injustice the Prime Minister must be pursuing right now. People in Glasgow East are no longer "just about managing"; we are just fed up with austerity.

Austerity from the British Government has affected, and will continue to affect, some of the most vulnerable people in my constituency. In particular, cuts to social security—I emphasise the words "social security"—are

the primary cause for the increased usage of foodbanks and a disproportionate dependency on local services in the voluntary sector, which is at breaking point. It is quite clear to me that it is no longer the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom supporting my constituents; instead, it is far too often the broad shoulders of the Glasgow North East foodbank.

For too long now, it is the most vulnerable who have felt the sharp end of this Government's austerity programme. Today, sadly, we live in a society in which the middle class are told blame the working class, the working class are told to blame the benefit claimants, and the benefit claimants are told to blame the asylum seekers and refugees. After that, there is no one left to blame. It is only then that the most vulnerable in our society are left isolated, often with no community support.

At a time when hard-hitting decisions are being taken about the nation's finances, and at a time when there is a smokescreen debate raging about immigration, we must consider how we treat others, both as legislators and human beings. During my time in this House, I will remember the words from the "Book of Micah" in which we are commanded to:

"act justly, walk humbly and love mercy".

Those are the values by which I will contribute, debate and legislate. I hope Her Majesty's Government will do the same.

5.19 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on a wonderful maiden speech. His passion and his determination to serve his constituents well are clear. I look forward to working with him and all the other new Members in this House.

This is my first debate on a Queen's Speech. My interest in rural schools is well known to my fellow Members. I was pleased to see in the Conservative manifesto a recognition of the importance of rural schools and was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mention the importance of fairer funding.

Moving on to technical apprenticeships, in a practical skills community such as mine in Copeland, it is essential that we continue the legacy of world-class skills to move forward. With 32 miles of coastline and the rugged beauty of our fells, we have a lot to be grateful for in my constituency, but we want to see the benefits of the northern powerhouse spread further north. We want to deliver the modern industrial strategy. I therefore welcome the 683% increase in technical apprenticeships and the expansion of the northern powerhouse up the country. I hope the commitment to new nuclear will be a prevalent feature of this Government, because Moorside is essential in my constituency of Copeland.

Mr Speaker: That was such a wonderfully pithy and succinct speech by the hon. Lady that I had not expected it to conclude, but it has done and we thank her for what she has said.

5.22 pm

Mr Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and, of course, the hon.

Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Southport (Damien Moore), who also made their maiden speeches.

It is lovely to come back to the House of Commons 15 years later, because I did my work experience here as a local comprehensive lad. Those opportunities for people from all backgrounds, which allow them to aspire even to be MPs, are vital in an egalitarian society, but they are often lacking in the current curriculum, which has been imposed on many of our schools by this Government.

Every school in my constituency faces cuts and many secondaries face having half a million pounds stolen from their budgets under the Orwellian description of a "fairer funding formula". It promises that some of the poorest schools in my constituency will lose out the most—not fair at all.

Brighton, Kemptown has the third-lowest enrolment of young people into university, despite having two universities and a music school in the constituency. This contrast of poverty will only get worse unless drastic changes are made. Only yesterday, one of my primary schools had to write to parents saying that teaching assistants would go and classes would be merged to make ends meet. One school has had to resort to asking parents to supply the very paper the children write on. If money can be found for a sweetheart deal with Northern Ireland, a lifeline can be found for the very future of our schools.

I know that my predecessor, Mr Kirby, cared about sports and education. He sat as an honorary vice-president of one of the local football clubs, Whitehawk FC, which is in my council ward. It is a community club that has as much passion, albeit not yet as much success, as one of the other clubs in my constituency—the Seagulls, who have been promoted to the top flight of football for the coming season.

I also want to praise my predecessor for being described as "pure grit" by the "ConservativeHome" website, and in that regard I hope to follow him—I hope to be the grit between the Tory-DUP alliance and its plans for Brexit, which will harm my community. Mr Kirby said in his maiden speech that 500 years after Brighton was invaded by France, we were suspicious of Europe. As we are the headquarters of American Express Europe, I must say that is not the Brighton and Peacehaven I recognise—the place where Queen Victoria set sail for her state visit to France; a city where, last year, almost 70% voted to remain in the EU and that, in the 1930s, hosted international children's camps and festivals for young people and Kindertransport children, organised by the Woodcraft Folk and Socialist International, as did the towns of Saltdean and Telscombe in my constituency in 1940s. To me, it is a constituency that is open and tolerant to the world and the EU, not suspicious of it.

I spent many years lobbying and negotiating in the EU for the Erasmus programme, because I value what youth work does. However, youth services have been cut to the bone. The Joff and the Brighton Youth Centre in my constituency both defend many young people from turning to extremism, and they are the last line in supporting young people in education. Youth services, underfunded and misunderstood, have become the first victim of local government cuts—austerity that harms the most vulnerable and helps only the most wealthy.

[Mr Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

Poor services and housing lead to poor academic attainment, poor health outcomes and a weaker economy, and they limit people's possibilities. I hope that, like many MPs for Kempton and Peacehaven, I will represent my constituents without fear and without favour. I hope that I will be able to do that across the Floor, so that we build a strong Britain and a strong Brighton through investment, not austerity. I want to start that today, not tomorrow, because my constituents cannot wait any more.

5.26 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Kempton (Mr Russell-Moyle). Nobody can doubt his passion and commitment, and I look forward to seeing him display that grit over many months and years to come.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the residents of Mid Worcestershire for returning me to this place. It is an honour to be a Member of Parliament, and like everybody in the House, I do not take that honour for granted.

There is much to praise in the Gracious Speech. It is a practical and consumer-friendly speech, and I am particularly pleased to see the recommitment to fairer funding, which I shall come on to in a moment. The overall theme of the speech, for me, was the continuation of the successes of the past few years. We can reflect on where we are in 2017: we have the highest employment level in this nation's history, and unemployment is at a 45-year low. Over the past seven years 29 million people have had a tax cut and 4 million people have been taken out of paying income tax altogether, while the top 1% of taxpayers pay 28% of all income tax. The tax-free allowance has increased from £6,450 to £11,500. At the same time we have been paying off debt and Government expenditure has increased significantly so that we have record spending on health, education, pensions and disabled people—the last of those is up by £3 billion in real terms since 2010.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): While my hon. Friend is listing the Government's great achievements, may I remind him that when Labour was last in government there were 1 million young people not in education, training or employment, and now we have one of the lowest levels of youth unemployment anywhere in Europe?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She makes precisely my point about education, which is the focus of today's debate. I am pleased that we are committed to £4 billion extra for education during this Parliament.

Hon. Members will be familiar with the fact that an increasing number of Members on both sides of the Chamber come from rather moderate backgrounds and went to comprehensive schools, including myself and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena). It is important to remember that we come from quite humble origins, and that education has enabled us to be successful in life. It has been the key to success in my life and has enabled me to do many things. It is my role, and that of many of us here, to give as many people as possible the opportunities that we have had.

Education can be and is the silver bullet. It is vital, therefore, that we have an education funding system that is fair and reasonable to all. Money is not everything, but it certainly helps. If we look at the educational outcomes and the improvements that we have seen in London over the last few years, there is no doubt that the huge amount of money spent there has helped to enable that success, but let us contrast the significant differences in per-pupil funding. For example, in Tower Hamlets the figure is now £6,965 per pupil. That is a fantastic number, but it contrasts sharply with funding in my constituency, which is £4,319 per pupil. Of course there are differences in the socioeconomic make-up, but a difference of £2,600 per pupil is a phenomenal sum. We must therefore focus on fairer funding, because there is nothing honourable and absolutely nothing morally superior in maintaining the blatantly unfair existing system. We therefore must do something about it. I therefore applaud the Secretary of State for Education for at least making an effort to improve things in this area, and will therefore be voting for this element and the many other positive elements in the Gracious Speech when we enter the Lobbies on Thursday.

5.30 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is great to be called at this stage and to have had the opportunity to hear so many fine maiden speeches on both sides of the House. I congratulate all the new Members on making them.

The Queen's Speech was clearly overshadowed by the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. It is a disaster that shocked the nation. Across the country, local authorities are responding with the seriousness that the disaster deserves. My constituency has most of Sheffield's high-rise housing and the council has acted promptly to check the safety of properties. Indeed, the cladding of one, Hanover Tower in Broomhall, has failed the test. The council has met tenants and taken immediate action, but the issue will cost money to resolve. Beyond that one block, the council is also putting in place the further measures needed to reassure tenants. Across the city it is retrofitting sprinklers in all tower blocks, but the question is: who is going to foot the bill?

Local councils have been the hardest-hit by Government cuts since 2010 across the entire public sector, and those in our big cities hardest of all. Local services across the board have been hit, from youth services to adult social care, with deep cuts deeply affecting local services. It is therefore all very well for the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to say, as he did yesterday, that local authorities should just spend the money on fire safety and then contact him for help. What we need is a guarantee that help will be forthcoming—a clear statement that the funds needed to put Hanover Tower right will be provided, and a guarantee to fund the sprinkler systems across Sheffield, and indeed the same response across the whole country.

But the problem goes much wider than that. Much of the high-rise in my constituency is in the private rented sector. The council does not own the properties but it has a responsibility for the safety of those living in them, and there are fire safety issues there too. We have seen an explosion in numbers in the private rented sector in recent years, but at the same time, in Sheffield as in so many parts of the country, we have seen a fall,

driven by the cuts, in the number of local government staff responsible for compliance in the sector, causing real risk to people in terms of fire and other issues. Do the Government accept that that is one of the issues that needs to be considered as part of any review of fire safety, not simply in high-rise but in accommodation generally in this country?

In the minute that I have left, let me turn to schools and the crisis they are facing. I have 24 state schools in my constituency. Every one of them has faced challenges in making ends meet over the last few years. Headteachers were right—I am disappointed that they have been attacked in the way they have during this debate—to highlight the combined threat of Government cuts and the new funding formula. From 2015-16 to 2019-20, every one of my schools faces cuts of between 6% and 19%—a loss of 103 teachers. Conservative Members seem to be in denial, as the Government are, about the crisis facing our schools.

If the statement that no school will lose out means anything, it must mean it in real terms. If that is the case, perhaps the Secretary of State could write quickly to the headteachers in my constituency to tell them that they need not worry about the redundancies that they are planning or the courses that they are proposing to remove, and to give them the guarantee that they want and that all our children deserve.

5.35 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate all the Members who have made their maiden speeches today. It is great to hear so many Scottish accents, with Scottish seats on the Labour Benches again! It was also special to hear the Geordie accent of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), who follows my good friend Pat Glass in this place.

As I said in my own maiden speech seven years ago, I am proud to have been an adopted Teessider for nearly 40 years, but I am even prouder of the public sector workers who have been so brutally treated by the Tories in power over the last seven years. Thousands of them on Teesside have lost their jobs as local councils and hospital trusts have seen their budgets decimated, while those who remain have had little if any pay increase in recent years. Is this really the way to treat the dedicated public sector workers who clean our streets, care for our elderly, run our school centres, police our communities, heal our sick, repair our public sector houses, and deliver a host of other local services?

I am also proud of my own local authority, Stockton Borough Council, which in the last week has been named the runner-up in the annual local government awards. I suppose that expecting it to win twice in the space of a few years was asking too much. Despite the pressures and the cuts, the council has a hard-working, highly committed team who work relentlessly to provide a better life for those in Stockton. Councils like that must make the decisions about who will be given a home help and who will have to go without. They have had to grass over the flowerbeds and roundabouts in our communities, because they have had to sack the gardeners as a result of Tory budget cuts. They have had to all but close down services for young people as social care has swallowed up more of their diminishing budgets, and they have had to row back on investment which could have created jobs.

I have been pleased to see the last two Governments build a little on the tremendous investment in our children that was made over the 13 years of Labour government, but that progress is now in jeopardy, damaged by budget cuts, the deployment of huge numbers of unqualified teachers, a lack of capital to replace the schools that are falling down and to provide new ones, and a workforce who are downtrodden by the Government and, in many cases, forced to beg parents for cash to ensure that children have the equipment that they need. Across the Stockton borough, schools will receive an average 1% rise over the next few years. That can only lead to sacked teachers and support staff, a restricted curriculum, and the need to get that begging bowl out for parents. While some parents may be able to stump up the cash, the vast majority cannot, possibly because they are public sector workers who have forgotten what a pay rise is like.

The jewel in the local services crown is, of course, the national health service. One of my key pledges during the election campaign was to save North Tees hospital's A&E department from being closed as part of the Tory sustainability and transformation plans. In the past few days, I have acquired a copy of a report which spells out the future of hospitals in our area. It speaks of the need to hit financial targets, which means that either Darlington Memorial hospital or North Tees in Stockton will be downgraded and the emergency service removed from one of them.

Yes: this is driven by costs. It is driven by the fact that the Government have failed to train and recruit the consultants we need, and it is driven without the approval of clinicians and the general public, most of whom are being bypassed. The Government are trying to solve the wrong problem. They are trying to beat down budgets and use the shortage of clinicians as an excuse to reduce services. They need to train and recruit the people we need. What we really want in Stockton, however, is the new hospital that was axed by the Tory-Liberal Democrat Government in 2010. The Government do not have the cash—yet they found £1 billion or more to buy the votes of the DUP to prop up their shambolic Administration.

Our education system and our local services have reached a tipping point. Either we invest in them, or they will continue to deteriorate beyond use. The Queen's Speech offers them nothing.

5.39 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me during the debate on the Gracious Speech.

This Parliament sits at a time of constitutional uncertainty and change. It is a Parliament in the balance, overshadowed by deep recent tragedies. In such an environment, it is with some trepidation that I rise to offer my thoughts. My trepidation, however, is blunted by the knowledge that it is with the authority of my constituents that I stand here. My constituents have placed their trust in me; their trust that I will seek to deliver a more hopeful, fairer, better future.

It is traditional to point out the strengths and character of one's constituency, and that task is made much easier for me as I represent East Lothian. I have heard eloquent speeches today describing the beauty of constituencies, but rest assured there is only one truly beautiful constituency, and that is my own: East Lothian. It has a history as an arterial route for pilgrims, soldiers, scholars and artists,

[*Martin Whitfield*]

and the development of its six towns reflects their connections to the sea, to trade, to agriculture and fishing and to embarkation and de-embarkation spots for soldiers.

The towns reflect the long history of industrialisation. The place where I live, Prestonpans, reflects the industrial revolution and coal mining, evidence of which goes back to 1210, a mere 140 years before the post of the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod was founded. The distinctive individual characters of the six towns are complemented by the surrounding villages, which carry their own identity. They weave together to create a constituency community that is distinctive, supportive, welcoming, creative, industrious, entrepreneurial and both forward and outward looking. Those are characteristics that I feel I can recommend to the House and to those listening.

Tradition dictates that I should pay homage to the previous MP, George Kerevan, who represented my constituency for two years. I am glad to do so, because it allows me to put right an innocent mistake. In Mr Kerevan's maiden speech, he omitted to mention Fiona O'Donnell, the MP who had represented East Lothian for five years previously. I am glad to put right that small omission today. As I looked at the previous MPs for East Lothian, I suddenly realised the giant task that confronts me. John Home Robertson and John Mackintosh were giants in the political world; they were pro-Europeans. Indeed, John Mackintosh was an advocate for being Scottish, British and European. As I was looking at what John Home Robertson said in his maiden speech about John Mackintosh, I found words that articulate my trepidation but also give me a rule to live by. He said:

"If we are always open and stick to what we believe in we may not always be able to satisfy our Whips, but in the end we shall earn the respect of our constituents. I believe that they are the people who really matter to us."—[*Official Report*, 9 November 1978; Vol. 957, c. 1257.]

Much is spoken of this land's assets, but I hope we can all agree that its greatest assets are the children and their future. If we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, and as we stand on the shoulders of giants, we have a duty to give our children the opportunity to build a greater, stronger, fairer, kinder future. History will treat us harshly if we do not step up to fulfil the obligation that we owe to our young. My promise to my constituents and to this House is that I will always be open and advocate for what I believe. I will fight for a kinder, more hopeful and fairer future.

5.42 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who has made a powerful and eloquent speech on behalf of his truly beautiful constituency, as he put it. I also congratulate the other hon. Members on both sides of the House who have made their maiden speeches today.

I welcome the commitment in the Queen's Speech to maintaining our 0.7% international development commitment. The new Government have two Ministers of State—one of whom I welcome to his place today—who are working jointly in the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

I wish them well. Greater co-operation between the two Departments is to be welcomed, but I hope that this will be a partnership and not the first step towards a takeover of DFID by the Foreign Office. Shortly before the election, the cross-party International Development Committee reaffirmed, on a cross-party basis, the importance of maintaining DFID as a stand-alone Department, and I urge the Government to continue to do so.

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart) *indicated assent.*

Stephen Twigg: I welcome the fact that the Minister is nodding at what I am saying.

In the recent general election, my pledge to my constituents was to seek a fair deal for Liverpool. Austerity has hit all parts of our country, but it has hit cities such as Liverpool the hardest. Liverpool City Council has faced budget cuts of nearly £100 million since 2010. Merseyside police have lost 1,700 officers or staff, and the Merseyside fire and rescue budget has been cut in half. In the next three years, the Liverpool City Council budget faces a further cut of £90 million. To protect social care, the council made the difficult decision to increase council tax by 4.99% this year, but even with that tax increase it is having to cut social care by £58 million. That is a loss of 5,000 care packages, which will affect some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Liverpool.

Investment in education is vital for social mobility, community cohesion, and our future economy. There is real concern in the schools in my constituency about the impact of the proposed funding formula. The proposal that was consulted upon last year would result in a loss to Liverpool's schools of £3 million. The Secretary of State today repeated the pledge in the Conservative manifesto that no school will have its budget cut but, as others have said, the crucial question is about whether that is in real terms. Otherwise, it will represent a cut for schools that desperately need to protect their funding. I urge the Government to maintain the deprivation and prior attainment factors in the proposed funding formula, which are vital for schools in some of the most deprived parts of my constituency.

This is not just about schools; we also need investment in our early years education. Children's centres do vital work, but there are also nursery schools. I have two outstanding nursery schools in my constituency: East Prescot Nursery School, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this week, and Ellergreen Nursery School. I want assurances from the Government about long-term funding for our nursery schools, which do such a vital job.

Finally, I want to discuss the promised major reform of technical education. There is no doubt that it has been a long-term weakness that goes back decades, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) reminded us. Let us look to countries such as Germany and Switzerland, which have done this so much better than us. I say to the Government, "Good luck with major reform of technical education, but you cannot do it on the cheap." The biggest cuts in recent years have been to 16-to-19 funding and, in particular, further education. As well as investment in our schools and in our crucial early years education, let us invest in FE, because only then will we achieve the promised major reform of technical education.

5.47 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I am honoured by the support of people from across High Peak that has enabled me to stand here today. As someone commented on my Facebook page:

“I can’t believe that one of our school run mums has been elected to Parliament.”

Well, I have four children and have been a school run mum for over 20 years, and I am proud to bring the views of school run mums to Parliament. As the first woman to represent High Peak, I will bring a different perspective from that of my predecessors. I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Andrew Bingham, who served as the MP for seven years and as a borough councillor before that, and I wish him well for the future.

I always said that I would only ever seek to be an MP if it was for High Peak. This north-western tip of Derbyshire, 90% in the Peak District national park, is extremely beautiful, but it is also my home and where I have brought up my children. There is nowhere I would rather live. Between and within the wild expanses of picturesque moorland nestle towns and villages that are vibrant, close and friendly. At the heart of each of those communities are their schools and nurseries. At school, children learn how to make friends, how to stay friends, how to work together, and how to plan and create things together. Those lessons apply not just to the children but to us parents as well. They mean that we school run mums can turn our hand to just about anything. We can organise play dates, childcare, fundraisers and parties, and we can organise campaigns to change things. Our schools and nurseries are not just factories for exam certificates; they create communities.

As I am sure that Members on both sides of the House who represent rural communities will agree, our schools are especially important in preventing rural isolation. That is why so many people across High Peak are very concerned about the enormous cuts facing our schools and our nurseries. The Government may say there is record spending, but when our excellent local schools in High Peak are about to lose over £4 million a year and our children are already in classes of 34 or more, it does not cut much ice to say that we could have lots of money for a free school if we want one.

We have outstanding schools already. Combs Infant School, where my two youngest boys went, will lose over £20,000 under these proposals, equivalent to one of its two teachers. Chapel-en-le-Frith High School is set to lose nearly £600,000, equivalent to 15 teachers. It seems that under this Government schools are punished rather than rewarded for their success, and nurseries too.

The underfunding of the promised 30 hours of free childcare is causing several nurseries in High Peak to consider whether they are able to keep going at all. In Gamesley, where the outstanding nursery’s fully qualified staff contribute so much to the life chances of children in this area of high deprivation, each place costs £5 an hour to run, but funding is being cut to just £4 an hour. It does not add up. No wonder more than half of nurseries are saying that they cannot afford to provide the 30 free hours. I urge the Government to have an urgent rethink of nursery funding before September, before we end up with fewer nursery places, rather than more; fewer children able to get the best start for school; and fewer parents able to work.

The fate of our schools and nurseries was so important to my constituents that they chose to elect a school run mum as their MP. And this school run mum will not fail to stand up for them, and for our schools and nurseries and the communities that need them so much.

5.51 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George). She is the most forceful, eloquent and committed school run mum I have ever heard in this House, and she will clearly be a great asset not just to our party but to the whole House. I congratulate her on an outstanding maiden speech.

I also associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who mentioned the plight of local authorities as they try to do the right thing about their tower blocks and other housing assets in the light of the terrible tragedy that has engulfed the nation and has led to such heart searching on what we do about our tower blocks and on who funds them.

Southampton has been tremendously responsible in its approach to its tower blocks. A number of programmes for installing sprinklers are already under way, and it wishes to progress them to the rest of the tower blocks, but, given the desperate cuts to local government over a considerable period, it simply will not have the resources—or if it does have the resources, it will be at the expense of many other basic services in the city. It is imperative that we get clarity as soon as possible on what funding will be forthcoming from central Government and the Department for Communities and Local Government to support authorities such as Southampton that are trying to act responsibly and carefully on the safety of their tower block residents. Hopefully those authorities will have Government support in making that happen in a way that allows local government to continue while providing the best safety for residents.

I find it odd that, in this Queen’s Speech, the Government of the day, who were allegedly the victors in the general election, have fled from their manifesto faster than any Government I have heard in this House. The Conservative manifesto’s chapter on education is headed, without any trace of irony, “The world’s great meritocracy”. That chapter does not seem substantially to exist as far as the Queen’s Speech is concerned. That gives me some pleasure, as grammar schools are not to be imposed upon us in the future and school lunches will not be cut. However, that world’s worst manifesto, which was “a long list of punishments for the public,”

to use not my words, but those of the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), who is not in his place—I am sure inquiries will be made by his own side about that description shortly—still puts in place a number of changes that are inadequate for school funding. That is what I wish to emphasise in the seven seconds I have left available. It needs more than the distribution of the cake; it needs a larger cake. That is the fundamental point about school funding for the future.

5.55 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for this opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate, Mr Speaker. As I believe is customary,

[Alex Norris]

I wish to start by paying tribute to my predecessor—this is something I am very glad to do. Graham Allen served our community in Nottingham North with distinction over the past 30 years. He has fought for better jobs, decent housing and the best possible education for our young people. He was a skilled parliamentarian who used all the devices of this place for the betterment of our community. His greatest legacy will be his work on early intervention, securing cross-party support and taking it from a theoretical discipline to one that is already changing the lives of the youngest people in my community. I hope to carry on this work as Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament for Nottingham North. I and all my neighbours owe Graham a great debt of thanks. He ought to be a freeman of Nottingham or never to have to pay for a pint in Bulwell again, whichever he considers the greater honour.

Speaking of great honours, being the Member of Parliament for Nottingham North is the honour of my lifetime. I am humbled that my neighbours chose me to be their voice in Parliament, and I will not let them down. I am humbled, too, to be a Labour Member of Parliament. I am very aware of the great names that have come before me, and I look forward to proving myself worthy of such exalted company. I am especially proud, during Co-operatives Fortnight, to be one of 38 Labour and Co-operative Members of Parliament this time, and again I look forward to serving the co-operative movement during my time here.

Nottingham has the very best of Britain, so I have pulled out a few highlights. They are not necessarily the ones that Members will find on Wikipedia, as I wanted to make them laugh, especially given the lateness of the hour. Our Old Market Square is one of the best big urban open spaces in the country, so every summer we chuck 100 tonnes—or whatever it is—of sand in there and make a beach out of it, because we are also as far away from the coast as it is possible to get. We have the best public transport outside the capital; we have two top-class universities—I am proud to be an alumnus of one—which have pumped out innovations such as the MRI machine and ibuprofen; we have produced the best British boxer of the 21st century, Carl Froch, as well as the best British boxer of the 19th century, William “Bendigo” Thompson, who was from not too far from where I live; Britain’s best actress, Vicky McClure, is a proud Nottinghamian; we have the oldest inn in England—we know how important that is; and in football our city has won more European cups than London, Paris and Rome—put together. We have the very best of Britain in Nottingham.

However, it is important to reflect on the fact that we have also traditionally had some of the worst of Britain—on health outcomes, results at school and outcomes in the workplace. We should not shy away from that challenge. All our challenges lead back to one point, which is our poverty. Thirty-four years ago, in his maiden speech, my predecessor but one, Richard Ottaway, remarked on Nottingham North’s proud industrial history and listed off all the big workplaces in the constituency. Four years later, my predecessor, Graham Allen, in his maiden speech, remarked that half of those had closed. Thirty-four years on from Richard Ottaway’s speech, none of them are there and they have not been for some time. They were

not replaced by the skilled, well paid jobs of the 21st century; instead, what has replaced them is cyclical poverty. We should be angry about that. It is not inevitable and it is avoidable. I am angry about it, which is why I come to this place—I am here to do something about it.

This is what is regrettable about this Government’s legislative plan for the next two years: there simply is not the level of ambition and imagination that my community needs from its Government in order for it to become a better place. A lack of resources is a factor in that, and we have seen disproportionate cuts in Nottingham, but more than that we are talking about the ambition to genuinely create a better Britain that gives everyone a fair shake. Although this Government will not do the things that Nottingham North needs them to do, I will do everything I can, as a Labour and Co-operative party Member of Parliament and trade unionist, to fill this gap. I shall seek to use all the intricacies of this place to highlight our issues. I shall seek to build support for the long-term projects we need to change our community, and I will work and work until we see things get better. That is what I offered to my neighbours and that is what I offer to this place.

5.59 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) and all the wonderful, passionate and eloquent maiden speeches that it has been my privilege to listen to this afternoon.

The Queen’s Speech says that we will invest in schools, ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a good school and see that all schools are fully funded. The National Association of Head Teachers says that the general election result showed that the public did not endorse many of the Conservatives’ more controversial policy ideas, including expanding selection and ending universal infant free school meals. It is right that those policies have been dropped from the Government’s legislative programme.

The Conservative manifesto contained a commitment to ensure that no school would lose per pupil funding under the formula, and it is vital that that promise is now followed through. However, the House of Commons Library says that the Government’s new funding formula would have “winners and losers”, with 54% of schools seeing a cash increase and 46% seeing a cut.

Figures from the National Audit Office show that, in the Borough of Rochdale of which my constituency of Heywood and Middleton forms a part, our schools are facing cuts of £15 million. On average, our local schools are facing cuts of £550 per pupil, which is equivalent to the loss of 468 teachers across the borough, leading to larger class sizes and increasing stress and disillusionment among those teachers remaining in post.

I have been contacted by many headteachers and teachers in my constituency, who have expressed their real and serious concerns about the impact of the new funding formula on our children’s education. They have told me that they have had to make budget savings year on year, and that now the cupboard is bare. The imposition of any more cuts will give them no option but to reduce the number of teachers. Locally, none of the schools in my constituency is a winner; they will all lose out under

the new funding formula. Nationally, the picture appears to be much the same, with even Tory MPs complaining that these cuts are “entirely unacceptable”.

We must not forget our international obligations. We have signed up to sustainable development goal No. 4, which commits to ensuring that by 2030 all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education.

Last week, the wonderful children at St Vincent’s Roman Catholic primary school in Norden in my constituency invited me to a morning assembly on the theme of “send my friend to school” where they sang and performed brilliantly on behalf of their international neighbours. They reminded me that, at our current rate of progress, sustainable development goal No. 4 will not be achieved until 2084. None the less, it made me very proud to see those children looking outwards, not inwards. Seeing this care and compassion among our young people gave me hope for the future, and I hope that this Government will take note.

Let me briefly touch on the recent election. The Prime Minister recklessly gambled with her majority and lost it. Far from providing strength and stability, we now have a fragile minority Government propped up by Democratic Unionist party votes. I was one of the few MPs who voted against the election—because of voter fatigue. My constituents have had a major election every year since 2014, and at the time the election was announced we were in the midst of the Greater Manchester mayoral elections. I tried to save the Prime Minister from herself but to no avail.

6.3 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): First, let me congratulate all Members who have made their excellent maiden speeches today, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris). He has very big shoes to fill, but I know that the experience and dedication that he has shown in local government will stand him in good stead in the days ahead.

Let me state for the record that I have declarable interests in that my wife is the Cabinet member for children and young people in our local authority of Cheshire West and Chester and education is the subject matter under discussion today.

A common concern raised with me on the doorstep during the election was funding for local schools, which I and many other Members have mentioned in the House on previous occasions and again today, but I want to focus today on the lack of accountability in our education system. Earlier this month, the University of Chester’s academy in Ellesmere Port was rated as inadequate by Ofsted, and the sad fact is that that is not the first time the school has failed an Ofsted inspection, having been rated inadequate in 2013. Although there have been improvements since then, we are now sadly back to square one.

We need to do something different, but the way the matter has been dealt with so far demonstrates a lacuna in Government policy towards failing academies. Whether it is an oversight or an ideological attachment to academies that does not concede they could ever have issues with their performance, the devastating reality is that the only prescription to remedy these failings is more of the same. My constituents deserve better than more of the same.

As Members will know, there is no mechanism for an academy to return to local authority control. Academies deemed to be failing or underperforming may be transferred to another multi-academy trust or sponsor, or made subject to other intervention from the relevant regional schools commissioner—who, for reasons I am yet to understand, thinks that Ellesmere Port is in the west midlands.

However, whatever the theoretical options are, I rather suspect that there are not scores of other sponsors queuing up to take over. If one does emerge, what guarantees do we have they will be any better than the current sponsors, that they will have any local knowledge or connection or that they will be accountable to the people they serve? The answer is of course none, yet we have a ready-made answer just waiting by the phone for a call—the local authority, with 90% of its schools rated as good or outstanding, a wealth of knowledge and experience, and, of course, the local connections that I believe will be vital in restoring public confidence in the school.

I know that the vast majority of teachers and support staff do a fantastic job in trying circumstances and that there are many at the academy who are working incredibly hard and doing their best, so it is important to note that this is a criticism not of the staff at the school but of its leadership and of a system that cannot deal with those failings. There is no doubt that if this was a local authority-controlled school an army of DFE advisers would have been in years ago extolling the virtues of academisation. Indeed, I know of one local primary that was positively encouraged to have the university as its sponsor—I am sure it is relieved that it resisted that particular temptation.

But this is the nub: we all want to see school standards improve and the best for our children, but the system designed to drive improvement is currently entrenching poor performance and underachievement. Although the Queen’s Speech has mercifully not included yet another round of tinkering with school structures, its big omission in education was any attempt to deal with the Select Committee on Education’s proposals and introduce a way in which failing academies and chains can be held to account. The sooner that triumph of ideology over reality is corrected, the better.

At the moment, we have a failing school and nobody taking responsibility for that failure. There is not even a governing body at the academy, and therefore no channel for staff, parents or the community to express their views and, critically, no accountability for the serial failings of leadership. The Queen’s Speech says that the “government will continue to work to ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a good school”.

It is about time that the Government put aside dogma and came up with proposals to actually make that happen. The education of our children is too important for them to continue to be let down in this way.

6.7 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Let me begin by saying what a pleasure it has been to listen to so many excellent maiden speeches; as the daughter of a Scot, it is particularly pleasing to see so many new Scottish MPs on the Labour Benches. I thank the people of Burnley for bringing me back here again. It is a privilege.

[Julie Cooper]

I want to begin by speaking up for children in Burnley. I was pleased to hear in the Queen's Speech talk of spreading prosperity and opportunity and I want to ask the Minister how Burnley's children fit into this plan. There are 19,709 children in Burnley and Padiham and, of those, 31.9% are growing up in poverty. In the most deprived wards, that rises to 50%—the staggering figure of a half of all children growing up in poverty. If we are to build the strong economy we all want to see, we need to maximise the economic contribution of all our people. Acting to break the cycle of poverty does not just transform lives; it strengthens our economy, and we cannot afford not to act.

I want the prosperity and opportunity that the Prime Minister speaks about to apply to the children in my constituency. I want it to reach them and I want to ask why the Government's actions seem not to match their rhetoric.

Education is undoubtedly the key to social mobility and economic opportunity. With that in mind, it is useful to look at what is happening on the ground in Burnley. There are eight state-maintained nursery schools. Every one of them is judged to be either outstanding or good, and all are at risk of closure. All the evidence shows that the first five years of life are so important. It is essential that that provision is not confused with childcare—I am talking about quality education, delivered by qualified teachers to children of nursery school age. Disgracefully, those schools are not protected. I want to thank the teachers and headteachers of the nursery schools in town who champion this cause in children's interests.

In the Queen's Speech, the Government promised to “continue to work to ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a good school and that all schools are fairly funded.”

All the children in my constituency have access to good primary and secondary schools, but the so-called fair funding formula will have a damaging and negative effect. Every school is to have its funding cut by more than £400 per pupil; shockingly, in the poorest parts of my constituency, that figure rises to more than £700. Can the Minister tell me what is fair about that and how it will enhance opportunity and spread prosperity? The reality is quite the reverse. Those budget cuts will mean teacher redundancies, supersize classes in primary schools and a reduced curriculum in secondary schools, all of which add up to fewer opportunities for the children in Burnley and Padiham.

At every stage, it seems that the Government are creating obstacles that hamper social mobility and deprive children of opportunities. This is a criminal waste that is denying opportunity and costing this country dearly. When will the Government understand that children are the future and that an investment in them is an investment in the future of our country?

6.11 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate and especially to enjoy such amazing maiden speeches from across the Chamber. I pay a special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who spoke so well. I am sure he will be a tireless representative for his community. I also pay tribute to my electors in the constituency of Clwyd South for electing me for the third time in seven years.

The Queen's Speech contained some very fine words, and here are my favourites:

“A priority will be to build a more united country, strengthening the social, economic and cultural bonds between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.”

That is a fine sentiment, but then we discovered what really happened—a tawdry little deal and a strange game of “Who Wants to be a Billionaire?” that led to the Government giving one of the constituent nations £1 billion, seemingly on the basis of a confidence and supply deal to prop up the Tories. What sort of message does that send to my constituents and to people across the rest of Wales, and indeed to the rest of mainland Britain? It will not come as a surprise that Members across the Opposition Benches will rightly be asking for that extra £1.7 billion for Wales, and I am sure that other Members will be making similar requests for other parts of mainland Britain.

The Queen's Speech rightly spoke about the importance of ensuring that people have

“the skills they need for the high-skilled, high-wage jobs of the future”.

Unlike some in this Chamber, I do not believe that we can pooh-pooh the issue of student debt. Our UK manifesto was right to address that, and I am delighted that our Welsh Labour Government have taken practical steps to ensure that students are better supported. Wherever one is on the political spectrum, it is undoubtedly true that student debt of levels that my generation did not see or know benefits absolutely no one.

There are some measures in the Queen's Speech that I think few would oppose, such as greater action to tackle domestic violence, meeting the NATO 2% commitment and support for the police and security services to tackle terrorism and human trafficking, which is a global concern. However, we need to recognise that we can only implement those measures with proper resourcing. This week's *Economist* magazine asks for an honest debate about taxation and cost-effectiveness, and about what we want to fund and how we propose to do it. That is a welcome debate, and in it we must speak up for the dignity of proper state investment for high-quality public services. We must speak up for the measures that were excluded from the Queen's Speech. What would be wrong about giving, as part of those settlements, a decent bridging pension to the WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—who were born in the 1950s? I believe that the ideological debate with the penny-pinching, small state ideologues of the hard right, who always have their way, must have its day.

No speech in this Parliament would be complete without a message for the Government on Brexit. Let us have a Brexit that works for the whole nation, not just for the hard right of the Tory party. If we end up with no deal and without proper votes, we are going to be mighty cross.

6.15 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Being called to speak at such a late hour has given me the privilege of hearing so many marvellous maiden speeches, particular that of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), whom I have had the privilege of knowing for many years, and who I know will be a strong advocate for Nottingham in this place.

When the Prime Minister went to the country on 8 June, she asked to be judged on her record, and she was found wanting. She should have taken the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and not had the election, because what we now have is a Tory party with no majority in this House and a Government propped up only by the votes of the Democratic Unionist party, which, to paraphrase that great poet Robbie Burns, has been “bought and sold with English gold”. Actually, I want to congratulate the 10 hon. Members from the DUP—they are no longer in their places—on securing more resources for their constituencies, because ultimately that is what we come here to do. My fear is that the benefits about to be bestowed upon Northern Ireland will be at the continuing cost of austerity in Stoke-on-Trent.

We have had a Queen’s Speech that, at best, is a thin gruel of legislative programming. It contains 27 Bills, eight of which relate to the process of exiting the European Union, and none of which seeks to deal with the inequalities that are the root cause of most societal problems. Therefore, I will not judge the Government by their actions, but instead hold them to account for their inactions and the political decisions that they have taken or, in the case of this paralysed Administration, not taken.

In Stoke-on-Trent, schools will face a budget shortfall of around £11 million by 2020, so where in the Queen’s Speech is the measure to ensure an equitable, adequate and properly funded fair funding system for all schools across the country? I have met headteachers who are working under immense pressure to deliver the very best for the children in my constituency. Stoke-on-Trent’s young people are rich in talent and with the right support would have a bright future, but that future is being robbed by an uncaring Government. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State may chunter from a sedentary position, but it is true.

It is not just in relation to schools that the Government are showing a dereliction of duty. Where are the measures to help parents who go to work with proper, affordable and accessible childcare? The proposal for 30 hours of free childcare is in principle a good one, but the Government are implementing the policy on the cheap. Nursery and wraparound providers in Stoke-on-Trent have told me that it will end up costing them more to provide 30 hours because the amount that the Government are offering per child per hour is simply too little to meet the operating overheads. It is childcare on the cheap, and the Government should be ashamed.

It is not just infants who are being let down; the Government’s silence on further education is also deafening. Although the Queen’s Speech made some references to technical education, it said absolutely nothing about the future of further education. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State may smile, but this is the Queen’s Speech that she struggled to make a case for earlier because there is so little about education in it.

In Stoke-on-Trent we have two fabulous colleges, Stoke-on-Trent College and City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College, both of which do exceptional work preparing the next generation of Stokies for work. However, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, while acknowledging the impact on technical education, said that the Government’s plan “fails to do anything for the rest of post-16 education, which is extremely poorly funded, and where many courses are being cut.”

The list of missing Bills and botched opportunities could go on, but time means that I cannot. The Queen’s Speech is a chance for a Government to lay out their priorities for the coming year. This Queen’s Speech suggests a Government who are out of ideas, devoid of aspiration and, at their very worst, indifferent to the people that I represent.

6.19 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It has been an absolute honour and a pleasure to hear the maiden speeches from across the House today. Although Tooting is not awash with peaks and flowy rivers, it is very beautiful and I am immensely grateful to the people of Tooting for re-electing me.

Brexit will play a substantial part in the business of the House over the next two years. However, ensuring that we have a well-resourced education system is something that we cannot revisit in two years’ time. Children, parents and teachers need answers now. When I marched with 500 Tooting parents and pupils in May against Government proposals to cut their school budgets, I made a promise to stand up for them in Parliament. Three weeks later, here I am, standing up for Tooting children, Tooting teachers and support staff and Tooting parents.

I will briefly take the House on a journey that children across Tooting will take throughout their education under Conservative proposals. At three years old, parents struggle to find a place in local nurseries able to provide 30 hours of free childcare. At four years old, our children begin full-time education—indeed, my daughter starts school in September—but those who have special needs cannot be catered for due to lack of funding. Many headteachers attempting to provide the best for their pupils in Tooting are having to go cap in hand at the school gates, asking for donations just to pay their staff and keep their buildings in repair. When the donations run out, teachers are using their own money to purchase basics such as books and pens. At 18 years old, our children have to decide whether to cripple themselves with university debt, try to get one of a limited number of apprenticeship places or go straight into the workforce.

As graduates, our young people have to decide whether they can actually afford to serve in public service roles. They have to decide whether they can become nurses, knowing that they will potentially have to use food banks, or whether they can become teachers, knowing that their morale will be stripped from them within their first year of working. Poorly thought out Conservative promises versus everyday reality pretty much sums up the Prime Minister’s education proposals—a Conservative promise of a fair funding formula for our schools. Teachers should be teaching, not fundraising; they should be able to get on with their job.

There are schools in Tooting that have not been able to provide cleaning staff, so children have had to clean their own classrooms. Children should be learning, not vacuuming. Who suffers in all this? It is the next generation of children and young adults, whose potential is being curbed before they even have the chance to reach it. *[Interruption.]* I am enjoying hearing the Secretary of State speaking from a sedentary position when she would not come to speak to parents in Tooting.

Justine Greening: I simply want to set out that the hon. Lady's party had exactly the same policy on funding to schools that would lose under the funding formula, which was to have no cash losers.

Dr Allin-Khan: Why was the Secretary of State, or any Conservative representative, not present at any of the hustings, the marches or the meetings during the electoral process? It is easy now to stand up in the Chamber where she feels safe among her comrades, but why is she not at the coalface speaking to parents, teachers and pupils? Nine-year-olds were marching against Government cuts. Where was she then? She was invited and she failed to show up.

At what point will the Prime Minister and her party accept that our children deserve more? They deserve a better start in life. Parents should not be worried about the fact that their children will be put in boxes based on their academic prowess at the age of 11. We are stunting our children's potential before they have even had the opportunity to flourish. Under a Labour Government, my brother and I were able to come from a poor background and have the aspirational hope that the Secretary of State spoke about. Under a Labour Government, we were both able to go to Oxbridge and I now stand here before the House. We had a single parent who worked three jobs, but a Labour Government gave us the opportunity to achieve.

It is a Labour Government who will stand up for every single child in this country. A Labour Government will be for the many, not the few. It is a Labour Government who will ensure that we have class sizes in which our children can learn and have opportunities, and who will say that an apprenticeship is as important as going to university and crippling ourselves with debt. A Labour Government will ensure that every single child has the best possible start in life, and I look forward to being part of that Government very soon.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), I emphasise that, of course, the debate can continue until 7 o'clock, but there is no obligation on the hon. Gentleman, or on the Minister, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), to continue banging on until 7 o'clock. It is perfectly permissible for them to conclude their no doubt Demosthenian orations before that allotted hour—hint.

6.25 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I get the sense that you would like us to finish sooner rather than later.

We have had a packed debate, and it has been great to listen to the 48 Back-Bench Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), for Heywood and

Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Burnley (Julie Cooper), for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan); the right hon. Members for Broadland (Mr Simpson), for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper); the hon. Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), and for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston); and the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer).

However, I pay special tribute to all those hon. Members who have spoken in this Chamber for the first time and to their excellent maiden speeches, which show that, whichever part of the Chamber Members sit in, they come here with the right reasons and the right purpose, which is to represent their constituents and their constituencies as best they can. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr Russell-Moyle), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for High Peak (Ruth George) and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), and to the hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), for Southport (Damien Moore) and for Glasgow East (David Linden). I would merely say that it was 12 years ago, on 23 May 2005, that I gave my maiden speech in the debate on communities, and I stand here 12 years later as the shadow Communities Secretary.

A week is a long time in politics, they say. Well, what a difference seven weeks made. When the election was called, I was virtually laughed off College Green in media interviews. Tory MPs' tails were up—they were heading for a landslide. They asked for a big majority, but the Prime Minister lost the majority she had inherited. Their response? Well, out went all their policies—to the extent that we had a delayed Queen's Speech that could have been written on an Ascot betting slip. Why the Queen had to wait for a goatskin to be prepared, I do not know—never has so much pomp and ceremony accompanied so little content.

This is the first opportunity I have had to speak since the appalling tragedies that shocked many of us over the past weeks. It is with pride, however, that I commend the way the communities of Manchester and London united to show opposition to that violence and hate. I also pay tribute to the heroic response from the emergency services, the NHS and the community following the dreadful tragedy at Grenfell Tower, and to those who provided support to all who lost family, friends and everything they own as the fire tore through their homes.

I know that, within the Labour party, there are staff and elected Members who have been affected personally, and I anticipate that similar can be said for others around the House. I am proud to stand alongside, and pay tribute to, all those who have demanded answers

over the failings that allowed this tragedy to happen. Rather than being torn apart, the community has come together in a remarkable display of human compassion, mutuality and solidarity. I also welcome the fact that the Prime Minister last week recognised the failure of Government in this tragedy, and I look forward to the results of the forthcoming investigation, which I hope will ensure this tragedy is never, ever repeated.

The consequences of a Tory Government are visible to all. They include unrepaired roads, uncollected bins, cuts to English classes for speakers of other languages, cuts to adult learning and closed children's centres throughout England. Less visible, however, are the stresses that have been placed on core services, planning services, building regulation and inspection of commercial properties. A recent study by the Local Government Information Unit found that three quarters of councils had little or no confidence in their financial sustainability, and more than one in 10 believed that they were in danger of failing to deliver legally required services such as those I have mentioned.

Lucy Frazer: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if only one in 10 believe that they are not capable of delivering, nine out of 10 are managing with some of their financial services?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. and learned Lady shows a lack of understanding of precisely what is happening in local government. The fact that one in 10 are fearful of the financial future does not mean that 90% are satisfied. I suspect that she will regret making that intervention, because she will know that councils of all political persuasions up and down the country are struggling to make ends meet, and they want an end to Government austerity too.

Although I welcome the fact that the general election demonstrated the strength of public support for the policies of my party, and that it led to the Conservative party abandoning not just some but most of its damaging and unpopular plans, there is now a complete financial and policy black hole.

A 56% cut of central Government funding to local authorities was due to be replaced through new measures allowing local authorities to hold on to 100% of locally raised business rates. Where are those plans now? Local business rate retention was expected to begin in 2019-20. However, due to the lack of a legislative framework to carry the introduction of the policy, many in the local government world now assume that the plans have been kicked into the long grass. This is the third time that I have had to raise this issue. When will the Government provide the clarity that local councils need? Are the plans still going ahead, and are they still going ahead on the timescales previously mentioned? Where is the legislation?

The Minister can intervene if he wishes to answer those points—perhaps he will answer them in his speech—but the fact is that Back-Bench Members on both sides of the House will want to question Ministers precisely on the detail of how their local councils are going to be financed. The Opposition will not let up until we have the absolute certainty of how the revenue support grant is going to be replaced.

The King's Fund predicted a £1.9 billion funding gap in social care this year, while the Local Government Association estimated a £2.6 billion funding gap by 2020.

Once again, the Government had no answers in the Queen's Speech. Almost half of elderly people are living in inadequate care homes.

Although it seems that the grammar school plans have been abandoned, thousands of teachers and teaching assistants have either already lost their jobs because of the cuts or left the profession early because of this Government's policies. This is not propaganda. Many schools are due to be worse off under the new funding formula, which will still result in Government cuts of 3% to school budgets, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Since 2010, 455 libraries have closed. Investment in arts and culture has declined by £236 million. Some councils have been forced to impose cuts of up to 80%, which have disproportionately affected the most deprived areas in this country. In the previous Parliament, the 10 most deprived council areas in England faced cuts 18 times higher than the least deprived councils. If we want a Government for the many and not the few, it is really clear that it will not be served by the party currently sitting on the Government Benches. We need a party that is committed to governing in the interests of the whole country and to making sure that inequality is reversed.

Let us look at what this Government have done. Despite the cuts to all our public services, this Prime Minister has managed to find £1 billion to invest in securing herself a wafer-thin parliamentary majority. Why has the same priority not been placed on investing in our public services? One billion pounds would help to prevent cuts to the police budget and allow us to recruit more police officers across the whole country. One billion pounds could train 45,419 new firefighters. One billion pounds could not only fund the Government's pledge to create 10,000 training placements for nurses, but allow them to do so without scrapping bursaries.

There is a growing consensus that the austerity project has failed, but this legislative programme promises more of the same—unless you live in Northern Ireland. Urgent action is needed on health and social care budgets, public sector pay and local government funding, yet all those issues were absent from this delayed Queen's Speech. Local government faces a cliff edge, yet during the election Ministers were unwilling to debate those issues. They remain so detached from those they claim to represent that they are unable to see the looming crisis. This Queen's Speech was an ideal time for the Government to admit that their 1% pay cap is not working and that public sector workers deserve to be paid a wage they can live on. It was an opportunity for the Conservative party to demonstrate that it had learned from the criticism it received during the election campaign. Sadly, I suspect we will still see nurses using food banks. It was an opportunity for the Government to recognise that not enough money is being invested in our education system. As has been demonstrated in today's debate, schools that raise concerns about a lack of funding are dismissed as engaging in political propaganda.

It is time to build a country based on hope and shared prosperity. Local government and public sector services will play a vital role in supporting us to do that, enriching communities and creating an environment in which we are able to tackle isolation, division and mistrust: a country for the many, not the few. This is possible only if it is properly funded. We will take no

[Andrew Gwynne]

lectures from this Government. We look forward to the day when we show this Government the door and we get the Government that our public services and constituents deserve and need: a Labour Government for the many, not the few.

6.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): This has been a good and wide-ranging debate. I am delighted to have listened to so many fantastic maiden speeches—we have been on a tour of the UK. The hon. Members for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr Russell-Moyle), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for High Peak (Ruth George), and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) all made passionate contributions from the Opposition Benches.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome my new colleagues: my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for Southport (Damien Moore). Those two new colleagues from Scotland are just two of our 12 new Scottish Conservative Members, which is great news. It was fantastic to hear the maiden speeches of my hon. Friends. They made serious but entertaining contributions to the debate and showed that they will be excellent Members of Parliament. All the new Members who have contributed to today's debate have shown, in their own way, that they will bring a range of expertise and views to this House over the coming Parliament.

A strong education offer is essential to unlock talent, to create opportunities for our young people and to equip them with the skills they will need to help us build and maintain a strong economy that generates prosperity for all. Last year, we consulted widely on how to create more good school places and how to ensure that our schools work for everyone. We will continue to build on the constructive conversations we had with higher education institutions during the consultation, so that we can agree what more they can do to raise attainment and increase the number of good school places.

To meet the needs of our growing and rapidly changing economy, employers need access to a workforce with the skills they require. Our reforms to technical education will help businesses, young people and adults to achieve their potential, as T-levels will become a gold standard for technical excellence.

I will go through some of the points that hon. Members have raised about education. Members on both sides of the House raised the issue of school funding, so it is important to start by reiterating what the Secretary of State for Education said earlier. As she said very clearly, the Queen's Speech was clear that the Government are determined to introduce a fairer distribution of funding for schools. We will set out our plans shortly and, as was outlined in our manifesto, we will ensure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula. My right hon. Friend was extremely clear on that point.

Lucy Powell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: Let me make some progress and then I will give way.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) mentioned the number of teaching staff being made redundant from our schools. I say to him that there are 15,000 more teachers in our schools today than when his Government left office in 2010.

Lucy Powell *rose*—

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Jones: I will make some more progress before I give way.

In responding to several Opposition Members on nursery school funding, I would like to say how important our nursery schools are. They are a vital part of our childcare sector. We have already committed to an additional £55 million a year to maintain their current funding levels to at least 2020, in recognition that they deal with some of the children from the most deprived backgrounds in our country. I point out to Opposition Members that our manifesto committed us to immediately instituting a capital fund to help primary schools develop nurseries where they currently do not have the facilities for one.

The shadow Secretary of State for Education raised the pertinent matter of school fire safety in her speech. Sprinklers must be installed in new school buildings if a risk assessment means that they are necessary or if they are required under a local authority planning policy. There are no plans whatsoever to introduce any changes that would make fire safety laws for schools less strict than they are already.

Lucy Powell: I want to go back to the Minister's comments about funding, because he seems to be missing the point. The redundancies that are being made in schools now are a result not of the national funding formula but of increased costs and real-terms cuts happening to schools now. The national funding formula is on top that, and schools will continue to lose out. Can the Minister give a guarantee from the Dispatch Box that no school will lose funding as a result of those real-terms cuts?

Mr Jones: I can, as a result of the formula that has been put forward. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made that very clear today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned social mobility and the importance of education in our primary schools. She said that we now have more good and outstanding primary school places than we did seven years ago. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned the importance of tackling domestic violence and welcomed the measures in the Queen's Speech to do so.

My hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) and for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) made important speeches in which they referred to the opportunities that we have as we leave the European Union. In particular, they said that those opportunities are about not just the trade in goods but the trade in services, which is also critical.

The role that local government plays in providing services is also essential to the smooth running of our society. Despite challenging financial conditions, councils continue to deliver, and council tax is expected to be lower in real terms in 2019-20 than it was in 2010-11. Councils have embraced innovation and transformed the way they work to deliver services for their local areas.

Maria Eagle: I accept the Minister's point that councils provide important services, but can he explain why Liverpool City Council will have lost 68% of its resource by 2020-21?

Mr Jones: The Government have had to look extremely carefully at funding in a number of areas over the past seven years, because when the Government the hon. Lady was part of left office in 2010, they left behind a deficit of £150 billion—the country was spending £150 billion more than it was earning every single year.

We have also given councils financial freedoms and flexibilities to manage their own budgets. In 2015 we provided them with more certainty and stability through the offer of a four-year financial settlement, and 97% of eligible local authorities have accepted that. It enables them to plan service delivery, transformation and more effective collaboration with local partners.

Mr Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Gareth Snell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will make some more progress before I give way.

We are also responding positively to help councils meet the cost of increasing service pressures. In the spring Budget we provided an additional £2 billion to put social care on a more stable footing, and allowed relevant authorities the flexibility to raise more income through the adult social care precept. My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) raised the important issue of social care. The former mentioned the importance of social care for the working-age population and what more we can do to get people with learning disabilities, for example, into work. That is an extremely important aspiration for the Government. The latter talked about what more we can do to deal with the social care challenges that we face, on which the Government will bring forward plans during this Parliament.

Mr Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will not, because I am just coming on to the point that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Before I cover the details of local government finance, I want to mention the important points made by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about housing, which I think we all see as a critical issue. That is why we are devolving £3.4 billion to the Mayor of London for affordable housing during this spending period and why, to answer my hon. Friend's question, we are fully committed to implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, a piece of legislation that secured agreement right across the House and on which I had the pleasure of working with him.

To answer the hon. Member for Sheffield South East—this was a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish from the Opposition Front Bench—local government devolution is still very much on the agenda. The Government are committed to delivering the manifesto pledge that we made to help local authorities control more of the money they raise and we will work closely with local government to agree the best way of achieving that.

Mr Betts: Before the election there was a Bill before Parliament to introduce 100% retention of business rates by local councils. That was due to start in 2019. This is a two-year Queen's Speech with no mention of that measure. Can the Minister therefore confirm that this measure will now not go ahead in 2019 as planned?

Mr Jones: As I have said, we are absolutely committed to allowing local government to keep more of the money it raises locally and we will work with local government to achieve that.

Some of our councils have also been sorely tested in recent weeks, dealing with major terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, and the appalling fire at Grenfell Tower. Our thoughts across the whole House are with the victims and their families, friends and communities. It is essential, as the Prime Minister has said, that the people affected get the support they need. The efforts of the fire service, the police and the emergency services have been outstanding. As the Prime Minister said last week in her statement on Grenfell Tower, we pay tribute to the London boroughs for their fantastic response. That includes a number of chief executives, who are currently working at the new central command centre, as well as the Mayor of London and leading figures from a number of councils outside London.

It is well documented that the initial response was not as good as it should have been, but since then we have acted quickly, working with local authorities on the immediate issues in advance of the public inquiry into the fire. We rapidly provided funding to help the residents affected by the tragedy and we have the Bellwin scheme available to meet the immediate and uninsurable costs of responding to the disaster. We have also guaranteed funding for temporary accommodation for those whose homes have been destroyed as a result of the fire while permanent homes are found. Funding for legal representation for residents to ensure that their voices are heard during the inquiry will also be provided.

We have seen extraordinary acts of selflessness and spontaneous acts of good will associated with these tragedies, which show just how strong and resilient our communities are. We must foster our togetherness and create the conditions for strong local public services to serve our communities. We value the important work that our public sector workers do in delivering these essential public services. This Government's proposals will strengthen the economy, generate the tax revenues needed to invest in public services and ensure that all our citizens are provided with high-quality public services, at local and national level, at every stage of their lives. I commend this Gracious Speech to the House.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Universal Credit: Lowestoft

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Craig Whittaker.)

6.54 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate, as it provides a timely opportunity to review the roll-out of universal credit in Lowestoft, which is in my constituency.

The full roll-out in Lowestoft began in May 2016. Significant problems have been encountered, with many vulnerable people placed in very difficult situations, and at times the system has struggled to cope. The position is now better than it was six months ago, but significant challenges remain. It is important for lessons to be learned before the roll-out to other areas accelerates this autumn.

Since the turn of the year I have been corresponding regularly with the Minister, highlighting the problems that have been encountered. I am grateful to him for taking those concerns on board, and for introducing measures that have led to improvements. I also thank him for visiting Lowestoft on 21 February, when he met staff from the jobcentre and representatives of Waveney District Council and Anglia Revenues Partnership to hear about the problems that had been encountered, and to hear their proposals for how the roll-out could be improved. That meeting was particularly poignant because the team from the council was led by its leader, Councillor Colin Law, who sadly passed away at the beginning of last month. Colin recognised that many vulnerable people in the local community were being placed in very difficult situations, and although not in good health himself, he was determined to ensure that the Government addressed their needs.

The principal problem with the roll-out has been the delay before claimants receive any payments. That has placed many vulnerable people in difficult circumstances, with no money to pay for the basic necessities of food and a roof over their heads. At the turn of the year my office was dealing with 20 ongoing cases, and when I visited a local food bank at that time, all the people whom it was supporting were there because of delays in receipt of their first payments. A further problem is that when those payments are received, they often do not include the housing element, which leads to a build-up of rent arrears.

The system that has been put in place is digitally based, requiring access to a computer. Many claimants immediately face the problem of either not having a computer or not being readily able to use one. The situation has been compounded by the fact that, initially at least, the IT systems were not functioning as well as they should have been. Constituents also experienced phone calls not being answered promptly, and then long delays while their problems were addressed. One constituent received very slow and inaccurate responses to his journal entries, and delays in the handling of his subject access request. When his housing element was eventually paid, it was for the wrong amount.

It is important to point out that universal credit requires those working at jobcentres—those on the frontline—to acquire new skills. They are no longer just the labour exchange. They need to be able to identify vulnerable customers at an early stage, to get to grips

with housing challenges that were previously the responsibility of local housing authorities, and to work with the central universal credit team in building the universal credit model. All the Jobcentre Plus staff whom I have met are up for the challenge. They are determined to succeed, and it is vital that the Government provide them with the support and resources that will enable them to do so.

In the early stages of the roll-out, there was concern about the fact that the various agencies, including the Department for Work and Pensions centrally and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, were not properly co-ordinated and working together with Anglia Revenues Partnership and Waveney District Council. In recent months that has improved significantly. The lesson to be learned for the future is that the roll-out will be successful only if everyone works together. There is a vitally important role to be played by the voluntary sector, including Citizens Advice and the local organisations that are helping people into work.

A specific problem in Lowestoft, which has created particular difficulties, is the seasonal nature of employment. That is a problem that will be encountered in other coastal towns, as well as in rural areas where there is seasonal agricultural work. The situation has improved, but challenges remain with housing, which I will come on to in a minute, and particularly with the transition from employment and support allowance to universal credit. At present, no transitional provision is in place for customers moving from income support ESA.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Peter Aldous: I have a constituent who was an ESA claimant. He was required to take part in a work capability assessment. His WCA was carried out, and it was decided that he no longer had limited capability for work and work-related activity. His ESA claim was thus disallowed. His appeal against that decision was successful, but as income-related ESA had been abolished and he had been required to transition to universal credit, he has found himself significantly worse off and facing serious hardship through no fault of his own and with no support to help him through a very challenging time.

Waveney District Council and Anglia Revenues Partnership have also identified the following ongoing concerns. First, universal credit payment delays and cash flow difficulties continue to be a problem for the council in respect of providing temporary accommodation. They urgently need a decision to be made to restore such administration back to councils so that it is treated in the same way as supported accommodation. Secondly, housing benefit recovery in universal credit remains a significant concern. Local authorities and the Local Government Association have proposed that housing benefit debt should be transferred to the Treasury to produce a better outcome for the public finances. Recovery from universal credit will be non-existent, thereby burdening councils with debt that they will not be able to recover.

Thirdly, although universal credit decisions appear to be improving, the housing element is often still being received only in the second or third monthly payment. This is a deterioration compared with national housing

benefit performance. Fourthly, the continuing lack of universal credit management information does not provide an insight to assist councils to manage customers' and landlords' expectations. Finally, there are no plans for universal credit to share data with councils about housing benefit cases migrating to universal credit. This is needed for local council tax support schemes, discretionary housing payments and supported accommodation claims.

A further issue that should be highlighted is the fact that since universal credit was rolled out in Lowestoft, the level of unemployment has increased. In May 2015, it was at a low of 2.5%. It stood at 3% when universal credit was introduced in May 2016, and it had risen to 5.1% in May 2017. Much of the increase is due to the fact that, under universal credit, a broader span of claimants are required to look for work than was the case under jobseeker's allowance. However, this raises the question of whether universal credit is fulfilling one of its objectives—that of better preparing claimants for the workplace and making it easier for them to move into full-time employment. We need to look at that to ensure that it is being adequately addressed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I sought the hon. Gentleman's permission before asking him to give way. Does he understand, as many of us do, that the switchover to universal credit is proving very difficult? Does he agree that those who have physical and mental issues need a dedicated helpline to ensure that those vulnerable people do not feel overwhelmed and that they can understand the process of change? Many of them do not.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I agree with him. He talks about a dedicated helpline and, yes, that may be one way forward. I would also suggest that there needs to be front of house support and assistance in the jobcentres themselves.

Delays in the paying of universal credit have led to rent arrears building up and, as I mentioned, the situation is being compounded by the fact that the housing element has often not been included in the first payment. The feedback from the DWP nationally is that the timing of payments is improving and that if a tenant has a reasonable expectation of receiving their housing cost as part of the universal credit payment, the landlord should not take action to gain possession of a property and thus the tenant should not face the risk of eviction. In real life, it needs to be borne in mind that that approach is easier said than done and that the landlords have many costs and commitments themselves. Landlords are often in a position to reluctantly have to issue eviction notices as a last resort, but it should be pointed out that many landlords own only one or two properties and that the rents that they receive are a vital part of their income—often retirement income.

Delays in the payment of the housing element are triggering a downward spiral of events: arrears leading to evictions, leading to an increase in homelessness, putting added pressure on local authorities and housing associations to house those who are evicted. In due course, there will be a reduction in the supply of housing as landlords decide not to let to universal credit claimants.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I thoroughly commend what the hon. Gentleman has been doing to support people on universal credit in his constituency and the

enormous amount of work and effort that has gone into that. As someone who has been working for the shop workers' union for 20 years, I have considerable experience, particularly from the past 12 months, of members who have been transferred on to universal credit and are suffering incredible difficulties and hardships, as the hon. Gentleman says.

The hon. Gentleman calls for councils to have their debt underwritten by the Government, but the situation is also a severe problem for housing associations where many universal credit recipients live, and many associations are suffering. I hope that he will allow me to support such cases being made to the Government before the scheme is rolled out any further.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. I will come to address the concerns that housing associations have mentioned to me. Her point is interesting in that jobcentres have in the past dealt with people who are not in work to get into employment, but now they are also dealing with people who are already in work, which is a major game change for jobcentres to deal with.

There is a concern that universal credit, the objective of which is to bring people closer to the workplace and to prepare them for work, may actually be doing the opposite. People need a secure and stable home life to be able to prepare and plan for regular work. That cannot happen if they are sleeping on the streets, sofa surfing or living in a hostel. Housing associations also face problems and are taking on more staff to liaise with tenants at an early stage to prevent rent arrears from increasing and to limit the serving of eviction notices. That is an added cost that they can ill afford, and they would prefer to be spending time and money on repairs and on building much-needed new homes.

The alternative payment arrangements are in place to help prevent such problems from arising, but in many cases they are not working properly and the process is taking too long. By the time decisions have been made to put in place such an arrangement, the landlords have invariably obtained court orders for possession. It is important to identify at an early stage where it is appropriate to make direct payments to landlords, and the jobcentre in Lowestoft has put in place arrangements to do that. Consideration should be given to changing the system of universal credit staff only communicating about an account with a tenant's explicit consent. The feedback that I am receiving from both social and private landlords is that a change to allow the landlord to open communications and make a request for an alternative payment would be welcome and positive.

Although I understand that the Government wish to empower tenants to manage their own money, there is an argument that such empowerment involves choice. Tenants should therefore be able to decide whether to have the rent paid directly or for it to pass through their own hands. Again, the feedback I am receiving is that many tenants would prefer their rent to be paid direct.

There is a need for full and proactive engagement with private landlords. That did not happen initially, but the situation is now improving and a local meeting between the DWP, Waveney District Council and private landlords is scheduled for 17 July to explore how best to address the problems. Hopefully my suggestions on alternative payments will be on the table for discussion.

[Peter Aldous]

The roll-out in Lowestoft has not gone well, but there are signs of improvement and examples of good practice have emerged, which I suggest should be replicated as universal credit is rolled out in other areas. Lowestoft jobcentre has a vulnerable persons officer, and I propose that additional attention and support is given to those with mental health challenges. The jobcentre works closely with the citizens advice bureau, which provides a money advice service in the jobcentre. There is an officer who liaises with the national universal credit team in the building of the model, and there are good working relationships not only with Waveney District Council and Anglia Revenues Partnership but with MyGo, the new youth employment service promoted by Suffolk County Council. Such joint and collaborative working is very much the way forward and must be promoted and properly resourced.

Consideration should be given to the following. First, the Government should respond to the Public Accounts Committee's most recent report on the impact of the changes and delays to the universal credit programme on operational costs, staff and claimants. They should also update the Committee on how staff are being enabled to engage in testing and learning processes and to feed back concerns. I appreciate that the general election purdah period has delayed that feedback, but it is important if the universal credit model is to be improved as the roll-out accelerates.

Secondly, there needs to be an initial assessment as to whether universal credit is achieving its objectives of better preparing people for the workplace, making it easier to move in and out of work and improving incentives to work. Thirdly, with the roll-out scheduled to move into more rural areas, work is needed to ensure that both digital services and broadband connectivity are resilient enough to cope and that the system takes account of claimants' use of the public transport system, which may in places be far from ideal.

Finally, there needs to be more transparency and closer working with all the partner organisations involved in the roll-out. There is a lot of heavy lifting involved, and jobcentre staff cannot do this all on their own if we are to ensure that universal credit customers receive the fair and efficient service that they are entitled to expect and that, up to now, has unfortunately let down a lot of people, placing some in very difficult and desperate situations.

7.13 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing a debate on this important issue. I know he joins me in supporting the aims of universal credit. I also know that the insight he brings, and the amount of thought and work he has put in, will prove a great asset as we strive collectively to make universal credit the best it can be.

I also recognise the concerns that have been raised, and I reassure my hon. Friend and parliamentary colleagues that work is under way to improve delivery. This debate provides a chance to show how the Department has removed obstacles to this flagship welfare reform. More than 1 million people have claimed universal credit, and 530,000 are currently on universal credit, of whom

6,067 are in his constituency. There are now more people claiming universal credit than jobseeker's allowance, which is an important milestone.

Ruth George: The Minister says that more than 1 million people have claimed universal credit and that currently 530,000 are receiving it. Does that mean that nearly half a million people have put in a claim and are yet to receive universal credit? If so, those are frightening figures.

Damian Hinds: No, it does not mean that. Obviously, people come into the benefits system and may be receiving benefits for a period of time but then go into work that is sufficiently remunerative to mean that they do not fall within the universal credit system. As the hon. Lady will know, people's circumstances change, and can do so often.

As I was saying, the digital take-up of universal credit is a great success story, with 99% of UC new claims made online, which will mean that in the long run the service is more expedient and more user-friendly. Overall, 82% of universal credit customers reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with the service, and figures show that it is working. Claimants are spending twice as much time looking for a job as under the old system and they are moving into work faster, with 113 people moving into work under universal credit for every 100 who were doing so under the pre-existing system.

One result of the roll-out of universal credit full service in my hon. Friend's constituency—I grant that this may seem paradoxical—is that the claimant count has risen since the full service went live in May 2016. As he rightly acknowledged, that is because under universal credit the count is extended—it is broader—to cover a wider group of claimants than under the old jobseeker's allowance benefit. This is part of universal credit's design and ambition to encourage and support more people into work.

My hon. Friend has deep roots in the constituency and community he represents, and I am very aware that he works closely with the local authorities in his constituency to make sure the voice of East Anglia is always heard. I was very pleased to have the chance to visit Lowestoft jobcentre earlier this year—he mentioned that—accompanied by the leaders of the Waveney and Great Yarmouth councils. I am also aware that he has made subsequent visits to the jobcentre, which I hope he also found useful. That visit was a great opportunity for me to see how we are delivering universal credit in his constituency and to hear at first hand some of the concerns people have had.

I also want to join my hon. Friend in expressing condolences following the death of Colin Law, the leader of Waveney District Council, in May. Councillor Law was a long-standing public servant who made a big contribution to the community he represented, as was manifested in the example my hon. Friend gave of his commitment even into his ill health. He will be missed by those on all sides of the political divide.

Given the ambition and scale of change that universal credit introduces, there are bound to be issues that arise as the service is rolled out. In particular, there are clearly concerns over the challenges some claimants face when managing a monthly budget for the first time,

but let me assure Members that the Department has already been making inroads on this issue and there are many good reasons to feel positive about the future.

I take the opportunity to highlight how universal credit helps people looking for work in my hon. Friend's constituency. There is a high level of seasonal work in the Lowestoft area. Before the introduction of universal credit, many people could have been reluctant to take up short-term or irregular work because of the old 16-hour limit with some of the legacy benefits. Since the launch of universal credit, jobcentre staff have contacted the large local employers, leisure parks and holiday resorts, to help generate job opportunities for claimants. We have run popular job fairs, attended by more than 1,700 claimants, promoting these openings. I know that my hon. Friend has had a lot of personal involvement in running job fairs, and other employability and opportunity events.

Universal credit claimants can now take up work, which may initially be just at the weekend and in school holidays, that builds up to extra hours as the season progresses. Claimants have the flexibility to take on extra hours without worrying about having to stop and then restart multiple benefit claims. Under universal credit, employers in Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth are able to offer extra work at short notice to a workforce that can make the most of those opportunities without the additional administrative burden.

Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth jobcentres were among the first to roll out the universal credit service to all claimant types, which has given us invaluable insight into what works and what we can do better. From my visits and from the correspondence that I have had with my hon. Friend and with the local authorities in his constituency it became clear that we needed to be better at gathering information and improving the speed and accuracy of payments to claimants. It was also clear that we needed to do a better job of speaking with landlords in both the private and social sector about the changes that universal credit would bring.

I am pleased to report that this valuable feedback has helped us introduce real improvements to the way we do things: we have removed delays and data verification that were causing some of the payments to go out late; and we have introduced a "Housing Confident" scheme to ensure that universal credit work coaches talk to claimants about housing and that work coaches are alert to the support that claimants might need. It is about properly understanding the claimant's needs, and this can extend to providing budgeting advice or, when needed, arranging for direct payments to landlords.

We have made improvements to the service that we offer private and social landlords. Thanks to feedback from landlords, we have made improvements to the way we set up direct payments of rent to landlords with an easier to use application form. That means that we are getting those payments out to landlords more quickly. We are also exploring how we can make it easier for landlords to find out the status of the application for a direct payment and we will be making an announcement about that soon.

Universal credit also brings big improvements for private landlords whose tenants get into arrears. Under the old system, landlords would need to apply for recovery of arrears via a third party deduction, often at a low repayment rate, which could mean a long wait

before landlords got back their rent. In universal credit, it is easier and quicker to set up an arrears payment for landlords. In addition, under universal credit, repayment for private landlords can be at a higher rate—up to 20% where claimants can afford it. That means that claimants can get on top of their finances and landlords can get the money they are owed more quickly.

These actions are having results. Our internal figures show that far more claimants are getting the right money on time. We aim to make this information public in the near future. I know that my hon. Friend has acknowledged these improvements in performance.

Jim Shannon: In my previous intervention, I suggested that perhaps a dedicated helpline would be one way of addressing the issues. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) responded by saying that some more frontline staff would also be of help. Would the Minister consider both of those suggestions?

Damian Hinds: In response to the points raised by my hon. Friend about the roll-out of universal credit in Lowestoft, I said that I would come on to some of the questions around our customers and claimants—people with particular needs and complex needs. The essential point is that, in jobcentres, our staff see the full range of society and of course we must have the wherewithal to help those people as best we can. That does involve being responsive to different types of people and their different needs. I am confident that our staff do that in the correct way, but can we learn more? Of course we can.

I do appreciate the concern that exists around rent arrears. It is an issue that matters to many people. We have had a chance to debate that matter in a recent Adjournment debate in this House. As I said at that time, there are many complex and overlapping factors at play, and the role of universal credit is by no means the sole factor contributing to rent arrears. Our research shows that the majority of universal credit claimants are comfortable managing their own budget. Furthermore, we know that, after four months, the proportion of universal credit claimants who were in arrears at the start of their claim fell by a third.

Let me reassure the House that there are safeguards in place for claimants. We can advance up to half of a universal credit payment at the start of the claim. Our work coaches talk to claimants about their financial situation and can also refer claimants for support to help them manage their budget.

If claimants do not want to talk about their finances face to face, our new "Money Manager" website, developed in co-operation with the Money Advice Service, gives claimants practical support and advice. There are a number of alternative payment arrangements available, which include paying rent costs directly to landlords but also making more frequent payments to claimants and splitting universal credit payments in cases of domestic abuse. Our research shows that over time, claimants successfully reduce their arrears.

I want to turn to a couple of the other specifics mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney. On emergency and temporary accommodation, we are aware that the transitory nature of universal credit temporary accommodation claims can cause problems to do with the timing of when people will be in temporary accommodation, the assessment period and when the payments are made. We also recognise that this has resulted

[*Damian Hinds*]

in some difficulties for local authorities and tenants in emergency or short-term accommodation. Our consultation on supported accommodation, which closed on 13 February, asked whether devolving shared accommodation to local authorities might also work as an approach for temporary accommodation. We are considering the responses to that consultation and the joint Select Committee on Communities and Local Government and Select Committee on Work and Pensions report, and we will work with colleagues across Government and in the devolved Administrations to set out further details of our plans as soon as we can.

On the question of claimants with complex needs, we make sure that our work coaches have the flexibility to shape support for individuals in difficult and different circumstances. Work coaches can adjust work search requirements to allow claimants to prioritise solutions to their issues, such as homelessness or addiction. We are also working with our partners to target resources most effectively. Hon. Members will be aware of the range of third-party services and partnership arrangements in place in a large number of jobcentres. We have also appointed vulnerable people officers in jobcentres to deal with claimants who face significant challenges. These officers work closely with the universal credit service centre to identify and resolve issues quickly.

The DWP's response to the Public Accounts Committee's report in February 2017 made a commitment to write to the Committee in spring 2017 to set out the impact of the changes to the programme on operational costs, staff and claimants. As a result of the general election, we will now send our response once the Committee has been reinstated. We also plan to publish a range of management information on universal credit later this year.

I recognise, of course, that there are areas for improvement in our service, but with every release of new software and every office that goes live with the full digital service, enhancements are made that improve the experience of using the service for staff, for claimants, for landlords and for our delivery partners. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney has seen for himself the drive, commitment and passion that so many of our staff, stakeholders and people across the programme have. They want to see this revolutionary welfare reform through, and I am confident that they will.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 27 June 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Joint European Torus Facility: UK Underwrite

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Today I have laid before Parliament a departmental minute describing the contingent liability resulting from Her Majesty's Government's underwrite of the UK's fair share of the Joint European Torus (JET) costs.

JET is a world-leading nuclear fusion research facility based in Oxfordshire and supports 1,300 jobs in the UK. JET is funded through a contract between the EU Commission and the UK Atomic Energy Authority. As part of this contract, the EU provides around £60 million of funding per year representing 88% of the JET running costs.

The current JET contract is due to end in December 2018 and the EU Commission is currently considering a potential extension of the JET contract until at least the end of 2020. This extension is crucial to the future of JET, the researchers that work there and to ensuring the UK continues to lead the world in fusion technology and research.

I wrote to the EU Commission on 20 June 2017 confirming that, should the JET contract be extended, the UK would continue to pay its fair share of JET costs. This underwriting of UK JET costs aims to provide the certainty needed to secure the extension of the JET contract and minimise the uncertainty around the future of this world-class facility.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that the Government will hold as a result of underwriting the UK's fair share of the JET costs. The value of the liability is subject to negotiation. Estimates as to the possible value of the liability will need to remain confidential so as to avoid prejudicing the UK's future negotiating position.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide Parliament with an opportunity to scrutinise the proposal and raise any objections. Because of the dissolution of Parliament it was not possible to allow for a period of scrutiny before incurring this liability. This was in order to ensure that the underwrite was communicated to the

EU Commission in time to influence a key report on which decisions about the JET contract extension will be based. This action was judged to be in the public interest because of the additional costs to the public finances which might be incurred if the Commission was not informed of the UK's intentions in time to influence its decisions.

[HCWS13]

DEFENCE

Contingent Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has received approval from Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) to recognise a new contingent liability associated with the Type 26 Global Combat Ship Manufacture Phase 1 Contract.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that the MOD will hold as a result of placing the Type 26 Global Combat Ship Manufacture Phase 1 Contract, which will provide for the manufacture and testing of the first batch of Type 26 Global Combat Ships. The maximum contingent liability against the MOD is unquantifiable and will remain until the latest Out of Service Date of the ships manufactured under the contract, in the second half of the 21st century.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide hon. Members an opportunity to raise any objections. I regret that on this occasion pressing commercial and industrial requirements to sign the contract within the next few days together with the dissolution of Parliament, have meant that it has not been possible to provide the full 14 sitting days prior to taking on the contingent liabilities. Any delay would have risked losing significant financial benefits for the taxpayer. The Secretary of State for Defence has decided to proceed with the agreement, following scrutiny 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.

Within the contract the exposure of BAE Systems Maritime-Naval Ships to a number of specified claims and to direct losses is limited to £50 million, while in respect of indirect losses and, within certain prescribed categories, catastrophic risks the contractor is indemnified against claims in excess of £50 million. It is the view of the Department that the likelihood of any claim is extremely low.

[HCWS14]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 27 June 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	439	BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—	
Business Confidence	447	<i>continued</i>	
Carbon Reduction Plan	453	Industrial Strategy	452
Construction Industry: Cash Retentions	442	Leaving the EU	441
Electric Cars	443	Leaving the EU: Small Businesses	450
Energy Price Cap	450	North Sea Oil and Gas	439
Euratom Treaty	448	Thames Gateway: SMEs	445
Gas Storage Facilities	446	Topical Questions	456
		Zero-hours Contracts	448

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 27 June 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	15WS	DEFENCE	16WS
Joint European Torus Facility: UK Underwrite	15WS	Contingent Liability	16WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Tuesday 4 July 2017**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 27 June 2017

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 439] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

NHS Shared Business Services [Col. 462]
Answer to urgent question—(Mr Hunt)

Debate on the Address [Col. 477]
Debate Adjourned

Universal Credit: Lowestoft [Col. 565]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 15WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
