

Monday
3 July 2017

Volume 626
No. 10



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 3 July 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, we are pleased to be joined today by Speaker Carme Forcadell, the Speaker of the Parliament of Catalonia, who is visiting London, and whom we are delighted to see. Welcome to you.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Child Sexual Abuse Inquiry

1. **Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): Whether she has held discussions with the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse since the withdrawal of the charity Survivors of Organised and Institutional Abuse from that inquiry.

[900114]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): May I take the opportunity, first, to welcome the new shadow Front-Bench team—the hon. Members for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for Derby North (Chris Williamson), for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)? They are welcome indeed.

I agree that it is regrettable that Survivors of Organised and Institutional Abuse has withdrawn from the inquiry. The inquiry is making good progress, in line with the plan it published last year. This is evidenced through public hearings and other events with victims and survivors. I retain my confidence in this independent inquiry to deliver its important work, to get the truth and to learn lessons for the future.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the Home Secretary for that, but this is now really serious: this is the fourth victims' group that has left, and today we have had the Sutton review, which reads like a total whitewash and suggests that no lessons have been learned by the inquiry or by the Government that set it up. What message does she think that sends to everybody in this country who is currently relying on a public inquiry to deliver justice for them?

Amber Rudd: I ask the hon. Lady to reconsider her view. The inquiry has said that the group can always come back if it wants to, and I ask her to think again about the people who are already being helped by the inquiry. There are 60 to 80 people whose experiences and attacks have been referred to the police, which may lead to prosecutions, and there are up to 1,000 people whose lives have been changed and who are getting the answers that they want. Those are real differences, which I ask the hon. Lady not to underestimate.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Last year, the inquiry attracted some unhelpful headlines on the back of its internal workings and certain personalities, since when, I am glad to say, it has been getting on with its important work. But we were promised an interim report and greater transparency, particularly after the Home Affairs Committee sittings, so when might we expect those?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I remember well giving evidence about this very matter when he was the acting Chair of that Committee. Like him, I have confidence in the new inquiry chair, Alexis Jay; she is getting on with the job, and as I said to the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), we are seeing real action and real results from the progress that is being made. I have been told that we will get an interim report during 2018.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary have any concerns about the fact that the police have announced that they are going to curtail annual checks on people who are on the sex offender register, when it is growing year on year?

Amber Rudd: I refer the hon. Lady to the fact that different police chiefs are taking different positions on this, depending on their experience in their particular communities. If she has a particular concern about the situation in her community, I encourage her to come and talk to myself or the police Minister in due course.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does the independent inquiry have a role to play in considering the outcome of the £1 million, two-year Operation Conifer—the inquiry into the allegations against the late Sir Edward Heath? If it does not, who does?

Amber Rudd: That is a matter for local policing. It is up to local operations to decide how they will proceed with that matter; it is not for the inquiry. The inquiry is making its inquiries, having the truth sessions and then referring, where appropriate, to the police.

Special Constables

2. **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What financial support is in place for special constables. [900115]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Since 1831, special constables have made a genuinely valuable contribution to local policing. That is why we should keep under regular review what the Government do to support that work.

Robert Halfon: Will my hon. Friend congratulate the 358 special constables in Essex, and congratulate Essex police on their push to encourage even more people to become special constables? Will he consider making it easier for councils to offer council tax rebates to special constables so that we can give something back to those who serve in our communities?

Mr Hurd: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. He has been a tireless champion for volunteering, and for special constables in particular. He represents a county that, through the leadership of police and crime

commissioner Roger Hirst, is showing real leadership in trying to encourage more special constables. At the moment, we provide access to insurance for legal expenses. There is provision for out-of-allowance expenses, and there is provision in law for discretionary benefits such as discounts on council tax, but I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss how we can go further.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: In welcoming back the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), I am informed that during his enforced and involuntary absence he has become a doctor of philosophy, upon which the House wishes to congratulate him, I am sure.

Dr Drew: I had to do something with my wasted years.

I welcome the police Minister to his place. We all congratulate the specials on the work they do, which is of course first-rate, but it seems to me from my experience—I am going out with the specials on Friday, so I am sure they will tell me in no uncertain terms whether I am right—that being in the specials is no longer an entrance point to the full-time constabulary. Is there a reason for that? If it is because of problems of release or of financial support, will the Minister look into that and do something about it?

Mr Hurd: I add my voice to the congratulations to the hon. Gentleman, with whom I used to serve on the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; it seems like 1,000 years ago. I would be concerned if what he says were true. It is not what I hear and not what the data tell me about the number of specials who go on to become regular police officers, but I will keep it under regular review.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): As a former special constable—I am sure that will not be the last time that is mentioned from this Dispatch Box—I saw at first hand the dedication and bravery of our frontline officers, but I also witnessed a collapse in morale as the Government ignored warnings over jobs, pay and resources, and this has only gotten worse. Only last month at the Police Federation conference, the Home Secretary dismissed the concerns of an officer who told her how pay cuts had left him struggling to put food on his table. Does the Minister agree with the Home Secretary or the Foreign Secretary on whether our bravest and best should continue to experience a real-terms pay cut until 2020?

Mr Hurd: I thank and congratulate the hon. Lady on the contribution that she has made as a special constable. In relation to police pay, let me be very clear: we want to make sure that frontline public service workers, including the police, are paid fairly for their work, not least because of the contribution that they have made over the years to reducing the deficit that we inherited from Labour, and, in that context, the work they have done to safeguard hundreds of thousands of jobs. How we do that in a sustainable and affordable way is under active discussion.

Extremism

3. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle extremism in the UK. [900117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): We will establish a commission for countering extremism to reinforce current efforts to tackle extremist ideology in all its forms wherever it occurs. Already, through the 2015 counter-extremism strategy, we have taken steps to protect children from the threat of extremism, taken action on hate crime, and provided protective support for places of worship. We are also supporting civil society groups to tackle extremism in their communities.

Andrew Bowie: I thank the Minister for that answer. Ten years ago last week we saw the terrorist attack on Glasgow airport, and since then we have sadly seen instances of extremism and terrorism in Walsall, Exeter, Manchester, Yorkshire, and of course here in London. What is being done with the devolved Administrations, as well the combined authorities and regions, to ensure that extremism, and therefore terrorism, has no place in the United Kingdom?

Sarah Newton: I very much welcome my hon. Friend to his place. I am sure he is going to make a significant contribution here at Home Office questions, as well as serving his constituents. He is quite right to point out that there is simply no place in our society for extremism or terrorism. In launching the counter-extremism strategy in 2015, the Government agreed with the devolved Administrations that they were not going to be part of the strategy at the time, but we continue to work with them. As we carry on working with them on setting up the commission for countering extremism, we will consult them widely. It is very important that we work together and learn together to keep the whole of the United Kingdom safe.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Last year, Twitter suspended 125,000 accounts that were linked to global terrorism, but millions of videos of such material remain on the internet. In Germany, companies can be fined up to £43 million for failing to take down illegal videos. When do the Government intend to introduce legislation of that kind?

Sarah Newton: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the vile hatred that is being spread on the internet. I am pleased to report that the action we are taking is regularly enabling thousands of images to be taken down. We leave no stone unturned, and the Home Secretary is working closely with all the bodies responsible for the internet to make sure that we take more action to remove every vile piece of hatred from it.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing to tackle anti-Semitism on campus, where the activities of hard-line groups often create an intolerant and intimidatory atmosphere for Jewish students?

Sarah Newton: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of anti-Semitism. There is no room at all in our society for hatred of anyone based on their faith, race or ideology. The Government have put a safeguarding responsibility on universities and schools to make sure that they protect young people from being exposed to vile hatred and radicalisation.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): May I press the Minister on the answer she gave to the former Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz)? Social media giants remain the command and control platform of choice for extremists. I wrote to the Home Secretary on 29 March to ask whether she was considering similar laws to those in Germany and in Ireland, where a new watchdog is being created to police social media giants, or indeed proposals similar to those in the US Senate, such as the Feinstein Bill, which would require social media giants to report terrorism content. Governments around the world are taking action; when will this Government follow suit?

Sarah Newton: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the Government are taking action by leading the international efforts to make sure that internet platforms take their responsibilities seriously. The Home Secretary has made it absolutely clear that nothing is off the table. We are considering all options to make sure that the vile ideology and hatred that is pumped around the internet is stopped as soon as possible.

18. [900133] **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Maajid Nawaz is a former constituent of mine whom I once visited in prison in Cairo, where he was being held because of alleged terrorist activities. Is my hon. Friend aware that he has completely turned his life around and is the founder of Quilliam, an organisation dedicated to tackling extremism in the UK?

Sarah Newton: That is really good news. Of course, the Government want to work with the Quilliam Foundation and any other organisation that seeks to stand up to extremism and terrorism and fight against evil ideology, to keep us all safe in our country.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her welcome.

A working and workable definition of what extremism means is central to any effective strategy for tackling extremism. Can the Minister assure me that the new commission set up to tackle extremism will construct a definition that is not only statutorily robust but will be able to withstand the scrutiny of the courts?

Sarah Newton: I not only welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place but very much welcome his views. The whole purpose of setting up the counter-extremism commission is to see what more we can do and what further steps we can take. I think we all understand what our shared British values are, and our strategy is making good progress. Of course, one of the commission's actions will be to look at the definition that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

Police and Fire Services: Collaboration

4. **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between the police and fire services. [900118]

8. **James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between the police and fire services. [900123]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Policing and Crime Act 2017 introduced a raft of new measures to drive greater collaboration between emergency services, including a new duty to collaborate and enable police and crime commissioners to take on governance of fire and rescue services where a case is made. The Government continue to expect the pace and ambition of emergency services' collaboration to increase.

Amanda Milling: Staffordshire's police and crime commissioner, Matthew Ellis, has identified savings of at least £3.6 million a year from the integration of police and fire services, and he has committed them to bolstering frontline services in each of those two areas, as well as to investment in preventive measures, especially relating to fire. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such integration should progress where there is a strong local business case for it?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right. Where there is a strong business case and collaboration can improve outcomes and save money, which can then be used for the frontline, it should be encouraged. I welcome the good work that she has been doing with Matthew Ellis to deliver just that.

James Duddridge: Roger Hirst, the Essex police and crime commissioner, has moved himself and his staff into fire HQ, saving £1.5 million, and has identified a further £23 million of potential savings in governance. What more can be done to encourage such excellent work in Essex and across the country?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me another great example of the sort of collaboration that we are trying to encourage to improve outcomes and save money that can be used on the frontline. I congratulate him on his good work with his PCC, Roger Hirst, and wish them well in that new endeavour.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Both police officers and firefighters have told me that they are increasingly called to assist residents experiencing a mental health crisis, so I was very concerned when the collaboration in Nottinghamshire, which saw a mental health nurse based in the police control room, was axed in May because of a lack of funding, even though the scheme was described as successful and valuable. What discussions has the Home Secretary had with chief constables and chief fire officers about how best to support their staff who are dealing with members of the public experiencing mental health problems of that sort?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady's view about how important it is to ensure that people with mental health crises or difficulties are treated differently. If she wants to write to me about the particular example she has set out, I will certainly look at it, but I am proud of the work that the Government have done to reduce the number—I think by nearly 80%—of young people with a mental health crisis ending up in police cells. The more we can do to address that, the better.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The Merseyside police and fire services already collaborate closely and are looking at ways of collaborating further.

Does the Home Secretary accept that the scale of her Department's financial cuts to the police service and the fire and rescue service in Merseyside makes that job much more difficult?

Amber Rudd: It is a good thing that we have protected police funding from 2015 to 2020. I admire enormously the work that the police and fire services do, and we will continue to look at how better we can support them. One of the ways that we have heard about today—I know that Merseyside has led on this too—is through collaboration, which will allow stronger working, better outcomes and money saved for the frontline.

Police Recruitment

5. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure the recruitment to the police force of people with the skills required to tackle modern crime. [900119]

11. **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure the recruitment to the police force of people with the skills required to tackle modern crime. [900126]

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government's programme of reforms is aimed at ensuring that the police workforce is flexible, capable and professional, agile enough to adapt to changes in crime and society. We established the College of Policing as the professional body for policing, and its new policing education qualification framework is designed to ensure that policing is fit for the future. In addition, innovative recruitment schemes are widening the talent pool, bringing in people from a diverse range of backgrounds.

Peter Aldous: Tim Passmore, the police and crime commissioner for Suffolk, is recruiting more officers. To help Suffolk police with that task, will the Minister consider expanding the direct entry scheme and introducing more flexibility in salaries and promotion within ranks, so that officers are better able to progress their careers and are not continually moving into new roles when promoted?

Mr Wallace: We are already encouraging more police chiefs to take advantage of the direct entry scheme. There are a range of innovative examples around the country, including the chief constable in Durham, who is going direct to Sheffield University. As my hon. Friend says, it is also important to recognise police who are already serving, and that is why we fully support the advanced practitioner programme, which is being piloted in eight forces and encourages police to continue to specialise for a longer career, and rewards that effort.

Mr Jayawardena: Will the Minister join me in commending Hampshire constabulary on its great specialist entry detective programme, which is helping people find jobs that they want to do in the police service, bringing new people in and keeping the people of North East Hampshire, their property and their families safe?

Mr Wallace: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to his force. It is really important that in the 21st century we recognise that policing has changed and that people who can contribute to delivering safe streets and investigations come from all over—from

education opportunities in universities and from within forces and other public sector bodies. That is why direct entry is one key and enhancing careers is another.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Given the falling numbers of uniformed police officers in Lancashire—down 700 since 2010—what reassurance can the Minister give to my Muslim constituents, who are fearful for their own safety and that of their families in the light of recent attacks on mosques and the horrendous recent acid attacks?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Lady who, like me, is a Lancashire MP. I speak regularly with the chief constable of Lancashire and his officers. They have put in place lots of measures to ensure that hate crimes do not impact on the community. It is important to note that since 2010 crime has fallen in Lancashire. It is not simply that crime has remained high and police numbers have been cut. The police are doing an amazing job facing today's challenges with the resources they receive. We have to remember that we have to live within our means.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given the fact that 21,000 police officers have been lost in the past seven years, whether it is modern crime or traditional crime, and given the pressures that police chiefs recognise, how many police officers does the Minister intend the Government to recruit this year?

Mr Wallace: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the number of police required in each force is down to the chief constable of each force. He should recognise, because in 2009-10 he was doing a similar job to me, that, owing to the changing nature of policing, we have seen an increase in funding for the National Crime Agency and specialist policing to tackle those areas. That goes alongside normal day-to-day policing. Back in 2015, in recognition of the importance of the beat constable, we on the Government Benches protected police spending. We were able to deliver that because we had a firm economy.

Community Police Officers

6. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What plans she has to increase the number of police officers in the community. [900120]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The hon. Gentleman will know, I am sure, that direct resource funding for the South Wales police force, which covers his constituency, will be up 3% in 2017-18. He will also know that decisions on the size, composition and deployment of the police workforce are operational matters for individual chief officers and police and crime commissioners.

Kevin Brennan: Ministers should be given credit for making sure that they leave no cliché left unsaid in their attempt to defend their actions in relation to the police force. Can the Minister remember a time when a Conservative Government have been so unpopular with police officers—apart from when the current Prime Minister was Home Secretary?

Mr Hurd: I know from my time shadowing the hon. Gentleman that he defers to no one in his admiration of a good cliché. What I would say to him is what I hope any Policing Minister for any Government of any colour would say, which is that public safety is the No.1 priority for any Government. As he heard from the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), we have protected police spending in real terms since 2015 and increased spending in areas of specialisation. Now, in the light of the terrible events that have shocked us all, it is quite right that we go through a process of reviewing, with police and crime commissioners and colleagues from all parts of the House, what resources are needed to be absolutely sure that the police have the resources to keep us safe.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Minister will be aware that motorbike and moped crime in London is on the increase. We need community officers who can deal with this problem directly, as it is an increasing issue. What are the Government doing about it? Can we please make our communities safer in this respect?

Mr Hurd: As a fellow London MP, I totally agree. In fact, I heard it directly the other day from a sergeant with whom I was walking the beat in London Bridge. As my hon. Friend knows, it is a requirement of local police chiefs to set the operational priorities. It is our responsibility to make sure they have the resources they need to meet all the risks they see.

19. [900134] **Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab):** The Minister will agree with me that community policing is the bedrock on which all policing operates, but following the bomb in Greater Manchester the whole of the police service has been working 12-hour days and there is no capacity to draw people in for overtime. Does the Minister not understand that policing is stretched beyond any capacity to deliver?

Mr Hurd: I hope the hon. Gentleman knows that we are extremely sensitive to that point. As I said in my remarks, we are very aware that the pressure put on the police as a result of recent terrible events, not least the one in Manchester, has required a surge of police effort and fantastic collaboration between forces, but we now have to sit down rationally with police and crime commissioners and police chiefs, to really understand and test assertions about pressure on police forces and to make sure that they have the resources they need to keep us safe.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Our west midlands police have done a fantastic job in cutting crime and doing more with less. Will the Minister ensure that the police funding formula is reformed to deliver a fair deal for the west midlands?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. I hope I can reassure him that a lot of work is being done to ensure not only that the police have the resources they need, but that they are allocated fairly across all forces. No final decision has been taken on the fair funding formula, but I am happy to sit down with my hon. Friend and colleagues from all parts of the House who have concerns about the resource allocation for their forces.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): During the Queen's Speech debate on security last week, the Home Secretary said she was more worried about outcomes than police numbers, so will the Minister tell the House how the Home Office measures and values the outcomes of community police officers?

Mr Hurd: Ultimately, what matters most is the trend in crime, which the right hon. Gentleman knows from experience is what unsettles our constituents most. Public safety is the No. 1 priority, so the ultimate outcome is the crime statistics, and I am sure that he will join me in welcoming the long-term decline that we have seen since 2010.

Fire Prevention and Safety

7. **Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab):** If she will discuss with Cabinet colleagues reviewing fire prevention and safety regulations, banning the use of flammable material in cladding and ensuring that fire inspections are not outsourced to private firms. [900121]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Secretary of State, who I believe is making a statement on Grenfell Tower this afternoon, has established an expert advisory panel to provide independent advice on any immediate measures that may need to be put in place to make buildings safe for residents following the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

Bill Esterson: Survivors and relatives of the victims of the Grenfell disaster are concerned at the proposed scope of the public inquiry, as the Minister knows, but does he agree that Departments, including his own, should act now to address many of the concerns raised? They include the safety of building materials, the resilience of the fire service across the country, the enforcement of regulations and a lack of trained professionals to carry out fire inspections as thoroughly and often as are needed.

Mr Hurd: The Grenfell tragedy, which should never have happened, and subsequent events, in terms of what we are learning about the fire safety of buildings, mean that there is a system failure, which has been allowed to build up over too many years. It is imperative that we do not just wait for a public inquiry, but that we get on with the work of reviewing not just regulation, but the whole system of enforcement and management of risk, and that we lead on that and are informed by an inquiry.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I, like all Members, have been inundated with emails from constituents demanding immediate changes to fire regulations. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that we look at what changes are needed to the fire regulations, but also at what changes are needed in the implementation of existing regulations, so that tragedies such as Grenfell do not happen again?

Mr Hurd: I do agree with my hon. Friend, and his question allows me to build on what I was saying before. There has been a system failure, built up over many years, and we need to address it as a matter of urgency and with rigorous analysis underpinned by evidence. As part of that we will of course look at whether the regulations are effective, but my instinct is that the biggest failure has been in the system of enforcement, inspection and risk management.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Detective Superintendent Fiona McCormack, who is conducting some of the inquiries, has said that the insulation has proved “more flammable than the cladding”.

Has the Home Office had representations from the police or the fire service on this? Does the Minister sit on the Government’s taskforce and, if not, has whichever Home Office Minister does raised the testing of the insulation with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government? If not, will they do so urgently and call for testing of insulation to be done?

Mr Hurd: I can assure the right hon. Lady that both the Home Secretary and I have sat on the regular Cobra meetings that have addressed this, and I sit regularly on the sub-group as well. The right hon. Lady is right; of course, testing the cladding was the priority, but it is becoming increasingly clear that this is not just about the cladding. There is a significant issue with insulation and fitting, and there are considerable questions to be answered about safeguarding and risk inside buildings. That is what we have to understand better, informed by the police investigation and the public inquiry about what exactly what has happened, but we also have to get on with the business of stress testing our current systems.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Banning flammable cladding is clearly a no-brainer. It should never have been used in those buildings, and nor, indeed, should any other flammable materials. As we start to beef up the rules and regulations, will my hon. Friend ensure not only that best guidance is spread around all local authorities in the United Kingdom and action is followed, but that we work with other Governments in other countries that contain tower blocks, so that the tragedy that has befallen the people of the United Kingdom will never befall another country?

Mr Hurd: I entirely agree with that sentiment, which was expressed very powerfully. The materials, particularly the panels, were not compliant, and should not have been used on those buildings. We must now re-examine systematically, using all the best evidence available, the landscape of policy and regulation—both the regulation itself, and what is meant to happen in respect of building inspection.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The concerns about fire prevention and safety are vital issues, but does the Minister agree that we should not lose sight of the immediate plight of the survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire, their families and their community? Does he understand that one of the factors preventing people from coming forward, either to obtain the help that they need or to provide the information that we need, is concern about their immigration status? I know he has said that their papers will not be checked, but will he consider announcing an immigration amnesty for the survivors of Grenfell Tower? Otherwise there will be people who have died whom we will never know about, and too many people who need help will not receive it.

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Lady is right. That is an issue, as I know from conversations that I have had and will continue to have with survivors. One of our big problems is not being able to identify fully who was in

the building on that night, and concerns about immigration status are part of that. We have communicated some advice which was meant to reassure, and we are reviewing with people closer to the community whether that advice is sufficient.

Avon Fire and Rescue Service

9. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of funding for Avon fire and rescue service. [900124]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I hope the hon. Lady will welcome, as I do, the fact that fire incidents in Avon have fallen by a quarter since 2010. Avon fire and rescue service will receive stable funding for 2019-20, and the Government consider that to be a fair settlement.

Kerry McCarthy: The service has lost £5 million of funding in recent years, and 200 frontline firefighting jobs have gone. Meanwhile, the police and crime commissioner is saying that the police are being pushed to their limit and have been asked to cut a further £20 million, which simply cannot be done. Must we wait until an incident in Bristol—an incident like the Grenfell Tower fire, or a terrorist attack—brings home to the Government just how much pressure those services are under?

Mr Hurd: I understand the point that the hon. Lady has made, but resources must be allocated in the light of risk, and, as I have said, risk has fallen in Avon since 2010. Obviously we cannot be complacent about that, and I have clearly signalled that there will be a profound re-examination of fire safety and risk, but I return to the point that I made about police resources. I am very committed to engaging with police authorities and police and crime commissioners, so that I can really understand their concerns about resources and ensure that any decisions are based on evidence rather than assertion.

Immigration Rules: Agriculture

10. **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the effect of immigration rules on the seasonal agricultural workforce. [900125]

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about this issue only last week. I know that he is engaging with the National Farmers Union, and I shall meet NFU representatives and my right hon. Friend shortly to discuss it further.

Helen Whately: Every summer farmers in my constituency require thousands of workers to pick their delicious fruit, but only 705 people in the constituency are unemployed and claiming jobseeker’s allowance, so it is very difficult for the farmers to recruit enough workers locally. Will my right hon. Friend consider a permit scheme for seasonal agricultural workers?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the excellent fruit that those workers pick in Kent. In terms of quality, it is almost up there with the blackcurrants in Great Yarmouth. While we are still full members of the European Union farmers can benefit from the free movement of labour, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will continue to discuss with the sector what will be done after we leave the EU.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the Minister knows, agriculture is devolved and stringent immigration rules could have a particular impact on the Welsh food production sector. Does he agree that, if there is to be, regrettably, a Brexit outside the single market, there would need to be a geographical visa system to protect key sectors of the Welsh economy?

Brandon Lewis: We are determined to ensure that we have an immigration system that continues to encourage the brightest and the best, and to ensure that all our sectors are able to flourish and thrive. However, I am not going to predict the outcome, or what we will be doing once we leave the European Union, after those negotiations.

EU Citizens in the UK

12. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps she is taking to reassure non-UK EU citizens resident in the UK about their legal status after the UK leaves the EU. [900127]

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): On 26 June, we published and laid in Parliament, and the Prime Minister outlined, a paper that outlines our offer for EU citizens. We want to ensure that they have certainty about the future. We have a fair and serious offer that we are confident will lead to a good agreement with our colleagues and partners across the EU.

Alan Brown: As someone who is married to an EU national, I can assure the Minister that right now EU nationals do not feel any certainty from this Government. Does he agree with the organisations British in Europe and the 3 million that the Prime Minister's offer will severely reduce the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and UK citizens living in the EU? Can he also explain why the Prime Minister made no reference to the far superior, detailed and comprehensive offer set out by the EU on 12 June?

Brandon Lewis: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me and colleagues in making it very clear that anyone from the EU who is working and living here at the moment can have confidence about the future. The offer we have made about settled status gives them that certainty. I hope that he will encourage not just his other half but all others on the matter. We ask him to bear it in mind that the offer we have made will mean that anyone from the EU who is settled here will have the same rights as any UK citizen. That is a fair and serious proposal.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the Prime Minister has made a very sensible offer and that this matter could be settled tomorrow if it were not for the EU's intransigence?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a very good point. The Prime Minister has made a fair, full and serious offer that gives European citizens, once they have settled status, the same rights as a UK citizen. I am hopeful that we and our partners across the EU will be able to reach an early agreement on that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister talked about giving confidence to EU citizens. Given that just under 30% of applications currently being made for EU permanent residence cards are being turned down, what assurance can he give the House that the new application process set out in the White Paper will not lead to the same outcome? Will those EU citizens who are refused under that new process be required then to leave the UK?

Brandon Lewis: What I would say to the right hon. Gentleman is that we outlined just last week in laying the paper that we want to ensure that, when we announce the system next year, it will be a simple, clear system, probably making use of digital technology, so that the 3 million Europeans who are living and working here, contributing fantastically well to our culture and economy, are able to go through that process as swiftly as possible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) has highlighted, it is bizarre that the Prime Minister expects the EU to reciprocate an offer that falls short of the offer that the EU made on 12 June. Can the Minister confirm that the Prime Minister expects the EU to water down its offer? If so, how does he think that will reassure British nationals living abroad, never mind EU nationals living in the UK?

Brandon Lewis: I will say two things to the hon. and learned Lady. First, just last week, I met one of the Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union and representatives of British citizens living abroad to go through with them the position we have taken. Secondly, the Prime Minister is right to ensure that the people who are living in the UK who gain settled status have the same rights as a UK citizen. I do not think any UK citizen would expect any more or less from the British Government.

Joanna Cherry: The point is that the EU offer would give EU nationals living in the UK and British nationals living abroad more rights than the Prime Minister's offer. One thing the Minister could do to reassure EU nationals living in the UK is to state that access to the national health service will be considered sufficient by the Home Office to fulfil the requirements for comprehensive sickness insurance. That was the cross-party recommendation of the Exiting the European Union Committee in the previous Parliament. What or who is stopping the Home Office from implementing that recommendation now?

Brandon Lewis: It is the EU that is stopping that, and if the hon. and learned Lady has a proper read through of our proposals, she will see that that is an issue we are looking forward to dealing with as we leave the European Union. It is right that we as the UK Government are saying that people have the same rights as UK citizens.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The Prime Minister's recent remarks on the status of EU nationals were too little, too late. The Government have failed to reassure long-standing EU nationals living here and have failed to prevent the brain drain of much needed staff in high-value industries and academia, and of students. Will the Minister clarify the position of EU students studying in the UK who will be part-way through their courses when we leave the EU?

Brandon Lewis: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new position.

This offer applies to all EU residents. If they are in this country and want to take settled status, they will be able to do that. That is an offer that will be open to everybody across the European Union, so in that sense it makes no change to the position of students.

Family Rights

14. **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): What steps she is taking to protect the family rights of UK citizens married to non-EU citizens. [900129]

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The requirements we have in place promote not just family values but integration, while also striking the right balance to ensure that we take into account the burden on the taxpayer as well, so we have a fair balance between family, integration and the taxpayers' position.

Ronnie Cowan: My constituent Paul McMillan, a medical student from Port Glasgow, is unable to be with his American partner because of the minimum income requirement on spousal visas, which stands at £18,600 and is due to rise. He has decided that because of the UK Government's increasingly hostile attitude towards immigrants, on completing his studies he will emigrate from Scotland to be with his partner. Scotland will lose not only his future medical expertise but the expertise of his partner, a qualified social worker. Considering Paul's situation, will the Home Secretary abandon plans to increase the minimum income requirement?

Brandon Lewis: If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me about any specific case, I will be happy to have a look at it. As a general point, however, it is right that we look at making sure that everybody across the UK has the same position to deal with, so that the system is fair and that it is also fair to taxpayers, so that someone bringing a member of their family to this country can afford for them to be here. I also point out to the hon. Gentleman that the figure of £18,600 is several thousand pounds below the median wage in Scotland.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Under the freedom of movement rules, EU citizens are currently not obliged to meet that minimum income threshold if they wish to bring in family members. However, UK citizens do have to meet a minimum income threshold, which the Supreme Court has said causes hardship and ignores the rights of children. Is it not therefore fair to say that this new regime proposed by the Government means that EU citizens will lose their current rights to family life and that it represents a levelling down?

Brandon Lewis: I think the right hon. Lady has slightly misunderstood the situation. If somebody from the European Union and their family are here, they will have that ability to have settled status. If they have not been here for five years but they stay for five years, they will be able to attain that right. I also point out to her that family life cannot be established here at the taxpayers' expense. That is perfectly right; family migrants must be able to integrate. That is what our family immigration rules achieve, and it is an approach that the Supreme Court has endorsed.

Topical Questions

T1. [900105] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): There is substantial interest in the House about this Government's policy about removing counter-terrorism online, and I want to update the House briefly.

Last week in Ottawa, we secured support from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US for the Government campaign to take terrorist material offline. Together, we announced that companies including Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter would form a new global industry forum to tackle terrorist use of the internet. We made it clear that hateful content used to recruit and radicalise should not be allowed on their platforms and must be removed faster and more proactively. The commitment from fellow "Five Eyes" members to a shared approach and their backing of a new industry group is a vital step forward. I plan to travel to the west coast of America to continue discussions with major technology companies and to see what progress they are making on the forum, and I will share these findings. The key to successful action here is to make sure that we have a truly global initiative engaging other countries and the international headquarters of these businesses.

Martyn Day: The Scottish Affairs Select Committee, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors have all said that Scotland requires a different immigration policy for its unique demographic needs. Will the Home Secretary consider the report by Professor Christina Boswell of the University of Edinburgh that evaluates the options for a differentiated approach to immigration policy in Scotland?

Amber Rudd: I do not think that we should have a different immigration policy for different parts of the United Kingdom, but I do think that we should have a fair, open and inclusive immigration system that will attract the brightest and the best, the right students and the people who are legitimately coming here to join their families. We will ensure that when we consult stakeholders and businesses over the summer, we have Scotland and other parts of the country in mind.

T3. [900107] **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): In the light of the recent cyber-attack on Parliament and the National Crime Agency's announcement that, because of under-reporting, the scale of cyber-crime is significantly underestimated, will the Secretary of State outline the specific steps that the Government are taking to tackle this threat?

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): Through the national cyber-security programme, we are investing £1.9 billion in cyber-security. We are investing in the National Crime Agency, the National Cyber Crime Unit and the National Cyber Security Centre, as well as the regional organised crime units at local level to ensure that there is a regional response. We have also given an extra £10 million to improve Action Fraud's response to constituents. At the same time, the Government are trying to consolidate and ensure that there is a consistent message in Cyber Aware so that all colleagues and members of the public understand what they need to do to keep themselves safe online.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Following the wholly avoidable tragedy at Grenfell Tower, will the Home Secretary tell us why the review of the building regulations, which was promised by Gavin Barwell in the wake of the deadly Lakanal House fire, has failed to materialise? Mr Barwell was the Housing Minister at the time; did he suppress the review?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I do not think there is any evidence that our former colleague suppressed any review. There was plenty of work ongoing into the simplification of regulations. I say to the hon. Gentleman, as I have said before, that the Grenfell tragedy should never have happened, and what we have found out since about the fire safety of the building means that we have to do a root and branch review not only of the regulations but of inspection and risk management.

T4. [900108] **Robert Courts (Witney) (Con):** When I was a district councillor in West Oxfordshire, I helped to settle six Syrian refugee families in the area. I have seen those families regularly, and one of the most heartening things is how they have integrated in our society in terms of school places and employment. Will the Minister please tell us what steps the Government are taking to ensure that such integration takes place swiftly and efficiently?

Amber Rudd: I know that my hon. Friend's constituency area has generously welcomed a number of families. So far, we have accepted 7,000 under this scheme. Today, additionally, I can confirm that we are taking advice from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on widening the eligibility for the scheme for vulnerable refugees so that we can include people of any nationality who are affected by the Syrian crisis. This will be good for families and good for ensuring that we truly help the most vulnerable in the region.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Merseyside police have had to cut £87 million and more than 1,000 officers and staff since 2010 and, notwithstanding the Home Secretary's bizarre claim earlier that police budgets had been protected, they are now being expected to cut a further £18 million over the next three years, leading to 540 staff and officers being placed under threat while tackling a gun crime wave that has involved 100 shootings in the past 18 months. Will the Home Secretary agree to meet me and a delegation of Merseyside MPs to discuss why her Department has just turned down a bid for extra resources to deal with this, which she and her Ministers themselves invited?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this question. We did meet; I met her and the other Merseyside MPs, and I have met the chief constable, Andy Cooke. I can absolutely confirm that the National Crime Agency and the regional organised and serious crime units are giving a great deal of support to help to tackle the appalling increase in gun crime in Merseyside. We will continue to do everything we can to support the police there.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): When I spent some time on the night shift with the local police, they told me that when they arrest a person they spend most of the remainder of the shift filling in forms relating to that arrest. The police obviously have to be accountable when depriving somebody of their liberty, but that system can surely be speeded up.

Mr Hurd: As my hon. Friend knows, we have done a lot to cut police targets and bureaucracy so that they can focus on what really matters. Post-arrest administration has not been raised to date in my meetings with the police, but I will ensure that I raise it in any future meetings.

T5. [900109] **Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** Under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016, 480 unaccompanied refugee children were expected to come to the United Kingdom. We learned in the House of Lords last week that only 200 have arrived. What are the Government doing to ensure that the other 280 vulnerable children at risk of exploitation are able to come to the safety of our shores promptly?

Amber Rudd: It is a very good question. I am aware of those numbers. We have made it clear to the countries that currently provide a home to those children—largely Italy and Greece, but some are in France—that we are ready and stand able to take those additional children. We will continue to engage with those countries to try to do that. Part of the issue is that some of those children have already settled in the country where they are, but we remain engaged with those countries to see what else we can do to help those children. Where we can, we would like to bring over those who have not settled and whose interests are truly best served by coming here.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Kent continues to be one of the main points of entry to the UK for illegal workers. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what steps the Government are taking to make it easier for businesses in Kent and elsewhere to identify whether someone is working here illegally?

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): We implemented the Immigration Act 2016 to make illegal working a criminal offence so that the profits can be seized as the proceeds of crime. The Act also introduces new, stronger sanctions against employers of illegal workers. There is a balance to be struck in ensuring that people are checking whether someone has a passport, if they are from the EU, or has leave or the right to work here, if they are not from the EU. If businesses have done those checks, they are in a position to defend themselves against any action, which is appropriate.

T6. [900111] **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): Ann Jones, the Welsh Assembly Member for Vale of Clwyd, successfully steered through Welsh Government legislation to make it compulsory to have sprinklers in new-builds and to retrofit them in refurbished residential buildings. Will the Home Secretary follow the Welsh Government's example and work with her Cabinet colleagues towards making that a UK-wide policy?

Mr Hurd: I refer the hon. Lady to what I said before. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is making a statement this afternoon, and the Prime Minister has made several statements about the way forward in reviewing regulations, guidance and the whole inspection and risk-monitoring regime, which will include guidance on sprinklers. As the hon. Lady will know, sprinklers have different applications in different locations; there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Yesterday evening, Gatwick airport had to close its runway on several occasions, leading to the cancellation of quite a few flights, owing to the irresponsible use of a drone. Will the Minister say whether the Government will consider reviewing the use of unmanned aerial vehicles around airports?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the dangers that drones can pose to aircraft, but drones are also used illegally to supply drugs to prisons and they are used by terrorists and criminals further afield. That is why this Government set up a group chaired by me and the Ministry of Defence about a year ago to look at measures that we can put in place not only to deal with the technological challenge that drones present, but to ensure that we counter drones in a way that fits with the idea of an open society in which law-abiding citizens can continue to use drones for their pleasure or for their work.

T7. [900113] **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): The prohibitive cost of testing for novel psychoactive substances is causing considerable expense to police forces in enforcing the current law. The present law on novel psychoactive substances simply is not working, so will the Home Office team please initiate an immediate review of it?

Sarah Newton: I simply do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 has proved to be an incredibly useful tool for police officers to identify really harmful substances and keep people safe.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Following the very tragic and fatal stabbing the weekend before last in my constituency, will the Home Secretary update the House on the plans being undertaken to tackle knife crime?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the very, very tragic case of James Brindley, who was so brutally knifed and killed in her constituency. The local police force's investigations are well under way, and a huge amount of work is being done to tackle knife crime. The local police force, West Midlands police, often takes part in Operation Sceptre, with the next

operation happening in July. Every Member has an important role to play in going out there to tell young people in their communities about the real dangers they are presenting to themselves by carrying knives.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Having lost more than 800 police officers and almost a quarter of its funding, Northumbria police have just announced that they are closing every single Newcastle police station front desk outside working hours. Given all the reassurances we have heard today, why is Northumbria police still being obliged to make operational decisions based on cost cutting, and not on preventing and detecting crime?

Amber Rudd: I say to all colleagues on both sides of the House that we have protected police spending—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members can have their own views; they cannot have their own facts. These are the cases. As long as individual councils use the maximum precept of 2%, they can raise the money. Additional support is available from the police transformation fund, and we will always make sure that we use it to keep communities safe and to provide the best policing available.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): In Northamptonshire our excellent police and crime commissioner, Stephen Mold, is dramatically investing in police buildings by, for example, opening the new command centre in north Northamptonshire. Does my hon. Friend agree that, actually, it is the investment in buildings that are fit for purpose for operational policing and the modernisation that are so important for driving outcomes?

Mr Hurd: Through my hon. Friend, may I congratulate Stephen Mold on the impressive leadership and innovation that he is showing? I look forward to visiting him.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): West Yorkshire police are still reeling from cuts dating back to 2010, when they lost 20% of their force. Will we look again at budgets so that they can restore the number of police officers on our streets and give them a fighting chance of dealing with demand?

Amber Rudd: I take this opportunity to clarify once more the situation with regard to police funding. From 2010 to 2015 there were indeed cuts, but what was so remarkable is that the good work of local policing and the good work of local communities meant that crime came down by a third. Between 2015 and 2020 we will continue to protect police money to ensure that crime continues to come down and that policing and communities get the necessary support.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What progress has been made to improve the co-operation between Action Fraud and individual police forces to ensure that, as in the case of a couple of my constituents, people are not passed from pillar to post when they seek information from one of those organisations?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right, and he has raised the issue before. That is why we have given some extra funding to Action Fraud to improve the process of managing the triage. At the same time, through the national cyber strategy, we are starting to see money going into the investments we require. Working with senior police leadership, whom I met last week, we are

also trying to make sure that the response from forces to cyber-crime is consistent because, as he knows, it is very inconsistent at the moment. For too long, some forces have thought that cyber does not belong to them while other forces have done a very good job. We want to make sure that there is a consistent response right across the board.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pointed out that 30% of applications for permanent residence are turned down, to a large extent because of the complexities of the process. Would it not be sensible to simplify the process now, instead of waiting until next year for the new system?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is correct that the system we are currently using is not the one that was designed for leaving the European Union and for allowing EU members here to apply for settled status. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that we will be providing a new system, which will be available by the end of next year; we are allowing people to make sure that they get additional information as it comes along and that their name is registered so that they get sent that information, but we need the time to build that system. We are confident it will be ready by the end of next year and provide a streamlined, effective online system for those applications to go through.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): In last month's birthday honours list, Alex Murray, who until very recently was Solihull's police commander, received an OBE for his

work. Will the Minister join me not only in congratulating Alex, and indeed all police in Solihull, who do such a tremendous job, but in recognising the need for a fair funding settlement for West Midlands police?

Amber Rudd: I am delighted to congratulate Alex Murray on his well-earned OBE—and all the other police officers and constables whose work was so rightly recognised. Perhaps we could also, from this House, recognise the good work that has been done by all police and emergency services, particularly over the past three and a half months, given the tremendous strains there have been on the work they have been having to do.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The provision of accommodation for asylum seekers is the responsibility of the Home Office and its contractors. What recent discussions have they had to ensure that such accommodation complies with fire prevention and safety regulations?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I visited some of those centres just last week, when I raised that very issue. I am writing to all suppliers across the country to raise that point, to make sure that they are fully aware of their duty of care and work to make sure that fire safety is of paramount importance for them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry but we must move on; demand has exceeded supply, as is very often the case in this place.

Energy Price Cap

3.36 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the Government's intention for an energy price cap.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Following a two-year inquiry, the Competition and Markets Authority found that energy customers on standard variable tariffs were paying on average £1.4 billion a year more than would be the case in a competitive market. That is completely unacceptable, so my party's manifesto committed to introduce a safeguard tariff to extend the price protection currently in place for some vulnerable customers—those on pre-payment meters—to more customers on the poorest-value tariffs. The energy regulator, Ofgem, has the powers necessary to impose such a price cap without delay, and I wrote to its chief executive on 21 June to ask it to use its powers to do so. Today, the regulator has replied and announced that it will work with consumer groups to take measures, including extending the current safeguard tariff for those on pre-payment meters to a wider group of consumers, and move urgently to implement these changes.

I welcome this initial proposal—it is a step in the right direction—but I will wait to see the actual proposals turned into action to cut bills, as the test of whether the regulator's changes go far enough is whether they move sufficiently to eradicate the detriment to consumers that the CMA identified. I remain prepared to legislate if they do not, and I hope that such legislation would command wide support across the House.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he recall that during the election his party placed the promise of an overall cap on energy prices at the centre of its manifesto? Indeed, does he recall the Prime Minister stating:

"I am making this promise: if I am re-elected on 8 June, I will take action to end this injustice by introducing a cap on unfair energy price rises. It will protect around 17 million families on standard variable tariffs from being exploited with sudden and unjustified increases in bills"

Does the Secretary of State accept that Ofgem's response to his letter of 21 June on energy prices falls far short of implementing that promise and that, although there are welcome suggestions on safeguarding tariffs and capping warrant charges for the installation of pre-pay meters, those measures would affect only 2.5 million customers, leaving more than 14 million SVT customers completely unprotected from price rises over the next period? Will he confirm that his letter did not ask Ofgem to consider introducing a general price cap? Will he tell the House why it did not, even though the chief executive officer of Ofgem confirmed earlier this year that it would have the discretionary power to implement an energy price cap?

Does the Secretary of State intend to pass legislation to require Ofgem to introduce a price cap, or is he now content to let his firm election promise of a cap fall by the wayside? If so, what does he have to say to the 17 million people on standard variable tariffs who thought that relief from rip-off price rises was on its way but will now feel completely betrayed by this policy U-turn?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I hope he will see that I answered many of his points in my initial response to the urgent question. He will share my view—indeed, I think it is his view, too—that we should act as soon as possible to provide relief to consumers. That will require Ofgem to use its powers. It has powers that it can use immediately, and I have encouraged it to do so.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned my letter. I am sure that, as he was hoping to come into government, he studied the prospective use of the powers, so he will know that legislation requires me to ask Ofgem for advice. I did so under exactly those terms and Ofgem has responded by saying that it will work with consumer groups to identify how far the protection should go. I have been clear that I want the detriment of £1.4 billion a year to be eradicated. It is a test of Ofgem's responsiveness that it should use its powers to that end. The constituents of Government and Opposition Members will look to the regulator to make use of its powers to prevent the continuation of such an unacceptable situation, which involves more than £1 billion a year.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): To build on my right hon. Friend's most recent answer, some 17 million families are being ripped off by expensive standard variable tariff deals. Ofgem's proposals will deal with at most 3 million of them, leaving 14 million still being preyed on by the big six energy firms. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ofgem's proposals will be viewed as a great betrayal of those 14 million households? If we are going to create an economy that works for everyone, will he distance himself from this big six stitch-up and pledge to help the millions of households that Ofgem seems set to ignore?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend has done great work with many Members from various parties to establish that there is an appetite and need to tackle the problem exposed by the CMA, which has been going on for too long. In response to my letter, Ofgem has said today that it will work with consumer groups and come forward with a range of responses. I will look at them closely, as I know my hon. Friend will, and I am sure that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will, too. I have said clearly that the test of the adequacy of the responses is that they address the clear detriment that the authorities have identified.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The UK Government really lack strategy right across the energy sector. The £20 billion Hinkley Point C project will add to future household bills, mention of energy was sadly lacking in the Green Paper that was published before the election, and now there is this lack of a joined-up approach to an energy cap. Will the Secretary of State confirm the Government's plans to protect the 14 million people who will not be covered by the current proposals? Of the £1.4 billion that the CMA has said is going to the big companies instead of staying in consumers' pockets, how much will be returned to consumers under the measures that are being introduced? He said that he might consider legislation, but what is his timescale for reviewing what is happening and deciding whether there is a need to act? Will he ask Ofgem to determine what the true level of a cap should be?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman talks about energy strategy, and it is right that the Government have taken a decision—this was ducked by previous Governments for decades—to renew our nuclear power stations that are coming to the end of their lives. He will know that the SNP Government in Scotland agreed to extend the lives of nuclear power stations there, and he will also know about the impact of our success on renewable energy, specifically offshore wind, in Scotland. I have had fruitful discussions with colleagues throughout Scotland, especially in the remote islands, about the future possibilities for that.

On Ofgem's response to my letter, I have set out clearly that it has said it will work with and consult consumer groups, and come up with a range of options. The £1.4 billion detriment has to be eradicated, and that is the test of whether the proposals are acceptable. I am sure that the House wants to scrutinise them as much as I do.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend inherited a system that relies increasingly on dear energy, which drives up household bills. Is there anything that he can do to bring a greater amount of cheaper energy into the mix so that bills reduce in five or 10 years' time?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We need to ensure that we meet our important climate change commitments at a competitive cost—for consumers and for businesses—and that we obtain the industrial benefits from having a supply chain in this country. That is exactly why we devote a chapter of the industrial strategy Green Paper to future plans to make the most of the clean energy transition in all respects.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Having seen the recent report, surely it is safe to say that wind and solar will be the future for low-cost energy, but there was a Duke Ellington song called "How long has this been going on?" The fact is that this has been going on too long—this exploitation of people who cannot avoid paying above the price. Is it not about time that we moved away from botched privatisation and inadequate regulation to an answer that puts money back in people's pockets, rather than taking it out?

Greg Clark: In response to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question, I welcome, as he does, the huge progress that has been made not just in the deployment of renewables, but in the cost reductions that we have seen. That process has created jobs across the UK, especially in coastal towns. I had the pleasure of opening the Siemens wind blade factory in Hull, which created 1,000 good jobs. However, he is right that the detriment has been going on too long, which was why the Government asked the CMA to investigate the industry root and branch. It has identified £1.4 billion of detriment, and I have made it absolutely clear that that detriment needs to be returned to the pockets of consumers.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): May I tell the Secretary of State that the latest data show that 2,687 households in my constituency are estimated to be in fuel poverty? That is 6.6% of all households. What more can be done to identify these vulnerable groups and ensure that they have the best advice and information

about switching tariffs? The suggestion that people search online is not the way forward. Perhaps it would be more helpful to have a better dialogue between the consumer and the energy provider.

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend. One feature of the energy market is that the poorer someone is, the larger the proportion of their income that they spend on energy. That is why it is imperative that vulnerable consumers should not be required to go on the internet every few months to check that their tariff has not defaulted to a much higher one. That was the reason for my letter to Ofgem, and it is why I want its response to be vigorous. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that an aspect of the wider set of policies is to make it easier for consumers to know the price of energy and how much they consume, and smart meters are being introduced to help more people to do that.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Has the Secretary of State seen the analysis and evidence of former independent energy regulators who say that the consumer detriment pointed to by the CMA in this market was based on seriously flawed methodology? If he has not, will he look at that and report back to the House?

Greg Clark: I have seen that. This two-year inquiry conducted by the CMA identified £1.4 billion of detriment, which is a huge amount of money. When our constituents see the difference—it can be up to £100 a year—that they pay for a dual fuel bill by being on a dual fuel tariff, they know that that is significant amount.

The CMA said that suppliers have "unilateral market power" over their inactive customer base and could exploit their position by pricing their SVTs above a level that could be justified. That cannot go on.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it will take more than easier switching to encourage a fairer energy market in this country?

Greg Clark: A response is required from the regulator; this is a regulated industry. The development of modern markets means that it is possible for suppliers, especially dominant ones, to identify the customers who are the least likely to switch. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) said, they are often among the most vulnerable. It is unacceptable to use that information to sting them, and regulation has to catch up with that.

Mr Speaker: I think it is time that we heard again from the good doctor—Dr David Drew.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is my lucky day today, but I am sure it will not continue. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As much as we welcome the attempt to deal with fuel poverty, the Secretary of State must realise that there is an adverse effect on renewables at the margins, which will now not come forward because of this fairly blunt pricing structure. Will he look into that and ensure that there is still a drive forward for renewables?

Greg Clark: We are seeing a big increase in the deployment of renewables as the price comes down, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said. The effect of the overcharging—the abuse—is not a return to consumers, and this is not about the increased deployment of renewables. In the analysis of the CMA, the practice results in profits that are higher than they would be in a competitive market and relative inefficiency on the part of the suppliers. Consumers should not be paying for either of those.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Many energy consumers, particularly those on low incomes, do not pay their energy bills by direct debit, but they get huge increased charges from many of the energy companies when they do pay, even when they do so on time. Will my right hon. Friend look into this and make sure that people who do not pay their energy bills by direct debit get a fair energy bill?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As I said, the poorest 10% of households spend 10% of their household expenditure on energy, whereas the richest 10% spend 3% of theirs on it. We need to look particularly at the conditions of more vulnerable consumers to ensure that they are not disadvantaged. My right hon. Friend mentioned one of the ways in which they are.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Are we not tinkering at the edges and doing a little bit of window dressing? I think that we all agree that the energy market appears to be dysfunctional. We saw that best at the beginning of this year when there was an increase in tariffs across the board that bore no relation to wholesale prices, but had everything to do with the exchange rate, particularly that with the euro, as most of our domestic companies are actually based in France or Germany. The big six are essentially operating as a cartel, not in the interests of the consumer.

Greg Clark: I am not sure that I would give them the excuse of exchange rate movements. The Competition and Markets Authority has said that suppliers have unilateral market power over this part of their customer base. This is a regulated market. Ofgem has the powers to introduce and extend the price cap, and my view is that it should use those powers now.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Going back to switching, does the Secretary of State think that more needs to be done to make it much easier to switch, particularly for our more vulnerable constituents?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend. While there should certainly not be barriers in the way, it also should not be necessary for people to spend every evening on the internet checking whether their bill has gone up by an outrageous margin. If people are loyal to a brand, it is not unreasonable for them to expect to be treated reasonably, especially as that brand may be a trusted brand. The regulator should enforce that.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): We produce far more electricity in Wales than we use, yet we pay the highest electricity prices in the British state. More than a third of our households are in fuel poverty. Does that not suggest that Westminster control over Welsh energy policy is not working?

Greg Clark: No, it is one of the reasons why this investigation was commissioned and why what I have asked Ofgem to consider and enact will be particularly important to the hon. Gentleman's constituents in Wales.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming Ofgem's proposal to consult on more measures to help microbusinesses?

Greg Clark: I do welcome that. We have talked about household consumers, and for many very small businesses, their energy bill is also an important component of their costs. In my request for advice, which it was technically necessary to make to Ofgem, I asked for that advice to apply to microbusinesses as well.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The usual vested interests—the big six—were on the airwaves this morning advising consumers to switch their energy supplier, but if consumers really want to see a change to this rip-off of energy prices, do they not have to switch Governments?

Greg Clark: No, it was this Government who referred the whole industry to the Competition and Markets Authority. When the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) was Energy Secretary, I urged this measure on him, and he rejected it flat, so it is this Government who have exposed the level of the detriment, and it is this Government who are acting to put a cap in place to prevent this abuse—that did not happen under Labour.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): As welcome as a price cap will undoubtedly be, does the Secretary of State agree that the real key to bringing down prices for consumers is the liberalisation of the energy market through the digitisation of the energy system, storage in front of and behind the meter, and a demand-side response?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend, who is well informed about such issues, is absolutely right. The opportunity that smart meters bring is that people can have much more knowledge and control of their energy use, and use that to get the best deals available. That is why the roll-out of smart meters is such an important part of our reforms to the energy market.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): But does the outcome of the CMA inquiry not tell the Secretary of State, as a reasonable man, that this is the end of the road for the system? Privatisation did not work, the regulatory system has not worked, and we have had to have a CMA inquiry. What is needed is a fundamental reappraisal and change of this whole energy edifice?

Greg Clark: I am surprised to hear implicit support from the hon. Gentleman for the programme of nationalisation of this sector that the Labour party stood on. The billions of pounds that that would cost would not be the most important use of funds. This has been a regulated industry since privatisation many years ago, and the regulation needs to function better than it has.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I have been listening carefully to my right hon. Friend's answers. Am I right to understand that he would not be satisfied with a final solution from Ofgem that continued to cross-subsidise some customers out of a kind of loyalty premium paid by those who, even if not vulnerable, did not switch?

Greg Clark: This is a wake-up call for the industry. A model in which consumers who are known not to switch can be milked to pay a subsidy for other consumers in an unfair way—the CMA identified “unilateral market power”, which enables firms to exploit their position—has to come to an end.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): While I welcome proposals to make it easier to switch away from poor deals, does my right hon. Friend agree that Ofgem needs to go much further than it suggested in its letter to him this morning to protect consumers from exploitation?

Greg Clark: There is a clear expectation that I want the detriment that the CMA has identified to be tackled once and for all. Ofgem has said that it will consult consumer groups, and I hope and expect that those consumer groups will share my hon. Friend's analysis.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming Ofgem's acknowledgment regarding the ability to put a cap in place? Should we not urge it to use the power fully?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right, and the proposal to consult consumer groups and to go beyond the CMA's remedies—at least what the majority report of the CMA recommended—is welcome. As I said, that is a step in the right direction, but I would want to see this put out in detail and implemented before I would be satisfied with it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Speaking as someone who represents an industrial town, has my right hon.

Friend, as part of the wider debate on these issues, had the opportunity to assess what impact nationalising the energy companies would have on household and commercial energy bills?

Greg Clark: I have indeed. The impact of finding the billions of pounds necessary to take these industries into public ownership would not only be a disaster for our public finances, but the destruction of investor confidence in a whole range of industries that we need investment in.

Mr Speaker: I call Julian Smith. I mean Julian Knight.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I did not think that I could have been behind someone else, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: You are not a senior Government Whip, Sir, but at least you are a Knight.

Julian Knight: I was a BBC News consumer affairs reporter for five years, and during that time I saw the havoc that can be wrought by pre-payment metering. Does my right hon. Friend agree that practices such as rip-off emergency credit, which makes a payday loan look reasonable, need to be brought to heel, and that we should welcome Ofgem's proposal to extend the current safeguard tariff for consumers on pre-payment meters?

Greg Clark: It can only be a matter of time before my hon. Friend enjoys the position to which you referred, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It has been the practice of this Government to intervene when there are abuses, especially of vulnerable people in the way in which he describes. That has happened with pre-payment meters, but the approach needs to go much further.

Mr Speaker: We are most grateful to the Secretary of State and to colleagues.

Northern Ireland: Political Situation

4.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the political situation in Northern Ireland.

As the House will recall, following the resignation of Martin McGuinness, the then Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland in January, an election took place to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 2 March. Despite intensive discussions in the three weeks following the election, the Northern Ireland parties were unable to reach agreement on the formation of a new Executive. In order to facilitate further discussions between the parties, Parliament passed legislation immediately prior to Dissolution extending the period in which an Executive could be formed until 29 June. Last Thursday—29 June—I made a statement in Belfast setting out that while differences remain between the parties, progress had been made and that it was still possible for a resolution to be achieved. I urged the parties to continue focusing their efforts on this, with the full support of the UK Government and, as appropriate, the Irish Government. In that regard, I want to recognise the contribution of the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, and his predecessor, Charlie Flanagan.

In the past few days since the passing of the deadline, some progress has continued to be made, including on the most challenging issues, such as language, culture and identity, but gaps remain between the parties on a defined number of issues. The Government remain committed to working with the parties and the Irish Government to find a way to close these gaps quickly in order to reach an agreement that will pave the way for the restoration of devolved government. The Prime Minister has been actively involved, following on from her meeting with each of the parties, including speaking to Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill on Friday night. I continue to believe that a deal remains achievable, and if agreement is reached, I will bring forward legislation to enable an Executive to be formed, possibly as early as this week.

But time is short. It has been six months since a full Executive were in place to represent the people of Northern Ireland. In that time, it has been civil servants, not politicians, who have made decisions on spending. Without political direction, it has not been possible for strategic decisions to be made about priorities in areas such as education and health. This has created pressures that need to be addressed, and it has led to understandable concern and uncertainty among businesses and those relying on public services alike, as well as the community and voluntary sector. This hiatus cannot simply continue for much longer.

There is no doubt that the best outcome is for a new Executive to make those strategic decisions in the interests of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland. It should be for a new Executive to make swift decisions on their budget and make use of the considerable spending power available to them. While engagement between the parties continues and there is prospect of an agreement, it is right that those discussions remain our focus. At the same time, we will not forget our ultimate responsibility as a Government to uphold political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland.

I made a written statement in April that sought to provide clarity for those civil servants charged with allocating cash in Northern Ireland, to assist them in the discharge of their responsibilities. Some £42 million in resources flowing from the spring Budget and budget transfers from the last financial year remain unallocated, and they are intended to provide an incoming Executive with the room to decide how they should best be spent.

If we do not see resolution in the coming days, however, it will become urgent that we reflect further on whether clarity is required for Northern Ireland permanent secretaries about the allocation of those resources. In that situation we would also need to reflect carefully on how we might allocate funding made available to address immediate health and education pressures, as set out in last Monday's statement on UK Government financial support for Northern Ireland, recognising Northern Ireland's particular circumstances. If no agreement is reached, legislation in Westminster may then be required to give authority for the expenditure of Northern Ireland Departments through an appropriations Bill.

From my conversations with the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, I know that we have not quite reached that critical point yet. But that point is coming and the lack of a formal budget cannot be sustained indefinitely. Similarly, decisions on capital expenditure and infrastructure and public service reform in key sectors such as the health service cannot be deferred for much longer.

One area on which there is much consensus, however, is the need for greater transparency on political donations. In line with the commitment set out in the Conservative party's Northern Ireland manifesto at the general election, I can confirm that I intend to propose legislation that will provide for the publication of all donations and loans received by Northern Ireland parties on or after 1 July 2017.

All of that reinforces further the importance of the parties coming together and reaching an agreement. It sets out, too, some of the hard choices we face if uncertainty persists. I am also conscious that, with the deadline now passed, I am under a duty to set a date for a new election. I will continue to keep that duty under review, but it seems unlikely that that would of itself resolve the current political impasse or address the ultimate need for political decision making, however we proceed.

As the Government for the whole United Kingdom, we will always govern in the interests of all those in the United Kingdom. Therefore, if resolution were to prove intractable and an Executive could not be restored, we would of course be ready to do what is needed to provide that political decision making in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

I am clear, however, that the return of inclusive, devolved government by a power-sharing Executive is what would be profoundly in the best interests of Northern Ireland, and that will remain our overriding focus in the crucial days ahead.

The UK Government will continue to govern in the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland by providing political stability and keeping an open and sustained dialogue with the parties and with the Irish Government, in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach.

I stand ready to do what is necessary to facilitate the quick formation of an Executive once an agreement is reached, and that is where our focus should lie. I commend this statement to the House.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and for his welcome efforts to keep me regularly updated on progress in the talks. I know that the Secretary of State, the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, and all the parties have been working hard to try to narrow the gap on the outstanding issues, in particular on languages, culture and identity. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has not come here today to say that the shutters are coming down on the talks and I admire his sustained—if slightly surprising—optimism that a deal might be done this week.

People in Belfast and across Northern Ireland will have heard his contention that there remains the prospect of a deal. If that is achieved, he will enjoy the Opposition's full support in putting in place whatever legislation is necessary to enable the Executive to reform and the Assembly to meet. But there will be legitimate frustration among many Northern Ireland citizens that fully six months after the Executive broke down, and little more than a week before the marching season reaches its apogee on 12 July, we remain at this impasse. There will also be some scepticism about the likelihood of his surmounting it in a few short days.

Hard questions must now be asked about what more the Government can do to assist the parties in moving forward. It is encouraging that the Prime Minister picked up the phone on Friday night to the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin. But I invite the Secretary of State, in the new spirit of free speech that seems to be abroad in the Conservative party, to agree with me that the Prime Minister could do a bit more. He could tell her to get on a plane to Belfast herself. I am sure that Arlene Foster would not mind lending the Prime Minister her plane for the weekend.

History tells us, on both sides of the House, that the direct involvement of the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach can sometimes help to bridge the divide in Northern Ireland and move things forward. It is a surprise to me that the Prime Minister continues to seem reluctant to take personal responsibility to break the deadlock. In fact, I think many in Northern Ireland would feel that the current Prime Minister has a particular duty to take some personal responsibility and get more involved because it was her decision to call an election in April that lengthened the hiatus and has taken us so close to 12 July, and her reliance on the DUP—a legitimate reliance, given the arithmetic of the House—that is being cited by other interlocutors in the talks as part of the reason for the impasse.

I agree with the Secretary of State that the hiatus simply cannot continue for much longer, but I would like to hear more from him about what he will do to resolve it. If it is not with greater hands on involvement by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, as I and others have suggested, does he think there is a role for a new independent—and perhaps international—chair for the talks, with fresh eyes and a new mandate? That too has been an important means of shifting things in the past.

I noted the coded warning that the Secretary of State gave, rightly, that if a way forward cannot be found, he will have to bring forward further budgetary transfers

to give extra clarity and certainty to the Northern Ireland civil service. That may well be necessary and, if so, he would again enjoy our support, but I am not sure that it would provide much of a spur to the parties, because they are used to this limbo land after the last six months. I know he agrees with me that it is profoundly unsatisfactory for strategic decisions to be put off and for Northern Ireland to be in the hands of unelected civil servants, no matter how competent and well intentioned they are. An appropriations Bill may prove to be a bigger spur, but some—as the Secretary of State knows—will see that effectively as a return to direct rule. I am sure that that will be a position that he will wish to avoid and I would urge him to take all possible steps to avoid it.

I welcome the decision that the Secretary of State has taken today to legislate for publication of all political loans and donations received by parties in Northern Ireland after 1 July. That is an important step in normalising the politics of Northern Ireland, although it may strike some as ironic in the light of the recent deal with the DUP. Does he intend that the thresholds that will apply to that legislation will be the same as apply to donations and loans in the rest of the UK? Will the same requirement apply that all donors are registered voters in the UK?

Finally, I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that Northern Ireland needs its Assembly and Executive up and running as soon as possible. There is no greater illustration of that than the fact that we are now entering the Brexit negotiations in earnest. Northern Ireland effectively has no voice at that negotiating table; certainly not one that reflects all the traditions, culture and heritage of Northern Ireland. There is an absolute imperative to get the Executive back on their feet and to restore Northern Ireland's voice. I am sure he will join me in urging all Members to urge all parties to make sure that that happens as soon as possible.

James Brokenshire: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in underlining that core message. I appreciate and welcome the support he has given to the Government in trying to reach a point where agreement is concluded and we are able to move swiftly in this House. I appreciate the opportunity we have had to discuss these issues over the last few days and I will certainly maintain that dialogue with him.

The hon. Gentleman raises a number of points. He highlights the frustration of many people in Northern Ireland that no deal has been concluded thus far. A theme that I know binds us together is how we can achieve that conclusion, with an inclusive power-sharing Executive of locally elected politicians getting on and making decisions in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the engagement of the Prime Minister. She has been involved throughout the process. She met all the leaders of the political parties in London and has maintained contact throughout this time. As I indicated, in recent days she has, as she has previously, spoken to the leaders of the two main parties. He will recognise that particular interventions may not necessarily have the desired outcome. From his previous involvement in Northern Ireland he will know of occasions that did not lead to the outcome he wished for at the time, in places such as Leeds Castle, for example. Different solutions and scenarios present themselves in

[James Brokenshire]

different cases. A defined number of issues remain outstanding and we need to give them our focus and attention, rather than extending out and changing the whole dynamic. We will continue to keep matters under careful review. Resolution is possible if the willingness is there. It is with that urgency that we must approach the days ahead.

There is opportunity here. I spoke about the additional funding that could be available to an incoming Executive to enable them to act and to take strategic decisions. It is profoundly in Northern Ireland's interest for locally elected politicians to do that.

I will write to the hon. Gentleman and set out further details on transparency issues relating to political donations—I think that is probably the best way to do it—and I will put a letter in the House of Commons Library. I will also introduce legislation spelling that out so that everyone will be able to see the next steps very clearly.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Consistent with what I said to the House last week, I am keen to uphold the tradition that Members wishing to take part in exchanges on a statement should be those, and only those, who were here at its start. I do not wish to embarrass individuals. A couple of Members who came in late are, very graciously, not standing, but that is not uniform. Those who came in late and are standing should not be doing so. It is quite wrong to wander in halfway through a statement and then expect to be called. Some people might even think it a tad arrogant, but there we go.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Regardless of the difficulties or disagreements among the parties in Northern Ireland, should not those issues be sorted out within the Assembly and the Executive, and not in this place? Or is it the case that one party, or maybe more, is actually looking for a rewriting of the rules?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his continued focus on Northern Ireland, following his chairmanship of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs in the last Parliament. I think all parties are focused on seeking an outcome and ensuring a functioning Executive, rather than fundamental changes to the rules. That is where we should focus our attention, because as he suggested, that is where I think he realises that decision making should happen—within Northern Ireland, within the Assembly and within the Executive, acting in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is disappointing to say the least that a deal has not been made and that the proper governance of Northern Ireland cannot restart. Does the Secretary of State accept that his party's deal with the DUP makes reaching a deal more difficult? Does he consider the link between his ministerial colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), and the Constitutional Research Council, which made the questionable Brexit donation to the DUP, to be an additional and unwelcome complication? Why did it take three years from the

consultation on increasing the transparency of political donations in Northern Ireland to get to a position where the Government are now announcing that they will be introducing legislation? The murk that surrounds this whole affair at times makes it increasingly difficult to trust that there is true impartiality on the part of the Government. What can the Secretary of State do to clear up the questions around the Constitutional Research Council and its donations, and restore confidence in the Government's impartiality?

Lastly, the devolved Administrations are supposed to be involved in the Brexit negotiations. Can the Secretary of State tell us who has been providing the input from Stormont and whether it is less or more than the input from the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government? Very lastly—[*Interruption*—]—what representations were made to him by the Secretary of State for Scotland about the deal done between the Government and the DUP?

Mr Speaker: Order. There was a certain amount of harrumphing from a sedentary position at the continuation of the hon. Lady's line of interrogation, but I can confirm, in defence of her, that she was fully 36 seconds within her time.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It's the way she says it.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is a matter of stylistic objection—or even, on the part of the right hon. Gentleman, aesthetic objection—but it cannot be said to be a matter of order.

James Brokenshire: It may not surprise the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) to know that I do not agree with the analysis that she set out in her questions. We stand four-square by our undertakings under the Belfast agreement and its successors, and the agreement relating to decision making here at Westminster does not contravene those important elements—something that is specifically spelled out in that agreement.

The hon. Lady highlights the issue of political donations and transparency. We conducted a consultation with all the political parties in Northern Ireland to seek their views first, and that was the reason for the decision we have taken today, reflecting those views and that input and the commitment in my party's manifesto.

The hon. Lady highlights the issue of Brexit and contact with the Northern Ireland Executive. Obviously there are not elected politicians there, so we have sought to engage with the Northern Ireland civil service within the Executive, but that takes us only so far. That is why I profoundly believe that we need to see an Executive in place, to be an additional voice for Northern Ireland, strongly making those points, and to ensure that, alongside them, we get the best possible deal for Northern Ireland through EU exit.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. What an extraordinary state of affairs: I was planning to call the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), but he now seems a little disengaged from our proceedings. He toddled up to the Chair and I thought he was interested. He can speak—go on Mr Paterson, let's hear it.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I came to apologise for missing the first two minutes, but you have called me, Mr Speaker, and I am grateful.

Can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm that unless we have a fully up-and-running Executive, we cannot implement the devolution of corporation tax, which will benefit every single citizen in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: And there I was thinking that the right hon. Gentleman had come up to the Chair and just muttered some prosaic pleasantries, which I readily greeted. It is very honest of him to say that he was late, but I had not known that he was, and therefore as far as I am concerned he was not.

James Brokenshire: Regrettably, the answer to my right hon. Friend's question is that without an Executive in place, the devolution of corporation tax cannot happen. That underlines one of many reasons why an Executive is needed to get on and ensure that that vision of prosperity and further investment can take place, and an Executive would absolutely aid that.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): We welcome the statement, and let me say, for the record, that the Democratic Unionist party was ready last Thursday to form a Government and to appoint our Ministers. There is no question of any reticence in our party about forming an Executive, and we have been encouraged by the Government to do so.

Will the Government proceed to publish the legacy proposals in the event that an Executive is not formed? We welcome what the Secretary of State has said about donations, but will that be extended to include donations to political parties operating in Northern Ireland that are routed via the Republic of Ireland?

James Brokenshire: As the right hon. Gentleman may know, our consultation about political transparency concerned the narrow elements that were contained within that, but I know that other issues and other points had been raised, including the matter to which he has referred, and they will remain under consideration. As for the legacy issue, I think there is a growing consensus that we need to get the consultation out there, and show everyone the work that has been done on the implementation of the Stormont House bodies so that we begin to see that coming into effect. I earnestly hope that we will be able to move forward, and that it will take place following the establishment of an Executive.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Is not the simple truth that, whereas the Democratic Unionist party has managed to obtain £1 billion from the Treasury to spend on the people of Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin—Gerry Adams and those at Connolly House who are refusing to re-form the Executive—will be in no position to ensure that their constituents receive an equal share of that money, because there will be no Sinn Féin Minister in the Executive, and the money will be spent either by Ministers in this place or by civil servants in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I think the simple point is that an Executive consisting of a First Minister, a Deputy First Minister and other Ministers will be able to make decisions on budgets and all other issues throughout

the community. The funds that have been outlined—to be spent on, for example, health, education, mental health, infrastructure and broadband—will be, profoundly, for everyone in Northern Ireland. All communities will benefit from those funds. I think that that underlines the need for the Executive, and the need to ensure that locally elected politicians are the ones who make the decisions.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): We are pleased that the Secretary of State has told us that it will still be possible for the two sides in Northern Ireland to reach a deal within the next few days. He will know as well as I do that trust is imperative in the current talks. Will he explain a little more fully why he is so reluctant to try to seal that deal by asking the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach to go to Belfast and attempt to bring the parties together so that the final measures that are necessary to secure a deal can be taken?

James Brokenshire: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I stress that the Prime Minister has been actively involved throughout the process, and has been having meetings with all the party leaders. She had a further conversation with the Taoiseach last week about how matters were progressing, and received updates from me and from Simon Coveney, the Irish Foreign Minister, that were received by the Taoiseach as well. There is that continued active engagement, but if further interventions are required we will, of course, keep matters under review in order to establish what will bring about an effective resolution and produce the Executive whom the hon. Gentleman and I want to see in place.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Of course I understand the points my right hon. Friend has made about the fact that the present situation cannot go on forever. However, one of the virtues that is required, and one of the many virtues that are involved in his arduous post, is patience. I hope he will be able to assure the House that he will be exhibiting that virtue even beyond the level of the proverbial saint, in order to put a power-sharing agreement and a new Executive in place.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his support, and for his indication that some patience is needed. Let me underline to him, however, that a great deal of patience has been exhibited up to now, and that there is a great deal of frustration among the public in Northern Ireland. They want services to work for them in the way that is necessary; they want to see the transformation that needs to take place in certain key services. That is why an Executive is so desperately needed at the earliest opportunity, so that we can see politics performing in the best interests of Northern Ireland. That change needs to happen.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): You know, Mr Speaker, that I do not often hanker after the days of Tony Blair, but if we had reached this state of affairs under his premiership, we would have seen not just involvement by the Prime Minister, but active leadership, and he would probably have made the statement to the House. With all due respect to the Secretary of State, it is a matter of regret that the Prime Minister is not here today.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

The Secretary of State is right when he says that we need greater transparency on political donations, but he must be aware that the House has already expressed its view on that matter. The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 set the relevant date as being 1 January 2014. Why is he now seeking to change that?

James Brokenshire: The simple point on that is that it is about compliance with the regulations and seeing that those making donations are able to make those determinations based on the law that is in existence, rather than looking at retrospection. Obviously, there will be further opportunity for the House to debate that issue. However, I think that that is the clearest way of doing it.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): While the political situation remains in limbo in Northern Ireland, elderly and frail British former soldiers are even now being brought before the courts on serious charges, while multiple terrorist murderers walk free, having served either derisory sentences or no sentences at all. Can the Secretary of State assure us that the Government remain focused on rectifying that inequality of treatment?

James Brokenshire: I know that this is an issue that my right hon. Friend and others have raised consistently in the House. I commend them for the focus they have provided. The Government remain committed to implementing the Stormont House institutions and that reform which is about fair, balanced and proportionate efforts in respect of the investigations of the past. That is what the agreement sets out clearly in applying the rule of law but, as I have said on a number of occasions in the House, I and others across Government will never tire of recognising the tireless contribution that so many in our security and armed forces made to ensure that we have peace today. Without their contribution, that simply would not have been possible.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It is not easy to establish devolved government. We achieved that in 2006-07 because the Prime Minister of the day spent 80 hours in St Andrews hands-on, dealing with all parties with the Taoiseach of Ireland. That is just advice to the Secretary of State; it is not a disservice to him and his colleagues to have the Prime Minister engaged heavily.

Given the £1 billion that has been committed by the Government, could the Secretary of State assure the House that in the absence of devolved government no expenditure decisions will be taken by civil servants on priorities for the expenditure of that money?

James Brokenshire: There are clear needs in Northern Ireland, which is why I made the point that I did on the potential need for further clarification for the Northern Ireland civil service in respect of budgetary issues. I also underline that last week's statement recognised the particular needs and circumstances of Northern Ireland and that there are some urgent and pressing priorities. That is why I think an Executive needs to be put into place, but clearly, in acting in Northern Ireland's best interests, we will keep that very closely under review if it is not possible to form an Executive in the coming days.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I would like to ask my right hon. Friend about the situation on the border, especially regarding the Brexit negotiations. As a Member of this House who was born in Northern Ireland, I know how important it is not to go back to the hard border that I remember from my childhood. Given that both the British and EU negotiators have said that they do not wish to see a hard border, how soon can we ensure that the situation is resolved to make sure that the people of Northern Ireland know that their future is more certain?

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend will know from her experience, the issue of Northern Ireland is a priority item in the Brexit negotiations. Discussions have commenced. We continue to work on that to provide assurance on the border and other issues. As a Government, we believe that a solution can be found and that there is good will on all sides in relation to finding that solution, reaching that agreement through the common travel area and looking at the issue of the movement of goods across the border to ensure that it remains invisible and seamless. It is a clear and firm priority of the Government to achieve that.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): My party is also disappointed that the Executive have not been re-established after being brought down by Sinn Féin earlier this year, but will the Secretary of State confirm that only one party in Northern Ireland is insisting on any preconditions on the setting up of the Executive, and if those preconditions are unreasonable—including the prosecution of soldiers and policemen, the establishment of an Irish language Act which would cost tens of millions of pounds, the commitment by that party to overthrow its manifesto commitments, and a refusal to sit with Arlene Foster, who won the last election—they will amount to blackmail, and the establishment of any Executive on that basis would be fragile and could not possibly exist? Will he also confirm this to us today: has he given into Sinn Féin's demand that there be no transparency on the funds it receives through the Irish Republic from foreign countries to its own party coffers?

James Brokenshire: I know that there are strong views on a number of issues. The hon. Gentleman's party and Sinn Féin continue in discussions to find a resolution to these issues and differences, and they have even been continuing today, shortly before this sitting started. The focus needs to be on that. We must have an Executive performing in the best interests of Northern Ireland; I know the hon. Gentleman's party has strongly indicated that it wants to see that. We will continue to support all the parties involved in this process to find that resolution, and to look beyond the differences between parties. We recognise also that the political process in Northern Ireland is very special, and that so many people have worked so hard to get us to this point. I think that the hon. Gentleman and others all want to see that progressing into the future, and to see that positive bright future for Northern Ireland across all communities.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The additional funds committed to Northern Ireland in recent weeks continue to be wrongly labelled as money for a single party in the Province. Will the Secretary of State reaffirm that this is in fact money for the whole Province, to be spent by all parties, and that it represents a billion more reasons for political leadership to be restored at Stormont?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a clear and important point: the funding package announced last week was firmly for the benefit of all communities, so that we see investment in infrastructure, which has not kept pace with other parts of the UK, and to deal with issues such as employment rates, which are behind those of other nations of the United Kingdom, and also to deal with reform in certain key public services. That is to the benefit of all communities in Northern Ireland. We want to see the Executive able to make decisions and feeling the real benefit of that; that provides that real potential and real opportunity which we want to see seized.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): This crisis has meandered across six months, two elections and, as of today, two and a half missed deadlines, but I still do not get any sense of urgency from the Secretary of State. There is a time for passive observation and there is a time for intensive intervention; why will the Prime Minister not go to Belfast with the Taoiseach and find a resolution to this that we all want to see?

James Brokenshire: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we do want to see that resolution. Interventions have been made by the UK and Irish Governments and others seeking supportive voices to assist in the community and elsewhere to get the parties focused on seeing that bigger picture, looking beyond difference, and being able to get an Executive formed. We will use all interventions appropriately to get that outcome. That is why I make the point about the work the Prime Minister has done, the work that I have done, the work the Irish Government have done and the work the Taoiseach and Irish Foreign Minister have done, but I also agree with the hon. Gentleman that time is progressing and we do not want to see the sort of interventions I have highlighted in this statement. Time is moving on, and if we do not see resolution quickly, there will be a need to take various steps around the budget and other areas. We are still working hard to support the parties, but ultimately it is for the parties to reach that agreement, to see those divides crossed so an Executive are formed. I can assure the hon. Gentleman of the urgency, attention, time and effort that continues to be made in that regard.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): As the only Member on this side of the Chamber who voted for transparency of donations three years ago, I welcome my right hon. Friend's decision to bring that forward. In relation to resolving the impasse, can he confirm that the £1 billion announced last week will be sufficient, and that there will be no need for more money from Westminster to get this deal over the line?

James Brokenshire: The funds that were announced last week should provide a sense of opportunity and potential for issues that are clearly of relevance to Northern Ireland, such as the lack of transport infrastructure compared with other parts of the United Kingdom and the digital and broadband issue, which has lagged behind other parts of the United Kingdom. The funds should give a sense of incentive and opportunity for an Executive to deliver and get on with so many of the things they want to see.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that this impasse in Northern Ireland has been complicated by the fact that the result of the general

election has meant the Government getting involved in a protection money racketing system of about £1 billion? As a suggestion, may I say that the only way to get rid of that is for the Prime Minister to call another general election? We know that she is frightened to death of doing it, because she knows that the Labour party would win. We would form a Government and get rid of this almighty mess. There would be no protection racket money, and we would have a decent Labour Government that would get rid of austerity. Get on with it!

James Brokenshire: It sounds as though the hon. Gentleman has still not recognised the result of the last election. The House will be interested in his comments, but I do not think that they will make a difference to solving the real problems that we are wrestling with in Northern Ireland.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): If the impasse is not broken, and if direct rule is imposed, can the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations perform its role without the participation of one of the constituent parts of the British state?

James Brokenshire: As I have already indicated in my statement, we are firmly not looking at interventions that even get close to the point that the hon. Gentleman alludes to. It would profoundly not be in Northern Ireland's best interests to head down that way, which is why I have made my points about the Executive. The best way to address his point is to have an Executive in place with a First Minister and Deputy First Minister who are able to represent Northern Ireland and argue firmly in Northern Ireland's best interests on Brexit and many other issues.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): This is an unusual Parliament, in that, because of the loss of Social Democratic and Labour party seats and the unwelcome continuing refusal of Sinn Féin Members to take their seats in this Chamber, there is no representation here of Irish nationalist opinion from the island of Ireland for the first time in many decades. Given what the Secretary of State has said in his statement about the possibility of having to introduce legislation in the near future, how will he ensure that that strain of opinion from Northern Ireland is fully taken into account in any consideration of that legislation?

James Brokenshire: I am certainly conscious, in my role as Secretary of State, of listening to voices from all parts of the community. Obviously the voices of the nationalist community are no longer represented in this House, and I will therefore continue to engage intensively with all parties in Northern Ireland. I will continue to listen and to hear the specific points that they make, and I will ensure that that is reflected in my own considerations and those of the Government more broadly as we look at the legislative programme ahead.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know my utter commitment to devolution, but at some point there has to be a realisation that the parrot could possibly be dead, that it is deceased of life, that it is no more. If that is the case with devolution, will the Secretary of State put a timeframe on the life expectancy that is ultimately left in this dead bird? Will appropriations be moved before the summer recess?

James Brokenshire: The head of the Northern Ireland civil service has indicated that we have not yet reached the point at which an appropriation Bill needs to be passed. We are still a little way away from that. None the less, urgent issues need to be addressed about the financial position in Northern Ireland, which is why I made points in my statement about the potential need for further assurance to be granted. I firmly think that there is still life there, and the engagement that we continue to see underlines that. Having locally elected politicians serving the community in Northern Ireland is profoundly what is in Northern Ireland's best interests. I know that the hon. Gentleman strongly believes in that, and the Government will certainly not be giving up on it. We are working tirelessly to ensure that we see reconciliation and the outcome that he and I know is what Northern Ireland needs. With the efforts that continue to be made, I earnestly hope that we will see that progress and see the implementation of a power-sharing Executive in a very short time.

Grenfell Tower

4.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the Government's response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and our safety inspections of cladding in other buildings.

Almost three weeks have passed since the catastrophe that hit Grenfell Tower. Progress has been made to help the survivors and people in the surrounding buildings who were affected. Landlords across the country have been taking measures to make their buildings safe. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has been appointed to lead a full public inquiry, and an independent expert panel is now advising my Department on any immediate action on fire safety that is required.

The disaster at Grenfell Tower should never have happened. The police investigation and public inquiry will find out why it did. Right now, the Government's immediate priority is to provide every assistance to those who were affected and to take every precaution to avoid another tragedy in buildings with similar cladding. The Grenfell Tower victims unit is operating from my Department and providing a single point of access into Government. Staff from across Government continue to offer support at the Westway assistance centre and at a separate family bereavement centre. Almost £2.5 million has been distributed from the £5 million Grenfell Tower residents' discretionary fund. Each affected household is receiving £5,500 to provide immediate assistance, and payments have been made to 112 households so far.

There has been much speculation about who was in Grenfell Tower on the night of the fire, and it is vital that we find out. As I announced yesterday, the Director of Public Prosecutions has made it clear that there will be no prosecution of tenants at Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk who may have been illegally sub-letting their property, so all tenants can be confident about coming forward with information for the authorities. There may have been people living in flats that were illegally sub-let who had no idea about the true status of their tenancy. Their families want to know if they perished in the fire. These are their sons, their daughters, their brothers, and their sisters. They need closure, and that is the least that they deserve. However, that cannot happen unless we have the information we need, so we are urging anyone with that information to come forward and to do so as quickly as they can.

The immediate response to the Grenfell disaster is being co-ordinated by the Grenfell response team, led by John Barradell. He is being supported by colleagues drawn from London Councils, the wider local government sector, the voluntary sector, police, health, and fire services, as well as central Government. Their expertise and hard work is making a huge difference, but it is only a temporary measure. It is also vital that we put in place long-term support for the longer-term recovery. It was right that the leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea took the decision to move on. I look forward to working with the new leader of the council, and I will look at every option to ensure that everyone affected by this tragedy has the long-term support they need.

The Prime Minister promised that every family who lost their home because of the fire will be offered a good-quality temporary home within three weeks, and the deadline is this Wednesday. I have been monitoring the progress of rehousing, and we will honour that commitment. Every home offered will be appropriate and of good quality. What we will not do is compel anyone to accept an offer of temporary accommodation that they do not want. Some families indicated that they wanted to remain as close as possible to their former home but, when they received their offer, took a look at the property and decided that it would be easier to deal with their bereavement if they moved further away. Some families have decided that, for the same reasons, they would prefer to remain in hotels for the time being. Other households have indicated that they would prefer to wait until permanent accommodation becomes available. Every household will receive an offer of temporary accommodation by this Wednesday, but every household will also be given the space to make this transition at their own pace and in a way that helps them recover from this tragedy.

The people affected by the disaster at Grenfell Tower need our assistance and are receiving it, but they also want answers. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has been appointed to lead a full public inquiry. He has visited Kensington and has met victims and survivors, as well as members of the local community who have done so much to help. After consulting the community, Sir Martin will then advise on the terms of the inquiry, and we will ensure there is legal support for victims so that they can play their full part.

We must allow that inquiry and the criminal investigation to run their course. Each must have the space to follow the evidence wherever it takes them. We must all be careful not to prejudge or prejudice either of them, but what we can do right now is take sensible precautions to avoid another tragedy. The Building Research Establishment is continuing to test the combustibility of cladding from councils and housing associations, as well as from private landlords. So far, all the samples of cladding tested have failed—that is 181 out of 181. It is obviously disturbing that there is such a large number of buildings with combustible cladding, and the priority now is to make those buildings safe. Where appropriate mitigating measures cannot be implemented quickly, landlords must provide alternative accommodation while the remedial work is carried out, and that is exactly what happened with the four tower blocks in Camden. Our primary concern has been buildings over 18 metres or six storeys in which people stay at night. Hospitals and schools are also being assessed.

We ourselves have asked questions about the testing regime after discovering the 100% failure rate so far. Last week I asked for the test process itself to be independently reviewed. That was done by the Research Institutes of Sweden, which confirmed that they believe the process to be sound. A full explanatory briefing note on the testing process has been made available on gov.uk. As the note explains, every failed test means that the panels are “unlikely to be compliant” with the limited combustibility requirement of the building regulations guidance. That has been confirmed by legal advice and by the advice of the independent expert panel, which was established last week. For use of the panels to be safe, landlords need to be confident that the whole wall system has been tested and shown to be safe.

We are not aware of any such system having passed the necessary tests, but I have asked the expert advisory panel to look into it further.

Almost three weeks have passed since the catastrophe that hit Grenfell Tower, and I know I speak for every Member of this House when I say that we are still all in shock. It is not just the terrible scale of the suffering; it is that it happened in 21st-century Britain in London’s richest borough. I will continue to direct the full resources of my Department to assist the Grenfell response team, and I will be working closely with the new leader of Kensington and Chelsea Borough Council to make sure there are plans in place for a longer-term recovery. I will return to the House regularly to update hon. Members on progress.

4.54 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the prior copy of his statement. He struck an appropriate tone today. These are complex challenges for government, both national and local, but Ministers have been off the pace at every stage since this terrible fire. They have been too slow to grasp the scale of the problems people are facing and too slow to act. For the Grenfell Tower survivors, for the victims’ families and for the local community in north Kensington, underlying everything is the question of trust: that those in positions of power mean what they say, do what they promise and do not drag their feet before acting to deal with problems. That powerful message must be understood by Ministers, Kensington and Chelsea Council and the chair of the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick.

The Grenfell Tower residents understood what the Prime Minister meant when she said:

“I have fixed a deadline of three weeks for everybody affected to be found a home nearby.”

It is three weeks on Wednesday since the fire. How many people are still in hotels? The Secretary of State gave the latest version of the promise today: “a good-quality temporary home within three weeks”. Does that include hotel rooms? How temporary is “temporary”? By what date will all residents affected by the fire be in permanent new homes? While we are trying to get the numbers clear: how many survivors are there from Grenfell Tower? How many have not received the Government’s immediate assistance payments of £5,500?

Let me turn to the wider fears of those living in 4,000 other tower blocks around the country. The Government say that 600 tower blocks with cladding need safety checks, but nearly three weeks on the Secretary of State confirms today that only 181 have been tested so far—and all have failed. Will he accept that these tests are too slow and too narrow? Will he confirm that the Government are testing only one component of the cladding—not the panels, adhesives and insulation; not the cladding as a composite system; and not the installation method or impact on the buildings? All those things can affect fire-safety qualities. Importantly, will he confirm that cladding is not the whole story? We know that from the two coroners’ reports after the previous fires at Shirley Towers and Lakanal House, four years ago. So will he act now—not wait for the public inquiry—to reassure residents in all other tower blocks by starting the overhaul of building regulations; by retrofitting sprinkler systems, starting with the highest-risk blocks; and by making it very clear that the Government will fund, up front, the full costs of any necessary remedial works?

[John Healey]

Turning to the public inquiry, which the Secretary of State mentioned, the Prime Minister has rightly set up this inquiry to get to the bottom of what went wrong at Grenfell Tower and help make sure this can never happen again. She said:

“No stone will be left unturned”.—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 168.]

Yet Sir Martin Moore-Bick has said:

“I’ve been asked to undertake this inquiry on the basis that it would be pretty well limited to the problems surrounding the start of the fire and its rapid development”.

So I say to the Secretary of State that I recognise the importance of the independence of the inquiry, but will he make it clear to the House today what brief Sir Martin has been given by the Prime Minister for this inquiry? As the Secretary of State said, John Barradell is leading the strategic co-ordination group at present, providing the emergency response, relief and leadership that Kensington and Chelsea Council failed to do after the fire. How long will it be running these council operations? What is the hand-back plan? Who will it hand back to?

There are deeper flaws in this council, beyond the very serious failings in response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and every public statement from the ruling politicians confirms that they are in denial. These are exactly the deeper problems that commissioners and a full corporate governance inspection would help put right. The Government are still off the pace. If this council were a school, it would be in special measures, fresh leadership would be needed and fresh confidence would be built, as it must be built in this council. Actions speak louder than words, and actions count most in helping the Grenfell Tower survivors, and in rebuilding their confidence in the future and the wider public trust that must be there for the residents who live in our tower blocks and make them their homes right across the country.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He asked several questions, and I shall start with the first, on temporary housing. Our commitment has been clear and it is unchanged from day one: all residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk will be offered temporary accommodation in Kensington and Chelsea or a neighbouring borough within three weeks. I just explained in my statement what that offer means. I want to make sure people are offered high-quality accommodation that is appropriate for their family type and size, but they should not and will not be forced to accept accommodation that they do not want to move into at this point.

I was at the Westway centre again on Saturday, and my hon. Friend the Housing Minister was there on Sunday. I met many of the residents and talked to them, mainly about their needs. I wanted to listen to them, because when officials have come back to me and said they are finding that a lot of people are saying, for example, “I’d rather stay in hotels for now and perhaps then exercise an opportunity to move into some of the permanent accommodation that has already been identified, especially the 68 units at Kensington Row,” that is something we should take into account. It would be absolutely wrong for us to say, “No, you cannot stay in the hotels. You have to move, and then you’re going to have to move again.” We should be led by the residents.

I have also met residents who have said, “I thought I wanted something close to where I lived before,” but when they went to one of the available properties, despite it being of high quality and appropriate in many ways, when they looked out the window they saw the tower, were clearly reminded of things they would rather not be reminded of, and changed their minds. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is not saying that in those circumstances we should force families to accept the accommodation, no matter what. We will be led by the families and their needs. Our commitment is clear: come Wednesday, every single family and every household from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk that has so far come forward to us will have been offered high-quality temporary accommodation.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked whether temporary accommodation includes hotels. Hotels are emergency accommodation; temporary accommodation—I went to see some examples myself in a neighbouring borough on Saturday—is high-quality accommodation. It may be houses or flats—whatever the residents choose. There is also permanent social housing, which it will take more time to identify, especially if the family desires that it is in the borough. As I have said, it is well known that we have already identified 68 units, and we are very close to adding a number of other units to that availability. That will be permanent housing that we will offer to the families, and they will be able to decide whether it is appropriate for them.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the testing process; it can move only as fast as the samples come in. Since I made my previous statement, there has been a sharp pick-up in the number of samples coming in from local authorities and housing associations. We are turning those around within hours of their coming in, with the results going immediately to the landlord. The test itself is on a component—the core—of each of the cladding panels. A sample of the core is taken, then categorised for its limited combustibility as either category 3, 2 or 1, with categories 3 and 2 being deemed not to meet the building regulation guidance.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked whether the whole system is being tested. As I said, the core of the panel is being tested. It is possible to conduct whole-system tests. That is not the test that is currently being conducted by the BRE, but the expert panel is meeting again today to advise how things can be done appropriately so that we are convinced that a whole-system test actually works and leads to a positive result. So far though, as I said in my statement, we have yet to see any evidence showing that any builder has passed the whole-system test.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about funding. We have made it clear that whatever measures need to be taken—any remedial measures to make buildings safe—local authorities and housing associations should get on with them. If local authorities or housing associations need help with funding, we are ready to discuss that with them and we will work with them.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly reminded the House that the public inquiry is independent. We have to be careful what we say about it in the House or elsewhere, but we should remember that Sir Martin started immediately, meeting victims, volunteers and others, as he should. He will set out the terms of the inquiry. He is not there yet—he should take the right amount of time

that is necessary and make sure that the inquiry is broad and to the satisfaction of the victims, their families and friends, and that they feel that the terms of reference are appropriate.

Lastly, the right hon. Gentleman asked about Kensington and Chelsea. Clearly, the Grenfell response team—what has been referred to as the gold team led by John Barradell—is being led appropriately with tremendous resource, both from the local government and voluntary sectors and from central Government. At some point, the process of recovery for the longer term will transfer to the council. We are not at that point yet. When we are, we need to make sure that the council is properly resourced with expertise as well as money and any other help that it needs. We will make sure that when that happens it is properly resourced.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is working with devolved Governments to ensure that every tower block around the country is going through the same fire safety tests?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can confirm that to my hon. Friend. So far, the Welsh Government have identified 13 tower blocks with aluminium composite material, and they are all being tested.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House to make a statement on the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and I appreciate the chance to have advance sight of the statement, which was very useful. I also welcome the announcement about the 112 households that have received payments. I am not certain whether he has said this already, but I would appreciate knowing how many households still need to receive payment and the timescales for those payments—how long are they likely to take?

Along with many Members in the House, I have been approached by residents in my constituency who live in multi-storey blocks. I commend the work that local authorities have done to take action to test buildings and to reassure tenants who live in those buildings. I used to live in a local authority multi-storey, and I well understand the access issues that concern people. I appreciate the moves that have been made by a number of organisations working together to provide reassurance.

I restate the position of the Scottish National party that the public inquiry should be as wide-ranging as possible. At every stage, the views of the Grenfell Tower survivors should be taken into account. I would also ask a couple of things. I would like reassurance that residents are being helped as far as possible to replace documentation that they lost in the fire, and about residents whose families want to take part in the inquiry and who live abroad. What financial help is available for them to ensure that they can come and take an active part in the inquiry?

Lastly, I would welcome confirmation that there will be no prosecution of the tenants. It is really important that those tenants, and anyone who has been living there, come forward, and I would welcome the Government's views about that.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. First, on payments so far from the discretionary fund, there is £5 million available from that fund; £2.44 million

has been paid out so far. Of the grants, 249 £500 cash payments have been made, amounting to £124,500, and there have been 112 payments of the £5,000 grant. I should also remind people listening to the statement that that has no impact on benefits or any other compensation that individuals might receive.

I agree absolutely with the hon. Lady's comments about the public inquiry. It should be as wide-ranging as possible, and should absolutely have the input of victims, their families and friends. Those victims must get the legal support that they need to make proper and full representations.

On lost documentation, I can confirm that since soon after the tragedy, in the Westway centre but also in the victim unit support in my Department in Westminster, almost every Government Department necessary has been represented. In fact, I saw a fantastic example on Saturday, when I met a team from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency from Swansea. They turned up at the Westway centre within a couple of days of the disaster, and they brought with them driving licences that they had printed out. Residents turned up saying, "I need a driving licence", fully expecting to make an application, and the DVLA team handed it to them in the envelope once an identity check had been done. That is the extent of the efforts many Government Departments have gone to, and that is what we expect as we continue to help these people—the victims—with their recovery.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend has described the tests taking place in housing association and local authority housing, schools and hospitals. What conversations has he had with the insurance industry regarding totally private tower blocks? Leeds has seen much regeneration and there are lots of tall tower buildings with cladding. It strikes me that insurance companies have a vested interest in ensuring that such blocks are dealt with before new regulations come into place.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to point that out. The insurance industry has been taking a great interest in the work that is happening, especially in the testing. The Chancellor had a meeting with the insurance industry just last week.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that the statement from the new independent chair that the scope of the inquiry might be limited to the start of the fire and how it spread has caused some alarm among survivors. Will he say a little bit more about that? Will he also confirm that all survivors will get proper legal aid so that they can have proper, independent solicitors and barristers representing their interests?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can confirm that. I was there again on Saturday, soon after Sir Martin's first visit, and a number of survivors and their families made the same point to me. It is worth reiterating and making clear that although the judge will rightly ultimately determine the scope of the inquiry, we all expect it to be as broad and wide-ranging as possible. We absolutely want to ensure that all victims, survivors, families and friends feel that they are properly represented and get the proper financial support.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has sadly informed the House that, so far, 100% of all 181 samples taken from buildings have failed the combustion tests. I do not wish to prejudice the public inquiry or any future criminal action, but will he tell the House whether the cladding originates from one source or whether it is from multiple sources, which would hint at a more systemic failure across the industry?

Sajid Javid: I can tell my hon. Friend that there are multiple sources.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) is a most estimable fellow, but I think he is probably still enjoying his honeymoon, which we hope that he celebrated with great joy. But I gently point out to him that he beetled into the Chamber 17 minutes after the statement started and that, therefore, it is a trifle saucy to expect to be called on this occasion. We will store him up for another occasion on which he can give the House the benefit of his wisdom.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): A week ago, the Secretary of State told us that the Government were capable of processing 100 tests a day. We now know that there is a backlog of 419 tower blocks that have not yet been tested. Can he tell us about that backlog? How many samples are currently in the laboratory, how many have failed to be provided and what is he doing to ensure that they are all supplied?

Sajid Javid: There is no backlog. We can only process the tests as soon as the samples come in. When they do come in, they are processed within hours and the landlord is informed along with the local fire and rescue service. I can update the House on numbers. Before we received the information back from the local authorities and housing associations, the original estimate was that they could own up to 600 similarly clad buildings. We now think that figure is around 530.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for the speed of cladding testing to which he just referred. When interim recommendations are made, what processes are in place to ensure that landlords actually comply and carry them out?

Sajid Javid: In the immediate term, we have made sure that the landlord is informed immediately when a piece of cladding fails the test. The local fire and rescue service will carry out the fire safety check, and we expect all those recommendations to be followed. The involvement of the local fire and rescue services, which will report back to my Department, means that we are able to monitor progress.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I do not think that the Secretary of State made reference to the review of building regulations and to the fire guidance contained in Approved Document B, which officers of the all-party group on fire safety rescue had the opportunity to raise with the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government—we were grateful for that opportunity. The review was recommended by the coroner's inquiry from Lakanal House; it is 11 years

since the last review. Does the independent panel of experts have the power or authority to recommend a recall of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee working party on Approved Document B so that this work can begin now, rather than waiting till the end of the public inquiry?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about building regulations and the guidance on them. It is already clear to us all that there will need to be changes, and that we need to look carefully at the causes and at the fact that so many buildings are failing the guidance test. The expert panel has a wide remit, which is broadly to recommend to the Government immediately any action it thinks we should take that will improve public safety. For the longer term, we will set out in due course how we intend to tackle the much wider review I think will be necessary.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Some media outlets have suggested that Grenfell survivors have been forced to move to cities in the north of England. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that nobody who chooses to not move out of London will be deemed intentionally homeless?

Sajid Javid: I, too, have heard these rumours, yet no one has come forward with any evidence of any such thing taking place—of someone being moved outside London. I can also give my hon. Friend a reassurance on the intentionally homeless point; in fact, I wrote to every resident last Thursday to make that point very clear to them.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The safety of domestic appliances is a vital element of fire safety in tower blocks—and, indeed, in all homes. This horrendous fire started with a fault in a fridge, so will the Government revisit the decision of March last year to dismiss or delay many of the recommendations of the Lynn Faulds Wood review into product recall, which I commissioned in 2014? In particular, will the Secretary of State recognise that funding for the enforcement of safety regulations through trading standards is inadequate and must be urgently addressed?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking at this issue very seriously. He is a member of the taskforce that has been discussing this and many other issues. He is speaking to many manufacturers about what can be done to make sure that, when products are recalled, that happens much more quickly and much more safely.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am sorry to say this, but I find the sophistry of the Secretary of State today quite sickening. The reason why people are refusing offers of accommodation is that they are not suitable, sometimes by reason of people's age or disability, and not because these are fussy people. The units of social housing being offered are existing social housing, so what happens to the people who would have gone into them? We are going to have a net reduction in the amount of social housing. It is an open secret in west London that the administration in Kensington and Chelsea could not run a bath. That is why the residents

of north Ken have had such a raw deal for so long. So when will the Secretary of State put country before party and send in the commissioners?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is a local London MP, and he has an opportunity now to put party politics aside and just do the right thing for his constituents. His constituents are watching him.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On Friday afternoon, I met the chief executive and the leader of Corby Borough Council, who assured me that the council has complied with all the requests the Department has made, and I shall ask the same questions of East Northamptonshire Council this Friday. However, is there anything more that individual Members can do to support Ministers and the Government, working across party lines and with local authorities, in the review process ahead?

Sajid Javid: One role that many individual Members, including my hon. Friend, have been playing well is making sure that their constituents are well informed about what the testing process is and what the results actually mean. That was one of the reasons why we published the explanatory note last Friday, and many Members have used it to inform their constituents.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let us come back to the issue of the commissioners whom the Mayor of London, among others, has asked to be put into Kensington and Chelsea. Of course they need not be put in to manage the whole council, but just its social housing responsibilities. As a localist, I believe that commissioners should be put in only in extremis—in cases such as Rotherham or Tower Hamlets—but surely this is an extreme example of a failure of governance. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to this request and what factors has he taken into account? If he rejects it, does that mean that he has full confidence in Kensington and Chelsea's ability to manage its social housing stock?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman rightly highlights that when control of the recovery effort transfers to Kensington and Chelsea for the longer term, we need to make sure that the right resources are there, including the right expertise and good leadership, but that is not about to happen. Before it happens, the Government will rightly consider all options that will bring that about.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about having a broad and wide-ranging public inquiry, yet Sir Martin describes his remit as very narrow. Will the Secretary of State explain this conflict? How he will clarify the situation, because this process has to get us the answers in the end?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that in an independent inquiry, and rightly so, it is important that the judge ultimately sets the terms of reference. This is just the beginning of the process. I urge her and all hon. Members to give the judge time to speak to victims and their supporters, the families, the volunteers and others, and then to come to the final judgment on how wide the terms of reference should be.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): This terrible disaster obviously raises questions about the effectiveness of local emergency planning. What steps are being taken here and elsewhere to ensure that other local authorities have good emergency responses should disasters befall them?

Sajid Javid: One of the lessons that has already come from this tragedy is about trying to make sure, across the country, that we take a fresh look at planning for civil emergencies. That work has already begun, led by the Cabinet Office.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Based on the intelligence of survivors, it appears that a number of the flats were severely overcrowded. We have to assume that those flats were being sub-let illegally and inhabited by people with unstable immigration status, and possibly even those who had been trafficked, as that has been identified as a problem in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea. What are Ministers doing to ensure that private landlords, legal or otherwise, are properly declaring vulnerable people who were in the building on the night of the fire, and not potentially profiteering from any properties or finances being offered to survivors?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that one of the steps that we have taken to recognise this picture, which absolutely may well have been happening where there was illegal sub-letting, was yesterday's announcement by the Director of Public Prosecutions that we want everyone with any piece of information to come forward. That was why the guarantee that they will not be prosecuted was offered, and I think that that will help and make a big difference.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Over the past few weeks, I have been visiting tower blocks across my constituency with fire officers and housing officers. Residents remain very, very concerned. Frankly, they do not understand why the Government and successive Ministers appear to have ignored the recommendations of the coroner's report on sprinklers following the Lakanal House fire. I would suggest that Ministers who are shaking their heads try visiting my constituents, standing on the 15th floor, and explaining in person to those residents why there are no sprinklers.

Sajid Javid: It is good that the hon. Lady has been visiting tower blocks in Bristol and I hope that she has been able to reassure some of her constituents. It is good to have MPs' involvement. However, she is wrong about the recommendations on sprinklers in the coroner's report on Lakanal House because they were implemented fully.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Given what the Grenfell Tower fire has exposed about the combustibility of external cladding in the UK, can the Secretary of State confirm that appropriate tests are being conducted at non-high-rise as well as high-rise buildings?

Sajid Javid: Our priority has been buildings that are taller than 18 metres—typically more than six storeys—and residential buildings, as that is where one would expect the highest risk, because naturally people would be there overnight. That is the starting point and the priority.

[Sajid Javid]

We expect that after we have dealt with the priority cases, we can make the testing facility available for all other types of buildings.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State knows that many other public buildings, including hospitals, use tower blocks for accommodation and that they might have vulnerable cladding on them. Will he confirm how many hospitals have been tested so far and how many have failed those tests?

Sajid Javid: As I said in my statement, I can confirm that hospitals, schools and other buildings in the public sector are being looked at. That work is being led, through the Government Property Unit, by the Cabinet Office. The process of testing is ongoing. Even before the cladding can be tested, we have made sure that local fire and rescue services have been informed and that any necessary mitigating measures have been taken.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that testing of the core of cladding had resulted in 181 failures and that that meant local authorities had breached building control regulations. Does that mean regulations at the time the cladding was put up, or regulations as they stand today?

Sajid Javid: The last time there was any significant change in building regulations guidance was in 2006 and much of the cladding was put up in the early 2000s. There has been no significant change in building regulations or building regulations guidance pertaining to fire safety for a number of years. I said in my statement that the samples had failed a limited combustibility test, and that test has been around for a number of years.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I want to take the Secretary of State back to the issue of hospitals, because my local hospital is a tower block with cladding that was put on in the past four years. The Hull royal infirmary management team has been very reluctant to tell the public what additional checks have been undertaken, but after being pressed several times by the local BBC, it has now admitted that the cladding has been sent for testing. Is it not about time that we had a statement from the Secretary of State for Health so that we can be clear about all our hospitals and other buildings with cladding, and so that the public can know what is happening?

Sajid Javid: I assure the hon. Lady that this is being taken very seriously. Where ACM or suspected ACM cladding has been found on any hospital, regardless of whether or not it is a tall building, it has been submitted for testing. Even before the results of those tests are back, the local health trusts have taken action to put in place mitigating measures. For example, many of them have put in place full-time fire wardens, 24 hours a day, to make sure that they provide maximum public safety.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The lessons of Hillsborough are that survivors must be listened to at all times and that inquiries must be transparent and comprehensive. What assurances can the Secretary of State give in relation to Grenfell Tower?

Sajid Javid: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Lady. Those are very important lessons to learn. I am confident that the judge, Sir Martin, will address them as he approaches his inquiry. I think that the first public sign of that will be when he sets his terms of interest.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Tenants in high-rise blocks in my constituency are often disabled or elderly, and in some cases they have poor or no English. Will the Government start to work with local authorities and housing providers to develop effective strategies to protect those most vulnerable tenants in the event of a fire or other disaster?

Sajid Javid: There are already many rules and regulations in place to do just that. As we learn all the lessons from this terrible tragedy, it is important that we ensure that we do everything we can to protect the most vulnerable.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I understand the focus of the Secretary of State and his Department on cladding, but may I ask him about the insulation? Some reports say that the insulation caught fire and combusted three times quicker than the cladding. Industry experts say that we should consider a system of non-combustible insulation, which is available on the market. What is the Secretary of State doing to investigate the safety of insulation, including when buildings are uncladded and the insulation is exposed to the elements?

Sajid Javid: The police report on the Grenfell Tower tragedy rightly referred to the insulation. After that, our guidance to local authorities and housing associations was immediately publicly updated to say that there should be checks on insulation, too.

Points of Order

5.29 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You would have heard earlier the Home Secretary and Home Office Ministers stating, in response to questions about reductions in police numbers in specific forces, that police funding has increased in real terms. It is the case that overall funding has been protected since 2015, but I would argue that it is misleading to suggest that that is relevant to numbers of police officers on the ground when it is in fact due to increases in funding for specific issues such as cybercrime and child sexual exploitation. As a result, some forces have not seen a single increase in resources since 2015. Only today, the chief constable of West Midlands police said that the Government need to offer real-terms protection and that policing is getting smaller and smaller. Will you advise me on how I may correct the record?

Mr Speaker: It is a pleasure to seek to advise the hon. Lady, in so far as it could in any way be said that she requires my advice. Let me begin by saying to her that she is an individual both sophisticated and wily. Notwithstanding what she regards as effectively—whether by intention or not—misleading statements, it is apparent from the very terms of her point of order that she, unsurprisingly, has not been hoodwinked in any way. She is on to the matter. She is seized of the issues. She is unpersuaded by the rhetorical blandishments of people opposite her.

I know that the hon. Lady is ferociously bright, but I am sure she will not suppose that others are automatically in every case less so, and therefore incapable of comprehending and seeing their way through the thickets in the way that she has so successfully done. In short, I say to her that these are matters of debate, and she has used the ruse—I use the word “ruse” advisedly—of an attempted but utterly bogus point of order to highlight her grave concern about this important matter. In that mission, she has been successful, for she has aired it and she has persuaded me to respond in terms.

We will leave it there for today but, knowing the hon. Lady as I do, I daresay that she will be at it again with vigour and ingenuity ere long.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Gosh! I just referred to the intelligence of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), and we now have no less a figure than a QC on her feet.

Joanna Cherry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your assistance as to how I might put the record straight regarding an exchange that I had with the Prime Minister last week about the requirement for European Union citizens resident in the United Kingdom to have comprehensive sickness insurance. On Monday 26 June during the Prime Minister’s statement on the European Council, I raised the concern of my Lithuanian constituent who, despite having been resident in Scotland for more than five years, is unable to claim permanent residency because she does not have comprehensive sickness insurance. The Prime Minister’s answer gave the impression that her Government could do nothing about the predicament of such EU nationals in the UK

until the UK leaves the EU, because comprehensive sickness insurance is a requirement in EU law. I fear that this inadvertently gave a misleading impression, and I am afraid that the matter was compounded by the Minister for Immigration repeating the same assertion in an answer to me earlier this afternoon.

While it is correct that comprehensive sickness insurance is a requirement of European Union law, there are steps that the Government could take immediately to state that access to the NHS in the UK satisfies that requirement. That is not just my view: it was the unanimous recommendation of the cross-party Exiting the European Union Committee in the last Parliament at paragraph 73 of its second report. I am sure that the Prime Minister is aware of the Committee’s recommendation and would, like me, not wish the record to stand uncorrected.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for her point of order and for her courtesy in giving me advance notice of its gist. What I would say to her is that I am not psychic and therefore cannot say for sure what was, or was not, in the mind of the Prime Minister at the time she answered the hon. and learned Lady’s question. Whether the Prime Minister did know, as the hon. and learned Lady clearly does, the contents of paragraph 73 of the Exiting the European Union Committee’s second report of Session 2016-17 entitled “The Government’s Negotiating Objectives”, I do not know. The Prime Minister might have been aware of the said paragraph at that time, in which case she has a quite extraordinarily compendious memory and power of recall when answering questions. It is possible, to be fair, that the Prime Minister might not have been immediately conscious of that particular paragraph. What I think it is fair to say is that the Prime Minister was endeavouring to provide a succinct reply. In that mission she was successful—her answer to the hon. and learned Lady consisted of 34 words.

I have no reason to suppose that the Prime Minister was seeking deliberately to mislead the hon. and learned Lady, or indeed the House. That causes me to say to the hon. and learned Lady, in thanking her for raising this matter, that differences of interpretation are not infrequent occurrences in the Chamber of the House of Commons, a point with which I suspect she will concur. I have no doubt that she will want to return to this issue and I therefore have a little advice for her. “Erskine May”, with which the hon. and learned Lady is immensely familiar—I am referring of course to the 24th edition, as I feel sure she knows, and, as I feel equally sure she knows, to page 358—states:

“The purpose of a question is to obtain information or press for action”.

In this case I think that the hon. and learned Lady is seeking to press for action rather than simply to obtain information. This I think she has achieved, at least in so far as Ministers on the Treasury Bench have now heard what she has had to say. They may or may not take initiatives as a result. If they do, I hope they satisfy her; if they do not, I feel sure the hon. and learned Lady will require no further encouragement from the Chair to raise this matter on subsequent occasions.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware of my interest in the estimates process. I was terribly excited to see estimates on the agenda for this week, but tomorrow

[Kirsty Blackman]

estimates will be decided without debate. I understand that this is because the Liaison Committee is not in place, and it therefore cannot put forward reports for debate. On the following day, supply and appropriation will be on the agenda, but that will also be decided without debate. Being particularly keen, I went to the Vote Office to see if I could get some papers on the estimates, but I understand that no papers will be available until after we have taken tomorrow night's motion—that was what I was told in the Vote Office just now. I understand the circumstances that mean there are no debates right now—I get that. However, my concern about the lack of information is one that I think the House should consider.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I was not aware of that matter. I feel modestly confident in suggesting that the estimates themselves will doubtless be available but, off the top of my head, I do not know how accessible they will be to the hon. Lady. Certainly the estimates—the figures—should be available. Whether there is other and better, more satisfactory, more discursive, more informative material available by way of commentary or assessment relating to those estimates, I do not know. If no material is available, the hon. Lady has identified quite a serious point. Rather than flannel and suggest to her that I have a comprehensive answer to that concern, I would say that I will make inquiries to Ministers in the relevant Department. If the position is as she describes, I will see whether anything can be done to offer her satisfaction before she is called upon to vote.

If there are no further points of order and Members' palates have, at least for now, been satisfied, I suggest that the Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders of the Day.

Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister of State to move that the Bill be read a Second time, I warn new Members, large numbers of whom are seeking to make their maiden speeches, that they must remain for the opening speeches and that remaining for the Minister of State's speech means that they not only are about to learn quite a lot about air travel organisation and licensing, but will probably benefit from a fair number of literary and possibly philosophical references in the course of his oration. I speak with some experience of these matters.

5.40 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is both fitting and humbling, as you will gladly acknowledge, Mr Speaker, that I should have been chosen to introduce the first piece of legislation of this new Parliament—fitting because of my status and popularity, and humbling because it does not pay to draw attention to either of them.

Hon. Members will recognise in taking a look at the Bill, as I am sure they have, that it reflects that this Government, like others before it, recognise the value of providing UK businesses with the best possible opportunities to grow and also ensuring that consumers are protected when and how they need to be in respect of, in this case, how and when they purchase their holidays. I am introducing the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill so that we can ensure that consumer protection for holidaymakers can keep pace with changes in the travel market.

The Bill has a long genesis in two ways. First, it builds on long established good practice. The arrangement in the Bill is born of the arrangement of a similar kind that began in the 1970s to protect the interests of travellers. Secondly, we have already debated these issues at some length. We had an earlier Bill, to which I will refer later, in which these measures were included. We gave that Bill a Second Reading and debated it in Committee in some detail. That was done in a convivial, consensual and helpful way, and I shall also refer to that later.

There is recognition across the House that the consumer protection measures in respect of holidays and holidaymakers need to keep pace with changing circumstances and conditions in the travel market. There may be those in the Chamber who, affected by the specious and pernicious appeal of liberalism—because it does appeal to some people—believe that the free market can sort all these things out for itself. That is not a view that I hold, and I know that there will be wise heads across the Chamber who recognise the efficacious role of Government in intervening where the market fails. It does not happen regularly in respect of holiday companies: anyone who looks at the history of this area of the Government's work will recognise that it has been rare for the fund established by the air travel organisers' licence to be called upon. None the less, it is an important fund and an important protection. It provides assurance and confidence to holidaymakers as they go about their lawful and regular business.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry that I am not able to continue to enjoy the right hon. Gentleman's oratory, but that particular pleasure is now to be enjoyed by the

First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. I have heard the first of the right hon. Gentleman's philosophical references and I am sure that the Chamber will hear several more in the minutes to follow. New Members are probably somewhat befuddled by this state of affairs, but I think I can tell colleagues that the right hon. Gentleman is what might be called a one-off.

Mr Hayes: Madam Deputy Speaker, let me say—as the Speaker leaves the Chamber—that I was about to move to John Ruskin, who said:

“the first test of a truly great man is his humility.”

We present this legislation in that humble spirit, recognising that this is a changing market and the Government must act to reflect that change, but recognising, too, that the market will continue to change. Any Government who believed that this was the end of the story would, I think, be disregarding the further changes that are likely to result from technology, the way people organise their affairs, the way they book their holidays, the way the internet operates, and the fact that other technology will change the way we go about our business. I therefore have no doubt that there will be a need for further provision at some point in the future, but, at this stage, the Bill is an important step in bringing the ATOL provisions up to date and up to speed.

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

Mr Hayes: I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman, who played a useful role in the Committee to which I referred a few moments ago.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way, and for saying that I played a useful role. As he knows, this legislation was part of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. What will happen to other measures that were in that Bill, particularly those relating to offences involving the use of lasers that affect pilots?

Mr Hayes: I would not want to test your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, or indeed your largesse, by ranging widely across the provisions of the other aspects of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, but the hon. Gentleman is right to point out that, as I said earlier, these measures had their origin—their genesis—in that Bill. We will bring further measures to the House: the Queen's Speech makes it clear, for example, that we will address the issues of autonomous and electric vehicles, which the hon. Gentleman debated, alongside the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), and others, in the Committee that I mentioned. Further measures will be presented, and—not wishing to test your generosity any further, Madam Deputy Speaker—I think I will leave it at that.

In this new Parliament, many of the measures that I described as essential will be introduced, and this ATOL reform is one of them. I hope that our debate today will match the convivial and consensual spirit of our discussions in the Bill Committee to which the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) alluded. We made progress on both sides of that Committee, and I hope that it continues. I think it fair to say that those discussions demonstrated that there was really

“no difference of principle between the Government and the Opposition on this matter.”—[*Official Report, Vehicle Technology and Aviation Public Bill Committee*, 21 March 2017; c. 25.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who also played a useful role in the Committee.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I very much agreed with the Minister's earlier philosophical comments about the appropriateness of Government regulation in matters such as this. I am sure that many holidaymakers will feel more secure when the Bill has been passed, knowing that they will not be left stranded abroad with no means of getting back. May I ask whether the Minister has consulted closely with the airlines, particularly those that fly planes from London Luton airport with holiday packages?

Mr Hayes: I will come to that later, because the hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the role of the airlines in all this. As he will know, they are covered by other licensing arrangements, but I will address the specific points that he has made. As ever, he has made a case for his Luton constituents, and particularly for Luton airport, which I know is in his constituency.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the Minister knows, Cardiff International airport is owned by the Welsh people via our own Government. What discussions has he had with the Welsh Government about the Bill's impact on operators working from Cardiff?

Mr Hayes: Prior to that first Bill, we had discussions with devolved Governments about its character and content, and I think that there is agreement across the kingdom about the necessity for these measures. I always enjoy my discussions with the devolved Governments, and will continue to do so in my role as Minister of State. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Bill will affect all parts of our kingdom, not least because of the travel that takes place to and from different parts of it by air. We will certainly want to continue to receive representations from those Governments as these matters roll out.

Before I go any further, let me say something that I should have said at the outset. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, there has been some debate in the Chamber in recent days about sartorial standards. I ought to say, as a matter of courtesy, that I will not be taking interventions from any Member who is not wearing a tie, on whichever side of the House that Member may sit. However, I believe in generosity as well as in courtesy, and I will provide a tie, which I have here, for anyone who is sartorially challenged or inadequate. Of course, I exclude lady Members from that; I would hardly expect them to dress in my tie, their own or anyone else's.

Let us move to the origins of the UK holiday market. This week will see one of the UK's, and the world's, leading travel brands celebrate 175 years of travel. It was on 5 July 1841 that Thomas Cook arranged the first excursion. That was a one-day train journey from Leicester to a temperance meeting in Loughborough. The train carried around 500 passengers a distance of 12 miles and back for a shilling. Contrary to popular belief, I was not the Transport Minister at the time, and I certainly was not one of the passengers, but those early excursions were significant. They helped to form the foundations of the travel and tourism sector in the UK. The growth of the railways meant that, for the first

[Mr John Hayes]

time, affordable travel could be combined with leisure activities or accommodation and offered to a growing population of consumers.

Of course, today's holidays—today's excursions—are quite different from those first ones. Society has changed, and the promise of sun, sea and sand means holidays are more likely to be driven by temperature than temperance. I personally choose to have my holidays on the east coast of England, largely, in Broadstairs, Northumberland and most places in between, but not everyone does, and those who want to travel further afield and those who wish to use technology to make those choices will want to know that they are protected in doing so.

The advancement of technology has continued to drive the biggest challenges facing the leisure travel sector. Affordable air travel and fuel-efficient planes mean that people are able to travel further, and for longer. The growth of the internet and mobile phone technologies have revolutionised the way people book holidays, creating greater opportunities for consumers and businesses.

We debated these issues on the Committee to which the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun referred. It was clear to us then, and I think to the whole House, that the UK has continued to lead the way. We have one of the most innovative and advanced leisure travel sectors in the world and one of the biggest markets in Europe. Overall, tourism contributes close to £121 billion to our economy annually, with outbound tourism contributing around £30 billion.

Strong consumer protection is vital to underpin confidence in that important sector. By its very nature, there are a number of risks in the holiday market which have existed ever since those first excursions. It is common for consumers to pay up front on the promise of a holiday, which may be many weeks or even months away. There can be a lack of awareness of the financial stability of holiday providers, particularly as services are often provided by third parties. In the rare event of a company failure—I mentioned at the outset that it is rare—consumers may experience a financial loss from a cancelled holiday, or significant difficulties from being stranded abroad. It was against that backdrop that the air travel organiser's licence scheme, the ATOL scheme, was introduced in the 1970s for UK holidaymakers flying overseas.

I will not tire the House with a long, exhaustive history of the ATOL scheme. I see that that is disappointing to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to others, but I want to give all Members as much opportunity as possible to contribute to this important debate. Suffice it to say that the ATOL scheme protects consumers if their travel company fails. It does that in two ways.

First, travel firms that sell flight packages in the UK must hold an ATOL licence, issued by the Civil Aviation Authority. That helps to regulate entry into the market and to filter out companies that are not financially robust. Secondly, the scheme acts as a fund to compensate consumers who might be caught up in a failure. The ATOL licensed company must pay a small levy, £2.50, for each person protected by ATOL. That money is then held in the air travel trust fund and used by the CAA to ensure that consumers are returned home or refunded when a company fails.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister looks delighted to give way on that specific point; I am sure he will want to say more about it. First, a correction—Luton airport is in the constituency of Luton South. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) and I have many a competitive conversation about it. On the £2.50 levy, I understand that there is a significant surplus in the fund now. Is the Minister confident that, under the new arrangements, where airlines may look around European member states in considering the best regime into which to pay, £2.50 is competitive and the right figure to charge?

Mr Hayes: First, I apologise for ascribing Luton airport to the constituency neighbour of the hon. Gentleman, and not to him. As he will know, in a previous ministerial job, I was able to visit Luton South and to enjoy his hospitality there alongside the local authority. Luton is playing a bigger part in this debate than we may have expected; both Luton Members have contributed to it. As he will know, the fund is administered by the CAA, with trustees appointed by the Secretary of State. It builds up and is invested accordingly.

As we speak, there is about £140 million in the fund. If a major holiday company collapsed, it would be essential that there were sufficient moneys in the fund to cover that collapse. That could happen more than once in a short period; that is not inconceivable. The critical thing is that the fund is never short of money. The guarantee is that we will protect consumers and get people home safely from perhaps far-flung destinations and that they will not lose out as a result of things that they could not have anticipated or affected.

If it is helpful, I will be more than happy to provide the whole House with a further note on how the fund has changed and grown over time. I have mentioned what it is comprised of. I think it would be helpful for me to make available to the Library, and therefore to the House, more details of the kind the hon. Gentleman has asked about. It will help to inform further consideration of these matters as we move from Second Reading.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Minister is right to say that there is cross-party support for greater protection of consumers, but he also mentioned safety. Could he take this opportunity to tell us whether Transport Ministers intend to introduce legislation to deal not just with the dangers posed by laser pens, but with the dangers posed by drones, which we have heard about again today?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady will know that that, too, was raised in our discussions on what was originally known as the modern transport Bill—or at least apocryphally known as such—and became the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. She will also know—because of her keen interest in transport matters and her enthusiasm to take those matters further with an election, to which I will not refer more than obliquely—that we are consulting on those matters; the consultation has finished and we will bring our conclusions to the House and elsewhere very shortly. However, she is right to say—I am happy to put this on the record—that that is a matter of some concern. Existing legislation provides some protection. For example, if a drone were interfering with military aircraft or a secure site, existing legislation would cover that to some degree, but there is a case to do more,

which is why we have consulted on the matter. I know that she will give the results of the consultation and our response to it her close attention, as she always does.

Let me move on; as I said, I do not want to prolong this exciting speech too much. As I said, the scheme also acts to compensate consumers who might be caught up in a failure. I have talked about the fund which is administered by the CAA to ensure that consumers are returned home, and since the 1990s the ATOL scheme has been the primary method by which the UK travel sector provides insolvency protection under the UK and Europe package travel regimes. Today the scheme protects over 20 million people each year, giving peace of mind to holidaymakers in Luton and elsewhere.

Kelvin Hopkins: It is reported in the notes that between 1998 and 2009 the proportion of ATOL sales fell from 90% of leisure flights to just 50%. That is a substantial drop in just 11 years. Were some passengers affected by not being covered during that period?

Mr Hayes: As I said at the beginning of my remarks, the purpose of this Bill is to ensure that ATOL remains fit for purpose. The hon. Gentleman is right that the way people travel, the means by which they book their holidays, and the organisations they use to do so are changing. That is why we must look again at ATOL: not because it has not worked or because its principles are not right, but because it needs to reflect those changes. This Bill is the first step in doing so. Anticipating—although not impertinently—what the shadow Secretary of State might ask me, it is also true to say that this Bill is just that: a first step that creates a framework that will allow us to update ATOL.

Further steps will be required, which might come through regulation or further review of the appropriateness of what we are putting into place today. The hon. Gentleman raised that point when we debated these matters briefly before, and I have no doubt that he will want to press me on it again today, but there is an absolute acknowledgement that this is a rapidly moving marketplace that will require rapidity in our response.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Having also served on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill Committee, I have a sense of déjà vu here. I agree with the general nature of the measures the Minister wishes to introduce, because he is right that it is a fast-moving market, but there is also some concern in the industry, which plans typically 12 to 18 months ahead, that it will need some of the detail of the secondary legislation as soon as possible, to allow it to prepare effectively for that.

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend might have raised that point in that Committee; my memory is good but not encyclopaedic, but I do seem to recall that he has made this point previously. He is both authoritative on matters regarding transport, having served with distinction on the Select Committee, and consistent in his line of argument. His is a perfectly fair question, and it is what the Opposition and the whole House would expect, so we will provide as much information as we can about what further steps we might take in terms of regulation. There is nothing to be hidden here; there is no unnecessary contention associated with this and certainly no desire

not to get this right, and the best way of getting it right is to listen and learn—as is so often the case in politics, in Government and in life.

I have talked a little about the diversification of the market and the growth of the internet and smart technologies. That is not a bad thing: consumers now have many options at their fingertips to buy holidays and put together their own packages. Indeed, an ABTA survey estimates that about 75% of UK consumers now book their holidays over the internet. As methods of selling holidays modernise, we must adapt the schemes and regulations that protect them.

“Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of intelligent effort”,

as Ruskin also said. That is why we took steps in 2012 to update the ATOL scheme; we introduced the ATOL certificate confirming the protection covered, and broadened the scope of protection to include “flight plus” holidays. These interventions have had a positive impact, extending consumer protection, levelling the playing field for businesses and improving clarity for all. The key here is that consumers know when and how they are protected: making sure the system is as comprehensible and comprehensive as possible is an important aim.

We now need to build upon the changes we made then, and make sure that ATOL keeps pace with the changing travel market. In particular, the new EU package travel directive was agreed in 2015 to bring similar, but further-reaching, improvements to consumer protection across the whole of Europe. I said earlier that the United Kingdom had led the way in this field. It is not unreasonable to say that Europe is now saying it wants similar provisions across other countries to the ones we have had here for some time. So that travel directive is both reflective of, and perhaps even, to some degree, inspired by, the success of our arrangements. This will need to be implemented into the UK package travel regulations by 1 January 2018.

The Government supported the rationale for updating the package travel directive. It will help to modernise and harmonise protection across Europe. Broadly, it will mean that the protection offered across Europe will be closer to the protection we have enjoyed from the beginning of ATOL, but most especially since the changes we put in place in 2012. It will ensure there is a consistent approach to the protection.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister is giving an interesting and full explanation of the benefits of this Bill.

Will the Minister clarify that the point is that the ATOL regulations currently apply to first-leg flights out from the United Kingdom and a UK airport, but that under this Bill the intention will be that in future if a UK ATOL-regulated operator sells a package virtually anywhere in Europe, as long as they comply with the rules here, that will be covered by the ATOL scheme and the potential levy?

Mr Hayes: Yes, that is part of what we aim to do: the aim is to ensure that if a holiday is bought here, wherever the person goes they are protected in exactly the way my hon. Friend described. He is also right to say that part of the change is the way people book and make their holiday plans, and part is about how and where people travel. The package holidays people first enjoyed in the 1960s and '70s are less routine now in that they are no

[Mr John Hayes]

longer the routine way people travel to the continent and further afield, and ATOL was of course born in that period when things were simpler—thus my point for the need for it to evolve, as it has to keep pace with these kinds of changes. That consistent protection of holidays across Europe will ensure that informal package holidays booked online will get the same protection as traditional package holidays booked on the high street—holidays of the kind that had their beginnings in the '60s and '70s.

For the first time, these measures will also bring protection to a new concept of “linked travel arrangements”, which I think is what my hon. Friend was referring to. This concept is designed to provide some protection to business models which are not packages, but which often compete closely with packages.

Overall, the new directive has the potential to provide a greater level of protection to UK consumers, whether they purchase from a company established in the UK or overseas. It will also help to level the playing field for companies whether they are in the UK or overseas, and whether they operate on the high street or online.

That point matters in itself. This is about protecting consumers, and about the clarity and comprehensibility that I described. It is also important for those in the travel sector and the industry to know where they stand. Creating a greater degree of consistency for them matters too, particularly for smaller businesses that really need to know, as well as to feel, that the regulations apply across the board in a consistent, fair, reasonable and implementable way.

In order to bring the new directive into force by July 2018, the four clauses simply enable the ATOL scheme to be aligned with the updated package travel regulations. The combined clauses will mean UK-established companies are able to sell holidays more easily. They will be able to protect these holidays through ATOL, and they will not need to comply with different schemes in each country. That is the essence of what we are trying to achieve today. The Bill will also extend the CAA's information powers so that they are more able to regulate the scheme and this cross-border activity.

Finally, the Bill will allow the scheme to be able to adapt more effectively to changes in the travel market. I have said that I anticipate further change as time goes on, and the Bill paves the way for that. Overall, the updates we will make to the ATOL and package travel regulations will mean that consumer protection can extend to a broader range of holidays. This will mean that protection is provided for traditional and online package holidays, but also for looser combinations of travel, which have previously been out of scope.

Of course, we also need to be mindful that the regulatory landscape will need to be able to adapt to changes in our relationship with the European Union. The changes we are making are in keeping with this principle. They will help UK consumers, businesses and regulators to transition to the new package travel regulations in 2018 with minimal impact, but we will also retain flexibility in ATOL regulations to adapt to the changes in our relationship with the European Union, ensuring that we continue to have strong consumer protections in place as we leave the EU.

I hope that that has given a clear and reasonably concise picture of the Bill and the reasons for introducing it. As I have said, the UK has always been a leader in this field. We have led in so many ways and so many areas, and when it comes to providing protection for holiday makers, the Bill will ensure that the UK continues to lead, whether we are inside or outside the EU. It will provide UK businesses with the opportunity to expand and grow, and it will provide a framework to ensure that ATOL remains flexible enough to cope with future trends. The Bill is indicative of a Government who are willing to act to protect and preserve the people's interests, and I stand here as a Minister ready to do that. It is a Bill for the people from a Government of the people.

6.11 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It was all going so well until that last comment! The Minister has it right, however, when he says that the Bill is to be welcomed. The events of failure are rare, but it is imperative that this market and the response to it should develop so that people who experience those failures have recourse to a remedy. He will find a great deal of support on this side of the House for what he has said and for the Bill. I thank him for his summary and his account. He is right to say that matters in the related Bill were conducted with a great deal of conviviality, courtesy and humility, and he is to be credited with ensuring that that was so.

As the Minister said, it is with a sense of *déjà vu* that we are debating these changes to the air travel organisers' licensing system. It has been only four months since these self-same clauses received their Second Reading when they made up part of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill—or VTAB, as we liked to call it. It ought to be an Act by now—VTAA—but sadly we must still refer to it as VTAB. The Prime Minister's decision to call an early election meant that VTAB, along with a whole host of other legislation, had to be dropped.

Given that we had wasted a great deal of parliamentary time and effort, it was quite a surprise to see that there was no reference to VTAB in the Queen's Speech. Instead, the Government have decided to fragment the legislation, splitting it between the Bill we are debating today and the automated and electric vehicles Bill that will be introduced later in the Parliament. It is interesting to note that 50% of the legislative programme relating to transport for the next two years of this Parliament will merely be clauses that have been copied and pasted from VTAB, a Bill that should have already been passed into law. This surely highlights how this minority Government are out of ideas and have very little new to offer the country as they focus their attention on a desperate attempt to cling to power.

Mr John Hayes: With the greatest respect, I think that the hon. Gentleman is underselling himself. The progress we made in Committee and on consideration of the previous Bill meant that, when the Government came to look at the model of what good legislation should look like, they needed to look no further than the work that he and I had done. I take most of the credit for that, but I think he should take some too.

Andy McDonald: As ever, the Minister is extremely generous in his praise. He is right, however, to say that we made a lot of progress. I just hope that we do not have to do it all over again. That is the point.

The Government do not have a plan to reintroduce VTAB in its entirety, even though it should already have been taken through. Madam Deputy Speaker, you could be forgiven for asking why the Government do not dare to try to pass legislation that has already passed through this place and received support from both sides of the House. Indeed, it is a matter of considerable concern that a number of important clauses from VTAB appear to have been left out of the Government's forthcoming legislative programme. They include the clauses in part 4 of VTAB that related to vehicle testing, the shining of lasers—which the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned earlier—and diversionary driving courses. The clauses in part 3 relating to air traffic services also appear to have been axed. Perhaps the Minister can offer some explanation of why he previously deemed it a necessity to legislate on those issues, as they are not being reintroduced now.

Moreover, during the progression of VTAB, Labour Members raised concerns over the absence of legislation to create a regulatory framework to deal with drones. With the proliferation of drones in recent years, we have seen a sharp increase in the number of near misses with planes. The latest figures show that there were 33 such incidents confirmed in the first five months of this year and 70 last year, compared with only 29 in 2015 and just 10 in the five years before that. Representatives of the aviation industry have expressed their concern over the Government's failure to bring in legislation to tackle this worrying trend.

Iain Stewart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way; I enjoyed our exchanges in the Committee stage of the previous Bill. I may be wrong, but given the intervention I made on the Minister earlier, I believe that it is important to get this Bill on to the statute book as early as possible so that the subsequent regulations can come into effect in an industry that has to plan 12 to 18 months in advance. The other measures that the hon. Gentleman mentioned are important, but they could be put into a different Bill. Perhaps that is the reason they are not in this one.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point, but those matters were considered an important part of VTAB, as were the bits relating to ATOL. It is a gross omission for us to come this far and not deal with such important matters now. Certainly, if the roles were reversed, we would want to introduce legislation before a near miss turns into a catastrophic incident that could have been avoided. We have heard about an incident at Gatwick airport in the past 24 hours, and this matter should concern everyone in the House. I make a genuine offer to the Minister that we will be nothing other than wholly supportive if the Government wish to bring forward legislation and regulations better to protect our airports and other places of great sensitivity. This is a huge issue, and the drone industry and others who support such legislation believe that the freedom to indulge in this activity is coming ahead of safety at the moment. I put it gently to colleagues that we should really be looking closely at this.

Mr John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman does the House a service in raising this matter. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) challenged me on it in an earlier intervention, and I made it clear that we had consulted on it—the hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the consultation exercise that we have

been engaged in—precisely because we agree that the matter requires further consideration. I am happy to engage directly in discussions with him so that we can find a way forward on drones. He is right to say that this a changing and potentially challenging matter, and we need to work not only as a Government but as a Parliament to address it, so I am happy to take up his offer of discussions on the back of that consultation and our response to it.

Andy McDonald: I am again grateful to the Minister for his consistent, collegiate attitude and for his co-operation. His approach to this Bill is exactly the same as it was with the previous Bill, and that should be acknowledged. The Labour party shares his objective of making this Bill and the forthcoming transport Bills relating to automated and electric vehicles and to the space industry the best possible pieces of legislation as they pass through the House. We only wish that the Government were prepared to respond to the rapid technological advances of recent years and to bring forward legislation in the areas that I outlined, which are in urgent need of a regulatory framework. It has become quite clear in recent weeks that inaction can risk lives.

As we stated when the measures in this Bill were first laid out in VTAB, the broad substance of the changes to ATOL are necessary and, for the most part, welcomed. The changes will harmonise UK law with the latest EU package travel directive, leading to many benefits for UK consumers and UK travel operators. A wider range of operators, including more dynamic package providers, will likely be covered under the changes, bringing protection to many more UK holidaymakers not covered under existing ATOL provisions. The requirement for travel companies to be in line with standards at “place of establishment” instead of “place of sale” will now mean that UK companies can sell far more seamlessly across Europe by simply adhering to the widely respected ATOL flag.

However, the EU-level changes do bring about something that could have adverse effects for some UK consumers purchasing from EU-based travel companies. The changes made through the directive will now mean that EU-based companies selling in the UK have to adhere only to an ATOL-equivalent insolvency protection laid out in the member state where the business is based. In practice, that could have unintended consequences and, more significantly, costs for UK consumers. Processes and timescales for recompense may be distinctly different to what many travellers would expect under the gold standard of ATOL. The impact assessment warns:

“If consumers purchase a trip from a business established elsewhere in the EU and the company becomes insolvent there may be some costs to the consumer of processing a claim with a non-UK insolvency protector.”

Based on the latest CAA figures, that is not just something that will impact on a relatively small number of holidaymakers; it would currently compromise over 500,000 passengers. It is therefore important the Government take appropriate steps to anticipate and prepare for any negative impacts. As suggested by the Opposition when the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill was in Committee, making it a requirement for the Government to monitor the impact for UK consumers using EU-based companies would help inform the Government about whether they should consider further guidance or co-operation with consumers and EU member states to ensure that adequate protections are in place.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will know that the existing legislation contains an obligation to review it after five years. He is making an argument that he has made previously, and it seems to have some weight. I am open-minded about how we consider such things, and I will certainly reflect on his point about our need to consider the impact of the changes that he describes. I am more than happy to include that in our discussions about drones.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification.

The Bill's second clause is not directly relevant to harmonising UK with EU regulation, but it contains a dormant power that the Government will retain, enabling them to make considerable changes to ATOL with regard to air travel trusts. During an evidence session when VTAB was in Committee, we heard from Richard Moriarty of the CAA, a trustee of the current air travel trust, who recognised the possible merits of separating the trust to reflect the variations of products in the market. However, he explained that we simply are not there yet and that it would be wrong for the Government to use this Bill as a means of making wholesale changes without due consultation. The Minister made it clear in a letter to me that changes would be made only through the affirmative procedure, yet the Bill does not account for any further consultation as part of this measure. Labour will therefore be again seeking a commitment from the Minister, which he gave in Committee during the progress of VTAB, that the Government will conduct a thorough impact assessment and consultation before implementing the power. Mr Moriarty said at the evidence session that he hoped that the Government

“will follow the practice that they have followed today: consult with us, consult the industry, do the impact assessment, and so on.”—[*Official Report, Vehicle Technology and Aviation Public Bill Committee*, 14 March 2017; c. 30, Q150.]

Accordingly, if the Government were to undertake a full impact assessment and consultation before bringing forward regulations to create any new air travel trusts through the affirmative procedure, that would be fair and reasonable and would guarantee scrutiny of any further changes to ATOL.

To conclude, while the Opposition are frustrated that the general election meant that the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill was dropped and, moreover, we are concerned with the Government's decision to omit a large proportion of the legislation as it is reintroduced in this Parliament, Labour none the less broadly supports this Bill. We welcome the changes that will harmonise UK law with the latest EU package travel directive, which will have many benefits for UK consumers and UK travel operators. However, we have concerns about the levels of protection given by EU-based companies selling in the UK and about whether UK consumers could lose out following the change. We will be pressing Ministers for reassurances on that during the passage of the Bill. As we did with the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, the Opposition will seek further detail from Ministers on the assimilation of the directive, the impact of Brexit, and Government accountability as the Bill progresses through this House.

6.27 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is an honour to be called to speak in the debate on the first piece of substantive legislation in this Parliament, and to be the

first Back Bencher to do so. The Bill brings back some traces of memory lane for me; I declare an interest in that I practised in consumer protection at the independent Bar before my election to Parliament. Indeed, I was involved in lecturing and cases in this very area. Somewhat optimistically, I called it “holiday law”, which makes it sound—I can hear one of my colleagues saying this—like rather good fun. Having spent years prosecuting trading standards legislation and defending criminal law, as well as working in the personal injury sphere, I must have been on my way back from holiday while looking for a new area to branch into, and then an opportunity came up. I obviously decided that if I could not actually be on holiday, I might as well at least talk about being on holiday. I therefore produced a lecture, which I covered with lots of rather attractive pictures of happy people on holiday, sun-dappled beaches and palm trees, but that of course rather missed the point, because when one goes to see a lawyer, one is telling them not how good a holiday was, but that something has gone wrong. That is the all-important point that I was addressing in my career and that the Government are seeking to address through this Bill.

Things occasionally go terribly wrong when people are on holiday and, from my experience at the Bar, that can be anything from simply poor quality through to a catastrophic failure of holiday, injury or, in some cases, even death. That is what we are seeking to address through the Bill.

I started my lecture to the Bar with the same story that the Minister told of the temperance campaigners—it is one of those throwaway anecdotes we tell at the beginning of what can sometimes be detailed lectures—and I thought for one moment that I was about to hear him repeat my lecture back to me. I am glad that he went on to more substantive matters.

In my constituency I have not only a great many places that people come to visit—I will refer to some of them in a moment—but, of course, many people who, as we all do, look for places to tour abroad. It is for the constituents of Witney and west Oxfordshire that I most strongly desire to see the Bill enacted.

I express my support for the Bill at the outset, because ATOL protection is a critical part of the protection that we all rely on when we book a tour. It is only right—and necessary—that we seek to extend that protection to a broader range of holidays. When ATOL protection started in 1973, the world was very different from the one that we inhabit now. It was a world with few airlines—a world of British Caledonian and nationalised airlines such as British European Airways and British Overseas Airways Corporation. One might even say that it was an era before the benefits of a free market were fully explained and realised in this country—we should perhaps remember that at all times in this debate. It was a day before the internet. It was a day when going abroad was full of uncertainty, and sometimes even danger. It was into that world that the package tours regulations came into being, and rightly so.

Kevin Foster: Does my hon. Friend agree that at that time it would have been unimaginable that someone could use a mobile phone to book a holiday with an operator in Germany, France or another country in Europe? At that time, walking into a travel agent on the high street was the only real way of booking this type of project.

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend makes an outstanding point. We could be sitting in the Chamber now, if we were not paying attention to the debate—I am sure every Member is paying attention with alacrity—and booking ourselves a holiday on our mobile phone. Such a world was not even envisaged in 1973, but we did have the advent of the package tour, and British Airtours, a subsidiary of British Airways, was one of the leaders. People's ability to have their package holiday protected, provided that they had a flight, was a major innovation, and it is something that we have now lost.

I say that from personal experience because, through my work, I have first-hand knowledge of how the package holiday industry now works. Not only do we have what is called "dynamic packaging", in which a vast choice of providers, destinations and activities are available to members of the public, who can tailor bespoke packages for themselves, but those selling holidays can seek to step around some of the relevant legislation. A website might purport to be operating and offering a package but, when one actually looks, it turns out that the flight is offered by a subsidiary, the accommodation is operated and offered by another company, and other packages—perhaps excursions—are dealt with by someone else. It is quite easy in this day and age to step around the regulations that ATOL provides, which is why the Bill is so necessary. The travel market has changed significantly in recent years. In those days, and it was a romantic era—

Mr John Hayes: Talk of romance was not what drew me to my feet, although it might have done. My hon. Friend talks about the changing character of the industry and the need to ensure that the regulations are updated. Reflecting on the remarks made by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who speaks for the Opposition, I reaffirm my commitment to consult further before any regulations are brought before the House under the affirmative procedure. I draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) to section 71B of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, which already makes provision for consultation by the CAA in the light of any such changes.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to the Minister for making that clear. The prospect of amendment has been ongoing for some time, so I am delighted that we are addressing it in the House today.

Although the image we all have of walking down the high street, flicking through a brochure and speaking to somebody behind a till still happens in many cases—many people avail themselves of the services that exist, including at the excellent travel agencies in my constituency—many people do not do that. It is now so easy to go on the internet to put together a bespoke package for ourselves. In a sense, we have become our own travel agents, but that brings challenges as well as opportunities for this new generation of travellers. In this House we embrace the opportunities that come with those challenges. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that we have seen the free market in action with the expansion of providers, destinations and activities. We have seen so many of the advantages that a free market can bring in the interest of consumers. Indeed, the online travel market has led to reduced costs for holidaymakers, as well as increased choice and flexibility.

Of course, we have to reassess protections at the same time as we reassess, and benefit from, those changes. The mix and match of lower prices and wider opportunities has to be seen alongside the protection. Many holidays now fall outside the scope of ATOL, which is very different from the situation in 1973. In 1998, approximately 90% of all leisure flights were covered by ATOL, but I understand that the figure has fallen to under 50% in recent years. I welcomed the Minister's comment at the start of his speech. As much as I have praised the free market and its benefits in terms of opportunities, choice and reduced costs, I also understand that there is a role for Government. I agree with him that it is appropriate for the Government to step in and ensure that consumers in this field are protected.

That is why I welcome the measures in the Bill to address such changes. The Bill will ensure that the ATOL scheme keeps pace with innovation in the online travel market, while also ensuring that protections are in place, regardless of whether someone books online or on the high street. We will therefore ensure that more than 20 million holidaymakers each year continue to be protected.

Kevin Foster: Given my hon. Friend's comments, will he say something more about clause 1, which extends ATOL to sales made by UK companies within the European economic area? Does he think that that provision is worth while?

Robert Courts: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's timely intervention, as the next page of my notes deals with clause 1. Existing ATOL legislation applies only when the first leg of a relevant flight booking departs from a UK airport. The new legislation introduces a single-market approach to insolvency, whereby EU-established companies will be required to comply solely with the insolvency protection rules of the state in which they are established, as opposed to the place of sale, which is the current position. The legislation is therefore much wider, and the company will only have to be established.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with me and several consumer groups that £2.50 is a low price to pay for ATOL protection compared with the cost of standard travel insurance? In the longer term, we might see a decline in the cost of travel insurance as more holidays are covered by this enhanced ATOL protection.

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is right that the ATOL scheme is funded by a levy of approximately £2.50 per protected passenger and that it would be extremely unwise of any holidaymaker to go abroad without adequate travel insurance. I encourage everyone always to have such insurance, although it can sometimes be pricey, especially if someone is looking to protect themselves against some of the more routine failures that are easily covered in the ATOL scheme. However, more serious misfortunes can occur when people are on holiday, which is why travel insurance is, of course, still advisable. As my hon. Friend suggests, the cost of insurance may come down in time as a result of this enhanced package.

Clause 1 will allow travel companies established in the UK that sell flight-inclusive packages to use their ATOL membership and protection to cover all EU-wide

[Robert Courts]

sales without needing to comply with the insolvency protection rules of any other member state. Clause 2 deals with funding and qualifying trusts within the ATOL trust management structures. The Department for Transport is alive to the fact that because we have seen significant changes to the travel industry—not only since 1973, but since 2004, as well as more recently—it might be necessary to enter into separate trust arrangements for the greater business model, such as linked travel arrangements, to give greater transparency to businesses and consumers. It might be necessary to introduce a new form of qualifying trust to ensure that the ATOL trust will still protect consumers in the all-important area of flight accommodation. The Bill allows the flexibility under trust arrangements so that we can increase funding and ensure that ATOL is adequately funded as time goes on.

Clause 3 addresses a slightly different point: the ability of the CAA—the House will realise that the authority is responsible for running the ATOL scheme—to require and request information from airlines selling ATOL-registrable products within the UK and more widely. Under the Bill, an important change would apply to airlines that have an air service operator's licence from another EU member state and therefore would not need any of the licences that have been granted by the Civil Aviation Act 1982.

The House will be delighted that this is a short Bill, containing only four clauses. I have needed to deal with only three, so I do not need to go through the other one—I am sure everyone is delighted. [Interruption.] The Bill is short in terms of clauses, as the House will realise.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend referred to clause 3. Those who have an air service operator's licence from other European countries will not need a CAA licence. Is he satisfied that the measure will still give full consumer protection?

Robert Courts: I am indeed satisfied that it will give full consumer protection. I say so because the Government have consulted widely. Once again, my hon. Friend has somehow, with extraordinary prescience, managed to prompt me to move on to the next stage of my speech, which may have been his subtle intention.

The Government have consulted widely, and the industry's response has been favourable. We have received broad support from a majority of respondents to the proposals to harmonise ATOL with the scope of the EU package travel regulations. I noticed that during proceedings on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, evidence given by the group director of consumers and markets at the CAA stated:

“There are a number of important and welcome developments from”

the Bill

“which will be good for UK consumers. First, the directive makes it much clearer what the definition of a package is.”—[*Official Report, Vehicle Technology and Aviation Public Bill Committee*, 14 March 2017; c. 63, Q143.]

I hope that the House will forgive my mentioning that in detail. I do so simply because of my experience of having argued the concept of what a package is in the courts of this country throughout my career at the Bar. The Bill has wide support in the industry.

I wish to make one more point, which is simply to note the educating effect of tourism. We are of course leaving the EU, but we are not turning our back on Europe or ceasing to be a European country—I will not make more detailed comments. As all Members will appreciate, travelling to a new country and appreciating a new culture is one of the most educating and enlightening things an individual can undertake. We will want people from this country to be able to expand their horizons throughout the EU, as indeed we will want people from the EU to be able to come here. West Oxfordshire has a plethora of tourist attractions, such as Blenheim palace, the great stately house; Cotswold wildlife park; and Crocodiles of the World, which is an excellent attraction that I invite all hon. Members to visit—I have been. We have many picturesque villages throughout west Oxfordshire, including Bampton, of “Downton Abbey” fame.

I have gone on at some length. The House will probably realise by now that this Bill has my full support, and I urge Members to give it its Second Reading.

6.47 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Let me take this opportunity to welcome you to your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to thank the Minister for his summary of the Bill's provisions. The decision to update the ATOL scheme to provide more protection to travellers when they go on holiday, and to align it with enhancements to the EU and UK travel package regulations that predate people booking their holidays on the internet, is of course to be welcomed. We need to ensure that the public are protected by updating the UK's financial protection scheme for holidaymakers. It is important to keep pace with the innovation in the online travel market and ensure that appropriate protection is in place, regardless of whether consumers choose to book online or on the high street. Of course we want to make it easier for UK companies when selling holidays across Europe, and they will be able to trade under the UK's ATOL scheme as opposed to the regimes in each country they sell to. The measures in this Bill are important as we need it to cover new digital business models and modern consumer purchasing models.

We know that more than three quarters of consumers booked their holidays online last year. The EU package travel directive of 2015, applicable from 1 January 2018, extends the protections beyond traditional package holidays organised by tour operators and also gives clear protections to 120 million consumers across the EU who book other forms of combined travel. The directive is expected to reduce detriment to consumers by about €430 million per year across the EU, and reduce administrative costs and burdens on business.

Passenger rights have been enshrined in EU law, and consumers and businesses deserve to know, need to know and are keen to know how Brexit will affect them. They seek cast-iron assurances that the rights and protections of travellers will not be diminished after the UK leaves the EU, and I know that the Minister understands that.

Existing EU directives mean that UK passengers are currently entitled to a number of benefits if a journey is cancelled or delayed. Such protections give consumers some peace of mind when they are booking travel. Since the EU legislated to provide a comprehensive system of

air passenger rights in 2004, the increased awareness of those rights and the chance to complain or appeal has led to a significant increase in the number of people doing so. That is a good thing, because it democratises the market and gives consumers proper routes of redress—the Minister mentioned the importance of intervening when the market has failed.

It should be noted that there are examples of court cases that have ruled on the circumstances in which airlines must pay compensation. Appeals against some of those judgments have demonstrated the reluctance of some airlines to pay out compensation unless the legal position is made absolutely clear. The rights of passengers must be clear and they must be upheld; otherwise, there will be a detrimental impact on passenger numbers and, ultimately, jobs will be put at risk.

Brexit clearly poses challenges in respect of passenger rights. It is essential that the UK develops its own system of passenger rights and compensation in the aviation sector, and there must be clarity on how such a system will affect non-UK airlines and passengers. Will we have such a system in the UK, post-Brexit? A system will clearly be required, but we, and non-UK airlines and passengers, need to know how similar it will be to current arrangements. In the post-Brexit world, what is to become of all the EU protections currently in place? Will they continue under the UK Government? What reassurances can UK passengers be given? The Minister referred to the “minimal impact” on consumers and business post-Brexit, but more detail is obviously needed, and it is keenly awaited.

The collapse of Lowcostholidays was a stark reminder of the importance of the EU package travel directive, which offers consumers protection in case of insolvency. Will the Minister give due consideration to the points I have raised and update the House as soon as it is practical to do so? He spoke of the need to revisit the relevant consumer protection as technology advances, but the question at the forefront of everybody's mind is what will happen post-Brexit.

Mr John Hayes: I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Lady invited me to respond as quickly as possible, so I shall respond now. The reform of ATOL and the package directive will bring the arrangements throughout Europe more into line than they have ever been before. It is imperative that we protect consumers through regulation in the way I have described, so it is inconceivable that, post-Brexit, we will not want to reflect the protections that already exist here and that we see increasingly abroad.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for his response. The clear guarantees that businesses and consumers are looking for must not be eroded after Brexit. If we have guarantees and the Minister can give us further detail on them, passengers and businesses will be reassured.

Clause 2 will give the Secretary of State power to reform the ATOL scheme and the air travel trust fund, with only an affirmative resolution by each House of Parliament required. Any changes that the Secretary of State wishes to introduce to the scheme must be preceded by a full consultation and an impact assessment that allows for proper scrutiny of the proposals.

Although we absolutely welcome the move to update the ATOL scheme to ensure that a maximum number of travellers are protected when they go on holiday and to align it with the EU travel directive 2015, passenger rights have been enshrined in EU law and consumers and businesses deserve clarity on how Brexit will affect them. The UK Government must provide more flesh on the bones and explain how such rights will be written into our laws. The updating of the scheme is to be welcomed, but the post-Brexit world poses a range of challenges on which consumers and airline business require clarity. I forward to hearing more detail from the Secretary of State in due course.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Rachel Maclean to make her maiden speech.

6.54 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

It is a great privilege to make my maiden speech in this debate as the representative of Redditch. Improving consumer rights is a priority for the Government, and the Bill is needed as a response to the change in how people book their holidays, as more and more people use the flexibility of the internet to book their breaks. I know that the hard-working people in Redditch will welcome the protections when they book their well-earned summer holidays.

The Redditch constituency that I am proud to represent has a proud tradition of returning women MPs to this place. If there is one woman to whom I owe the greatest debt, it is my daughter, Ruth, who at the age of 14 said to me, “Mum, why aren't there more women MPs? You ought to stand!” I replied, “I will try to find a few moments in between running my own business, taking your three brothers to football and scouts, washing your school uniform and supervising your homework.” Nine years later, I am honoured to have been elected by the people of Redditch.

Redditch is a new town, originally built to accommodate people from a rapidly expanding Birmingham. As another Brummie newcomer to Redditch, I am following in their footsteps. Other hon. Members have extolled the virtues of their wonderful constituencies—the natural wonders up and down the country—and I only wish I had time to visit them all. However, most people in our nation live in towns, and we must remember that people need beauty in their lives, whether they live in the countryside or in towns. I am proud that in Redditch any student of town planning would find the best example in the country of a well laid out, modern urban landscape. Developments such as Church Hill, Matchborough, Winyates, Lodge Park and Woodrow have all been designed to allow maximum amounts of green space, quiet streets and traffic-free highways.

At the heart of the town is a lovely, natural oasis: the Arrow valley lake and country park, which comprises 900 acres of green space and is packed with wildlife rarely seen in an urban setting—although unfortunately no crocodiles—and also provides a focal point for our community events. To the west the modern shopping centre and the historical centre of the town exist harmoniously.

[Rachel Maclean]

One can understand why so many people wanted to move to Redditch to live, work and bring up their families.

Along with our excellence in town planning, we are not without sites of natural beauty. The constituency includes some beautiful areas of rural Worcestershire, such as the villages of Feckenham, Inkberrow, Hanbury and the Lenches. Hanbury church, which I visited this past weekend with the local ramblers group and my dog, is said to be where the bells on “The Archers” radio show are rung. I am mindful of the diverse challenges I face in representing the issues throughout the whole constituency, including a brownfield-first policy for new developments, broadband provision and farming.

Redditch is also a great centre of enterprise and business, with a wealth of manufacturing companies, although it is particularly famous for its needles. At one point, Redditch made 90% of the world’s needles, and needle-making still occurs there today. In preparing for this speech, I read a play that Members may have seen, “This House”, in which my predecessor Hal Miller features. In one scene, he complains that, despite his envisaging his constituency as one of

“meadows and steeples and farmyards and haystacks”

upon his election he found a somewhat different reality, angrily declaring to the Whips:

“You can’t find a haystack in Redditch because of all the needles!”

Redditch has been fortunate to have had a number of formidable MPs among its previous champions. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Karen Lumley, who sadly retired due to ill health after seven years of dedicated service. She was an MP who fought on behalf of her constituents for the Alexandra hospital, for apprenticeships, for mental health, and for fairer funding in schools. People will remember her for that and with great affection for her ability to bring additional colour to the House, with her varied and unique choices of hair colour. I promise Members that the next time they see me I will still have the same hair colour as I have today—we could not say that about Karen. I would also like to acknowledge Jacqui Smith from the Opposition—the Member for Redditch before Karen—for her great service to the country as our first female Home Secretary.

One issue dominated my general election campaign: our local hospital, the Alexandra hospital, known as the Alex. I want to reassure my constituents that the Alex and its service to patients and their families is my No. 1 priority as their Member of Parliament. I raised that and the issue of the Worcestershire acute trust that runs the hospital on my very first day in the Chamber, and I will continue, again and again and again, to fight to protect and strengthen local health services.

When I reflect on the challenges facing the Alex I am reminded of why I strove to enter Parliament for some years. The Alex hospital, like all our public services, depends on a strong economy. It relies on the taxes that ordinary people pay, and we should never forget that or where those taxes come from: the wages earned by people in jobs created by their employers—the small business owners who have created 2.9 million more jobs since 2010. For the very first time in my life, my wages are paid by the taxpayer. I do not take that lightly, because I know the sacrifice needed to create that money.

Before I entered Parliament I spent my career working in teams that started and grew small businesses in the digital technology sector, as a small business owner and employer. One of those businesses started small, but is now medium-sized and is Britain’s leading publisher of technology content.

Over the years, I have created many jobs for people that enabled them to fulfil their potential and build a secure future for themselves and their families. It has not been easy. I have been through the devastating failures that many entrepreneurs face, losing my home and livelihood before picking myself up and starting again. Anyone who builds a business will recognise that journey. My four children learned at an early age not to ask their mum for pocket money. They learned that we could not go on holiday, that their clothes came from charity shops, that they could not have new toys, phones or trainers, and that their mum and dad did not sleep at night because they were worrying about how to pay the wages of their staff.

Businesses are not some abstract concept. They are built by people from all walks of life up and down this great nation of ours: people who differ from one another in many ways, but who have one thing in common—the desire to work hard, take a risk and create a better life for their children than the one that they had. I want everyone in Redditch to have that opportunity. There are people who feel overlooked and left behind where deprivation and poverty exist and where communities struggle with issues of physical and mental health. I therefore welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to mental health, to investment in our national health service and to affordable housing. I look forward to working across the local community in Redditch to tackle mental health issues proactively and make sure that there is help on the ground where it is needed. I shall work with organisations such as the Sandycroft Centre, which offers a wide range of services to support vulnerable families as well as many other people in the town.

Our Prime Minister said in the House that not every problem in society could be solved by an Act of Parliament. I agree, because many problems are solved by the diligence, commitment and sacrifice of ordinary citizens such as the people behind the 275 new businesses that have started in Redditch since 2010. It is our job in Parliament to provide a solid economic foundation so that those people can do what they do best: building businesses; creating jobs; changing our country. I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate. I look forward greatly to supporting the Second Reading of the Bill and other important pieces of legislation in the coming months. I will never forget the privilege of speaking up in this House for the wonderful people of Redditch.

7.5 pm

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I am extremely grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate. May I begin by commending the new hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on an erudite and passionate speech about the place that she represents? I am certain that if she finds a way to bring that passion to every issue that we debate in the House, while keeping in mind the constituents about whom she clearly cares a great deal, she will make

an impressive impact on this Parliament. I noted the news about her predecessor, Karen Lumley. I have known Karen since she came to Parliament at the same time as me, and I am certain that the whole House sends her its best wishes. If the hon. Lady carries on in the vein of her immediate predecessor and her predecessor before that, Jacqui Smith, she will achieve great success in the House.

I served in the last Parliament as a member of the Women and Equalities Committee—a fantastic institution that we are rightly going to put on a statutory basis from tomorrow. The hon. Lady may wish to turn her attention to our most recent report, “Women in House of Commons after the 2020 election”. I hope that it is not entirely redundant, given the actions in 2017.

If it is in order, Madam Deputy Speaker—and I look forward to your guidance—may I welcome you to your position in the Chair? Opposition Members have benefited greatly from your wisdom, friendly arm around the shoulder and occasional quite straightforward direction in your previous role as Chief Whip. I note from those discussions that your leather whip has not made it to the Chamber, as it did to the Whips Office. I shall check the Chair to see if a new place has been installed to store it, but I wish you every success, Madam Deputy Speaker, in your new role.

We are here to debate the measures introduced by the Minister. The changes are welcome. Given the various models for selling flights and package holidays, the divergence created by the internet and innovations in the market, it is right that we seek to comply with those changes and bring about better consumer protections. The irony that we have debated this in the previous Parliament is not something on which I seek to reflect at length. However, as a Member of Parliament who represents two FTSE 100 companies with direct links to the travel and tourism industry, easyJet and TUI in my constituency, where I also represent Luton airport, there is a great irony at the heart of the Bill, which could be misunderstood as a piece of legislation that is linked to our future relationships under Brexit and is about giving Ministers greater flexibility to handle that. That is one aspect, but the genesis of the Bill is as a piece of legislation that seeks to comply with EU directives, including the package travel directive, which seeks to standardise and give greater consumer protection to the 500 million or so people in the single market. Compliance with that is a welcome measure, and it is right that we should make parliamentary time available for it.

The measure must be complied with by 1 January 2018, and it will apply by 1 July 2018. However, the key date that is not discussed in the Chamber and which is the most important is 31 March 2019, only 15 months later, as that is the day on which we will leave the European Union. Despite the best intentions of the Minister, the Department and the Government, they cannot yet tell us the framework for the measure after that date, so everything we debate today is essentially on a temporary footing.

I raised my concerns directly in the last Parliament, as I was fortunate enough to be granted the Adjournment debate that first put on record in *Hansard* the concerns of the whole industry in the past year about aviation and leaving the European Union. We need a comprehensive air services agreement that not only allows for consumer protections, but which is the most basic starting point

for the industry in the first place, allowing us to take off in one place and land in another, not just in the European Union. Even our relationship with the United States is governed through the European Union. This is a significant piece of work.

Britain is leaving the EU and it is incumbent on the Government to bring forward a Brexit deal for approval by this House. But, however people voted, they did not vote to weaken consumer protections, to add cost and complexity to UK operators or to find themselves in a situation where they cannot get the flights that they wish for. The directive being enacted today has significant advantages for UK aviation and consumers, and I very much hope that we will take that spirit forward by seeking a comprehensive air services agreement that includes the measures in the package travel directive. Our membership of the European Union has had other advantages that I hope we will replicate as closely as possible and enact. For example, the most recent changes to the ability to roam with a mobile phone will make a significant difference to many travellers over the summer.

The alternative is that laid out for airlines and travel agents inside the single market, whereby businesses outside the EU will be required to comply with the different rules of each member state to which they sell. That is opposed to the situation issued by this directive and the Bill, whereby each member state recognises the jurisdiction of the others. That reduces risk, complexity and cost. Will the Minister lay out the Government's intentions regarding the measures being enacted today? It would be a great disservice to UK operators if they were bound by the different regimes across 27 member states having spent only 15 months covered by the protections given by the provisions in the Bill.

In answer to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), the Minister said that it was inconceivable that we would not want to uphold these consumer guarantees. But, with respect, the reciprocal is not within our gift and, therefore, any negotiations must seek to include this newly enacted settlement.

One further issue raised in the meat of the Bill is that of consumer protection. Will we transpose and adopt the promises of EU regulation 261, which provides compensation when flights are significantly delayed or cancelled? I would appreciate it if the Minister could say a word about that. On the comprehensive air services agreement, does he agree that the most important thing is to try to change as little as possible, given that UK airlines are planning and blocking flights that will take off—or not take off, dependent on the deal—to other EU member states after 31 March 2019? We should seek to get as much stability in the industry as quickly as possible.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily powerful point about the importance of aviation to our economy. Manchester airport is in my constituency. Does he agree that aviation is unique because it does not have World Trade Organisation rules to fall back on, and that it is imperative that the Government secure a deal quickly?

Mr Shaker: My hon. Friend pre-empts my point; we are working from the same page. As aviation is not covered by WTO rules, it would be quite conventional to have a separate stand-alone air services agreement with the European Union. It is my view that we should

[Mr Shuker]

try to bring that about now before the meat of the major deal to come, not least because aviation is governed in a different way, but also because establishing those links is generally viewed as the prerequisite to any future trade deal.

In conclusion, the Bill is welcome and brings forward provisions that we all want for consumers and our constituents, but more must be said and done on the issue during this Parliament. The Minister will be acutely aware that he will be judged not on the passage of the Bill, but on the content of any future deal that covers these issues.

7.14 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker), who cares passionately about Luton airport in his constituency, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who has just given an outstanding maiden speech. I thank her so much.

In a modern and outward-looking Britain, it is significant that the first piece of legislation in this new Parliament is a Bill making it easier for consumers—our constituents—to travel overseas and for people from other countries to travel to Britain. It is also significant that this first Bill is about consumer protection, because this Government believe that we should put people first.

The ATOL system offers protection to holidaymakers if their tour operator goes bust. The UK is proud of having had the system in place since the 1970s. It is robust consumer protection that gives confidence to people booking their holidays and, therefore, contributes to our vibrant travel markets. The system supports the economy—not only the destinations to which people go, but also our local tourism industry. I am particularly thinking about the 800 residents of Chelmsford who work at Stansted airport. It is important for their jobs that we continue to have a vibrant holiday market.

Although holidays are always meant to be the happiest time of year, that happiness so quickly turns into a nightmare if there is a problem with a tour operator. Last summer, 27,000 British travellers found themselves overseas when the company, Lowcostholidays, collapsed. Another 110,000 British consumers had booked their holidays through that operator and did not know what the future would hold. Lowcostholidays had, of course, moved its location from Britain to Spain, so it was no longer ATOL-protected. That reminds us exactly how important it is to look at the consumer protection we offer people buying from British-based companies and that we offer British consumers who buy from companies based in other countries. That is why the EU countries agreed new changes to the package travel directive in 2015, requiring all European countries to have ATOL-type protection. The bit of law we are discussing today will implement that decision.

In the European Parliament, the committee that looks at such issues is the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, because consumers are at the heart of the market. As the person who chaired that committee, I chaired the negotiations on the package travel directive. It is important that we ensure that the measure is implemented equally across all of Europe,

otherwise we could find that some countries bring in a different system. There is an important difference in that ATOL membership will now be based on whether or not a company is based in Britain, as opposed to whether it just sells into Britain.

As colleagues have said, another important part of the legislation was updating the guarantee system so that it is fit for purpose in a digital age. If someone buys their flight from the wonderful Stansted airport, they will probably click on the airline operator. They will then click through from the airline operator to buy their hotel and then on again to buy their car rental. That might feel like buying a package to some of us, but it was not covered under the old rules in the package travel directive. I welcome the Minister's work on modernising the measures, which will ensure that those click-throughs are now covered by the ATOL protection.

However, we had many other discussions in those detailed negotiations. For example, should business travellers get the same protection as consumer travellers? That is where we have tended to have a bit of a difference between Conservative Members and Labour Members. My excellent hon. Friend the Member for Redditch has just explained the challenges for small businesses, and an extra cost burden may be unaffordable for them, so we were concerned that they should not automatically have to pay the extra cost of ATOL protection. That is the sort of discussion I hope we will now be able to look at in more detail.

There were also discussions about whether the package should cover add-ons. For example, if someone gets to their holiday destination and decides to buy excursions, or if they bought them before they went, should those be included in the package? We had a lot of representations from small businesses saying, "No, please don't put these in the package, because it will add bureaucracy and reduce consumer choice." While I am absolutely passionate about the need to provide consumer protection, we also need to take a step back from time to time and to be on the side of consumer choice and of not adding additional, unnecessary costs for businesses.

In a post-Brexit Britain, our consumers will still want to purchase goods and services from those in other countries, and it will be important to continue to engage with other countries—especially our nearest neighbours in Europe—on issues such as consumer protection. It is important in the Brexit negotiations that we focus on getting a deal that works for consumers as well as businesses, because a vast range of consumer rights are embedded in EU law, on issues to do with not only holidaymakers but misleading advertising, unfair contract terms and the right to seek redress. Crucially, there is also really important legislation about the safety and standards of food. It appears that the tragic fire at Grenville Tower may have started because of an electrical fault in a domestic appliance, which is a brutal reminder of how important it is that we maintain high standards for consumer products.

Today's consumers are changing, and they embrace innovation. Markets are also constantly evolving, and we are constantly getting new products. Of course, we also have the digital revolution. We therefore need to be constantly working on making sure that our consumer protection, consumer laws and consumer standards are fit for purpose.

The excellent consumer organisation Which? has sent us all a briefing on what it would like from the Brexit negotiations, and it makes a strong case that the UK should continue to work with our European neighbours on consumer standards, on measures to counter fraud and on developing and sharing best practice. In particular, it recommends that we should at an early stage reach agreement on continued co-operation with such agencies as the European Medicines Agency, the European Food Safety Authority, the European Chemicals Agency and the European Aviation Safety Authority. We should listen very carefully to what our consumer organisations are saying.

As the hon. Member for Luton South mentioned, there are other issues that affect holidaymakers, such as the need to negotiate landing rights. There is also an issue about making sure that any deals about how we use our mobile phones overseas are covered. The UK was a great champion of removing expensive mobile phone roaming charges, which put such a huge burden on consumers. However, other issues, such as the motor insurance directive, have not been perfect for the UK; indeed, that directive is causing great uncertainty in the motorsports industry in the UK, and we will need to continue to engage on that.

When the Prime Minister talked about our offer on EU citizens, I was pleased to hear her offer to keep the European health insurance card, which makes it easier for people to get medical care when they travel across Europe. That is a very generous offer from the UK to the rest of Europe, and we should welcome it.

To wrap up, maintaining consumer confidence is key to a modern, dynamic economy. As we seek to leave the EU and to create a new, deep economic partnership with those across the channel, it is important that we continue to stand on the side of consumers and that we find new ways to co-operate with our neighbours and those across the world who seek to make sure that consumers are fairly protected.

7.25 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): May I offer you my congratulations on your new role, Madam Deputy Speaker?

First, I would like to acknowledge my immediate predecessor, Edward Timpson, who served the previous Government as Minister of State responsible for children and families. Edward was known for his desire to improve the care system for vulnerable children.

I would also like to pay tribute to the late MP Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, who was, and is to this day, regarded as one of the greatest parliamentarians to have sat in this House. I intend to serve the diverse communities in my constituency with the same unwavering tenacity as Gwyneth did during her 25 years' service.

It is a source of great pride to have been elected to represent the constituency where I was born and raised, and where I continue to live with my family today. As the granddaughter of a Scottish miner, I was brought up on a diet of working-class values. During my childhood, our family had real times of struggle, but that tough resilience and determination engrained in my roots has always driven us forward. I know what it is like to grow up living with loved ones who are plagued by mental illness, and I know what it is like to be a single mother

with a modest income, struggling to make ends meet. I can promise today that I will never, ever forget where I have come from.

As a teacher and a parent, my love for education will not come as a surprise. Before my journey into politics, I was known for leading the fairer funding campaign in Crewe and Nantwich, which I am still committed to. I stand here today for the children in my constituency, and I will continue to prioritise their education and my children's education—the future of this country's education—for as long as I am in the House.

Nantwich is a picturesque market town, home to the world's biggest cheese awards, and we will, in fact, be celebrating the best of cheese later this month. We are also proud of our annual jazz and blues festival, which attracts more than 40,000 revellers to the town.

Needing little introduction, Crewe is synonymous with railways. At its height, Crewe Works employed 20,000 workers, but that has now fallen to fewer than 1,000. Crewe deserves investment, and I welcome the commitment in the Queen's Speech to bring forward legislation to deliver the next phase of High Speed 2, as this will undoubtedly benefit Crewe.

The surrounding areas of Crewe and Nantwich are scattered with villages steeped in local tradition, and it is important that the people of Shavington, Willaston, Wistaston, Wybunbury and Haslington know that I will work hard to support their communities. These places are all united by the hard-working, community-spirited, salt-of-the-earth, proud northern folk who live and work in them. It is the nature of my hard-working constituency that I want to focus on in this, my first speech. I want to pay tribute to the British workforce. Every single one of Britain's 31 million workers ought to be recognised and celebrated as the real wealth creators in this country. Without them, this country would grind to a halt.

Unemployment levels in Crewe and Nantwich are lower than average for the north-west, and lower than the UK average. Yet, food banks in my constituency provided more than 50,000 meals last year, and almost 4,000 children are living in poverty. These are not mere statistics for me to be concerned about; each and every one is nothing less than a travesty. This reflects the changing nature of poverty in the UK. There are now more people in working poverty than in out-of-work poverty. It would seem that in 21st-century Britain work simply does not pay in many cases.

I have just a few more facts for you. More than one in five workers earn less than the living wage, and more than half of working households have seen no improvement in their disposable income in more than a decade. Under-25s are not even entitled to the Government's national living wage, which is in itself inadequate and falls short of a real living wage. Full-time working lone parents are often the worst affected. Having been a single mother myself, I know how tough and isolating it can be. Forty-seven years after the Equal Pay Act, the gender pay gap still stands at wholly unacceptable levels. This inequality follows women into their retirement as lower pay translates into lower occupational pensions. Instead of addressing this, the previous Chancellor prioritised changes to the state pension that have shattered the retirement plans of women born in the 1950s, with devastating consequences. I stand with the WASPI women fighting against this injustice. We should also celebrate

[*Laura Smith*]

the fact that there are now a record number of female MPs in Parliament by acting finally to eradicate gender inequality in the workplace.

We have a duty to address all forms of poverty as a priority, but the fact that we have in-work poverty in the fifth richest country in the world is shameful, and it is a sad indictment of our economic policy. Work should be an escape route from poverty. It is wrong to claim that we are “all in this together”. CEOs can earn in two and a half days what it takes the average worker an entire year to earn. I also cannot help but wonder whether action on poverty pay might be addressed more urgently if we in this House had to do our jobs on a worker's wage. Is it any wonder that so many people are infuriated by the hypocrisy of MPs receiving inflation-busting pay rises themselves while voting to cap the pay of dedicated professionals who work in our public services? If this Government want to show the UK workforce that they value them, they can—they can start by giving them the pay rise and financial security that they deserve. Actions speak louder than words, and I will continue to hold the Government to account on this issue. In the words of Nelson Mandela,

“As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.”

Fellow Members, I have no intention of resting.

7.32 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (*Laura Smith*) in her powerful maiden speech.

With a three-year-old and a one-year-old at home, the thought of enduring a plane ride to sunnier climes on a family trip is somewhat terrifying, so I suspect it may be a little while before I will be in a position to benefit from the additional protections this Bill looks to bring into force. Nevertheless, I welcome its Second Reading.

It is an honour and a privilege to be standing here as the Member for East Renfrewshire, but I must confess that I committed the ultimate sin as a successful candidate at the count: I forgot to thank my wife, who was standing a mere six feet away. So if I could indulge myself for a moment, I would like to put on record for ever more my thanks and love to my wife, Heather, and our two children, Daisy and Charlie.

I would also like to start by paying tribute to my predecessor, Kirsten Oswald. Kirsten was a diligent and conscientious MP who did superb work as her party's spokesperson for veterans. She achieved a great deal in her short time in this place with much patience and charm, and I wish her and her beautiful family well for the future.

I would like to give special mention to the last Conservative Member for the seat, Allan Stewart, who sadly passed away in December. I know how much it would have meant to Allan to have seen East Ren turn blue again, and he and his wife Susie were in all our thoughts on election night.

Madam Deputy Speaker, despite what other new Members may have led you to believe, it is of course East Renfrewshire that is the most beautiful constituency in the land. It is a beauty found not only in its famous

green spaces but in its people. East Renfrewshire is home to Scotland's largest Jewish community. It has a significant Muslim community, a growing Sikh community, and a strong Christian community. It is home to people of all faiths and none—but the key thing is that none of that matters. The constituency is a fine example of everything a modern, open, multicultural and tolerant Britain should be. Testament to that rich diversity and community cohesion is the fact that the constituency will soon be home to the world's first-ever joint Catholic-Jewish school in Newton Mearns.

Throughout East Renfrewshire flows an entrepreneurial spirit. From Stamperland to Eaglesham, Busby to Clarkston, home businesses are thriving. Family businesses like Valentini's ice cream parlour in Giffnock and McLaren's plant nurseries in Uplawmoor sit at the heart of their local communities. From small enterprises like Optimal Physio in Newton Mearns, or the Enchanted Forest children's nursery in Thornliebank, through to household names like—appropriately for this debate—Barrhead Travel and Linn Products, ambition, aspiration, innovation and a desire to build a better future for those who follow are proud values that underpin the people I am privileged to represent.

Today's entrepreneurs are following in a grand local tradition. In 1868, John Shanks opened a foundry in Barrhead to make brassware. In the decades that followed, he developed the bath and lavatory fittings for which his name is famous. Barrhead's history stretches back much further, however, with the Arthurlie Cross, a stone sculpture dating back to the 9th century, rumoured to mark the grave of Arthur, King of Britons. Nearby Neilston was famed for its cotton, the industrial revolution of the 1800s seeing textile mills dominate the area, powered by the stunning Lavern Water. The thread spun at Crofthead mill reached the summit of Everest, being used in the boots of the climbers on the famous British expedition in 1975. Thornliebank printworks, established by the Crum family in 1778, was one of the first smoke-free factories in the world. It has since been replaced by a business park, including a unit inhabited by two Members of the Scottish Parliament, and now myself—so I suspect there is far more hot air emanating from the site now than there was 250 years ago.

East Renfrewshire's natural history is equally prevalent. The outskirts of the constituency provide a stunning landscape punctuated with lochs, hills, moors, woodlands and dams, and the community are rightly protective of it. It is little wonder that the constituency boasts the UK Park of the Year in Rouken Glen, and, according to the Royal Mail, the most desirable location to live in the UK, with three other spots in the top 10.

East Renfrewshire's more recent history brings me back to this place via two Prime Ministers. Gordon Brown was born in a maternity home in Giffnock, now the site of the Orchard Park hotel; and the former Member for the constituency, the redoubtable Betty Harvie Anderson—the first lady to sit in the Speaker's chair as Deputy Speaker—shared her first parliamentary office following her election in 1959 with none other than the then new Member for Finchley, Margaret Thatcher. So for those new Members who believe that history repeats itself, I am open to offers.

While the results of this election may not have been what those on these Benches hoped in their entirety, north of the border the picture was a little brighter. Much like *indyref2*, the panda jokes are dead, and I am

proud to stand alongside 11 fellow Scottish Conservative faces. Together, we will continue to fight against the destructive politics of socialism and the divisive politics of nationalism. But we shall do so with an outstretched hand, not a clenched fist, because when the UK Government and the Scottish Government do come together in common cause, that partnership is capable of truly transformational change. East Renfrewshire will receive around £44 million of investment through the Glasgow region city deal for projects as diverse as a business incubation hub in Newton Mearns to a wakeboarding centre at the Dams to Darnley country park. I am not sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, if wakeboarding is high on your agenda, but I will extend an invite none the less.

The people of East Ren are renowned for their love of democracy—turnout is always among the highest in the UK—but after seven trips to the polls in just over three years my constituents need stability and for their politicians to get on and do the jobs they were elected to do. It is the Scottish Government's inability to do just that which is one of the reasons I am here today. For my part, I will first and foremost dedicate myself to improving the lives of my constituents and assisting them when life deals them a difficult hand or they just need someone to listen. East Renfrewshire's leafy reputation hides real pockets of severe deprivation and daily struggle, with people who feel left behind and forgotten. It is those people who look to this place and to each of us to demonstrate the good that Government can do, and we must not let them down.

The Conservative party must remember what it is for: extending the ladder of social mobility while providing a robust safety net for those who make the climb. This Government must remember that just as we on these Benches believe that anyone from any background can reach as far and high as their talents and efforts will take them, so too must we acknowledge anyone can fall on hard times. One of the giants of Scottish Conservatism, Teddy Taylor, coined the phrase "tenement Tories". It meant something very simple—that Conservatism must offer an aspirational vision to all. I am here to represent the people who, as he put it, "don't all live in big hooses".

The 2015 general election was the point at which the Scottish National party was at its peak—dominant and arrogant. It claimed ownership of my flag and of my voice, but it did not speak for me and it did not own Scotland. And so, the day after that election, I joined the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party. In doing so I made a promise to myself that I would do everything in my power to ensure that my children grew up in a Scotland where their opportunities are unconstrained and their ambition never frowned upon; where their talents and potential would not go unfulfilled; where they are never made to feel ashamed of who they are or how they vote; and, yes, where they remain part of our wonderful United Kingdom. Standing here today may be only the first step towards me keeping that promise to myself, to my children and to families and individuals right across East Renfrewshire and Scotland, but let me assure this House that it is a promise I have absolutely no intention of breaking.

7.40 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East

Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). It has been great to hear his and other maiden speeches, which have brought back diversity to what would otherwise have been a one-sided debate. I gently point out to him, however, that the irony of a Conservative Member mentioning divisive nationalism is not lost on us. On the question of the Government getting on with the day job, we are debating this Bill because they actually did not get on with their day job, and chose instead to call an early general election that was not needed.

As a Back Bencher, I find it frustrating when the Chair has to apply a time limit to cut speeches short, leading to frantic scoring out. I think that time limits would actually have been useful for some of tonight's speakers, because some hon. Members have managed to speak at amazing length about a Bill that is only four clauses long. I will try to be a bit briefer.

This is a small but welcome Bill, although it is perhaps indicative of the Government's lack of strength and ambition, given that its measures were originally part of the wider Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. Even so, this four-clause Bill was heralded in the Queen's Speech, which, as we all know, lacked ambition.

The air travel organisers' licensing scheme is well known and has provided comfort to thousands of holidaymakers over the years. It has rescued people financially and literally got them home in a timely fashion. It is a fantastic scheme. As other hon. Members have said, holiday travel and booking arrangements have changed over the years, so it is only appropriate that protections change too.

The Minister was keen to say that the UK has led the way in Europe with ATOL. I do not dispute that, but over the years the European Union has also strengthened passenger rights, and it is imperative that those rights are not weakened post-Brexit. The UK Government need to provide assurances that the rights and protections of travellers will not be diminished after the UK leaves the EU.

In fact, it is the 2015 EU package travel directive, which will be applicable from 1 January 2018, that is the driver for this Bill. The fact that three quarters of those who booked holidays last year did so online highlights the need for further protections. It is to be welcomed that protections will now extend beyond traditional package holidays. The new directive applies to three sorts of travel combinations: pre-arranged packages; customised packages; and linked travel arrangements.

I also welcome the fact that clear protection will be provided to 120 million consumers across the EU who book other forms of combined travel. A further advantage is that the measure is expected to reduce detriment to consumers across the EU by about €430 million a year, while at the same time reducing the administrative burden on businesses. It is suggested that compliance costs for traders will reduce from €11 to €8 per package.

Yet again, we have to be grateful to the EU for taking on big businesses, including the airlines, and extending consumer rights to meet modern travel needs. Since the EU legislated to provide a comprehensive system of air passenger rights in 2004, increased awareness of those rights, and of the ability to complain and appeal, has led to a significant increase in the number of people doing so.

That has been supplemented by a number of court cases that have ruled on the circumstances in which airlines must pay compensation. Appeals against some

[Alan Brown]

of those judgments have meant that some airlines have been reluctant to pay compensation until the legal position is absolutely clear. There is therefore still industry resistance to the current compensation schemes. I repeat that it is absolutely vital that the UK does not weaken any legislation in the future.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulate the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) on a fluent maiden speech. I am sure it will not be the last such speech he gives in this House.

Does my hon. Friend agree that this Bill demonstrates why we need Government assurances about the impact of Brexit? There are so many uncertainties about so many aspects of consumer protection and its impact on individuals' daily lives. If we had had such assurances and clarity this time last year, perhaps we would not be in this situation.

Alan Brown: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. There seems to be great reticence on the part of the UK to come out and give the necessary cast-iron guarantees. We are a year down the line since the vote, but we have not moved forward in many regards. Too often we keep hearing how everything will be okay, but we need to start seeing some flesh on the bones.

We still do not know when the UK will develop its own system of passenger rights and compensation in the aviation sector post-Brexit, how similar that will be to the current arrangements and, importantly, how non-UK airlines and passengers will be affected. That brings me back to the point that we need a clear guarantee from the UK Government.

On a slightly different theme, Scotland has a large number of regional airports, many of which are completely reliant on low-cost airlines and outbound tourism to survive and be an economic success. Recent reports have stated that Prestwick airport in my neighbouring constituency is vulnerable to Brexit, given the number of low-cost airlines there and the type of passenger traffic, which is mainly outbound. Despite the fact that the Scottish Government have voted to reduce air passenger duty by 50%, which they hoped to use as a mechanism to grow the number of routes operating out of Prestwick, Ryanair has confirmed that, because of the uncertainty surrounding Brexit and the open skies agreement, it will not expand further at the airport. That is a cause for concern with regard to local jobs in my area.

The International Air Transport Association predicts that just a 12% reduction in sterling would result in a 5% decline in outbound travel from airports. Since the EU referendum, sterling is down 25%, so it has become even more vital for Prestwick airport that we continue within the open skies agreement and maintain outbound passenger numbers. It is incumbent on the UK Government to give an unequivocal guarantee that the UK will stay in the single aviation market after we are taken out of the EU.

Remaining in the open skies agreement—the single aviation market—is vital to ensuring that our airports remain economically viable, and low-cost airlines are vital for regional airports to be a commercial success. EasyJet is setting up a separate operation outwith the

UK to ensure it can continue to fly without restrictions after the UK leaves the EU, which is in no small part due to the lack of clarity over the aviation agreement that the UK will eventually come up with.

It is clear that, despite the mantra that everything will be okay when we leave the EU, or even better than the current arrangements, the risks are materialising in front of us. It is clearly worrying if airlines are finding other EU member states a more attractive proposition, and the UK Government need to think seriously about how they are going to counteract that problem for our regional airports. The UK Government really must provide clarity and certainty sooner rather than later.

Clause 2 gives the Transport Secretary the power to reform ATOL and the air travel trust fund using only the affirmative procedure in each House of Parliament. The UK Government need to provide assurances that any changes that the Secretary of State makes to the ATOL scheme through secondary legislation will be preceded by a proper consultation of members of the industry and consumer groups, and by an appropriate impact assessment.

We welcome the Bill but, as I said in an intervention on the Minister, we are concerned about the status of legislation on laser pens and, as the shadow Transport Secretary said, drones. It is imperative that the Government move quickly to provide reassurances on those matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Steve Double.

7.49 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate by you, Madam Deputy Speaker, in your first session in the Chair. I congratulate you on your new role. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). I also congratulate the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today—we have heard some excellent ones.

One of Cornwall's earliest tourists was the spirited and adventurous Mary Kelynack, a Cornish fishwife who in 1851 travelled to London to visit the Great Exhibition. That took her longer than some say it should have done, but then again she did walk the 600 miles there and back, and she was 84 years old. At the time, Cornish travellers did not have many other options. Some will try to give the impression that little has changed when it comes to travelling out of Cornwall today, but that would give the wrong impression because, thanks to the support of this Government, Cornwall is enjoying record investment in our transport infrastructure.

If Mary had made her journey today, she would have had several options. She could have travelled by road, in which case she would have seen the soon to be completed upgrade of the A30, with the dualling at Temple that will be opened in just two weeks' time. My hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), the roads Minister, is in the Chamber, and I acknowledge and welcome the Government's announcement today of their support for the next phase of the upgrade of the vital A30, the main road through Cornwall.

Mary could have travelled on one of the new Great Western Railway's bullet-style Hitachi trains, the first of which we saw in Cornwall just over a week ago—a

£146 million investment in our railways which will be fully rolled out next year. Or she could have taken one of the three aeroplanes a day from Newquay to London.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Riveting though the hon. Gentleman's speech is, it has nothing to do with the Bill. Many hon. Members want to speak, so perhaps he could get to the relevant aspects of the Bill.

Steve Double: I am not sure I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but I am about to come to the very point.

Newquay airport is booming. Passenger numbers are increasing year on year, and by some measures Newquay is now regarded as the fastest growing regional airport in the country. Only recently *The Independent* declared Newquay the best regional airport in the country. It has regular flights to UK destinations and an increasing number of holiday destinations in Portugal and Spain. That is why I welcome the Bill.

The way in which tourists book their holidays is changing, with fewer and fewer booking the traditional package holiday by popping down to the offices of the travel agent in the town centre. In 2016, 76% of the UK's 20 million holidaymakers booked their holidays or travel online—a staggering increase even compared with recent years. There was a partial reform of the regulations in 2012, but I am pleased that the Department of Transport firmly believes that more should be done to protect consumers. Holiday providers, market options and ever more varied flexi-packages change, and with that comes the confusion of not knowing whether ATOL cover applies, depending on where the holiday or travel provider is based and what terms and conditions apply in the event of business failure. The Bill seeks to rectify that.

The Government has said that they will

“harmonise ATOL with the scope and definitions of the EU Package Travel Directive. It was widely agreed that this will bring greater clarity and protection for consumers and help to level the playing field for businesses selling similar holidays.”

I welcome this key development and note that the Bill also seeks to build in future-proofing so that as the packages on offer—and where and how they are sold—change, they will come under the new legislation.

The travel industry has seen enormous change in just a few years, and the Bill seeks to reflect that so that travellers and the industry are served more effectively. Many if not all of the changes in the travel industry have been to the benefit of consumers, including greater competition, more choice and greater flexibility. It is important that the legislation keeps pace with those changes. It is essential that flexi-packages of all types are covered by ATOL protection and that travellers are clear and confident at the time of purchase, which might be many months prior to a departure date, that the cover is in place. The Bill serves to ensure that very purpose.

Future-proofing the legislation around ATOL protection is a necessary move that is broadly welcomed by all parties throughout the industry, but I want to push the Minister a little on that point. I am sure he would be disappointed if I did not take this opportunity to mention the potential spaceport at Cornwall Newquay airport. I was delighted to see that the legislation to enable that was included in the Gracious Speech. While it will

initially be focused on commercial satellite launches, there is also no doubt of the future potential for space tourism. I know that some will scoff, but do not underestimate the Cornish. Trevithick was a pioneer of steam that revolutionised the world and Davey transformed mine safety. The Cornish have it in their psyche, in their history and in their blood to be pioneers. Surely the day will come when Newquay welcomes its first space travellers. With Cornish inventiveness in our being, “Beam me up, Denzil” is surely only just round the corner. I therefore ask the Minister—with tongue only slightly in cheek—whether the ATOL protection in the Bill can be extended to space tourism when the time comes.

I welcome the additional protection that the Bill will offer to Cornish travellers and believe that it will only enhance the opportunities for smaller regional airports such as Newquay to continue to grow and expand their tourist flights.

7.57 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow my comrade from Cornwall, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double).

I am in an odd position in this debate as I have worked for the Association of British Travel Agents and Thomas Cook, and I now sit on the other side of the fence examining the ATOL regulations for which I made the argument several years ago. It is great to be back on this subject again.

I hoped that the first Bill we addressed in this Parliament would be about food banks or a new train line to the south-west, but ATOL reform is as good a place to start as any. I welcome the Bill. The updating of consumer protection for holidaymakers is long overdue and it comes on the back of several improvements in recent years in the way in which holidays have been sold and protected. I spent many years in Brussels working with colleagues of the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and others on how we could strengthen the consumer protection for people buying holidays. As other hon. Members have said, the way in which holidays are sold has changed considerably in recent years. The travel industry operates under legislation that has not kept pace, in the UK or the EU, with the way in which travel is sold, partly because of the inventiveness and ingenuity of innovators and entrepreneurs in the travel industry. We are fortunate that the UK sector is second to none in how entrepreneurial it is.

My starting point for considering the Bill is to ask whether it will give certainty and confidence to consumers. The ATOL certificates introduced several years ago by the coalition Government were a step forward, but more can be done. In particular, people are often confused by the protection given when they buy a package, when they buy a flight-plus arrangement or when they buy separate arrangements sold at the same time with transferred data—a linked travel arrangement. The Bill does not say much about what secondary legislation will accompany it, and it will be essential that we get the detail right. The industry and consumers have been waiting for the Bill for some time and it is important that there is no further delay.

Having listened to the debate and having worked in the travel industry for a number of years, I think it is important that the House understands the clear distinction

[*Luke Pollard*]

between the protection afforded by ATOL for package sales and those that can be afforded by buying decent holiday insurance, including SAFI—scheduled airline failure insurance. As the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) remarked, time is running out. We are six months away from legislation needing to be in place and 12 months away from full compliance. For an industry already selling holidays 12 to 18 months ahead, that creates a difficulty for consumers when it comes to understanding what protections will be in place for their holidays.

The package travel directive, which I have learned to love and hate at the same time, introduced many new concepts and requirements, particularly in relation to the notable systems changes required to facilitate additional information provisions within the directive. It gets even more complicated when one starts looking through it. Travel businesses need to have sufficient time to prepare for the effective date of 1 July and to plan sales beyond 2018. That preparation is already at an advanced stage. We need the Government to publish the regulations quickly so that they can be properly consulted on and so that industry can take the necessary steps to adapt to them. I am thinking particularly of small businesses that may be captured for the first time in the scope of the regulations.

Travel is a complex fast-paced industry full of fantastic people. These technical updates need to be fully understood and implemented over time for many different booking systems, both in UK companies and those that operate internationally. That is why the draft regulations cannot come a moment too soon. The Bill will help to clear up confusion about which holidays are protected and which are not. There was an interim stage of flight-plus: buying a flight plus another element, such as holiday accommodation or car hire. Wrapping them all together is a positive step forward, but will the Minister look again at how linked travel arrangements are treated in the Bill? He mentioned an attempt to bring LTAs into the scope of the protection. I would like to see more detail on that, because how they are treated is especially important. If those transactions are not treated in the right way, they can fall outside the scope of the protections.

The people of Plymouth should not need to look into the small print of their contracts or their regulations to work out if they are protected. At the moment, there is still too much detail for people to understand whether they are fully protected. Given my newness in this House and the fact that this is the first Bill to be presented, will the Minister do me a favour and address a few things in his summing up? Will he clarify whether the implementation date for all bookings is from the point of sale or the point of departure? That is really important in terms of understanding whether holidays being sold now, which may be captured by the regulations after the implementation date, need to have retrospective protection added to them or whether that needs to be added subsequently. That could result in real confusion for consumers, so I would be grateful if the Minister cleared that up. I would also be grateful if the Minister reaffirmed that the protections afforded by not only the package travel regulations but the air passenger and other passenger rights regimes will be carried through when we leave the European Union.

I would like to spend a moment on the air travel trust fund. For those who have not spent time looking at how the ATTF operates, the fund provides back-up support in the event of a holiday company going down. It should ensure that there are sufficient resources not only to bring people stranded abroad home but to refund passengers who have not yet taken their holiday. Will the Minister provide an update on how it is going? Now there is £140 million in the fund and provisions in the Bill to create what I suspect are protected cells within the air travel trust fund—the Government have up to this point shied away from doing that—will he clarify how it will work in practice? Should a new entrance cell in the ATTF be exhausted by the failure of a company in that cell, will the ATTF for the remainder of the holiday industry need to top it up? If a company already covered goes bust and the fund is insufficient, will the ATOL protection contributions—the £2.50 we pay for protection—be transferred into that element of the ATTF to ensure that people are brought home? The ATTF has been exhausted in the past so these technical questions could help to provide reassurance for consumers to know that the fund will always be there.

Finally, on enforcement of the Bill, I note that the Civil Aviation Authority and Trading Standards are to take a larger role. The CAA has, for quite some time, done a good job of enforcing the ATOL regulations. I am, however, concerned about Trading Standards, which is already under a huge amount of pressure and stress to deliver the work it currently undertakes. This could further add to that difficulty and complexity.

It is great that so many people are familiarising themselves with the intricacies of ATOL protection. I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members do so during the passage of the Bill. I hope that the Bill will also be the start of a greater focus on tourism by Government. Outbound tourism, which is the type of tourism that ATOL protects, has fallen between a number of Government stools for far too long, with split responsibilities between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Transport and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It sometimes seems that this is a hot potato that no Government Minister wants to touch. I am grateful that the Bill has been introduced, because it is time to consider a single regulator for the travel industry and whether there can be a clear Department responsible for bringing together all the elements of outbound protection for holidaymakers.

We are very lucky to have an outstanding outbound tourism sector. I notice that nearly all Members who have spoken to date have praised their local airport. Plymouth's airport closed in 2010. I implore the Minister to look again at how measures can be put in place to help us to reopen our airport in Plymouth so that I can join the cohort of Members who have praised their own airport. At the moment, my airport is growing grass on the runway. I hope it can open again soon, so that holidaymakers in Plymouth can enjoy the same protections that ATOL affords holidaymakers leaving other airports.

8.6 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to contribute for the first time in this place. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and

Devonport (Luke Pollard). I cannot hope to live up to his erudition and obvious knowledge of the subject. I am also grateful for the opportunity to be able to speak on the Bill, which I wholeheartedly support. When times change there is sometimes a need for regulations to change. Sometimes there is a need for no regulation, but in this case there is a need for regulations to change. I support that and I look forward to supporting the Bill in the coming months.

It is an honour and a privilege to represent the beautiful constituency of North East Derbyshire, a constituency of stunning landscapes, vibrant communities, rich ambition and a proud, proud heritage. We sit two hours away from here, nestled between the steel city of Sheffield in the north, the beauty of the Peak District in the west and the market town of Chesterfield in the east. My constituency has been happily and completely intertwined with Chesterfield for hundreds and hundreds of years. From that market town rises the crooked spire, with which some Members may be aware: a church that has been in place for over six centuries and which is notable for its spire not quite being as straight as it should be. It dominates the landscape of Chesterfield and my constituency for miles around. I am a son of that crooked spire. I was born only a few hundred metres away from where it has stood for those six and a half centuries.

There is something unique about having the privilege to serve in this place and I look forward in the coming months and years to doing so, but there is something particularly unique about having the opportunity to represent the place where I grew up and the people who gave me the very values I will speak of in this place when I have the opportunity to do so and to be able to talk about the area that made me. I have that privilege and I am incredibly grateful for that.

Before I enter North East Derbyshire into the obligatory most beautiful constituency competition—I assure hon. Members that my constituency will win hands down—I would like to spend a moment talking about my predecessors. I walk in huge and assured footsteps: the progeny of one of the founders of the industrial revolution, Francis Arkwright; one of the people who opened up the Derbyshire coal field, for which my constituency is so thankful and to which so much of its legacy is accorded, Alfred Barnes; and even a Nobel peace prize winner, Arthur Henderson, the three-times leader of the Labour party who did so much during the dark days of the 1930s for the causes of disarmament and peace.

I would just like to dwell for a moment on one particular person who had the privilege to represent North East Derbyshire: my immediate predecessor, Natascha Engel. I have been here but a moment, and I can already see the love and the respect that Members across the House have for Natascha, and I am happy to report that that love and respect is reciprocated in the constituency. In a time of fierce partisanship and, in my view, unnecessary rancour, I am happy to say that, despite having a different rosette from Natascha, I believe she was an exemplary Member of Parliament. I thank her for her 12 years' service in the constituency and I hope she returns to public life soon, albeit representing a different area, if she chooses to come back to this place.

North East Derbyshire is a constituency of contrasts, from the beauty of the richly undulating hills of picture postcard-perfect villages such as Ashover and the beauty

of the Cordwell and Moss valleys in the north and east, to the fiercely independent market town of Dronfield, with its monument to Sir Robert Peel's repeal of the corn laws in the 1850s—an indication, I am sure, of my constituents' dislike of unnecessary regulation, which is something I will remember. They give way in the east to a landscape at once both scarred by the endeavours of man and then rebuilt over time, as we return to our former glory in North East Derbyshire.

My constituency came of age in the service of its nation in the provision of energy. At one point a century ago, a predecessor of mine stood in this place and talked of 40,000 men in my constituency who were mining under its ground every single day. Mining is in my constituency's blood and, like the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), I share that trait, in that both my grandparents were miners, including one who mined for a time at Westhorpe colliery in Killamarsh, a town that I now have the privilege to represent.

I am the son of a milkman who left school at 15 and went out to work every day before dawn in order to provide for his children and his wife. I am the son of a lady who left school at 16 and, through sheer force of will, went back to school in her 30s and, while holding down a job and bringing up two boisterous young boys, got two university degrees so that she could provide for her kids and make her life better. I am the great-nephew of the lady who ran the post office at Renishaw, a village in my constituency, and I am the nephew of an aunt who once went to work for the National Union of Mineworkers during the miners' strike.

North East Derbyshire has demonstrated by electing its first Conservative Member of Parliament since 1931 that it has changed. I do not say that in the spirit of partisanship; I say it as it is merely a fact. In the same way that my constituency has changed, I think my family somehow reflects that change as well, from the descriptions that I have just given. That I am stood here today, a working-class boy able to talk in this place and represent the people I grew up with, is something that I will never forget. I will always seek to do my best for my constituency as a result.

Beautiful as my constituency is, and honoured as I am to be the winner of the competition that I have spoken about, my constituency also suffers from unique challenges and problems. We currently have the issue of inappropriate housing developments in the beautiful valleys that I have talked about, because the local council did not put in place the plans that it should have done years ago to avoid that. We have a fracking proposal in the beautiful Moss valley, which my constituents neither want nor wish to see happen, and I will support them in their opposition for as long as it is on the table. We also have the ever-growing burden of congestion, across a constituency as disparate as mine, which stops people getting around and stops businesses doing their daily work and which we have to tackle in these debates.

But my constituency is more than that. I pledge to my constituents that as long as I have the privilege to speak in this place, however long or short that is, I will work hard on their behalf and try my hardest every single day to make life better for them. Although I cannot guarantee that I will solve the problems that I have described or the ones that may come in future, I will try my hardest to mitigate the effects on them and resolve them where I

[Lee Rowley]

can. If I have any time beyond my constituents, I will seek to dedicate it to this place, in trying to answer one of the big challenges of our time—a challenge that I, as someone new here, believe is growing and urgent and needs to be resolved. That is the challenge, at its most basic, of creating healthy, happy and prosperous communities that are bound together in tight union by energy, grit and determination.

I was born in 1980. According to some social commentators I am, to use that ugly word, a millennial and I sense something deeply amiss in my generation and the one that comes after it—a grave uncertainty, not about the politics of today or the policies that my Government are pushing forward, and which I wholeheartedly support, but something that is more visceral, more structural, more underlying. I feel that my generation is unsure about its place in the world. I feel that it is uncertain about where the world is going—that it feels that it is hurtling untethered into a place unknown and has been for 20, 30 or 40 years. I fear that my generation believes that it may be the first to hand over the world in a worse state than it found it, despite the best efforts of those on these Benches and all Benches in this place. We have to consider that as parliamentarians. We have to realise that my generation and other generations are unsure and uncertain.

However, I would also say to my generation, as frustrated as it is, that the easy words and warm allure of anecdote and emotion that I have seen in recent weeks, months and years is no substitute for good governance. In whatever time I have in this place, I will stand up for cool thinking and understanding and for articulating problems in a proper and clear way. In the time I have here, I will also stand up for the values of my constituency—values of compassion and emotion, but also the values of hard work, aspiration and ambition that my constituency has imbued in me. I will also stand up for the creed of free markets, liberal economics and capitalist progress—unfashionable as they may be in a field in Somerset, but the only engine for us to unshackle ourselves from the bonds of yesterday, that we may face the challenges of today and look forward to the future of tomorrow. While I have the opportunity to serve here, those are the things that I will put forward.

8.16 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on being re-elected—very good choice, may I add? It is great to follow the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who made an excellent maiden speech.

As is customary in a maiden speech, I want first to acknowledge the work that my predecessor, Graham Evans, did for the constituents of Weaver Vale during his seven years in office. Graham's contribution to parliamentary life was richly diverse. He both chaired the all-party group on beer and encouraged many hon. Members to take up running—although I am assured that this did not involve running in the direction of the bar. Graham completed the London marathon many times, raising a great deal of money for good causes both local and national, and he encouraged many Members from all parts of the House to do likewise. I wish Graham and his family well in the future.

The House of Commons Library and a plethora of MPs from all parts of the House advise me that it is important to research some notable historical facts and figures about my constituency. Its three major conurbations are Northwich, Runcorn and Frodsham. Weaver Vale takes its name from its association with the River Weaver in the heart of my Cheshire constituency. People and things of historical association include Sir John Brunner, founding member of ICI and a former MP for the patch, Tim Burgess of The Charlatans—a band that are a favourite of mine—who hails from Northwich, and the excellent comedian John Bishop, a Runcorn lad with excellent taste in politics. Weaver Vale is also the place where Daniel Craig served his James Bond apprenticeship in the Ring o' Bells pub in Frodsham, undoubtedly doing stunts across the bar. Another person of note associated with Runcorn is my wife Amanda, who was born there and has stuck with me through thick and thin—I think it was a wise and necessary move to include Amanda in my maiden speech.

As Members will know, Britain is a diverse, rich and vibrant nation, and much of that can be said of my constituency. An array of industries and business sectors are represented in Weaver Vale, with no one industry dominating the life of the entire constituency. Northwich, Weaverham, Frodsham, Helsby, and the eastern part of Runcorn comprise much of the urban life of the constituency, woven around rural areas. I am obviously going to say this, but it is one of the best places in the country in which to live, visit and work.

What grabs me most about the diverse fabric of Weaver Vale is how it has changed over the centuries and decades. At Runcorn is found Norton Priory, the most excavated monastic site in Europe, where the remains of the 12th-century abbey are found alongside the urban estates from the 1970s, where I must now focus much of my attention in assisting constituents. Weaver Vale has a proud industrial heritage, spanning back to Roman Britain, from the salt mines in Northwich to its association with ICI, historically employing thousands of workers throughout Runcorn, Northwich and surrounding areas. Although many people are still employed in the chemical industry, new high-tech industries have emerged and are thriving at Daresbury laboratory, using nanotechnology and robotics and providing the high-skilled, high-knowledge jobs that our community and our nation need. During my tenure as Labour MP for Weaver Vale, I will encourage new and emerging green industries to locate in my patch, and to employ local people. My hon. Friends and I want an economy that works for everyone. We want a race to the top, creating access to highly skilled, fulfilling and sustainable jobs, not a race to the bottom, with insecure zero-hours contracts and fake self-employment franchises.

Like the nation itself, Weaver Vale is a tale of two communities. It has some beautiful countryside, towns and villages. Just picture that rural idyll, with thatched cottages and country pubs such as the White Lion in Alvanley, which I visited only on Sunday. Some residents in my constituency are fortunate enough to have incomes above the national average, but many of my constituents in places such as Windmill Hill and Palacefields in Runcorn face real poverty in their daily lives, from childhood onwards. Despite what Conservative Members claim, there is a real lack of work, too much insecure

part-time employment, a growth in zero-hours contracts and a welfare system that lacks compassion and common sense.

One person who experienced the shortcomings of our current welfare system is Sheila, who, very recently, had an operation to remove a brain tumour. When I met Sheila, she could barely walk a metre to the TV. That was a result of the operation, but also of the side-effects of the steroid drugs that she was taking to help to prevent seizures. Sheila had worked hard. She had played by the rules, and paid her taxes. But in her time of need, when the welfare state should have been there to care for her, she instead received a £1,500 cut in her income, and was labelled a shirker by a system overseen by a callous, out-of-touch and now, I would say, chaotic Government. The Prime Minister talks about a nation that works for everyone, but it is certainly not working for Sheila and many thousands like her.

Let me also tell the House about another growth industry that is not a welcome sight in my constituency. I am talking about the sight of hard-pressed residents and families having to use food banks. In the past year the use of food banks has gone up by 25% in the Northwich part of my constituency alone, an issue that was highlighted only recently by one of the local newspapers, the *Northwich Guardian*. It seems that those who are most in need in our society are paying the price of a failed austerity programme that has more to do with an ideological drive to shrink the state, while living standards go into reverse gear and the national debt is now more than £1.7 trillion. This is not a society that works for everyone.

Finally, I want to thank the thousands of constituents who put me here, especially the young people who came out to vote for the first time, inspired by the politics of hope and opportunity and by a manifesto that wants to put them first for investment rather than cuts: a manifesto for the many and not the few. This rather weak and unstable Government need to take note: I took my seat from one of your own, because my constituents want more bobbies on the beat, not less. They do not want to see individual school budgets cut by hundreds of thousands of pounds. They want smaller class sizes, and they want teachers and support staff who are secure in their jobs and not fearful for the future. They also want to keep their local hospitals open—and yes, those with the broadest shoulders should pay their fair share in taxes and invest in our future.

As a lad born in Wythenshawe, Manchester, I never envisaged that I would have the honour of sitting on these green Benches to represent Weaver Vale. I was the first in my family to get a degree, and I gave back to society by becoming a careers adviser, helping young people to get into work, training and education. I was the first in my family to become a city councillor, serving the good people of Manchester for 11 years, and I am now the first Amesbury in my family to become an MP—a Labour MP.

Unlike some in the House, I do not have a long line of ancestors who served this House and the other place next door. My family made me who I am. My dad, Barney, was a carpet fitter, then a publican. My late mum used to clean caravans and serve school dinners, and my younger sister is a teaching assistant. All those people would be hit by the pay cap. All of them were and are extraordinary people in their own right: grafters, fighters, and real people.

I bring my real life experience into the Chamber as a check and balance on the Government and as a champion for my constituents, especially those who are most in need. To represent the people of Weaver Vale now is the greatest privilege of my life. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to introduce myself to the House.

8.27 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), who made an impassioned speech. It is also a great honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who spoke without notes. I intend to do no such thing.

ATOL equals peace of mind. It is safe to go on holiday if the holiday is protected by ATOL. That makes sense. Peace of mind is good; it is happy. I therefore support the Bill.

It is also an honour to be here at all. Just a few short weeks before I stood for election—at the by-election in Clacton in 2014—I was on tour with Jason Donovan in a production of “Priscilla, Queen of the Desert”. I have played on many stages across the world in 45 years, but this has to be the finest. Thank you, residents of Clacton; I will do my very best for you.

I was honoured and indeed humbled when the residents of Clacton gave me the overwhelming support they did at the last election, but I had one other overwhelming sensation, which I am sure many others have, when they first take their seat in the House—that was, what on earth have I let myself in for? When I relayed my concerns to my wife, Vanda—she gets a namecheck as well—she said, “It’s a stage and an audience. What could possibly go wrong?” What a stage and what an audience!

In preparation, I looked up the advice on maiden speeches. It tells us that the typical maiden speech is divided into three parts. Part one consists of being nice about the previous incumbent of the seat. I remind Members that my seat is Clacton. Part two involves a glittering description of the constituency, outlining its fabulous assets and its wonderful potential. In part three, one is advised to lay out some of the plans one has to enhance the wonderful area one represents, left even more wonderful by the splendid previous incumbent.

So to part one. My immediate predecessor was the notable Douglas Carswell, against whom I fought two parliamentary elections. It must be said that we did not always see eye to eye, but I will say this: Douglas was an extremely good constituency MP. As a district councillor, I was regularly in contact with him and I saw at first hand his competent dealings in the constituency. You would send him a note and he always gave you a considered reply—a good example to me. Even after he moved gently on from our party, he always behaved like a gentleman and it is to his credit that we fought those two elections without any mud-slinging, however tempting it might have been. We fought on the issues, not on the personalities. I had respect for him holding his views, even if I did not agree, and I frequently did not.

When I made my speech on being elected, I touched on the subject of respect. I paid tribute to my fellow candidates. I respect them for going on the sometimes gruelling journey that we all know about in this place, pacing the streets, taking some flak, but meeting some wonderful people. I may have stoutly disagreed with my

[Giles Watling]

fellow candidates on many issues, but I never once attacked them personally. You can check Facebook, Twitter or any of the other social media platforms and you will see that I never denigrated the other candidates. It seems a pity that we have reached a nadir through social media where a lot of plain nastiness is regular. If we all had a little more respect, the world would be a far happier place.

To part two. Over the last 10 years, I have been fortunate to represent my residents at Tendring District Council. My ward, Frinton-on-Sea, has always been at the forefront of my mind when dealing with issues at district level and, from now on, Clacton, my constituency, its residents and their views will always be at the centre of all I do here.

The Clacton constituency is roughly half of Tendring district, a stunning peninsula with the Colne to the south-west, the Stour to the north and the North sea to the east; I think Members can see where I am going with this. As a result, we have 36 miles of the most stunning coastline pretty much anywhere in the country. We have the sandy beaches of Walton, Frinton and Clacton. Probably the best beaches of all are at Jaywick Sands. We have the Walton Backwaters, a mysterious area of tidal creeks, mudflats and islands—salt marshes and marsh grasslands which in the late '30s gave Arthur Ransome the inspiration to write his book, "Secret Water". It is called "Secret Water" because, when one approaches from the sea, it is difficult to see that there is an entrance there. So we have the buzz of Clacton, the quiet of Frinton, the rustic charm of Walton, the beautiful village and priory of St Osyth, and the bucolic hinterland of gorgeous villages and countryside. It is no wonder that we have a fast-reviving tourism industry. We are the sunshine coast.

Which brings me neatly to part three. I find it absolutely incomprehensible that this extraordinarily special place so dear to my heart, lying as it does a mere 70 miles from London, has historically been constantly overlooked. That 70-mile journey takes the best part of one hour 40 minutes by train, which is simply not good enough. A journey by car during peak times is an adventure only for the very brave. The A12 is known to be one of the worst roads in the country. It is often argued that we should be thankful that we are so hard to get to, but there is the old adage: down good roads wealth flows. Imagine if we could bring that journey closer to an hour. Seventy miles in an hour—not unthinkable; not even illegal. We would suddenly get the wealth of London on our doorstep and we would regenerate.

Clacton faces many challenges, most of which we have been taking head-on at the district council, and we have had some success. The long-awaited regeneration of Jaywick has begun. It has new roads, new buildings and a great sense of community. It is on the up. Walton-on-the-Naze has new developments and quality shops arriving. It is on the up. In the last five years, at the district council, we have managed to obtain £50 million-worth of investment for the area, £36 million of which has been spent on new sea defences in Holland-on-Sea and Clacton. You have to go to see them. We have created new lagoons, reefs and beaches over a 5 km stretch. We are on the up. But we need that infrastructure, and that is just one of my priorities for our much overlooked constituency.

I just want to remind everyone that we do exist in Clacton and that all are welcome to come and see us. I will take pleasure in taking visitors to the Naze Tower, built in 1720 by Trinity House as a landmark for mariners. It stands on the highest point in the constituency and gives breath-taking views across to Suffolk and over the beaches and looks down on those treasured backwaters.

We are a jewel of a place with many facets. It is well worth that 1 hour 40 minute journey; do come.

8.35 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I want to say what a great privilege it is to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), but such was the brilliance of his speech that my heart rather sank.

I am genuinely humbled by listening to some of the wonderful speeches including those by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) and my hon. Friends the Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who really brought home why we are in this place; we listened in silence, and I thank him.

I think I am going to support this Bill, although I have to say that any Bill relating to tourism that encourages anyone to go anywhere other than the Isle of Wight seems to suffer from what our philosophical Front Bench would call an a priori flaw. However, my constituents are as generous as they are understanding, and I am sure that they would allow me to support this otherwise very sensible Bill.

I also want to pay tribute to my predecessor. Andrew Turner was a kind man, a good listener, attentive to his constituents and held in very high regard by many of them. He worked hard for our island for 16 years and I wish him a long, contented and happy retirement.

Representing the Isle of Wight—we call it the island, and I apologise if I refer to it as such—is for me a labour of love. It is my patch of England. I have loved it ever since I was knee high to a grasshopper, and it is close to my heart.

It also has a special place in the nation's heart, serving as a source of inspiration for islanders, visitors and our nation's greatest artists. Turner's first great work was for the Royal Academy: "Fishermen at sea" in the Solent, with the Needles as a moonlit backdrop. The poet Alfred Lord Tennyson settled here, and we hear our sounds and understand our sense of place in his work. When we listen to the seawater today rushing off the stones at Alum Bay, we understand the line in "Maud":

"Now to the scream of a maddened beach dragged down by the wave".

Swinburne and Keats wrote here:

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever",

from "Endymion" is one of Keats's greatest lines, and was inspired by visits to Shanklin and Carisbrooke. The wonderful eccentric Edward Lear tutored Queen Victoria at Osborne, the Bonchurch watercolourists painted near Ventnor, Julia Margaret Cameron, the wonderful feminist, pioneered portrait photography at Dimbola Lodge, and the Pre-Raphaelites hung out in Freshwater. And today we remain a home for many island artists, as well as cultural and sporting events of world renown.

We have a special place in science, too. We had the world's first telegraph station, the hovercraft and the seaplane were built here, and the Blue Streak missile system—what a great name for a missile system—was test-fired from the Needles. And today the island's experts produce some of the most sophisticated radars in the world for the Royal Navy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) eloquently assured us a fortnight ago that he was still thrusting. I am sure of it, but let me remind the House that our Thrust 2 jet-engined supercar, built largely on the island, won and held the world land speed record for our nation for over a decade, at some 633 mph. So on the Isle of Wight, even our thrusting is world class.

Moving from science to pseudo-science, Karl Marx was a regular visitor, a point I might have to make should the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) ever come to power—although if the victory last month was any harbinger of the future, let us wish Opposition Members many more such victories in the years to come.

On a more serious note, I mentioned our arts and science not to provide a potted history lesson or to express my love for my constituency—which I hope is self-evident—but because they are what we need for our future. We need again to embrace art, science, technology, innovation and education to inspire, to enrich and to employ. Our island is special in many ways, but our wealth has not always been of the financial kind and there is a perception that Whitehall sometimes overlooks us. In the 1990s, the Government promised the Isle of Wight and the Scilly Isles that they would study the extra costs of being an island. Sadly, that promise came to nothing, but those costs are recognised in Scotland through the special islands needs allowance, which provides an uplift in funding for some half a dozen councils with island seats. I believe that we need a better deal for our island, and it is not just a question of money, although every little helps and I will fight for extra spending on health and education. It is about islanders working with the Government to generate ideas for the public good, and about the Government working with us and being keen to listen. I know that there are good examples of that happening, and I wish to encourage more of it.

We need to embrace the knowledge economy and higher education. I look forward to working with the Department for Education and with universities to provide opportunities for such engagement. We need to continue to drive all education standards on the island, and I will continue to fight for the future of the Sandown Bay school. I look forward to the Government's continuing support.

Our cultural offer is getting stronger. We have the wonderful Isle of Wight festival—I think Rod Stewart topped the bill this year, as part of a tartan revival that is clearly taking place in politics as well. We also have the wonderful literary festival and the cutting-edge Ventnor fringe festival—look out, Edinburgh! However, I wish to work with Culture Ministers and institutions to find out how they can help us to improve our museum offer and possibly attract a major gallery to the island, to help with year-round cultural tourism.

I look forward to engaging with Sport England and with trade and investment Departments to work with our high-tech sailing industry and with the sailing clubs of Cowes and others to ensure that the town of Cowes

remains the centre of the sailing world. I also hope that it becomes a global centre for disabled sailing. That would be an important move that would have practical and moral implications. I was privileged last month to meet the captain of our national blind sailing team, who were prepping for their world championships, and I wish Lucy and her inspiring team all the very best.

We need to work with the Department for Work and Pensions, and organisations such as Help the Aged and our wonderful Mountbatten hospice, to make the island a national leader in ensuring quality of life for those in later life, combining health and social care and voluntary and state support to enrich life.

In transport, we need to ensure the future of the Island railway line and improve our cycling routes to make us Britain's leading cycling destination. We also need to engage with the ferry firms to provide a better service. Let me be clear: privatisation did a great deal of good in the '80s and '90s nationally, but the privatisation of our ferries was not such a great success. I do not have all the answers, but I know that we should not have started from that point. I am uncomfortable with the levels of debt that Red Funnel and Wightlink have, because islanders—who are not the richest people in the country—have to help to subsidise it in order to cross the Solent.

I welcome the Government's commitment to social housing and starter housing from the bottom of my heart. I find it difficult to explain to my fellow islanders why rich property developers were able to build houses there that most of my constituents could not afford. We do not need large-scale projects, which are heartily disliked by many islanders. They do significant cumulative damage to our precious landscape, on which much of our tourism—which accounts for half our economy—depends. We do, however, need genuinely affordable projects to provide homes for islanders, and we will work with the Government to build them. Our island plan should reflect that. For my islanders, housing is hope, especially for the younger ones. Working with many others—our chamber of commerce, our council, our excellent tourism team, voluntary groups and individuals—we will present ideas for a brighter future for our island.

Nationally, this Government have laudable aims of social justice, hope, meritocracy and opportunity for all, values which were inherent in manifestos and are absolutely inherent in our hearts, but we sadly failed to translate them during the campaign. I want those principles, aims, values and aspirations for my fellow islanders and for our nation. Let us deliver real change and real hope in the next few years and set an example, whether economic, moral, or political, that we are the natural party of government.

My fellow islanders deserve nothing but the best, and I will do my best to give them the voice that they deserve. Some Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire, have explained why we are here far more eloquently than I have, but I will battle for my island. I cannot promise to win every battle, but I will fight every battle on their behalf for as long as I have the honour of serving in our Parliament what Wordsworth called "that delightful Island".

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

8.45 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): There is much acclaim for my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), whom I am delighted to follow. Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Friends and family have asked me what it feels like finally to be here, and I simply say, "Surreal," but in the best possible meaning of the word. I could add "overwhelming", and that sense is multiplied today as I speak for the first time in the Chamber as the new Member for Stirling. I am acutely aware that so many people have placed in me a sacred trust to do my best to serve all the people of Stirling and to do what is right for my constituents and in the national interest.

I am proud to call Stirling my home. It is situated at the heart of Scotland and its story is long and dramatic. The famed legend of Stirling's wolf comes from the 9th century, when the Anglo-Saxon defenders of the castle were roused from their sleep by the howling of a wolf, warning them of an impending Viking attack. The wolf is still celebrated to this day.

Stirling remains as steadfast as the rock upon which its castle sits. Last week, I had the privilege of marching with the people of Cambusbarron on the annual march of the gillies, which commemorates the actions of the sma'folk and camp followers at the Battle of Bannockburn, who came over the hill making such a din that they caused the English to flee. We Scots have always had a knack for causing a stooshie. The march now focuses on saving this important historic site from the threat of quarrying.

Stirling constituency is more than the city. It stretches from Drymen and Strathblane in the west to Cowie, Fallin and Plean in the east, and from Killin, Crianlarich and Tyndrum in the north to St Ninians and the Whins of Milton in the south. Through the good offices of our auction houses, Stirling hosts the premier bull sales in Scotland. Dairy, meat production, and some of the best shortbread in the country are all mainstays of my constituency, not to mention the two whisky distilleries making great use of our prodigious rainfall and fertile soils. Our financial services sector and high-tech businesses in the digital economy all make up a diverse, high-value economy that contributes to the success of Stirling and of the Scottish and the UK economies.

I am a graduate of the University of Stirling, which is now in its 50th year and has a reputation in research and teaching that is second to none. Stirling hosts the oldest and the second oldest charitable trusts in Scotland. Spittal's Trust and Cowane's Trust are part of the centuries-old tradition of Stirling's voluntary sector in providing relief for the needy members of the local trades and guilds and their relatives. Social enterprise is alive and well in Stirling, whether through the encouragement given to local food and environmental initiatives such as the Forth Environment Link, the work of Town Break in helping those with dementia, or the work done by the Trossachs Mobility group in ensuring that people with disabilities can access our magnificent landscape from Callander, which is fast becoming Scotland's outdoor capital.

Today we are debating the travel industry, and Stirling has a unique connection to the things that make up the modern travel industry. Stirling proudly owns Britain's answer to the Wright brothers. Frank and Harold Barnwell,

originally from Lewisham, made their homes in Balfron in 1882. They came from a family in the shipbuilding business, and they were great innovators. They built their first full-size biplane in 1908. Unfortunately, it failed to take flight but, undeterred, they produced a second design at their works, the Grampian Motor and Engineering Company, under the shadow of the Wallace monument in Causewayhead. And then, on Wednesday 28 July 1909, they were responsible for the first powered flight in Scotland when their aircraft flew to an altitude of 13 feet and travelled for 80 yards before a somewhat abrupt crash-landing.

It is down to the great innovators, like Stirling's own Barnwell brothers, and the pioneering paths they forged in manned, powered flight that today we have the aviation industry we have. Frank and Harold Barnwell represent the great things that Britain has achieved—in this case, two English entrepreneurs who moved their business to Scotland—to create the inventions and businesses that made the modern world.

I say to entrepreneurs and innovators across the globe: Stirling is evidently the place to be—just as I say to all hon. and right hon. Members that when the peoples of Scotland, England and the other nations of the United Kingdom work together, they have achieved and can yet achieve remarkable things that, in turn, make this world a better place.

Stirling's best days lie ahead. The enthusiastic support of Her Majesty's Government for the Stirling city deal, so expertly prepared by the officers of Stirling Council, is most welcome, and I will make it my top priority to work with the Secretary of State for Scotland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), to secure and deliver the Stirling city deal.

This Bill is especially important to the way in which regulation works for innovative companies that have revolutionised the travel industry in the digital space. The new digital district at the heart of the Stirling city deal will encourage the birth, survival and success of many more innovative digital companies.

The pace of technological change in the world today is staggering. We book travel and transport in completely different ways from how we did it only a few years ago. Gone are the days of flicking through teletext to snap up package deals to the sun. The internet revolution has empowered consumers and disruptive new companies to turn old market models inside out, and the provisions of the Bill are very welcome. It is important that consumer protection rights keep up with the pace of technological change. We must shape future measures in a way that adapts to the new market conditions being created by the entrepreneurial skills and talents of our challenger digital businesses, and not stifle creativity by holding on to outdated and outmoded regulation.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Steven Paterson. His tenure was short, and I make no apology for that. That said, he was an honourable and worthy opponent whose passion for Stirling and Scotland cannot be doubted. I wish him well for the future.

His predecessor was Dame Anne McGuire. She was Stirling's Member of Parliament for 18 years, and her public service was especially noteworthy for her tireless work to promote and extend the rights of disabled people. Hers is a wonderful personal legacy, and one in which we should all take pride. I pay tribute to her.

I should also like to make a special mention of my friend Lord Forsyth of Drumlean, the previous Conservative Member for Stirling. His record of service in this House on behalf of the people of Stirling and Scotland, and the United Kingdom, is remarkable. In his maiden speech in 1983, he spoke of the problems facing rural Stirling in the field of telecommunications. That, I am sad to report to the House, remains an issue, although it is now about broadband and mobile telephony, rather than phone connections. I assure the House that digital connectivity is a subject I will keep coming back to.

Public service is often cited as a reason for Members taking seats in this House, and I add myself to their number. A body politic that exists to serve its citizens is one worth aspiring to. I was raised on politics, listening as a small boy as my grandfather held forth on the merits of the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. He was not a fan, but his trenchant view was that the Government of the day should govern in the national interest. Henry Campbell-Bannerman, a former Member of Parliament for Stirling and a former Prime Minister, said:

“Good government could never be a substitute for government by the people themselves.”

That is also the perfect encapsulation of my personal political credo. I believe in liberty, in freedom and choice. I enlist to the moral argument for free enterprise and free trade as the most powerful means of lifting people, whole nations and regions out of poverty. I believe in law and order, equality for all before the law and in the good that government can do. I believe that the family, in all its forms, is the basic unit of society; thriving and successful families make for a thriving and successful society, and social policy is always best seen through the filter of what strengthens the family. I believe in fair dealing, competition that advantages consumers and justice in all its realms. I believe in giving power to the people and in respecting local democracy, in the constructive tension of public accountability, and in listening carefully to the voice of the people.

Whether right hon. and hon. Members reflect on those last words in terms of the implementation of a Brexit sanctioned by the people or the results of the referendum in Scotland to confirm its place within the United Kingdom, respect for the voice of the people and following their democratically delivered instruction is now the business of this House. And so it is that we must be ready to implement the will of the British people, and I make it my part to do so.

The British people have spoken and we will leave the European Union. So much of the work of this Parliament is now focused on the job at hand, and much of our work as Members must be focused on working together to get the best deal for our constituents and our country. I believe that, in doing so, we have a duty as parliamentarians to personify civility. We should resist trading in dubious charges, misrepresentations and ugly innuendos. We should demonstrate respect for all people, become good listeners and show concern for the sincere beliefs of others; although we may disagree, we ought not to be disagreeable.

I am here, then, on a mission: a mission to restore civility in politics; a mission to represent and defend the interests of Stirling; and a mission to promote and be an advocate for my home constituency and, above all, to serve the people and national interest of this United Kingdom.

8.58 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is difficult to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), as I stumble my way through my maiden speech. The best thing is, though, that he and I will be sharing an office for the next five years, so I will have the opportunity to polish my public speaking with the benefit of his advice.

It is interesting that this Bill is the first one that we are discussing. People are talking about the problems air travellers might have, but according to the 2011 census, nearly one in four of my constituents do not even own a passport. The Bill is clearly very important for those who do have a passport and manage to undertake overseas travel, so that their money is protected. For some people, air travel is not something they do every week or every year—it represents a one-off opportunity. It would clearly be the worst thing that could happen to them if their funds were in any way threatened by companies going out of business, so the Bill is incredibly important.

Some Members might not have been present when the Minister opened the debate, but I firmly endorse his sartorial standpoint of not taking interventions from male Members who are not wearing ties. I bought this suit at the weekend specifically to wear when making my first speech in this Chamber—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I will obviously be wearing exactly the same suit for the rest of the week, but at least for today I am looking my best.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in today's debate, because the good people of Walsall North, which includes Willenhall, Bloxwich, Leamore, Blakenall and Short Heath, have had to wait 41 years to hear a maiden speech from their Member of Parliament. You can only imagine how disappointed they will be when they see that the seven people who made speeches immediately before me were funny, erudite, clever and interesting—they will think, “What the hell did we wait 41 years for this nonsense for?”

In preparing for my maiden speech, I sought advice from experienced orators from both sides of the Chamber, but I think that the best advice I received came from Brendan Fisher, one of our ever-present, ever-helpful Doorkeepers. I have made a freefall parachute jump with my wife Clare and my two children, Sam and Corrine, and Brendan suggested that making a maiden speech was like doing a freefall parachute jump: there is the nervous anticipation while boarding the plane and ascending to the required altitude, before leaping, screaming, through the doors, only to find that the sensation of racing towards the ground at 100 mph is actually a pleasurable one—something that you want to repeat as soon as your feet hit the ground.

Hitting the ground running was what I needed to do to stand any chance of beating my entrenched predecessor, David Winnick. Many Members will be familiar with David as a tenacious parliamentarian. If I remember correctly, it was David's amendment to legislation on the detention of terror suspects that led to the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, losing his first whipped vote in this Chamber in 2005. When I knocked on doors during the campaign, I realised just how assiduously David had worked on behalf of his constituents. I found many people who were not minded to vote for the Labour

[Eddie Hughes]

party—at least not under its current leadership—but were prepared to vote for David because of the good deeds he had done for them, their friends or their family. It was David's 84th birthday last Monday and I wish to extend my best wishes to him for his birthday and his retirement.

I grew up in a house with six brothers. My dad was an Irish bus driver, and we did not have a lot of money to celebrate birthdays. There was not much money for presents, but with six lads there was quite a lot of fun and quite a lot of fighting. My parents were delighted—and, I guess, relieved—that I went to grammar school. I then went on to university—I was the first in my family to do so—and it was at university that I developed an interest in politics. As soon as I graduated, I went back to night school to do A-levels in politics and economics to give me a bit of a basic grounding. Although, unfortunately, I voted Labour the first time I voted—[HON. MEMBERS: “Boo!”] I know, but I was actually a closet Conservative—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] It was then a quick journey from joining the party as an enthusiastic activist to standing for the council, and I have served on Walsall Council for the past 18 years.

What a privilege it is now to be the MP for Walsall North. I will be building on some bostin' work that is already going on in my constituency. For example, I recently met Peter Shirley—the irrepressible Peter—who started the Midland Food Group in 1976 on his own. Today, that business turns over in excess of £50 million a year and employs more than 250 people. It sources quality meats and cheeses locally, and its export market includes the Falkland Islands. Similarly, Walsall Housing Group—I am proud to chair the board—recently signed a deal for a joint venture to build 400 new houses in the Goscote Lane corridor. Indeed, according to a recent edition of *Inside Housing*, within the next two years, Walsall Housing Group will complete just over 1,100 new houses. That is what is going on under the Government: creating high-quality affordable houses and the jobs that go with their construction.

To get a job, people need a good education, so what better place to start that education than Beacon primary school in New Invention? Two years ago, the school was rated by Ofsted as requiring improvement. Boy, did that improvement come in the shape of Paul Drew, the innovative headmaster, who has raised standards not just for staff but for students. Ofsted has recently rated Beacon as a good school. It does not take money to persuade the admin staff at the school that they should be trained to help children with reading practice. That just takes forward thinking—the type that we need to see. Better education is not always about throwing money at it: it is about employing inspirational leaders.

And so to my inevitable Brexit peroration. Sixty-eight per cent. of people in Walsall North who voted in the referendum voted to leave the EU. They want a good deal for themselves and a good deal for the country, but they do not want a deal that is good just for the 68%—they want a deal that is good for the 100%. They want to know that there are local entrepreneurs who are going to create jobs and find new and exciting export markets around the world. They want to control immigration while ensuring that we have the skills to maintain a strong economy and a strong public sector.

They want low-cost affordable housing for every stage of their life, and they want inspirational headteachers to give their children the best start in life. It is a privilege to speak this evening, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I hope that you will call me many times in future to advocate on behalf of my constituents.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have another maiden speech. I call Bill Grant.

9.7 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) on both his note-free speech and his choice of suit, which I have been admiring like other colleagues.

The Bill deals with ATOL and is relevant to people who choose to travel by air. Like my colleagues, I am minded to welcome and support it for three reasons: it is modernising; it is harmonising; and it provides good consumer protection.

May I begin my maiden speech by saying that I am indeed honoured and humbled to be in this Chamber today, having been elected by the people of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock? It is a privilege, and I will always remember that they trusted me with their vote. I value that and will do all that I can for the constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. May I share with hon. Members part of my life's journey? It would be terribly boring if I gave them my whole life's journey, but for the past 10 years I was an elected councillor in South Ayrshire. My ward was in the town of Ayr on the coast. There are many good things about Ayr, but I will touch on two. Ayr racecourse is one of the UK's premier racecourses. I invite Members to come along and spend their money there—they might even make money that they can invest to make some more. Odds on, they may lose some money. In addition, we have hosted the Scottish international air show for the past three years. For the moment, it is a wonderful event. It is not a threat to Farnborough but, in years to come, one never knows.

My time on the council was preceded by 31 years in Strathclyde fire and rescue service. I served throughout Ayrshire and the central belt, was based in headquarters for 10 years as a member of the technical support team, and finally served as a senior officer covering Argyll and Bute, and the beautiful islands—I would name them, but there are too many. It was a complex and diverse fire service, with Glasgow sadly being remembered as a tinderbox city many years ago, and I was well aware of that. Given my background, it is particularly poignant for me to deliver my maiden speech so close in time to the tragic Grenfell Tower incident, which must surely have been a hell on earth for all concerned. I await with interest the outcome of what must be a thorough and effective public inquiry.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Corri Wilson, for the good work she undertook in this Chamber and in the constituency during her period in office. I thank her and wish her well for the future. Some further thanks are due to my appointed buddy, Joanna Freeman, who is a tolerant and lovely woman. She guided me—a lost soul as one of the new MPs—through what I describe as the wonders of Westminster. I will also take a wee moment to thank my long-suffering wife, Agnes, our two daughters, Angela and Karen, and our family,

who have been helpful in the journey that has brought me to this Chamber. Sandra Osborne, Phil Gallie and George Younger preceded Corri Wilson as MPs for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. They were all excellent parliamentarians who may be remembered by some in this House.

Let me take Members back to the dark days of the second world war of 1939 to 1945, when the Labour MP for South Ayrshire was Alexander Sloan, better known locally as Sanny Sloan. A former miner and a workers' champion, he served his community well, but regrettably, like so many miners, he was dogged by ill health and died in 1945, soon after his second victory in an election to this House. The commonality is that we were both born to mining families in the small Ayrshire mining village of Rankinston, albeit we were born some 72 years apart.

There are many proud British institutions, but I shall mention just two: this Parliament and the national health service. One wonders—dare I say it?—what the outcome would be if there were a referendum on which should be closed. I suspect that this Chamber would be empty. I thank the national health service, and Dr Nykerie and his team at the Golden Jubilee hospital in Clydebank near Glasgow, for the successful double bypass surgery that I successfully underwent in 2014. My family and I are eternally grateful to them. However, I must apologise to my constituents in Maybole, a town just south of Ayr. I waited three months for my bypass, but they have waited nearly 30 years for theirs. The town is severed by the A77, which is—excuse the pun—a main artery from the central belt of Scotland to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) for the important ferry ports at Cairnryan that serve the ferry traffic to and from our neighbours in Ireland. It is an economic driver, so the A77 is an essential link. The punishment of the 30-tonners and 40-tonners taking that journey through the villages needs to be rectified, particularly at Maybole, and I am sure that it will be.

Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock is a rural and coastal community that is, to some extent, the bread basket of Britain, with Ayrshire tatties, bacon and cheese, and Ayrshire cattle, not forgetting the—albeit smaller—fishing communities along our coast from Dunure to Maidens and Girvan, which is still an active port, and to Ballantrae in the southernmost part. The good food and eateries in the constituency are considerably more reasonably priced than those in London; they have wonderful prices. After consuming the lovely food of various eateries, visitors may wish to toast that good food with a fine whisky or a delicately distilled Hendrick's gin from William Grant & Sons in Girvan. There is no connection. Although I am Bill Grant and they are William Grant, I do not have a distillery. Their product is wonderful. Hendrick's gin and Grant's whisky are global.

As an area, we have attracted many famous people. Post-war, President Eisenhower was gifted access to and the use of apartments at the beautiful Culzean castle. More recently, another President—President Trump, although he was known as Donald at the time—secured the Turnberry hotel and golf course. I thank his son Eric for the investment in this world-class facility and for securing its future and the associated employment.

We were home to Sir William Arrol, who resided at Seafield House in Ayr. More recently, that was a children's hospital, where Dr John McClure MBE was the senior

paediatrician for many years. Sir William Arrol was the engineer responsible for building the Forth rail bridge—I nearly said road bridge, but that is not the case—the gantries at Harland and Wolff in Belfast, where the infamous or famous ship, the Titanic, was built; and Tower bridge here in London.

This being an Ayrshire constituency, it would be remiss of me not to mention Scotland's bard, Robert Burns, who was born at Alloway—the ploughman poet, whose fondness for women is renowned. The women were far more fertile than the fields he ploughed, producing numerous offspring, and I am sure he would have faced immense challenges from the Child Support Agency.

But his passion went far beyond the fairer sex, and he penned many poems and songs, with lines such as

“Ye banks and braes o' bonnie Doon”.

From its source at Loch Doon, the River Doon gently winds its way past Dalmellington, Waterside, Patna, Polnessan, Dalrymple, Alloway and finally to the Firth of Clyde at the aptly named Doonfoot.

There is also “Afton Water”:

“Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes”.

The River Afton gently winds its way past New Cumnock, where I shall pause for a moment and mention the local football team, Glenafton Athletic, better known as The Glens, who, during the election campaign, won the Scottish junior cup by beating nearby rivals Auchinleck Talbot. To see New Cumnock bedecked in the team colours of red and white, with virtually every home displaying them, and with the lampposts adorned with bunting, was a credit to the strength and community spirit of New Cumnock, and I commend it for that and for the victory on the football park.

As we move onwards, we come to Cumnock, sometimes referred to as Old Cumnock, which plays host to Emergency One (UK), bespoke builders of fire appliances and emergency vehicles that are used throughout the United Kingdom. I commend them for their good work as they export—yes, I will use the word “export”—from Cumnock in Scotland all over the United Kingdom.

As we move on towards Ochiltree, I will stop for a moment at Dumfries House. May I give immense thanks to His Royal Highness Prince Charles for his involvement and, indeed, vision in not only saving Dumfries House for the nation but securing job opportunities in catering and tourism within and, indeed, beyond the constituency? Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock has a proud past. As the Member of Parliament for that constituency, I will endeavour to do my best to secure a promising future.

Finally, an extract from Robert Burns's poem “To A Mouse”, which may be reflected on by many parliamentarians from all parties, whether past, present or future. It reads simply:

“The best-laid schemes o' Mice an' Men

Gang aft agley,

An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,

For promis'd joy!”

9.18 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). Before he spoke, he promised me that he would make me look good. By speaking so powerfully, so poetically and so brilliantly, he has already broken his first political promise—so thanks a bunch for that.

[Neil O'Brien]

It is also a pleasure to follow my predecessor, Sir Edward Garnier. He was a brilliant constituency MP for 25 years. He is independent-minded and he is brave, but above all he is just an exceptionally nice man. He will be missed in all parts of this House, and he will be massively missed in our constituency.

It is an honour to represent the people of Harborough, Oadby and Wigston in this House, and I would like to thank them from the bottom of my heart for sending me here. There are four really striking things about my constituency. The first is the staggering amount of community and voluntary work, whether it is local charities such as Rainbows, LOROS, VAL or VASL; the award-winning work of Market Harborough in Bloom, which is visible all over the town and makes it beautiful; the strength of our local army, sea and air cadets, with whom I celebrated Armed Forces Week just the other day; or community campaigns such as the campaign to save the children's heart unit at Glenfield hospital, which I support. The strength of our civic life is incredibly visible from the briefest look at *The Harborough Mail* or the *Leicester Mercury*, or by tuning into our community radio station, Harborough FM. A huge number of people in my constituency dedicate themselves to improving the lot of their fellow citizens, and it is absolutely inspiring.

The second striking thing about my constituency is the strong culture of enterprise. There are now nearly 4,500 businesses in the constituency—a quarter more than in 2010. There is simply nothing that the people in my constituency cannot do well. From milk floats to jet engines, we have made everything. Although we have heard speeches this evening about the invention of powered flight in Scotland, you will be relieved, Mr Speaker, to hear that we have never tried to combine the jet engine and the milk float, as that would lead to dangerous adventures, I think. My constituency is famous for farming and food, and also for textiles. One of its most famous family businesses, Symingtons, actually managed to combine both of those things, because one brother made soups which fattened us all up, and the other brother made corsets with which to constrain our bulging waistlines. You will agree, Mr Speaker, that that is a very cunning business model. Given the culture of small business, the have-a-go culture, and the culture of enterprise in my constituency, I will work to make sure that important initiatives such as the Midlands Engine and the new industrial strategy work for small business as well as big.

The third really important thing about my constituency is the open and welcoming nature of the people. Perhaps that is because we have been plugged into the global economy ever since the Romans came and built the road that now forms the eastern boundary of the constituency. I have to tell you, Mr Speaker, that not all of that road is now passable by car due to several centuries of disgraceful underinvestment by the Vikings, Normans and Saxons, but none the less, later on the canals came and put the constituency back on the map. The fantastic staircase of locks at Foxton Locks is a testament to the time when it was the spaghetti junction on the M1 of its day. In more recent decades, the constituency has welcomed people from all over the world. Sometimes they have come with absolutely nothing but the clothes on their backs, particularly the Ugandan

Asians who came and settled there when they were fleeing from Idi Amin. Wherever they have come from, they have often started brilliant businesses and powered our economy forward. In our constituency, we have very good relations between all the different communities, and I will work to keep it that way.

The fourth and final thing, Mr Speaker—you will perhaps see this coming—is of course that my constituency is strikingly beautiful, from the well-kept gardens of Oadby, Wigston and Market Harborough to the gently rolling countryside, it is a lovely place to be. When we are walking near our home—me, my wife Jemma, and our little daughter Florence—tramping through the tall buttercups and the nice pink clover flowers under the big Leicestershire skies, that is about as close as it gets to heaven.

My constituency is a place of beauty, a place of opportunity, and a place with a strong community, and I want to keep it that way. To keep it beautiful, we have to start by reforming our broken planning system. We have made progress in recent years, and of course we must build more houses, but too often at the moment our planning system only builds resentment. It puts development in the wrong places and does not match new housing with the necessary infrastructure, and councillors and the community simply have too few powers relative to developers.

To extend opportunity we have to focus on education. I grew up in Huddersfield, went to a comprehensive, got to go to Oxford and have ended up in this House. I want young people in my constituency to have the same chances as I have had. It simply cannot be right that school pupils in Harborough, Oadby and Wigston get so much less funding than children in identical circumstances in other areas. The new national funding formula will start to address that injustice, and I hope that the Government will press on with it as soon as possible. I also want the forthcoming review of council funding to address the wider underfunding of Leicestershire.

To make the most of our community spirit, we have to make sure that everyone in it is included. We are an ageing society with more people living alone so loneliness is a growing problem. I commend the work of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and the fantastic work being done by mainly community groups in my constituency to address loneliness. I will get right behind them.

I am an optimist by nature. Yes, we are in a global economic race, but this country has better schools than ever before and a brilliant culture of enterprise. Yes, we are an ageing society, but I believe that, with more older people and time to volunteer, we have the conditions for a massive boom in our social and community life. Although this country faces some challenges, I for one believe that our best days still lie ahead.

9.26 pm

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in the Second Reading debate on this important Bill. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House to improve the protections available to British holidaymakers.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on his excellent maiden speech. I must also express my appreciation for the

advice and guidance I have had both from hon. Members and from Officers of the House as I take my first faltering steps in this place.

I must pay tribute to my predecessor, Richard Arkless, who was elected in 2015. Richard did not have long in his role, but he made a positive contribution in those two years and I wish him very well for the future. I also pay tribute to Russell Brown, his predecessor, who served our region with aplomb for 18 years, until 2015. Russell defeated the Conservative candidate in 1997, riding on a Labour tidal wave, if you remember those days. I do: I was standing in Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale, John Major was going out and Tony Blair was coming in. It was a painful experience—this is sort of therapy for me tonight. Poor old Russell came in on the Labour tidal wave, only to go out in an SNP tsunami in 2015. We may not have seen anything so dramatic at the polls in Scotland this time, but the tide is rising for the Scottish Conservatives and long may that continue.

I have the honour to represent the electors of Dumfries and Galloway, which, measuring more than 2,500 square miles, is the sixth largest constituency in the United Kingdom. From Dumfries to Stranraer, it is a combination of rolling farmland, sparkling waters and beautiful hills and forests. It captures not only two and a half counties, but the hearts of those who live there and all who visit.

Historically, Dumfries and Galloway is the birthplace of John Paul Jones, the founding father of the American navy. No President has visited us to thank us for that. There is one at the moment with a golf course in the neighbouring constituency to the north, but we are not holding our breath. It is also the resting place of Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns—a fertile poet, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) has covered in his excellent maiden speech. I will say no more on that subject. Thanks to Kirkpatrick Macmillan, in 1840 Dumfries and Galloway gave the world the first bicycle, which I see has really caught on in this city.

Today our industry is centred on agriculture, tourism, forestry and food processing. In particular, the tourism and farming industries are the bedrock of the local economy, and are based around the small market towns of Castle Douglas and Newton Stewart. My constituency is host to some of the finest dairy herds in the United Kingdom, some of the most expansive upland sheep farms in Scotland, and of course the world-famous pedigree beef cow that is the Belted Galloway.

Our tourism market is very important to our region, and we look forward to welcoming old friends and new to treasures such as the Scottish national book town of Wigtown, with its excellent festival; the ports at Portpatrick and Kirkcudbright, the latter also famous for its artists; and the rugged scenery of the Galloway coastline and hills.

Our small communities are dependent on fishing, field sports and walking tourism, but they are also dependent on faster and wider broadband to develop home-grown businesses, and that is something I seek to improve in my new role.

I am well aware of my obligation to play my part in sustaining those rural communities, but I must also encourage economic development in the larger towns of Stranraer and Dumfries. I was born in Dumfries so I

know well its issues. However, I also want to make a positive impact in Stranraer, which has seen its ferry terminal move five miles north to Cairnryan in recent years. That move has resulted in many fewer visitors to the town, but they are a resilient lot in Stranraer, with a wonderful community spirit, and I intend to support them in their regeneration efforts in every way possible. The biggest win for them would be an upgrade of the A75 Euroroute from Carlisle to Stranraer, something I have been telling the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), my neighbour across the water. I hope that he has taken it on board. That important economic artery has been ignored by Scotland's Government for far too long.

I would like to take this opportunity to send another message to the Scottish Government. In the 2014 independence referendum, my constituents voted overwhelmingly to remain in the United Kingdom. The leadership of the SNP should respect that decision.

As we prepare to leave the European Union, it is the task of us all in this House, and in all corners of our great country, to ensure that the United Kingdom goes forward economically, socially, and constitutionally, as one nation. To that end, I look forward to working with my neighbours on both sides of the border, to bring forward the borderland growth deal for the economic benefit of the whole of the north of England and the whole of the south of Scotland.

In conclusion, I thank the House for the consideration that it has shown to me this evening. I would add only that I am proud to have been elected to represent Dumfries and Galloway; proud to be one of a baker's dozen of Scottish Conservatives returned to Westminster; and proud that we have turned the tables and imposed a Conservative Government on the English! [*Laughter.*]

9.33 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to make a brief contribution to this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) and all the other hon. Members on both sides of the House who have made wonderful maiden speeches today. Indeed, I wonder whether their eloquence in painting pictures of the treasures of their constituencies has made the Bill irrelevant. Who would want to travel abroad when we have such a wonderful array of treasures in these isles? For some inconceivable reason, people will still wish to holiday overseas so the Bill is incredibly important.

As we have heard, the way people book their holidays and travel has changed remarkably. Not that long ago, people would toddle off down to the travel agent and book a fortnight in Lanzarote or Torremolinos—whatever was their destination of choice—as one package, and that was it. People now mix and match using the internet to add on all sorts of different parts of their holiday, and it is important to upgrade the regulation—the valuable ATOL scheme that has been in place for many years—to reflect those changes. The market will continue to evolve, so it is absolutely right for the Bill to set a general framework for the new legislation that can then be augmented by specific regulation. It was a pleasure to serve with the Minister, the shadow Secretary of State and other Members on the Public Bill Committee in the previous Parliament. I am glad that today we are revisiting those provisions.

[Iain Stewart]

I will make one very brief point, which I made when I intervened on the Minister's opening speech. It is important to have the detailed regulations in place as soon as possible. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who made an excellent speech and who is very knowledgeable in these matters, echoed that point. The industry has to plan 12 to 18 months ahead and it is anxious that we get the regulation in place as soon as possible, so that people booking holidays today for that period ahead can have the coverage and protection the scheme should provide. I will support the Bill on Second Reading tonight, but I hope the Minister will address that point in Committee. Regulation must be in place as speedily as possible.

9.35 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is quite something to be the last Back Bencher called in a debate where we have had, I think, nine maiden speeches back-to-back. We are ending with one of the old regulars. One point I would make to new Members is that when I arrived two years ago I was told to find a nice quiet spot from which to speak. They can see the spot I decided to pick: directly opposite the then 56 Scottish National party Members. There are now slightly fewer of them.

I represent Torbay, which is a main tourism area. Indeed, I struggle to think why anyone would not want to enjoy our beaches and our history. It is one of the most beautiful constituencies in the whole country. It is right, however, if people do go abroad, that there are important protections—the ATOL regulations—in place.

One point made in a number of interventions is that the market has changed massively since the start of ATOL. It is likely to change again so it is important that our regulatory system is kept up to date. I therefore welcome the Bill. A lot of Members mentioned their birthplaces. I enjoyed the speech made by the hon. Member from my own birthplace, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). I was born in Freedom Fields, which he will know, and it was interesting to hear the points he made. This is a changing market, where the travel agent with a selection of brochures has been replaced by a smart phone with an app that connects people immediately with a site that can sell them everything, but not necessarily a package holiday. It is important that we keep up to date and it is right that changes are made.

Reference was made to the origin of package holidays, which can be traced back to a temperance meeting. Sadly, one of the earliest package holidays arranged by entrepreneurs out of Torbay was a trip to a public hanging in Exeter, with a trip to the races thrown in on the way back. There was a slight problem, however. The individual concerned was reprieved and spent 30 years in jail, which rather ruined their plans.

It is right that we have talked about the importance of making sure that British travel agents can compete in a marketplace larger than their own. I therefore welcome the changes that will mean it is the place where they are established that governs what system they are related to, rather than from where the first flight departs, which is the current situation under the ATOL regulations. Realistically, firms will want to sell different flights and different packages, and not be constrained by the point

of origin. I hope that travellers will see the benefits of booking through British and UK-based travel agents, knowing that they have the certainty of a scheme, supported by a large pot, that has worked well for over 40 years. I do not normally rush to favour extending taxation powers, but it is appropriate that clause 1 provides the ability to extend tax-raising powers to those selling direct to consumers in a European economic area country, rather than just those in the UK.

This has been a fascinating debate. I feel like I have been on a tour of various parts of the United Kingdom, with all the maiden speeches we have heard, in a debate on people taking trips abroad to see what is on offer over there.

I certainly think that this Bill is worthy of its Second Reading. There are clearly points to go over in Committee, but the protections to ensure that nobody will be stuck abroad without being able to return are welcome. It is right that industry should bear the cost of that rather than the UK taxpayer, which would be the case if we allowed the current system to continue and did not reform it in the way suggested. It will make a real difference, and I look forward to seeing the Bill progress into Committee.

9.40 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, in which we have had 22 Members speak and no less than 13 maiden speeches. There have been too many to mention, but the contributions have been truly excellent, in what has been a non-contentious debate, given that the Opposition agree with the Government's position. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) stated at the outset of the debate, the Opposition are not opposed to the Bill; indeed, we are broadly very supportive of it. There are, however, some concerns about the impact of some provisions, so we want to press the Government on some issues.

The Bill will bring ATOL up to date and ensure that it is harmonised with the latest EU package travel directive, extending coverage to a wider range of holidays and protecting more consumers, as well as allowing UK travel companies to sell more seamlessly across Europe. Labour welcomes the extensions, which will ultimately help to protect more holidaymakers, but we want clarity on how UK consumers will be protected by EU-based companies, as they will no longer be subject to ATOL, but to member state equivalents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Karl Turner: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will not give way at this stage. I am hoping to mention some of the wonderful maiden speeches if I have time later.

The implications of ATOL after Brexit are also a cause for concern. Hidden in the Bill are proposals that the Secretary of State will require only the affirmative resolution procedure to significantly reform ATOL and the air travel trust fund. Labour recognises the merits of some reforms, but we believe that an impact assessment, full consultation and full scrutiny will be required before any fundamental changes are made to this well-respected consumer protection. These issues bring to the forefront uncertainties about the future of UK aviation following

the decision to leave the European Union. Labour has been clear that whichever framework is chosen, the Government should prioritise retaining an essentially unchanged operating environment.

In conclusion, the Labour party broadly supports the Bill, as it will extend protections to many more holidaymakers. However, we want clarity on how EU-based companies—which will no longer be subject to ATOL, but rather to their respective member states' equivalents—will provide protections to UK consumers. We are committed to securing the best possible framework to ensure that the sector flourishes, but this means adequately preparing ourselves for the many implications that Brexit will have for ATOL and our aviation sector as a whole.

Given that I have a few minutes, I want to mention some of the maiden speakers, kicking off with the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). She spoke very passionately about her constituency and the fact that her daughter Ruth encouraged her to stand and continue the long tradition of Redditch electing women to Parliament. That was an excellent move, because her speech was extremely well received and very good. She also spoke warmly of her immediate predecessor, Karen Lumley, who retired from this place due to ill health. We send our very wishes to her from all parts of the House. The hon. Lady also mentioned her predecessor Jacqui Smith, who was the first woman Home Secretary from this place.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) eloquently described the need for consumer protections in this area. She spoke with great knowledge about the EU and the importance of these consumer protections given that we are leaving the EU. I understand that the hon. Lady is a Member of the European Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) spoke with great pride about representing the constituency in which she had been raised. She also spoke about the very important issue of gender inequality and the pay gap, and the injustice represented by the WASPI women.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) rightly used his opportunity to right the wrong of forgetting to mention his wife in his general election acceptance speech. The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) spoke with great passion about the constituency in which he grew up, and also spoke very warmly about his predecessor, our very own Natascha Engel, who is greatly missed here. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) spoke with great passion about his constituency as well, and also, very cleverly, mentioned his wife, referring to the fact that she had been born and bred in Runcorn.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) was, I have to say, very entertaining. He was, I understand, an actor, but he said that this was probably a more interesting theatre. If I remember rightly, he appeared in "Bread", which I recall watching as a kid. That, of course, was the comedy series about a family in Liverpool who had suffered a terrible time under the Thatcher Government.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) spoke with great passion about notable people in his constituency—too many to mention—but he also decried the privatisation of the ferry service, and many Labour Members would probably agree with him. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) spoke with great

passion about his constituency too, especially when referring to the wonderful shortbread and whisky. The hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) spoke about a very serious issue: the fact that nearly one in four of his constituents do not own a passport, and the importance of the Bill in protecting people who spend an awful lot of their hard-earned money on holidays and expect to be protected by legislation.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke of the terrible tragedy that is Grenfell Tower, having had a great deal of experience as a long-standing fire officer. I am sure that the House will benefit from his expertise in that area, and in others.

The hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) told us how innovative his constituents were, making everything from jet engines to milk floats. He also mentioned the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, and said that he would support it. All of us, in all parts of the House, would be grateful for that support. Last but not least among the maiden speakers, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) also spoke about innovation in his constituency, in which the first bicycle was created.

The Bill is not particularly contentious, and Labour supports the Government's efforts to legislate in this regard.

9.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is an absolute honour for me to be able to close the Second Reading debate on this Bill. I must tell you, Mr Speaker, that when I first looked at the Order Paper and saw that we had six and a half hours in which to debate a Bill consisting of four clauses, my heart slightly quailed for a second, but I would like to put it to the entire House that tonight has been an absolute triumph. I have enjoyed every speech: it has been just marvellous.

When I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) stand up and quote, in the context of a number of maiden speeches, the maiden-seducing Robbie Burns himself, and not only that but mentioning his famous poem "To a Mouse", which begins, as the House will know:

"Wee, sleeikit"—

I will not do the accent—

"cowrin, tim'rous beastie,

O, what a panic's in thy breastie!"

I was tempted to think that none of the new Members speaking could count as a sleeikit, cowrin or tim'rous beastie, and that the panic was likely to be in the Labour breastie. So it has been a delight. I must say it has been less a parliamentary debate than an episode of "Britain's Got Talent", with dazzling speeches and new voices—and especially, may I say with delight, Scottish voices from my side of the House, a rare and delightful occurrence. We have lost great colleagues across the House, but this evening has brought home to us what absolute legends we have received instead.

We have had an extremely useful debate and I warmly thank all those who have taken part, including the many Members on both sides of the House who have made their maiden speeches. As the debate has made clear, this is not a Bill that is politically charged or partisan. We are collectively seeking to act in the interest of the UK businesses that sell holidays, and in particular in the interest of the travelling public who wish to enjoy

[*Jesse Norman*]

those holidays free of care. This may not be the largest of Bills when measured in terms of the number of its clauses, but it is a very large Bill when measured by its potential to bring peace of mind to people in every constituency throughout the UK.

That reassurance is what the ATOL scheme was originally created to provide, when it was set up in 1973. Today, not only does it help to prevent rogue traders from entering the market, but it provides important protection to consumers in the event that their travel organiser should fail. It has provided effective protection to consumers for over 40 years and it is well regarded both by those who use it and by the travel sector itself.

Consumer protection is an important pillar of the holiday sector owing to the nature of the market. Holidays are frequently booked and paid for many months in advance of travel, and the consumer may often be unaware of the financial stability, or instability, of their holiday providers. The impacts from the failure of a travel company can be grievous. Consumers may face a serious financial loss from not receiving a refund, or from the cost of having to make alternative arrangements to get home. Even worse, they may experience the trauma, heartache and sheer inconvenience of a cancelled holiday, or of being stranded abroad without accommodation or a ticket back.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response to the issue that we face. He will be aware that, for many holidaymakers and travellers, delayed and cancelled flights are an issue. Does the legislation that he is bringing forward address the issue for people who are in that very difficult position, whether domestically, in Europe or further afield?

Jesse Norman: I am not quite sure I have taken the point the hon. Gentleman has raised. If it is about Brexit, I am not expecting this to change at all. He would be welcome to put the question again if we had more time, but I am afraid I will have to move on. I apologise for that.

The ATOL scheme provides important protection in these situations. It ensures that, if an ATOL holder fails, its customers are able to continue their holiday and return home, or that they will not lose out on the money paid if they are yet to travel. Fortunately, the failure of travel companies is relatively rare, but it does happen. In the last financial year alone, 19 ATOL holders collapsed. In each of those situations, the Civil Aviation Authority had to step in to deliver the appropriate protection to consumers through the scheme.

Many colleagues will be aware of the recent failure of the Spanish online travel agent, the Lowcost Travelgroup. When that business failed last summer, it was reported that there were 27,000 customers on holiday and over 100,000 customers who were yet to travel. Although many of those customers were from the UK, the company did not have ATOL protection as it was regulated under the Spanish regime. The collapse of companies such as that is an important reminder of the need to ensure that consumer protection keeps pace with the way people book their holidays. The huge growth in online booking means that customers have a much wider choice of providers, including those based overseas. Yet it is clear

from the low-cost holiday situation that not every travel provider is covered by the same level of protection, and inconsistencies apply across borders. That is why we have already begun to take steps to update the ATOL scheme and bring it into line with modern trade practices.

The Minister of State for transport, legislation and maritime, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), has already mentioned in his opening remarks the legislative changes that we made to ATOL in 2012. These introduced the flight-plus category, to bring ATOL protection to the many consumers who book mix-and-match holidays online, in addition to those who buy traditional package holidays on the high street. The then Government also introduced the ATOL certificate, so that consumers know when they have booked an ATOL-protected holiday, and who to contact if their travel provider fails. We believe these interventions have had a positive impact for consumers and many businesses. Not only have we seen an increase in the number of protected consumers, but the changes have also helped to level the playing field between online and high street businesses.

For similar reasons, we have also been working with the European Commission and EU member states since 2012 to ensure that the European regulations are also brought up to date. The original package travel directive was agreed in 1990, and its provisions were introduced into UK law through the package travel regulations of 1992. As my right hon. Friend said earlier, the ATOL scheme is a crucial means by which UK businesses can meet their obligations to have insolvency protection under the EU directive.

The EU and UK package travel regulations have contributed significantly to consumer protection rights since their introduction. However, those regulations were originally designed for a world where people booked their pre-prepared package holidays through a high street travel agent or tour operator. The regulations thus pre-date the growth in the internet, where people are able to create their own informal packages online. As the House well knows, the internet has since become a vast travel marketplace, providing opportunities for consumers and businesses. Indeed, we heard at the start of the debate that around 75% of UK holidays are now booked online.

That being the case, it is important that regulations and consumer protections are able to keep pace with major changes in the marketplace. That is why a new package travel directive was finally agreed across Europe in December 2015.

The UK Government have supported the rationale for updating the directive, in order to bring greater clarity on what constitutes a package holiday in today's marketplace and to improve and harmonise protection across the continent. The updated package travel directive will do just that: it brings protection across the rest of Europe closer to the model we have operated since we updated ATOL in 2012. Once again, the UK is leading in Europe; that is good news for consumers.

Overall, it will mean consumers will see insolvency protection extended to cover a broader range of holidays. In particular, it has updated the definition of a package holiday, so that an informal package booked online will need to be protected in the same way as a traditional package holiday booked on the high street.

As has been noted, it also brings a new concept of “linked travel arrangements” into the scope of protection. Like a package holiday, these involve a combination of at least two different types of travel services purchased together for the purpose of a holiday. However, those arrangements are looser, involving the separate selection and payment of each travel service, and separate contracts with different travel service providers. Linked travel arrangements will not be protected to the same level as a package holiday; however, under certain conditions, a refund or repatriation will apply.

There should also be benefits to business. A harmonised approach will help to level the playing field, with the same rules applying for businesses across the EU selling similar products. This harmonised approach will also help to remove barriers for UK businesses that want to trade across borders.

Concerns have been raised about air passenger rights when the UK leaves the EU. The Government are committed to delivering an orderly withdrawal and are preparing to introduce legislation that will preserve the EU *acquis* on the domestic statute book for the time being. The Government are also seeking to have UK consumers continue to enjoy the strong protections and effective consumer regime that they currently enjoy both inside and outside the EU.

Today, we are taking forward the ATOL Bill to harmonise our domestic regulations with the changes coming in across the EU in 2018. As the House has heard from my right hon. Friend the Minister, the Bill will update the ATOL powers to align them with the scope of the directive. It is a fine piece of work, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

AIR TRAVEL ORGANISERS' LICENSING BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Mike Freer.*)

Question agreed to.

Theme Parks: Child Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

10 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me this opportunity to raise the issue of child safety in theme parks. We in Leicester were deeply affected by the death of one of our own, Evha Jannath of Belgrave, at Drayton Manor park in Staffordshire. On the morning of Tuesday 9 May 2017, Evha woke up excited at the prospect of visiting Drayton Manor park with her school, the Jameah girls academy, which is in Rolleston Street, Leicester. She had been given £10 by her family to spend at the park. Just four days before, she had celebrated her 11th birthday. What Evha's mother, Mussamth, did not know, when she waved Evha off that morning thinking that she would be safe and would have an enjoyable trip, was that that would be the last time she would see her. Tonight, we need to begin the process of addressing some of the issues surrounding Evha's death, and I am grateful to see the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work in the Chamber. This is not just for the family or for the 1.5 million people who visit Drayton Manor each year, but for the millions of theme park-goers worldwide.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have sought permission from the right hon. Gentleman to make an intervention. Like many in the House, I enjoy theme parks. When we go to Florida, for example, we notice that wherever there is a level of fun, there is also a need for strict regulations. Does he agree that, when it comes to regulations that work, we should perhaps take some lessons from the Americans when we deal with our own regulations back home?

Keith Vaz: This is certainly something that I hope the Government will look at, once they have had an opportunity to see the reports that have been prepared by the police and the Health and Safety Executive.

On that tragic day, Evha got on the Splash Canyon ride at just after 2 pm with her school friends. According to eye witness accounts, as the Splash Canyon ride went around its circuit, Evha fell into the water as the vessels bumped into one of the sides of the ride. Having fallen into the water, Evha began walking towards her friends who were in the vessel as it was pulled away by the water current. For a few minutes, Evha followed the vessel trying to get back to safety and to rejoin the vessel, because her friends were still in it. Sadly, at that stage she received no help and was eventually sucked under the water. In his initial report, the coroner, Andrew Haigh, has suggested that Evha suffered blunt chest trauma which led to her death. In his communications with the family and with me, and especially in allowing Evha's family to see the body for a second time—which was of particular benefit to Evha's mother—Mr Haigh has been exceptional.

Issues of theme park safety are critical at all times, but especially as we head towards the school summer holidays. These parks across the United Kingdom earn millions of pounds, and whether it is at Disney in the United States or at Drayton Manor, adults and children must be safe to visit them. According to Health and Safety Executive data, there were 420 non-fatal injuries

[Keith Vaz]

at theme parks in 2015-2016, with 249 of them involving children under 16. There have been three deaths since 2005. That is three too many.

All theme parks have television screens that are monitored by staff. The family want to know who was watching these screens and how Evha was left in the water for several minutes without anyone coming to rescue her. The House may recall the horrific accident at Alton Towers in June 2015 when passengers on a ride crashed into an empty carriage and many suffered appalling injuries. The fact that this tragedy could happen so soon afterwards means that certain issues were not addressed, and it is in the public interest that they are addressed immediately. Following the tragedy, a feature of this case has been how the agencies involved have gone to great lengths to help the family. I thank the Health and Safety Executive for the work that it has done so far in investigating the issue, particularly the work carried out by Catherine Cottam under the leadership of head of operations Neil Craig.

The vessels on the Splash Canyon ride have no seatbelts and a number of vessels had their “stay in your seat signs obscured.”

Unfortunately, this incident was not the first time that somebody had fallen out of a vessel at Drayton Manor. In 2013, Patrick Treacy also fell off the Splash Canyon ride. In an interview with BBC Radio 5 live following Evha’s death, Patrick’s mother Vicky called for lap bands on the seats to ensure children or adults do not stand up on the ride. If there is a threat that children may fall out of such rides and into the water, certain safety procedures should be adopted. I fear that that was not the case at Drayton Manor after the Patrick Treacy incident and in Evha’s case the same thing happened again.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, other major theme parks, including Alton Towers, Legoland and Thorpe Park, closed their water rides. However, the rides have since reopened without waiting for the Health and Safety Executive report. The presence of lap bands that would ensure that participants sit in their seat, but would not impede escape if the vessel capsized, must be seen as a potential solution. That would not affect their enjoyment. Clear public announcements regarding seating on rides at all parks, a member of staff escorting people to their vessels and informing them that they must remain in their seats, and clear signage are all vital, but the family feel that all that was lacking on that day at Drayton Manor. According to the children who were interviewed afterwards, they called out for help to the guards, but nothing was immediately done for them. Making sure that such rides are adequately staffed is also a priority. Perhaps it would have been better if there had been two members of staff at the start of the ride assisting children to board the vessels.

I accompanied the family, including Evha’s father Muhammed Islam, her brother Muhammed, and her uncle Mohammed, to Drayton Manor where the ride and the circumstances were explained carefully to us by the police. On behalf of the family, I thank Superintendent Steve Morray and DCI John Quilty and his colleagues for their work and for the relationship that they have built with the family. Of particular benefit was showing the family the CCTV footage of Evha’s last moments. The police investigation continues.

Evha was only 11 years old and got on the boat with five other children of the same age or younger. Children under-12 should be accompanied by an adult at all times on such rides.

I also want to raise the issue of bereavement damages for the death of a child, which are currently capped at only £15,000. That is woefully low. Although of course no amount of money can compensate for the loss of a child, we must look again at the issue of fair compensation for families. There is no cap on such payments in the United States. Legislation should be introduced to remove the cap to allow proper compensation to be given to families.

The owners of Drayton Manor have been deeply affected by the tragedy, and William Bryan wrote to me: “the whole Drayton Manor community remains deeply saddened and upset by the terrible incident last week. I cannot comprehend the pain and anguish that the family and wider community feel right now”.

His letter was deeply appreciated. There are so many heroes and heroines who acted swiftly after Evha was discovered. I personally pay tribute to the air ambulance service for its reaction to the incident and its efforts in trying to save Evha’s life, and to the staff, who must have been horrified by what they saw.

Hundreds of people attended the funeral in Leicester, even though many of them did not know Evha personally. The Darus Salam mosque and its director, Moj Mohammed, have also been exceptional and have established a JustGiving page to support Evha’s family. Evha’s school, and particularly its headmistress Erfana Bora, provided great comfort to the family after Evha’s death.

Many legal issues remain outstanding, and I have been careful not to cross into them while the inquest is pending. The family have appointed Hilary Meredith, of Hilary Meredith Solicitors, and her legal team to deal with legal measures, and they have taken up the challenge forcefully, for which I thank them.

By themselves, even though I am sure they will be extremely thorough, the police and Health and Safety Executive inquiries will never bring Evha back. However, it is hoped that their recommendations will change how the system works. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is absolutely right that there are theme parks in other countries. Theme parks do not exist only in the United Kingdom; they exist all over the world. Millions of children enjoy going to them, and if there is an example of better practice, I hope we will be able to follow it.

Throughout May I spent a great deal of time with the family, who remain shocked and in mourning. As one would imagine, Evha’s mother is still devastated by the death of her young child. Muhammed, Evha’s brother, has taken on so much after this tragedy and has handled himself in a way that most 18-year-olds could not, and should not be asked to do. Muhammed and the family are concerned about potential negligence leading to his sister’s death.

To lose a child is horrific, but to use that loss as a means of achieving positive change, so that things can be improved for others, is nothing short of heroic. Having spoken to Evha’s father, Muhammed Islam, I know he is set on ensuring that no other family is hit by such a tragic event. No Member of this House wants to be in the position of calling for change after such a tragedy, which is why we need to ensure there is change.

The House will inevitably move on to debate other tragic events—indeed, earlier today we heard more about Grenfell Tower. However, for this close-knit and loving family, no minute will go past, no day will go by and no birthday will fail to be acknowledged without longing for their daughter, sister and niece. They will never again hear little Evha chatting and laughing, and they will never see her lovely face, which is why they want to get to the truth of what happened. They deserve nothing less.

10.15 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for securing this debate and commend him for the support and advocacy he has shown for his constituents. May I take this opportunity to extend my sincere sympathy to Evha's family and friends at their immense loss, and to join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to all those who have assisted by helping on that tragic day and since? In particular, I wish to thank him for mentioning the HSE—I am the Minister with responsibility for that body—its 50-strong fairground inspection team and, in particular, the two officers he mentioned for the leadership they have shown in this instance.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that Staffordshire police, with the HSE's support, are currently investigating the circumstances surrounding Evha's death and that, as a result of that ongoing investigation, I am constrained as to what I can say, particularly about this incident. However, I hope to afford him and his constituents some reassurances, within those constraints. I can confirm that Drayton Manor's procedures for responding to emergencies at this ride, including its arrangements for identifying and rescuing anyone who falls into the water, will be examined as part of the investigation and that the ride remains closed while this investigation takes place.

Immediately after the accident, the HSE contacted Merlin, which operates similar machines manufactured by Intamin at Alton Towers and Thorpe Park. Merlin had already closed its rides so that it could conduct an in-depth check to ensure that the machines were operating correctly. It agreed to keep the rides closed until the HSE could reassure it that there was nothing physically wrong with the Drayton Manor ride that would increase the risk to passengers. The HSE did that, and the rides were closed for three days.

Once it had completed its checks, Merlin confirmed to the HSE that it had reviewed all the operating procedures to ensure they were in line with the manufacturer's instructions and that the operators were working in accordance with their training. It also confirmed that it had reviewed the arrangements for supervising the ride and the riders, ensuring that only those who could be safely accommodated were allowed on to the ride; providing clear instructions to riders to remain in their seats while the ride is in operation, and not to stand, swap seats, lean out of the boat and so on; and ensuring that riders knew that the ride is vigorous and that they need to hold on as the boat moves down the ride. Merlin also confirmed that it had reviewed its rescue and response measures to ensure that it would know immediately that a person had fallen into the water; and that, crucially, it could stop the water flow with an emergency stop and could swiftly get someone

out of the water using appropriate techniques and equipment. On the information provided, the HSE was satisfied with Merlin's review of those other rides. That is important to mention in the immediate aftermath of that tragic incident.

Following the incident, the HSE also sent out an information note to the Amusement Devices Safety Council for onward transmission, reminding ride operators of the steps that they were required to take in order to ensure the safety of riders on water rides, in particular. Those included some of the areas that I have just mentioned. Any specific learnings that come out of the investigation at Drayton Manor will be shared with the industry so that it can ensure that they are taken on board.

As I said, the investigation is ongoing and the ride has been shut down to allow that to proceed. The specific lines of inquiry that are being followed cannot currently be disclosed, for reasons that the right hon. Gentleman will understand, but, based on the emerging findings of the investigation, the Health and Safety Executive has no information that suggests the other rides are unsafe to operate.

The investigation is also looking at the arrangements made by the school. After the incident, the Department for Education produced a statement with further advice. If necessary, it will provide additional guidance, should the investigation identify deficiencies in the processes.

Fortunately, serious issues such as this one are rare, but the right hon. Gentleman is quite right to point out that even one is one too many. This was the first drowning on a water ride in the UK. Following such an incident, the Health and Safety Executive carries out an in-depth investigation, not only to establish the causes of the incident but to achieve justice for the victims and their families. Any lessons learned will be shared with the industry, which will be required to implement them.

By way of example, as I am constrained in what I can say about the Drayton Manor incident, I shall explain what happened following the Alton Towers incident involving a multi-car rollercoaster. The operators reviewed and tested their operational and administrative procedures for clearing the block-stops on multi-car coasters. Merlin reviewed its safety management arrangements at Alton Towers and implemented a number of recommendations. Alton Towers' staff did a series of national and international presentations explaining what went wrong and why. It is important to mention that, because the right hon. Gentleman rightly flagged up the fact that we can learn from other nations, and other nations can learn from what has happened at our theme parks.

The HSE national fairground inspection team's work plan for this year includes the inspection of multi-car rollercoasters at specific theme parks. The HSE is working with theme park operators and their representative body, the British Association of Leisure Parks, Piers and Attractions, to improve management systems for the control of risks associated with rides such as roller coasters. There is no room for complacency, and the lessons that can be learned from incidents are certainly disseminated, with any new requirements enforced.

If the investigations into the recent incident expose any breaches of the law, appropriate action will be taken to hold those responsible to account. If any shortcomings are found in the current regulatory regime,

[Penny Mordaunt]

steps will be taken to address them. The Health and Safety Executive will act on information received about incidents in other countries. Often, that information is communicated to the executive through its contacts with the British Association of Leisure Parks, Piers and Attractions, which is a member of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions. The Health and Safety Executive publishes its safety alerts and bulletins on its website, thus making them available to a worldwide audience. When necessary, the executive will engage with international colleagues to improve safety at fairgrounds and theme parks worldwide.

Jim Shannon: Before the debate, I spoke to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) about Florida, where there are safety belts in all water rides, wherever they may be. That might be a simple solution, but it is perhaps one way to ensure that what happened at Drayton Manor does not happen again.

Penny Mordaunt: Indeed, the right hon. Member for Leicester East also mentioned other possible interventions that might have helped in this particular incident and might help in others. Indeed, on hearing about the incident I have formed a layperson's view. One asks all sorts of questions, including about lifejackets in certain circumstances.

Keith Vaz: I thank the Minister for the thoughtful and compassionate way in which she has responded to the debate. Does she have any indication of when the HSE will complete its report, because the inquest cannot take place until it is complete? We will then have an opportunity to look at changes that we might want to make.

Penny Mordaunt: I am happy to keep the right hon. Gentleman informed about that. I cannot give him a timeline today for the HSE investigation. I have inquired about that, but the investigation will be led by the evidence, so I cannot give him an end date. I understand from what hon. Members have said that they are keen that any safety measures that could be introduced are introduced now. The process that I have outlined, and the methodical review of different but similar rides will, I hope, give some assurance on that front. There are other things that they have mentioned, and which may strike us as laypeople as common-sense things to introduce. It is, like many situations, a bit more complicated than that. In cases overseas, if people have been more restricted in a boat, that has impeded their escape after an accident.

We need to wait, having assured ourselves that the immediate checks have been done on similar rides, for the HSE report. As I have outlined, any recommendations that it makes to the industry will be disseminated widely. The executive is working as swiftly as it can to complete that report so that other parts of the investigation can move forward, which I appreciate is incredibly important to the family. I would add that the HSE has commissioned research into the risks presented by water rides of this nature, as well as the current philosophy on risk control and whether that needs to change.

I assure hon. Members that the HSE will ensure that lessons are learned from this tragic event and are acted on by the industry. In the interim, measures have been taken to ensure that other rides operate safely. I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East for introducing the debate. As things progress, I stand ready, as does my Department, to assist him and his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 3 July 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Post-Council Statement

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): The second Energy Council of the Maltese presidency took place in Luxembourg on 26 June. I represented the UK.

The Council began with the Commission (Vice President Šefčovič) presenting the recommendation for a mandate to commence negotiations with the Russian Federation on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. It reiterated its commitment to ensuring energy supply routes to the EU complied with the rules of the third energy package, including diversification and security of supply, which was supported by the member states that intervened. The presidency noted the legal and political concerns raised by the Council.

The Council then discussed the energy efficiency directive on which the main outstanding issues were whether the EU-level energy efficiency target should be binding or indicative, and whether early efforts generating long-term savings could be counted towards the 2030 energy-saving obligation. Some member states supported maximum ambition; others called for more flexibility so that ambitious targets could be met.

The presidency made further efforts to find a compromise that could command a sufficient majority but texts which might have been acceptable to the UK were blocked by a group of member states demanding a more ambitious target yet less flexibility for member states to be able to meet them. Ultimately a general approach was adopted that included a higher EU-level energy efficiency target of 30% and some limited flexibilities for member states to achieve their binding national energy savings target. Eight member states voted against the proposal, on the basis that it ran counter to the position of the European Council in 2014. Although the balance of the proposal would have been acceptable to the UK, we were unable to support the text because the Commission refused to confirm the joint understanding reached with the UK in 2013 on what could be counted towards our 2020 binding national energy savings target. This could materially impact on our ability to meet our 2020 target.

Next, the presidency presented its compromise proposal on the energy performance of buildings directive, emphasising the uptake of electric vehicle charging points as the centrepiece of the revisions, and the increased flexibility for member states compared to the Commission's initial proposal. The Commission (Commissioner Cañete) highlighted what it saw as a loss of ambition. Member states supported the balance of the presidency's proposal and the Council agreed on a general approach, although some member states, including the UK, noted the need for measures to be economically and technically feasible.

The Council then discussed energy interconnectors at the request of Spain and Portugal, who sought binding targets for interconnection and funding for the required infrastructure. The Commission reiterated its commitment to the 2015 Madrid declaration on developing interconnectors, and highlighted the future discussion of this issue at the high-level group in September.

Finally, the presidency noted the intention of working groups to move forward on the six remaining legislative files that comprise the clean energy package; the Commission updated Council on a number of external energy relations issues over the past six months, including discussions on energy co-operation with China, Japan, Africa and Iran, and the development of the Eastern Mediterranean as a gas supplier, in order further to improve diversification of supply. The Estonian delegation presented the priorities for its upcoming presidency, which focused on electricity market design but also included negotiations on other elements of the clean energy package and the mandate for Nord Stream 2.

[HCWS20]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

DCMS: Digital

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): With agreement of the Prime Minister, we can confirm an addition to the Department name. DCMS will change from Department for Culture, Media and Sport to Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The Secretary of State's full title will be the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. All responsibilities and portfolios within the Department remain the same. The Department will still be referred to as DCMS.

[HCWS22]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Fisheries

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): As part of the wider process of becoming an independent coastal state, the UK will be withdrawing from the London Fisheries Convention. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will today formally give notice under the convention.

This is the first step towards taking back control of our fishing waters and creating a policy that leads to a more competitive, profitable and sustainable fisheries industry for the whole of the UK.

We are committed to acting as a responsible coastal state. We look forward to working closely with the EU and other coastal states to ensure the sustainable management of fish stocks in accordance with our rights and obligations under international law including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA).

[HCWS21]

HEALTH

Delayed Transfers of Care

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):

I would like to update the House about action we are taking to address delayed discharges from hospital in advance of this winter. Last year there were 2.25 million delayed discharges, up 24.5% from 1.81 million in the previous year. The Government are clear that no-one should stay in a hospital bed longer than necessary: it removes people's dignity, reduces their quality of life; leads to poorer health and care outcomes for people; and is more expensive for the taxpayer.

In this year's mandate to NHS England I set a clear expectation that delayed transfers of care (DTocS) should equate to no more than 3.5% of all hospital beds by September. Alongside this, the spring 2017 Budget announced an additional £2 billion to councils in England over the next three years to spend on adult social care services.

The system has worked extremely hard to agree spending plans and put in place actions to make use of the £1 billion provided in 2017-18 to meet the three purposes of the funding:

- meeting adult social care needs;
- reducing pressures on the NHS, including getting supporting more people to be discharged from hospital when they are ready; and,
- ensuring that the local social care provider market is supported.

Since February, there have been significant improvements within the health and care system, with a record decrease in month-on month delayed discharges in April 2017. We are supportive of the best performing systems where local government and the NHS are working together to tackle the challenge of delayed transfers of care. However, we are clear that we must make much faster and more significant progress well in advance of next winter to help free up hospital beds for the sickest patients and reduce pressures on overcrowded A&E departments.

This is why today we are setting out a further package of measures to support both the NHS and local government to reduce delays. This package supports all organisations to make improvements, and includes:

The integration and better care fund planning requirements 2017-19, clarifying how this, and other aspects of the better care fund planning process, will operate.

Joint NHS England, NHS Improvement, Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Adult Social Services guidance on implementing trusted assessors.

A performance dashboard showing how local areas in England are performing against metrics across the NHS-social care interface including delayed discharges.

Plans for local government to deliver an equal share to the NHS of the expectation to free up 2,500 hospital beds, including a breakdown of delayed days per 100,000 of the population and the indicative reduction levels required by each local authority and local NHS, which can be shared out differently at local level if agreed by both organisations.

Considering a review, in November, of 2018-19 allocations of the social care funding provided at spring Budget 2017 for areas that are poorly performing. This funding will all remain with local government, to be used for adult social care.

In addition, I have asked the chief executive of the Care Quality Commission to commission 12 reviews of local areas to consider how well they are working at the health and social care boundary. A further 8 reviews will be commissioned based on the performance dashboard and informed by local authority returns due in July. These reviews will commence immediately with the majority complete by the end of November, with a view to identifying issues and driving rapid improvement.

We are also putting in place a comprehensive sector-led support offer and in early July NHS England, NHS improvement, Local Government Association, Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and the better care support team are publishing the definitive national offer to support reductions in delayed transfers of care to all areas.

The health and care system has committed health and social care staff and managers up and down the country working every single day to deliver the best outcomes for people. Today's announcement will give our workforce and their leaders clarity on how the Government expect the NHS and local government to work together to achieve this joint ambition.

[HCWS24]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Resettlement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): As the Syria crisis enters its seventh year, civilians continue to bear the brunt of a conflict marked by unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life. This crisis, and wider instability across the world, is driving thousands of refugees and migrants towards Europe's borders.

The UK has been at the forefront of the international response and has pledged £2.46 billion to help address the humanitarian crisis, complemented by continued diplomatic efforts in the region to end the conflict. Our direct support has reached hundreds of thousands of people in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. By meeting basic humanitarian needs and helping to create new opportunities, we aim to help Syrians to build a life in neighbouring countries.

As part of our comprehensive approach to the Syria crisis, the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme (VPRS) was launched in January 2014 and expanded in September 2015. In 2016 the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state. The scheme, to date, has focused on Syrian nationals because they formed an easily identifiable cohort of vulnerable refugees who have fled the conflict and whose needs are clearly evident. This focus has enabled us to provide a quick and effective response to the crisis.

The scheme sees us working closely with the UNHCR to identify individuals who are most at risk in the region and whose particular needs can only be met in countries like the UK. Up to the end of March 2017, 7,307 Syrian nationals had been resettled across the UK under the Syrian VPRS, half of whom are children, and we are on track to meet our commitment of resettling 20,000 refugees by 2020. This is in addition to our vulnerable children's resettlement scheme launched last year, which will see

us resettle up to 3,000 of the most vulnerable children and their families from the middle east and north Africa region by 2020. We remain committed to resettling the overall number of refugees previously announced on both schemes.

However, whilst the Syrian VPRS is aimed at the most vulnerable Syrians, there are additional groups in the region who have fled Syria and are also extremely vulnerable but who may not be able to access one of our resettlement schemes. UNHCR's advice is that a diversified resettlement quota is needed in order to address the needs of the most vulnerable refugees from all refugee populations in the region.

In light of this, with immediate effect, I am amending the scope of the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme to enable UNHCR to refer the most vulnerable refugees in the MENA region who have fled the Syrian conflict and cannot safely return to their country of origin, whatever their nationality.

The Government are committed to an effective response in the affected regions and to resettling the most vulnerable; this includes those who had sought refuge within Syria prior to the conflict and been recognised as refugees. We will continue to rely on UNHCR to identify and refer the most vulnerable refugees but will no longer limit the scheme solely to those with Syrian nationality. UNHCR will only refer to us those who are genuine refugees, in that they cannot seek the protection of their home country.

This change will also mean that mixed family groups are eligible for resettlement under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. This change might also

open up the scheme to other groups, such as Iraqi minorities who sought refuge in Syria, but had to flee again as a result of the Syria conflict.

This remains within the overall spirit of the then Prime Minister's 2015 commitment while recognising that other nationalities who had resided in Syria have been impacted by the same conflict. This decision demonstrates the UK remains fully committed to playing its part in the global migration crisis. We continue with our approach of taking refugees from the region—from Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt—as well as providing life-saving humanitarian assistance such as the £2.5 million migration emergency response fund in response to the Mediterranean migration crisis. Our approach is rightly based on targeting our support so that it delivers the most impact, helps those who need it the most, and avoids unintended consequences.

This provides refugees with a more direct and safe route to the UK, rather than risking the hazardous journey to Europe which has tragically cost so many lives. Local authorities and partners play a vital role in helping those arriving here to settle into a new life in the UK. I am grateful for the way in which over 235 local authorities across the UK have stepped up to provide places for those arriving under the resettlement schemes.

We can be proud of the contribution the UK is making to support refugees, including the support and generosity from the British public, and I believe that this policy change will help us to continue to support the most vulnerable refugees fleeing Syria.

[HCWS23]

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