

Monday
30 October 2017

Volume 630
No. 42



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 30 October 2017

House of Commons

Monday 30 October 2017

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Coastal Communities: Economic Growth

1. **Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic growth and job creation in coastal communities. [901462]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Since 2012, we have invested £174 million in 295 projects for the coastal communities fund. These are forecast to help to deliver more than 18,000 jobs. In my hon. Friend's constituency, £2.5 million has been provided through the fund to support economic growth and job creation.

Craig Mackinlay: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the coastal communities fund helps to attract more visitors to our coastal communities so that they may thrive? Will he promise to consider very carefully any future bid to the fund to restore the front of Ramsgate Royal harbour in my constituency—the only royal harbour in the country—to its former glory?

Sajid Javid: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The £2.5 million already allocated to his constituency will help South Thanet to thrive, and will certainly help to attract more visitors. I commend him for the role he has played to secure that funding. He is a passionate advocate of Royal Ramsgate harbour, and I know he has a meeting with the Local Growth Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), coming up in which he can discuss his plans.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Interreg North Sea Region Programme is funded by EU grants totalling €167 million. What plans has the Secretary of State made to replace that funding when the UK leaves the EU?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that we have set out plans for a UK shared prosperity fund, which will eventually replace EU funding such as that of the European regional development fund and the European social fund.

Landlords and Letting Agents

2. **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): What plans he has to ensure that landlords and letting agents meet contractual obligations to tenants. [901463]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): We will make it mandatory for landlords to be part of an ombudsman scheme and we are increasing local authorities' powers to tackle rogue practices. We also published on 18 October a call for evidence seeking views on regulating all letting and managing agents.

Simon Hoare: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. May I urge the Secretary of State, in clamping down on rogue practices in the private sector, to keep a weather eye on some of our housing associations, which often seem to think that they are above and beyond the rules and regulations that govern the private sector?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the profile of social housing tenants. Last month, we announced that there will be a Green Paper on social housing, which will be a broad review of issues facing the social housing sector to ensure that tenants' voices are heard. The Housing Minister is travelling across the country to listen to tenants and ensure that we truly understand all the issues.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Under Newham Council's excellent landlord licensing, working with the police and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs the council has issued 2,834 notices since January 2013 to address and abate serious hazards. The decision on reauthorising the scheme was due seven weeks ago. Will the Secretary of State assure me that from 1 January he will not deny private tenants in my constituency the vital protection provided by this scheme?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman will know that selective licensing is an important part of ensuring that we can look after tenants, particularly those who might be more vulnerable. We consider every application we get carefully, as we want to make sure that that consideration is proportionate. We will take a careful look at the case he mentions.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I welcome the Government's plans to reform the lettings market and the estate agency market. Given, however, that most firms undertake both lettings and sales, will the Government avoid the unnecessary duplication of rules and regulators? After all, separate regulatory regimes could be expensive for business and confusing for consumers.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with experience and makes a good point. Of course we want to avoid unnecessary and duplicative regulation, but I think he agrees with the Government that it is necessary to regulate letting agents and it is good that we are progressing with that.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Is not one of the first lines of defence against rogue landlords local government, particularly environmental health inspectors? How does taking an axe to local government finance help tenants?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman should know that when we changed the law in April 2017 so that local authorities had more power to intervene against rogue landlords, we also provided additional funding of some £12 million.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to encourage private landlords to offer longer tenancies?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. So many more people are renting today than ever before, and, as we fix our broken housing market, it is important that we listen to them and find ways to ensure that more of them are offered longer tenancies. That is why I recently announced that the Government are actively looking at the issue, and we will bring forward plans to ensure this in the Budget.

Residential Tower Block Safety

3. **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): What progress has been made on improving safety in residential tower blocks since the Grenfell Tower fire. [901465]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): We have established a building safety programme and identified all unsafe aluminium composite material cladding on English social housing buildings over 18 metres. I have also asked all local authorities in England to identify such cladding on privately owned residential tower blocks and to report their findings to the Government. This is to ensure that appropriate action is being taken to keep all residents safe.

Jo Swinson: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply, but I want to ask him about other things that can be done to prevent fires from claiming lives. We know that sprinklers save lives, yet only 2% of council tower blocks have sprinkler systems. Is the Secretary of State content with that state of affairs, and if not, four months on from the Grenfell tragedy, when will he stop passing the buck and help local authorities fit sprinklers in high-rise buildings?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that it has been the law in building regulations since 2007 that any new high-rise dwellings above 30 metres are required to have sprinklers fitted. In terms of whether that is appropriate and whether more can be done, the appropriate way to look at that is through the independent review of building regulations and fire safety that Dame Judith Hackitt is undertaking, and we will listen very carefully. She is gathering evidence, and there is a call for evidence right now—perhaps the hon. Lady would like to have an input into that.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): A case in Cannock has highlighted the building of homes in very close proximity to a licensed recycling site that handles highly toxic chemicals, prompting real concerns about fire safety. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss the need to ensure that fire safety is a top priority in house building too?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. I am not aware of the details, but I would happily meet her to discuss it further.

23. [901486] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What progress has the Secretary of State made in introducing compulsory electrical safety checks?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know, first, that the Department's responsibilities in this area are shared with other Departments, such as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and I am working with my colleague the Secretary of State there to look into this further. Also, the building regulations and fire safety review is a broader fire safety review, and I certainly expect it to look at those issues too.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not an irony that it was not that enough money was not spent on Grenfell Tower, but that £10 million was spent on it to provide cladding to stop water ingress, and that that caused the whole problem? Is my right hon. Friend aware that, as experts have told me, sprinklers are not the sole solution to this issue? Sprinklers alone, without sound fire doors, will not work, and there are other provisions that can be made.

Sajid Javid: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I will not speculate on Grenfell Tower and the causes of that terrible tragedy—I am sure he understands that. However, in terms of his broader point about measures that are also important, such as fire doors, we found in Camden, for example, when fire safety checks were done, that hundreds of fire doors were not in place. There are other measures alongside sprinklers that certainly can be taken and should be taken where necessary.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): What redress will be available to private leaseholders in a private residential block that has failed fire safety tests where the company does not have the money to carry out that work or goes into dissolution?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Lady will know that there are redress mechanisms available at the moment. Many of them depend on whether the freeholders or the managing agents are members of a redress scheme. This is one of the reasons why I recently announced the need to regulate all managing agents, who often look after these types of buildings, and to see what more we can do.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Housing Associations such as the Guinness Partnership, which operates residential blocks in my constituency, also have an important role to play in fire safety. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on them to review, and where necessary improve, their fire safety to make sure residents are safe?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I will join my hon. Friend in calling for that. He is right to point out the critical role that housing associations play. Ever since the terrible tragedy that took place at Grenfell Tower, I have seen an excellent response from housing associations, and certainly from the National Housing Federation, and I will continue to work with them.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee this morning issued a report on building regulations and fire safety in Scotland. In terms of the recommendations and the support the Committee is giving to the ministerial working group in Scotland, it supports unannounced inspections by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and a national inventory of all high-rise domestic buildings in Scotland. Would the Minister support such recommendations for England?

Sajid Javid: I listened carefully to what the hon. Lady said, and I have followed developments closely in Scotland. We are working closely with our Scottish colleagues to make sure that we can share information and knowledge on this very important issue. As to whether we would take similar steps in England, it is important that I leave the first-point decision making for the independent building regulations review.

Children in Temporary Accommodation

4. **Mr Gavin Shuker** (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): What recent estimate he has made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. [901466]

13. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. [901475]

17. **Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. [901480]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Temporary accommodation ensures that no child is left without a roof over their head. Homelessness prevention is at the centre of our approach to protecting the most vulnerable. We are spending over £950 million until 2020 to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping, as well as implementing the most ambitious set of legislative reforms in decades with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Mr Shuker: I asked the Minister what recent estimate he had made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. The answer is that there are more than 120,000—up 66% since his Government came to power. Why?

Mr Jones: The number of children in temporary accommodation is below its peak in 2006, but we are certainly not complacent. That is why we have put £402 million into the flexible homelessness support grant over the next two years so that local areas can plan strategically to reduce the number of people in temporary accommodation.

Ruth Cadbury: Three and a half billion pounds has been spent on temporary accommodation in the private sector in the past five years. Most of the cost of this is found from the Department for Work and Pensions, even for households that work. Would this money not be better spent on building and letting council homes whose rent would be less than half that of expensive, poor-quality, temporary accommodation?

Mr Jones: That is exactly why we have introduced the flexible homelessness support grant and are devolving £402 million to local authorities over the next two years so that they can plan more strategically, as I said to the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker). The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that the use of temporary accommodation in her area is actually falling.

Sarah Jones: The number of families in temporary accommodation in Croydon has doubled in seven years. Right now, two thirds of families in Croydon in local authority housing are in debt and at risk of eviction directly because of universal credit. How will the Minister stop more families in Croydon on universal credit becoming homeless and spending the winter months in temporary accommodation?

Mr Jones: The latest available figures show that the number of people in temporary accommodation in Croydon is actually falling. This Government have given £1 million to Croydon for the homelessness prevention trailblazer that it put in for. We have also given £870 million in discretionary housing payments to help people who have short-term difficulty in sustaining their accommodation.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Wealden District Council has provided a stellar service supporting vulnerable children and homeless children. However, pressure at East Sussex County Council may lead to a change in service provision in rural areas like Wealden. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me and Wealden Council to help it to continue to deliver superb children's services?

Mr Jones: I hear what my hon. Friend says and I will certainly be willing to meet her. We will get that meeting into the diary.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Child victims of human trafficking are the responsibility of local government, but adult victims of human trafficking are dealt with nationally. Would it not be a good idea to make child victims of human trafficking looked after nationally, which would also free up the money for local government to look after other children?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend raises an important point. This is a very important issue that we are considering very carefully, particularly as we come up to the local government finance settlement. I certainly hear what he says, and no doubt his views will be considered as we take this area of policy forward.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire has a disproportionately large number of unaccompanied asylum-seeker children, who are very expensive for the local authority to look after. Will my hon. Friend look at the local government funding formula to make sure that Northamptonshire is getting its fair share of resources?

Mr Jones: I am aware of the issues that my hon. Friend puts to the House, particularly those that relate to the motorway network that runs through Northamptonshire. He knows that we have undertaken to conduct a fair funding review to see how local government resource is distributed. We are still committed to that, and we will take the work forward shortly.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Despite the shocking increases in homelessness overseen by this Government, the recent National Audit Office report found that the Department has not produced a strategy to tackle homelessness. When is it going to come up with a plan and publish it, so we can finally see some action for the 120,000 homeless children in Britain today?

Mr Jones: As the hon. Lady knows, the Government are doing a significant amount to change the culture across the country and make sure that we do far more in relation to prevention. Through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, we are confident that we are going to see significant progress. As I said at the start of this group of questions, we are putting £950 million into this up to 2020.

Mayors: Economic Growth

5. **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What discussions he has had with newly elected mayors on delivering economic growth. [901467]

8. **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What discussions he has had with newly elected mayors on delivering economic growth. [901470]

14. **Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): What discussions he has had with newly elected mayors on delivering economic growth. [901476]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I have met or corresponded with every metro Mayor in England during the last month. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is the midlands engine champion, and he chairs an inter-ministerial group to drive forward its growth.

James Morris: Does the Minister agree that one of the vital roles to be played by elected Mayors, such as Andy Street in the west midlands, is to focus on skills—particularly in areas such as the Black country, where we have a lot of young people without basic skills—to make sure that young people can take the opportunities and the jobs that are out there and drive economic growth?

Jake Berry: As my hon. Friend is aware, Andy Street is already playing a vital role in tackling the skills gap. My hon. Friend will also be aware that we are devolving the adult education skills budget from 2019 to support all our metro Mayors as they drive forward skills in their area.

Wendy Morton: The Government's devolution to city region Mayors has been a real success in the west midlands. Last month, Andy Street announced £2.1 million for the region's creative and technology industries. Does my hon. Friend agree that devolution can bring only prosperity, jobs and a bright future to the people of my constituency and across Walsall?

Jake Berry: I agree with my hon. Friend that Andy Street is a prime example of how the leadership and accountability of metro Mayors drive forward our country's

economy. Only this month, he approved a bike-sharing scheme in the west midlands. Move over, Boris bikes; it is time for Street cycles.

Julian Knight: Does the Minister support the innovative work of Andy Street to boost the number of houses in the west midlands—absolutely key to economic growth—by intensifying the use of urban areas to take pressure off our green belt, particularly around Solihull?

Jake Berry: The Mayor of the west midlands, Andy Street, is determined to build the houses we need. We are supporting development across our country through the £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund, and the outcome of the bidding process will be available shortly.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, the TUC and many of the Minister's colleagues in local government believe that there is a very strong economic case for a devolved settlement for One Yorkshire. When the Minister whiles away the wee hours working through his ministerial box, does he ever think that he might be on the wrong side of this argument?

Jake Berry: The Government have been absolutely clear, not least in the letter from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 15 September, that we will not undermine or unpick the South Yorkshire devolution deal, which, after all, was legislated for by this House of Commons. However, I acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman and I have held recent discussions, which have been extremely helpful. We have also been clear that completion of the South Yorkshire deal does not preclude any other devolution discussions across Yorkshire.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am pleased that responsibility for the health and work programme has been devolved in Greater Manchester to the metropolitan Mayor, Andy Burnham, but may I ask the Minister whether the funding that has been made available—£52 million, including European structural fund money—will be continued beyond the period of the SF funding, with the Government making good that money? Will responsibility for the programme continue to be devolved to the Manchester Mayor?

Jake Berry: The Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham—[*Interruption.*] We have to give Labour Members something to cheer about, don't we? He is doing an exceptional job in driving forward Manchester and its economy. The hon. Lady will be aware that a recent guarantee was put in place for all European funding. What happens after that guarantee is ultimately a matter for this House.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Far from being devolution to the street, this is more like a devolution cul-de-sac. Is it not the truth—[*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State can learn something from this. Is it not the truth that devolution has stalled? That is bad news for those with devolved settlements, but it is worse news for the 32 million people in England who do not have any devolution settlement whatever. When can we expect to see the framework for devolution in England?

Jake Berry: Some 33% of England now has an elected Mayor, and it is the Conservative party that is returning power back from London to our regions. Unlike the Labour party, which just wants to nationalise and centralise everything, I can say, like Citizen Smith, “Power to the people!”

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is clear from what the Minister says that Andy Street is doing a grand job in the west midlands, but what about areas that do not have elected Mayors? Will the Minister assure me that they will be considered when the Government look at further devolution projects? We urgently need one in northern Lincolnshire.

Jake Berry: The Government’s manifesto committed to provide clarity about what devolution means for different administrations across England by setting out a clear devolution framework. As we set out the next steps on our industrial strategy, this is exactly what we intend to do, as well as clarifying things like town deals for places such as Grimsby.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol is the only city outside London to make a net contribution to GDP, but we need money to invest in infrastructure if we are to make the most of that economic contribution. We now have a bid in for £250 million from the housing infrastructure fund. May I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State, who is very familiar with Bristol and the needs of the city, to look at that seriously, because the only way we can unlock the investment is to have that money?

Jake Berry: The Mayor of the West of England, Tim Bowles, has worked closely with the Government in bringing forward his housing infrastructure fund bid. As I said in answer to an earlier question, decisions about that fund will be made shortly.

Council Tax: Non-payment

6. **Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on recent trends in the number of people given custodial sentences for non-payment of council tax. [901468]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is for magistrates courts to decide whether a custodial sentence should be imposed for non-payment of council tax, taking account of the particular circumstances in each case. There has been a slight reduction in the number of such cases since 2009-10.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Minister for his reply. Is it not time that the non-payment of council tax ceased to be an offence punishable by time in jail? How can it be right that anyone should have to do time for falling into debt?

Mr Jones: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that people in genuine hardship should be supported. That is why there are over 4 million people on local council tax support scheme payments throughout the country. However, we also need to recognise that every penny of council tax that is not collected means higher council tax bills for law-abiding citizens who do pay. There needs to be a form of enforcement and sanction,

but it needs to be used proportionately. As the hon. Gentleman will see, the number of people getting a custodial sentence is actually falling.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Guidance to local authorities advises them to be sympathetic to those in genuine hardship. Does the Minister believe that a custodial sentence—with no right of appeal, no remission for good behaviour and no requirement for a pre-sentencing report—shows sympathy for those struggling to pay their council tax, and will it lead to more or fewer families being in genuine hardship?

Mr Jones: Council tax, in real terms, is 9.1% lower than it was in 2010. During the Labour Government of 1997 to 2010, the cost of council tax doubled. As I said to the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), 4 million people receive council tax support, and we are clear—we published guidance in 2013—about good practice. We want to make sure that those in genuine hardship are supported and that enforcement is proportionate.

Family Hubs

7. **Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** What steps he is taking to encourage local authorities to work with voluntary and private sector partners to establish family hubs. [901469]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I welcome the development of family hubs and we know that many areas are already moving towards this model of support for children and families. Local government and its partners understand the needs of their communities best, and they should be the ones to determine how they provide services for families.

Sir Edward Leigh: As we know, the wheels can fall off any family’s wagon at any point; family hubs can be an essential part of the solution, to improve the lives of children up to the age of 18. Does the Minister agree that more local areas should upgrade their children’s centres to family hubs so that we can do this essential work?

Mr Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend’s commitment to excellent services for children and families. Ultimately it is up to councils to decide on the best solution for their area, but it is important that the whole family has access to the right services to meet their needs.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): On that point, of the 120,000 children in temporary accommodation across 77,240 families, 28% are housed in boroughs other than their own, and the receiving boroughs often have no idea that those children—many of them vulnerable—have entered their areas. Will the Minister consider the suggestion of providing family hubs at large-scale temporary accommodation centres outside home boroughs?

Mr Jones: We are clear that when people are placed in temporary accommodation, access to things such as schooling is taken into account. We are also clear that when people are moved to a neighbouring or different borough, they should be informing the receiving borough

and support should be given to those families. I am working to support London authorities that are working with the Greater London Authority to improve the procurement of temporary accommodation across London.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to hear Members on both sides of the House talking about the value of early intervention and family hubs. I ask the Minister to come to Manchester to see the early years delivery model, which is now transforming lives in those early years, working across the voluntary and private sectors. Critical to those family hubs is the support of the local authority. Does he agree that the slash and burn approach to early intervention moneys is putting children's lives at risk?

Mr Jones: I am aware that under the northern powerhouse initiative we are putting £3.2 million into Manchester for early intervention. The next time I am in that neck of the woods I would certainly be keen to come and see what is working in Manchester. I can reassure the hon. Lady that the Government are committed to early intervention, both through children's centres and the troubled families programme.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Across swathes of England, children's services are now in crisis. Seven years of Government funding cuts to services supporting families is failing children and driving councils to the financial brink. Only last week, a poll showed that the majority of councillors in the Minister's party did not back the cuts. When will the Minister finally admit the growing emergency in children's social care and take some action, ahead of the Budget, to deal now with this major crisis for councils?

Mr Jones: More than £200 billion is being given to local authorities up to 2020 to support local services. Children's services and early intervention are among that funding stream. The Government are aware of the challenges in many areas with providing children's services and safeguarding, and we continually look at ways in which we can support local government in that regard.

Assessment of Housing Need

9. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What progress the Government have made on establishing a standardised assessment of housing need. [901471]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): On 14 September, we published a consultation that proposes a new standard approach to assessing housing need. The proposed approach will play a crucial role in helping to meet housing ambitions, reduce complexity and costs, and increase transparency.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that answer. Understandably, more and more people want to move to Cornwall—after all, it is the best place in the UK to work, raise a family or retire—and that is putting unprecedented levels of demand on our housing stock. We currently have over 20,000 people on the housing register and young people are being priced out of ever owning their own home. Does the Minister believe that the approach he outlines will help to deliver more housing for local people in Cornwall?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The starting point has to be an honest, open and consistent approach in assessing the number of homes an area needs. That is precisely what the new approach to housing needs assessment will deliver.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My constituency is also a beautiful place to live, but homes are not being sold because they are under leasehold arrangements. Will the Minister let us know when his excellent consultation on the crackdown on unfair leasehold practices will announce its results, so our housing market can get moving again?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. We need to ensure fairness in the system, which is precisely why we launched the consultation. A very significant number of people responded to it and we will respond to it in due course.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The housing need White Paper also covers viability assessments. Their use by developers is referred to in the consultation as gaming the system to avoid section 106 contributions, such as affordable housing. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look at whether the assessments are appropriate for the market today, or whether they should be scrapped completely?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend will know, we are consulting on proposed changes to viability assessments as part of the local housing needs assessment. The White Paper states that under our proposals we would expect assessments of affordable housing infrastructure needs to be considered at the plan-making stage, and that will ensure more certainty.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My constituents in the villages of Kidlington, Yarnton and Begbroke find themselves in a perverse situation. Cherwell District Council is proposing to build 4,400 homes in the green belt between the villages to meet Oxford city's unmet housing need. Due to the sequencing of the plans, however, that unmet need is now down to go under the new proposed assessment. In short, the districts are putting the cart before the horse. Will the Minister agree to meet me, so I can explain the situation more fully and reassure my constituents that their grave concerns about this plan will be heard?

Alok Sharma: Of course I will meet the hon. Lady. We are committed to retaining the current green belt protections. There may be exceptional circumstances in which a local authority chooses to amend its green belt, but it has to take its local community with it.

Midlands Engine

10. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the delivery of economic growth through the midlands engine. [901472]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): A strong midlands engine is vital to Britain's economy. We have provided the midlands with £1.9 billion of local growth funding, and in March we launched the midlands engine strategy to drive economic growth and improve quality of life.

Andrew Bridgen: Does my right hon. Friend agree that a clear focus of the midlands engine should be improving east-west connectivity—specifically, in relation to my constituency, a direct rail link to East Midlands airport and the new east midlands gateway?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend that transport links are critical to the success of the midlands engine. Midlands Connect predicts that improving connectivity across the midlands can secure a £1 billion-a-year boost to the regional economy and create some 300,000 jobs. The recently commissioned east midlands gateway connectivity study will consider carefully how to achieve this, and it will be looking at the East Midlands airport.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just said that transport links are essential if the midlands engine is to drive the economic growth we all want. Will he explain, therefore, why his colleagues will not allow the full electrification of the midland main line?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that under this Government, since 2010, this country has seen record investment in transport infrastructure, including in the midlands. That includes the recent announcement about the help the Government will provide in creating the midlands rail hub concept.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): From Tetney Lock to Chapel St Leonards, the coastline in my constituency is among the most beautiful in the midlands—and, dare I say it, in the country. Does my right hon. Friend share my hope, therefore, that the midlands engine will travel as far as the Lincolnshire coastline to invest in the vital infrastructure we need in our rural and coastal economies there?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend on many fronts, including how beautiful her constituency is, and the midlands engine does indeed travel that far. She is right to raise the particular challenges faced by our coastal communities, which is why we are launching a fifth round of our coastal communities fund early next year. I urge her to get her application in.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The midlands engine sits as a sister organisation to the northern powerhouse. In the light of the comments earlier, would the Secretary of State be willing to meet Yorkshire and the Humber MPs to discuss the future of devolution in the area, in order to drive economic growth in the region?

Sajid Javid: I recently received a request to meet Yorkshire and the Humber MPs and local council leaders. I have accepted that request and look forward to the meeting.

Affordable Homes

12. **Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con):** What plans he has to increase the number of affordable homes. [901474]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): The Government are investing more than £9 billion between 2016 and 2021 to deliver a wide range of affordable housing, including homes for social rent, to meet the needs of a broad range of people. We have also

confirmed long-term rent certainty for social landlords, which will create a stable investment environment to support councils and housing associations.

Jeremy Quin: Local housing associations such as Saxon Weald in my constituency have welcomed recent Government announcements. What are the Government doing to help them to build more affordable homes?

Alok Sharma: Part of the £9 billion I just noted is the £2 billion of additional funding that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced, and that includes the clarity on rent. Housing association leaders I have spoken with are very positive about these measures, which will allow them to build additional affordable homes as well as improve current stock.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister read something of the history of Harold Macmillan? He was a Prime Minister who actually built houses. This Government are not building houses and certainly not building affordable houses. When will there be an imaginative plan to build houses?

Alok Sharma: Almost 1 million homes have been built since 2010. The hon. Gentleman talks about our record. I can tell him that over the past six years more affordable homes have been built than were built in the first six years and the last six years of the last Labour Government. We will take no lectures from Labour on building affordable homes.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Has the Secretary of State had any further talks with lenders? Housing in St Albans is some of the most unaffordable in the country, and trying to get mortgages or extended lending terms is very difficult for those struggling to get on the housing ladder.

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend will know, we have announced an extra £10 billion for the Help to Buy scheme, and there are several other schemes in the market, but ultimately this is about making sure that more homes are built. That is what will drive affordability.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The City of York consultation on the local plan closes tonight, but it has failed massively on the tenure needed in the city and is 5,800 short of statutory guidance. Will the Minister ensure that if guidance is set it is followed?

Alok Sharma: We want to make sure that the right number of homes are built in the right places, and of course the plan will be assessed by an inspector.

Homes: Construction

15. **Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con):** What plans he has to increase the number of homes constructed each year; and if he will make a statement. [901477]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): Our housing White Paper “Fixing our Broken Housing Market”, published in February, sets out how we will build the homes this country needs. Broadly speaking,

we want to do this by diversifying those building homes, increasing build-out rates, supporting homebuyers and releasing more land.

Vicky Ford: Some 4,500 homes have been built at Beaulieu Park in Chelmsford and another 5,000-plus are planned, but the roads are at capacity and we need a new railway station and a bypass. That is Essex's No. 1 priority for the housing infrastructure fund. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this important infrastructure to unlock housing?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is a passionate supporter of new housing for her constituents, which is very welcome. Of course I will meet her. As she knows, I am not able to comment on any particular bids, but I can tell her that there has been a great deal of interest in the £2.3 billion for the housing infrastructure fund.

18. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): [901481] Does the Minister agree that as we embark on a major housing programme we should be building the houses of the future, such as net zero energy bill homes, which are particularly helpful to people on low incomes because they do not have to pay gas and electricity bills?

Alok Sharma: Yes, of course we should be doing precisely that. I should add, however, that since 2010 we have strengthened the energy requirements for new homes by 30%, which has reduced energy bills by an average of £200.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister clarify the Government's policy in respect of building on the green belt?

Alok Sharma: I thought I had already clarified it, but let me make it clear again. We believe in protecting the green belt. There will be exceptional circumstances that local authorities can consider, but they will need to take their local communities with them.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that colleagues on both sides of the House will join me in warmly welcoming back to his place the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles).

Nick Boles: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. It is good to be back.

The Government have made remarkable progress in cutting the deficit from the 10.5% of GDP that we inherited in 2010 to 2.5% now. May I therefore urge everyone to back the Secretary of State's call for special borrowing to put in place the infrastructure that will unlock the hundreds of thousands of extra houses that we need? This is the kind of borrowing that we should all be able to support.

Alok Sharma: Of course all of us in the House support the ambition to build more homes, but my hon. Friend should wait for the Budget announcement in relation to any specifics.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Has my hon. Friend made an assessment of the need for social housing, particularly in new towns such as Harlow, and will he consider tax incentives to ensure that housing associations can build more social housing?

Alok Sharma: I can tell my hon. Friend that housing associations have hugely welcomed our announcements about rent certainty—social housing rents will rise by the consumer prices index plus 1% from 2020—and the investment of an extra £2 billion, and we are engaged in a constant dialogue with them.

Women on Local Councils

16. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to encourage more women to stand in local council elections. [901479]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I recently met my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and representatives of the Fawcett Society to discuss this important issue. As a start, I shall be holding a round table with local government organisations, cross-party councillors and chief officers in November to discuss how we can break down the barriers that prevent women from engaging with local politics and standing in council elections.

Vicky Foxcroft: Women are disproportionately affected by services that are controlled by local government, but just one in four directly elected mayors and 17% of local authority leaders are women. In order to address that imbalance, will the Government now legislate for all-women shortlists in local government elections?

Mr Jones: As I have said, the Government take this issue very seriously. We want to see more women on councils, and in cabinets. I think that the political parties have a considerable part to play in that, and I think that Members of Parliament have a part to play in encouraging people to stand for election. As I have said, however, we will be looking at the position far more carefully.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I thank the Minister for meeting me and the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). Will he consider introducing consistent maternity and paternity leave and adequate childcare policies throughout councils to encourage more women candidates to come forward?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that meeting, and for the work that she has done with the Fawcett Society. As I said to the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), we shall be looking at the issue very carefully, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will bring her ideas to the table when we meet in November.

Topical Questions

T1. [901452] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Since my last departmental oral questions, I have announced plans to require all private landlords to join a redress scheme and for all letting agents to be regulated; a clampdown on rogue

managing agents; and plans to improve the process of buying and selling homes. Anyone who works hard should be able to afford a place they can call their own, and we will continue to do everything possible to make this vision a reality.

Dan Carden: Does the Secretary of State not understand that people outside this place simply cannot grasp his reluctance to accept that sprinklers in tower blocks are necessary fire safety works? Coroners for both the Lakanal House and Shirley Towers fires recommended them, yet his Department is turning down requests from councils and housing associations to pay for them. We do not need another review; we need common sense.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman says coroners recommended them for Lakanal House. It is worth reminding him that when the then housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who is sitting opposite me now, was asked about the Government paying for sprinklers, he responded in Parliament:

“The resources local authorities receive for management and maintenance and major repairs should enable them to implement necessary fire safety measures”.—[*Official Report*, 16 September 2009; Vol. 496, c. 2209W.]

So there was no new money. What this Government have said is that we will help every local authority with any essential fire safety measures.

T7. [901458] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council.

The acute funding pressures on Northamptonshire County Council could be helpfully and substantially addressed by imaginative reform of local government structures in the county, including, perhaps, the establishment of a combined social care and health commissioner. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is open-minded to such suggestions?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this. Some councils have already come together and put forward restructuring proposals. We are considering each of them very carefully, and if Northamptonshire comes forward with one, I will look at it very carefully, too.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Some 3.5 million families with a variable rate mortgage face higher costs if the Bank of England puts up interest rates this week, so why are the Government, at this of all times, scrapping support for mortgage interest payments?

Sajid Javid: This Government have made it clear that it is our ambition to have more people own their own homes. There are a number of areas of intervention; one of the most prominent is the Help to Buy scheme, which is helping hundreds of thousands of people, who otherwise might not have been able to buy a home, to get on the housing ladder for the first time. Ultimately, if the right hon. Gentleman, like me, wants to help more people own their own home, he should support this Government with our housing White Paper and the other measures we take.

John Healey: The Secretary of State is flannelling. Home ownership is at a 30-year low, and he does not seem to appreciate that 126,000 households, including 60,000 pensioner households, get help from the current scheme. From April, they and anyone else struggling

with their mortgage costs will be offered a loan, but a loan is no good for those already struggling with the cost of the loans they have. Under Labour, with our mortgage rescue scheme, help was there when it was needed for families facing repossession. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is laughing; I ask this of the Secretary of State, who takes the subject more seriously: will he use the Budget to scrap the Government's current changes and back instead a new home ownership guarantee scheme, as Labour proposed at the election?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman talks about what happened on housing under Labour, so let me remind him: when he was the housing Minister, house building fell to almost its lowest level for almost 100 years, and the number of social units available for rent declined by 410,000. So we will not be taking any lectures from the right hon. Gentleman.

T8. [901459] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Will the Secretary of State look at what can be done to lift restrictive planning conditions that are holding back long-term economic growth?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): Planning conditions should, of course, only be imposed where they are necessary and meet the other requirements of national policy. What I can say more widely is that we are making changes in the planning system: planning fees are being increased, which will ensure there is more money in the planning authorities; and we are also looking at requiring an increase in build-out rates.

T2. [901453] **Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): In Bristol, university expansion means that a significant increase in student numbers is putting pressure on stretched local services right now, yet student accommodation providers contribute almost nothing to the costs. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss bringing student accommodation within the scope of business rates, like other businesses, to help to ease this strain on Bristol and other councils?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I can confirm to the hon. Lady that we have no plans to change business rates by bringing student accommodation into their scope as she advocates.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Young people in Sutton and across London are depending on local action to help them to secure affordable housing. What lessons can the Government learn from the Mayor of London's poor record on housing?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It has now become apparent that, despite all the talk from this Labour Mayor of London, not a single home for social rent was started during his first year in office. According to the National House Building Council, housing starts are down by a third in the last quarter. That is his track record. He needs to live up to his words and build more homes for Londoners.

T3. [901454] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): In 2016, the Department for Communities and Local Government provided a transition grant to some local authorities. The calculations and assumptions for this

were not published, and 80% of it went to Conservative councils. Will Ministers pledge today to make previous and future calculations available, and will they confirm from the Dispatch Box that future funding will be based on need rather than on anything else?

Mr Marcus Jones: This was part of an historic four-year settlement, to which 97% of local authorities signed up. Yes, there were some challenges relating to the transition that certain places would have to make as a result of the formula at that time, and it has been widely recognised that that was dealt with in the right way. Labour authorities such as Lancashire benefited from it at the time.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Last year, the Federation of Small Businesses reported on the untapped potential of women in enterprise. However, Analysis Legal in Bramhall in my constituency was set up by a group of female lawyers and is going from strength to strength. Does the Minister agree that encouraging more women into business and supporting female entrepreneurs is key to the success of the northern powerhouse?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why I am in active conversation with groups such as Northern Power Women, which have sought to find ways to champion visible and diverse role models of leadership in the northern powerhouse. After all, we should not ignore 51% of the talent pool.

T4. [901455] **Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** In an earlier question, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) stated that the introduction of family hubs should be accelerated, and that was implicitly welcomed by the Minister, who stated that it was down to councils use their budgets as they saw fit. Does the Minister agree, however, that the 60% real-terms cut to the children's centres budget in Warwickshire and the planned reduction of 39 children centres to 12 family hubs should be stopped, and that the council's significant reserves should be used for the maintenance of—

Mr Speaker: Order. To be fair, new Members are often not aware of the fact that topical questions are supposed to be shorter than substantives. It is as simple as that, and Ministers are supposed to respond in kind. However, I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Marcus Jones: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, although I think he should look back over the records of Warwickshire County Council, which clearly show a motion being put which was seconded by the then Labour group leader, who advocated the reduction in funding that the county council is now making in that area.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that his Department is liaising with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that ports such as Lowestoft have the necessary infrastructure and supply chain to take advantage of the opportunities arising from the forthcoming Fisheries Bill?

Sajid Javid: I can absolutely confirm that to my hon. Friend. We are working very closely with DEFRA and the Department for Transport to ensure just that.

T6. [901457] **Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab):** With the First Minister of Wales meeting the Prime Minister earlier today amid the continuing lack of clarity over Brexit, can the Secretary of State reassure me that the Government will respect the devolved nations and regions of the UK and not use Brexit as an opportunity for a power grab?

Sajid Javid: Of course we will respect the powers and responsibilities of the devolved nations, and we will make a resounding success of Brexit.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): The proposed revised housing formula will add a further 8,000 homes to the current target of 30,000, which is unsustainable and undeliverable without large investment in infrastructure. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me and Medway colleagues to consider the disproportionate burden on the Medway towns?

Alok Sharma: I will of course meet my hon. Friend. I should just point out that Medway does not have an up-to-date plan at the moment, and I would encourage responses to the consultation proposals that we have set out.

T9. [901460] **Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab):** In the light of the recent announcement that the Welsh Government will continue with their council tax reduction scheme, which has reduced council tax for almost 300,000 low-income and vulnerable families and has excluded 220,000 completely, will the Minister consider seriously the Welsh Labour Government's excellent approach and the situation in England, where households pay around £190 more?

Mr Marcus Jones: As I explained to the House earlier, the local council tax support scheme gives help to over 4 million people who are on low incomes and may otherwise struggle to pay their council.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of the concerns expressed by the leader of Leicestershire County Council about the letter he received about money going back to the NHS, rather than sticking with the social care authority, and about delayed transfers of care. Will he comment on that and on discussions he has had with his colleague the Secretary of State for Health?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is right to raise that. Delayed transfers of care are a shared endeavour between councils and the NHS. There has been good progress in Leicestershire, especially from using the better care fund, and this is a good opportunity to commend Leicestershire on its improving DTOC position.

Mr Speaker: I call Clive Lewis. [*Interruption.*] I am sure that what is on your iPhone is of very great importance, but your question is potentially of greater importance—get in there, man.

T10. [901461] **Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): Will the Government commit to fast-tracking their private rented sector consultation so that landlords are required to use their own funds to bring properties up to energy performance certificate band E by April next year?

Sajid Javid: That would have been done sooner if the previous Labour Government had taken the private rented sector more seriously, which they refused to do. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman welcomes our consultation.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Given the understandable short postponement of the business rates retention scheme, will the Secretary of State meet me to consider the particular funding pressures that changing demographics are placing on outer-London boroughs?

Sajid Javid: Yes.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Scotland secured €941 million in the 2014 to 2020 funding period, split across the European regional development fund and the European social fund. What plans do this Government have to ensure that those funds are replaced post-Brexit and that the Scottish Government will be involved in discussions?

Sajid Javid: We have set out that there will be a UK shared prosperity fund that will eventually replace EU structural funds and ERDF funds, and we will work together with the devolved nations in developing it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): One thing that would help to drive further economic growth in Corby is a new

enterprise zone, so will my right hon. Friend make a case to the Chancellor in advance of the Budget for another round of bidding opportunities?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of enterprise zones, which have often been announced in previous Budgets. I am sure that he is making an excellent case, but if I can help him, I will happily do that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware of the increasing number of people who are illegally sub-letting in social housing? Does he agree that it is dangerous if we do not know who actually lives in a house?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that. It is of course going on, which is why from April this year we have given landlords more powers to deal with it and more funding to consider such issues. In the forthcoming review and consultation that we have set out, we will be seeing what further action we can take.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week, developers pulled out of a plan to build 10,000 homes in Enfield and Haringey due to interference from the Mayor of London. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to consider that plan? We desperately need new homes in London, and the plan would seem to provide them.

Sajid Javid: We have already heard about the Mayor of London's failure to provide a single property for social rent in the past year, so my hon. Friend is right to raise that. We will certainly be taking a much closer look.

Speaker's Statement

3.34 pm

Mr Speaker: I wish to make a statement about recent disturbing allegations about a culture of sexual harassment at Westminster between Members and those who work for Members.

Let me make it clear: there must be zero tolerance of sexual harassment or bullying here at Westminster or elsewhere, whether that involves Members, their staff, parliamentary staff or those working on or visiting the estate. If there have been assaults, they should be reported to the police here, as anywhere else.

The House of Commons Commission, which I chair, has a duty to provide a safe place to work. In 2014, in addition to introducing the Respect policy providing a proper regime for complaints by parliamentary staff of bullying or harassment, the Commission introduced a helpline for Members' staff to raise personal and work-related concerns. And I have consistently supported the workplace equality networks as peer group support for staff. These have all been established since 2010 and are doing important work, which I know to be valued by staff.

At its monthly meeting this evening, I will be inviting the Commission to consider any further action. I also propose to refer the whole issue of sexual harassment to the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, which I established last year.

Members' staff are, of course, employed by individual Members. That means they cannot simply be treated as if they were parliamentary employees, nor of course can Members. I am therefore glad that the party leaders have, in statements made over the weekend, acknowledged their responsibilities to deal with such behaviour within their respective parties.

The Prime Minister's letter to me, written as leader of the Conservative party, very candidly admits the difficulties the Conservative party has had in introducing the sort of mandatory grievance scheme that some other parties have introduced in recent years. It does not require my intervention for the party to adopt an effective grievance scheme. I hope that all parties will rapidly and thoroughly review the arrangements they have in place to ensure that those arrangements are credible, enforceable, accessible, transparent, and comprise an independent element. The latter notion, that any complaints system and grievance procedure must satisfy constituents as well as colleagues, strikes me as important.

The Prime Minister refers in her letter to the prospects of a House-wide "corporate" scheme. I would be happy to have the idea considered. In the first instance, I hope that parties will live up to their responsibilities by demonstrating both an appetite for change and a practical means of delivering that change without delay. Make no mistake, there is a need for change.

The House will also know that Members must abide by a code of conduct, which means that alleged breaches can be investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. The commissioner suggested, in her September 2016 consultation on the code, a new rule that:

"A Member must treat all those who work in Parliament with dignity, courtesy and respect."

I hope that the Committee on Standards, comprising equal numbers of Members and lay members, will take forward suggested revisions to the code with appropriate urgency and come to the House for its decision.

I hope I have the support of the House in calling for these issues to be resolved swiftly and decisively; it should not require endless debate and discussion. For my part, as Speaker, I am happy to do whatever I can. Others must do likewise.

Sexual Harassment in Parliament

3.40 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Leader of the House if she will make a statement about her plan to tackle sexual harassment in Parliament.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

As you know, Mr Speaker, I was very keen to come to the Chamber to make a statement today, but I am delighted to respond instead to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and grateful to you for inviting me to provide a full response. It is absolutely right that the House must address the urgent issue of the alleged mistreatment of staff by Members of Parliament. These allegations make it clear that there is a vital need to provide better support and protection for the thousands of staff members working in Westminster and in constituency offices across the country. In tackling this problem, we also need to recognise that we have interns, those on work experience placements, House staff, clerks and civil servants, all of whom deserve to be afforded our care and our respect.

I can confirm that the Cabinet Office is urgently investigating reports of specific allegations of misconduct in relation to the ministerial code. I am well aware that the public rightly expect MPs to display the highest standards, and, as the Prime Minister outlined in her letter yesterday, there can be no place for harassment, abuse or misconduct in politics. Your age, gender or job title should have no bearing on the way you are treated in a modern workplace—and nobody is an exception to that.

As the Nolan principles outline, as public servants we must demonstrate accountability, openness and honesty in our behaviour. Regardless of role or position, a new approach will need to cover everyone working for Parliament. If someone is made to feel uncomfortable, or believes that others have acted inappropriately towards them, they should be able to contact an external, independent, specially trained support team—via phone, the intranet or face to face—so that any issue can be raised confidentially, and appropriate advice and support can be given. Everyone in this House must be clear that whenever a serious allegation is made, the individual should go to the police—and be supported in doing so.

However, it is clear that the current system is inadequate. It is for Parliament to come together to resolve this, but the Government believe there should be some guiding principles. First, as in any other workplace, everyone in Parliament should have the right to feel at ease as they go about their work, irrespective of position, age or seniority. Secondly, although we have had a confidential helpline in place for several years, it must now be strengthened as a dedicated support team, made more accessible, given more resources, and with its role and responsibilities highlighted to all who work here. Thirdly, the support team should have the ability to recommend the onward referral of a case—to ensure that appropriate investigation and action take place. Fourthly, the support team should recommend specialised pastoral support for anyone who is experiencing distress as a consequence of their treatment in the workplace. Fifthly, the support

team should recommend reporting any allegations that may be criminal directly to the police. Sixthly, and in addition, there may be further action that government and political parties themselves can take to ensure high standards of conduct and that inappropriate behaviour is properly dealt with. This is the very least we can do.

As the Prime Minister outlined yesterday in her letter to party leaders, we must establish a House-wide mediation service, complemented by a code of conduct and a contractually binding grievance procedure, available for all MPs, peers and their staff, irrespective of their party banner. This will reinforce to those who work here, and to the public, that we are serious in our treatment of wrongdoing and in our support for those who suffer it. I know that all party leaders will work together, with the House, to reach an agreement and get these changes in place as soon as possible. We are Members of Parliament, and our constituents will be rightly appalled at the thought that some representatives in Parliament may have acted in an entirely inappropriate way towards others. These reports risk bringing all our offices into disrepute.

I know that this is an issue of great concern to you, Mr Speaker, and I know that you will do everything you can to tackle it. Members from all parties will want to work alongside you to investigate every claim, provide the right support in the future, and make sure that this never happens again. It is a right, not a privilege, to work in a safe and respectful environment. The plans I have outlined will ensure that Parliament takes a zero-tolerance approach. Parliament must take action in days, not weeks.

Ms Harman: I fully endorse the words that you said, Mr Speaker, and I thank you for the commitment you have always shown on these issues.

I thank the Leader of the House for her answer. She is right: there is obviously a problem. It is a good thing that it has been exposed, and it has to be dealt with. No woman—or man, for that matter—who comes to work in this House should be subjected to unwanted sexual advances from those who are in a position of power over them. No one should have to work in a toxic atmosphere of sleazy, sexist or homophobic banter. No MP, let alone a Minister, should think this is something to make jokes about. This is not hysteria; it is something that is long overdue for all the parties in this House to deal with.

Does the Leader of the House agree that all parties should agree on clear, strict rules about what is not acceptable, make sure that everyone knows about them, and that there has to be independence in the adjudication of complaints? Does she recognise that it is almost impossible for someone at the bottom of the system to complain and make allegations about someone at the top? That gives those at the top impunity, of which some—few, but some—will take advantage. A young researcher would fear that if she made an allegation about an MP, her name would be plastered all over the newspapers and she would never get another job. A young journalist would know that if she made an allegation about a Cabinet Minister, she would be subjected to an immediate assault on her integrity, and that would be the only thing for which anyone ever remembered her thereafter. We must, therefore, have complainant anonymity at the heart of this.

[Ms Harman]

Above all, does the Leader of the House recognise, as we all must, that Members of this House have an immensely important job and great responsibility? To speak up for our constituents and hold the Government to account—that is what we are here for. No one voted for me to come to this House to engage in high jinks; no one elected any of us to engage in sleazy, oppressive behaviour, so it has to be stopped. And now is the time to do it.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share the right hon. and learned Lady's concerns about allegations, and I share her determination to stamp this out. We are absolutely determined to get a grip on this. She is right that all parties must agree on the rules and that there must be an independent grievance procedure. I absolutely share the concern that it is particularly difficult for young people who come to work or to do work experience in this place to come forward themselves with allegations, for fear of what might happen to them. That has been the case throughout all areas of life in which those in power seek to abuse those who are younger and less powerful than they are. It is absolutely appalling and unforgivable. I also share the right hon. and learned Lady's view that complainants should be given anonymity and that there should be proper and thorough investigations of all complaints.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I, too, congratulate you on and endorse your comments, Mr Speaker? I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for all that they have said. We do indeed need change; things cannot go on as they are. I very much welcome the notion that we are going to set up an independent grievance procedure to provide to everybody who works in this place the same protection as any other worker would have. Will my right hon. Friend look into extending that protection to every parliamentary passholder or parliamentary email account holder? Will she set out a timetable? Does she agree that this is not only about sexual harassment but extends to other forms of abuse? It is important that we recognise that.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right that this must include all passholders and all work experience people and members of the media who come to this House. It is absolutely clear that there needs to be a proper means for people to come forward with grievances. She is also right that this is a matter not just of sexually inappropriate behaviour, but of bullying, accusations and all manner of inappropriate behaviour. The procedure should be all encompassing, and that is exactly what we intend to achieve.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for raising this very important issue: 35 years in this place and she is trying to take society forward in a leap. May I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for your statement? I welcome the statement of the Leader of the House and thank her for early sight of it. We on the Labour Benches are ready to work with the Government and with all parties on this, as the Leader of the Opposition made clear in his statement at the weekend.

We all need to come up with an appropriate safeguarding policy for everyone who works in this place. In her letter to you, Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister mentioned that there may have to be a new body. Any new body must encompass everyone who works in the House: it must look at complaints about Members, the staff of the House, including contractors on the estate, and Members of the other place. It must also work with trade unions, which certainly helped the Labour party draw up its code of conduct.

There must be due process: any allegations must be made and there must be a proper process of investigation, and some serious allegations may be referred to the police. If we have a streamlined process, everyone will be aware of it. I know that the House currently has the employees' assistance programme, which was set up by you, Mr Speaker, in 2014 for Members' staff, who also have a free confidential phone line, but it needs to go further. The new body needs to build on that. The Leader of the House made a number of recommendations, which need to be looked at by a working party, or another body, so that we ensure that we do not just react to the situation, but deal with it appropriately.

I ask the Leader of the House to ensure that the House looks at widening the scope of this helpline to include independent advice, including legal advice, on the next steps for the complainant. Currently, all the helpline can do is to give counselling to complainants and then refer the matter to parties. I am not clear what other parties do, but the Labour party has a code of conduct that is signed up to by every single member of the party—MPs and members of the party. This code has been sent around a number of times since I was first elected in 2010, and it has been sent around again today. If anyone wants to raise anything under that code of conduct, it is referred to the head of complaints at the Labour party, who will look at the nature of the complaint.

May I ask the Leader of the House whether she has seen the letter from the shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), to the Prime Minister? Will she ensure that, when a Minister is said to have broken the ministerial code, it is clear that they were actually a Minister at the time? Can the Prime Minister's response be placed in the Library?

It is not acceptable that, now in society, women are not treated equally even when we do the same work; it is not acceptable that names for women's anatomy are used as swear words; and it is not acceptable that, every time unacceptable behaviour is challenged, it is closed down as political correctness. I know that all of us—every single one of us from all parts of the House—will use our strength and experience to protect the vulnerable.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady's concerns. We met earlier today, and I am pleased that we are absolutely in the same place regarding our determination to tackle this issue very quickly. The hon. Lady is right that the House needs to look at broadening the resources available to the helpline so that staff in this place can get better support and more advice. The Prime Minister has not yet seen the letter from the Opposition Women and Equalities spokeswoman, but she will, of course, look at it very carefully. I share the hon. Lady's concern about the way in which words for women's anatomy are used as swear words. She is exactly right that it is deeply

frustrating and irritating for women and for men. We must recognise that this issue does not just affect women; it also affects men. In dealing with the problems across both Houses, we need to have respect for all people—women and men.

Mr Speaker: In echoing the shadow Leader of the House, I should congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) because I think she marked—and, I hope, celebrated—the 35th anniversary of her election to the House on 28 October. That is a very remarkable achievement.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome the statement made by the Leader of the House, and particularly the leadership shown by the Prime Minister on this issue. I welcome the idea of an independent grievance procedure for everybody who works in this place, but I also gently remind hon. Members that two thirds of girls in our schools experience sexual harassment on a regular basis, half of university students experience sexual harassment and half of women in work experience sexual harassment. What more support might the Leader of the House be able to give to debates on those issues and to encouraging the Government to take action? Mr Speaker, you will be aware that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and I are holding a debate in the Chamber on Thursday on sexual harassment in schools.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point, which highlights that we should be role models and that what we do in this House sets an example to those in the rest of the country. It is a pretty poor show if we cannot sort out our own house, particularly at a time when we are so concerned about sexual harassment in schools.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I very much welcome the statement from the Leader of the House and, indeed, your statement, Mr Speaker, which helpfully makes for a positive way forward. We support any call for a whole House response to this issue and the establishment of an independent grievance procedure.

Sexual harassment or abuse of any form and in any workplace must be condemned in the strongest possible terms, and this House is no exception. The Scottish National party agrees, of course, that we should adopt a zero-tolerance approach. We will ensure that any issue in the Scottish Parliament is robustly investigated. Indeed, the First Minister has written today to the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament in regard to this. Will the Leader of the House confirm, and perhaps tell us a little bit more about, her plans to involve all the parties in this House? How will these talks be progressed? Does she agree that all staff working on the estate must have access to information, impartial advice and a means of raising these concerns, and that a safe space must at this point be created so that any concerns can be raised confidentially right now, immediately after this urgent question? Finally, does she agree that this is a watershed moment for the House—an opportunity for an institutional shift, whereby the historical culture of this House can be tackled positively—and that there must be no suggestion that this House considers itself above any investigation?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's contribution. He asks what plans there are to involve all parties. Obviously, this is all very recent news, and it is vital that we tackle it urgently. Meetings will be arranged between all parties in the very near future—I mean within days—to ensure that we are all agreed on a common approach. He is absolutely right that all staff must have suitable information and a safe space. I urge people, if they have allegations or if they feel they have been made to feel uncomfortable, to come forward and speak to my office, to their Whip or to your office, Mr Speaker. It is absolutely essential that people feel they have somewhere to go. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out again that the employee helpline must be more widely communicated to staff, and we will see that that is the case.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman made the point that this is an opportunity for Parliament to show that we can react quickly to problems and take a quantum leap forward in our approach to dealing with this terrible issue, and I would like to think that we can and will do just that.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): May I first pay tribute to the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister for grappling with this issue so swiftly? The Leader of the House talked about this being a modern workplace, and is that not the rub? This is not a modern workplace; it is a very strange workplace. It is strange for Members and it is strange for our families, but most of all it is very strange for these members of staff. You, Mr Speaker, hinted at that when you talked about Members of Parliament being individual employers. There are 650 different employment relationships, so I urge the Leader of the House to reflect on the fact that any new organisation, which I warmly welcome, and which must be independent, needs to be nimble enough to consider how this place actually works and to deliver the institutional shift the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has just talked about, and must not be like the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, costing the taxpayer £6 million a year.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Any new body across both Houses will need to be nimble, it will need to have an understanding of parliamentary procedures and it will need to offer good value for taxpayers' money.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Would the Leader of the House accept that, in any debate on sexual harassment, there is too much victim blaming? People blame women for not speaking out about harassment, rather than asking why they did not. We have seen young women who did speak out being targeted with abuse on social media. If we are to get the right kind of reforms—*independent reforms*—of processes, or the right kind of culture change in not just this place but institutions right across the country, there has to be a much stronger voice in any reform debates for the young women and men and the junior staff who too often end up being the victims of unacceptable abuses of power. Their voices must be heard.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Lady makes a very good point—that it is vital that victims feel they have a safe place to bring forward allegations and that they are not the ones who end up being blamed for failing to

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

come forward or for presumably making false allegations, which too often seems to be the case. I highlight the situation of my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who tried to raise some allegations and suffered unbelievable abuse for it. It is an appalling cultural trend in this country, and it really has to stop.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Sadly, those of us who have been in the House for some time know that there is nothing new about the exchanges today. I therefore welcome your statement, Mr Speaker, that of the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister's intervention; indeed, I have agreed with all the exchanges in the House today. We should not forget that this issue applies to both Houses. We should not forget that it applies to our constituency staff and people beyond here. May I urge the Leader of the House, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) did earlier, to come up with a timescale, because the matter is pressing? In the meantime, could she also make it clear to everybody working in this estate or connected to it what the interim procedures are for individuals who may be on the receiving end of the appalling treatment we have been reading about in the papers?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend mentions the fact that any new procedure needs to cover both Houses, and she is right. She is also absolutely right that it needs to cover all staff working here and in our constituencies. She wants interim procedures to be clarified, which we will absolutely do. However, I would just point out to her that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has absolutely gripped this issue. While it may have been rumbling on for many years, we should all be pleased that we will be addressing it in the very near future.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I welcome these steps to eradicate harassment from this place. However, when I complained recently to an officer of Parliament who had some responsibility in this area that I knew a number of researchers, male and female, who had been made to feel deeply uncomfortable in the Sports and Social club by Members of Parliament, I was told that that happens in pubs all over the country. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the duty of care that we owe extends 24/7 and to every restaurant and bar in this place?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to give that absolute assurance. There should be no place here on the estate, or in our constituency offices, where people can be abused or their allegations not taken seriously. I can assure the hon. Lady that I will be meeting Lord McFall to discuss the specific issues around the Sports and Social bar tomorrow.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Thank you for your statement, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for the consensus so far in all the statements made and questions raised in these exchanges. Let me point out that we would not be having these exchanges if the document I have here—the code of conduct of the House of Commons—was actually working and the machinery around the code was effective. May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the fact that the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards is conducting a review of the code of conduct? The Public Administration and

Constitutional Affairs Committee has submitted quite radical suggestions about how the code, and the machinery around it, should be reformed so that we spend far more time in this House as Members of Parliament experiencing proper professional development and understanding the code of values at the front of this document—what they actually mean and how we should live those values as Members of Parliament—than just concentrating on all the other pages, which are about declarations of outside earnings, Members' interests and all the other stuff that seems to preoccupy the regulatory authorities of this House.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that there is already a code of conduct. I am grateful to him for sending me his Committee's report on this matter over the weekend. I will certainly look at it carefully over the next couple of days.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Much has been made in the media this weekend of the inability of the Standards Commissioner, and therefore the Standards Committee, to look into many of the issues raised over the past week. In a report debated in March 2012, the Committee tried to give the commissioner a wider scope over these issues, but an amendment tabled by the three major parties' parliamentary shop stewards and supported by Front Benchers was introduced to block this, and therefore the commissioner was left unable to look into these very important issues. When the Standards Committee re-forms shortly, we will again look at the code of conduct, and I hope that all parties represented here will be a lot more receptive to necessary changes.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. I can assure him that the Commission will meet under the chairmanship of Mr Speaker this afternoon and we will discuss these matters there.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I am delighted to hear that the Leader of the House will extend these measures to other forms of abuse. Will that include those MPs who go on rallies endorsing the lynching of other MPs? It is an absolute disgrace that senior MPs go about their business inciting violence against female MPs.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point, again, about the vital significance of what we do as MPs. Certainly, repeating slogans about lynching other MPs is incredibly despicable behaviour that is occasionally encouraged. That is deeply regrettable, and we all need to look very carefully at what sort of behaviour we endorse in this House.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Sexual harassment is a problem in Parliament—as it is, indeed, in workplaces and schools right across the country—and it is often worst where there are big discrepancies of power. I really hope that the news reports of the past few days will act as a watershed moment and help to catalyse the change that we so clearly need, not least in the outdated attitudes that exist, still, in some quarters. I welcome the cross-party agreement that we need an independent reporting mechanism for investigating complaints, but does the Leader of the House agree that if people are to have confidence in using it, the process needs to be very clearly set out, as do the outcomes, because repercussions in secret via the usual channels will not cut it in 2017?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has been a big champion for women over several years, and I applaud her for that. She is absolutely right. The grievance procedure will need to be very clear and very well communicated. It will have to set out clearly established principles about how the procedure escalates, with very clear “So what now?” results at the end of it that everybody who participates in it can see for themselves.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Urgency is very important in how we deal with this issue. Nevertheless, will the Leader of the House confirm that it will not be dealt with simply by House officials and those working in the Palace of Westminster, but that best practice will be utilised and advice will be sought from external organisations as to how they deal with it? We need to get this right first time around.

Andrea Leadsom: Cross-party agreement and working closely with your office, Mr Speaker, are vital. Of course, the House officials themselves have some expertise in this area, but all ideas will be welcomed—bearing in mind, as a number of Members have said, that this is a very unusual workplace.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I welcome what has been said here today, and I look forward to working with you, Mr Speaker, on the reference group on this issue. As I rushed in here for this statement, I overheard two male colleagues walking through the halls wittering about a witch hunt that was going on in Parliament. We in this building must think of this not as a party political thing, but as something that absolutely has to happen. We should not just cheer when one of our opponents is the person getting attacked; we should cheer when everybody is bang to rights.

Will the Leader of the House touch on what she believes should happen to perpetrators of this crime—she did not mention this when she outlined what she and the Government felt needed to be done? Good referral lines and support for victims are obviously things that I support, but the fact of the matter is that nothing hurts a victim more than watching a perpetrator getting away with it.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is exactly right, and I certainly welcome her desire for a non-partisan approach to the resolution of this matter. It affects all parts of the House, and we need to work together on it. What happens to the perpetrators is, of course, a matter for the House to debate, but it will include the following: where staff are the perpetrators, the normal contractual potential for losing their job, and where the perpetrator is an MP, the possible withdrawal of the Whip or the sacking of a Minister and so on. All those well-known things that can happen from time to time must and will be in scope.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Mr Speaker, I very much welcomed the mention in your speech of bullying and other forms of harassment. Sometimes victims are not empowered to speak up and make a complaint, so can we make sure that there is a form of reporting for other people who may observe harassment and bullying within an office or workplace and feel they could alert someone to it?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes. I think that if we can establish a proper grievance procedure, it should be perfectly possible to report observed behaviour, not just personal experience.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome your statement, Mr Speaker, and the statements that have been made today. As others have said, this is nothing new. It comes about because of a political culture of preferment, in which people cannot speak about what has happened to them for fear of their career being stifled. To change that political culture requires all of us to show very strong political leadership. I say to the political leaders from all parts of the House that that means taking decisions against colleagues and others, even when that is inconvenient and even when it goes against their own allies or their own supporters. Does the Leader of the House agree that that requires strong leadership?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I, too, welcome the statements and comments that have been made today. When I was speaking to my own researcher earlier this week, she highlighted some of the experiences that she has had in this place. As a new MP, I definitely find such experiences shocking and unacceptable. May I highlight the importance in the code of education both for staff and for us as Members? Many coming in as Members have not had the experience of employing people before. We need to be kept up to date with what is happening in society, including about what constitutes harassment. We may think such phrases are innocent, but they are not perceived as such. Our staff also need to be empowered completely to bring forward complaints. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a really important and thoughtful point. Very often, Members have not had experience of employing staff before coming to this place, and they themselves need some guidance. That could be a very useful contribution as a result of this experience.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): A worker employed as staff of a Member told me today that she reported being sexually assaulted to the proper authorities earlier this year, who did nothing. She is deeply disappointed and distrustful, and she tells me that distrust is endemic. How can I assure her that her complaint would now be treated differently?

Andrea Leadsom: I can say to the hon. Lady that if the member of staff would like to talk to me about it, I will certainly take up her complaint personally.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement sending a clear message that sexual harassment is never acceptable. Who would have thought that, as we celebrate the centenary of women getting the vote, we have to address in this Chamber the conduct and language that intimidate and control women in particular? This is about the abuse of power and the status of women. I welcome the cross-party agreement to stamp this out, especially as we are all working in a climate where women on both sides of the House are being abused just for being in public office.

[Ms Nusrat Ghani]

Perhaps we can start by referring to the code of conduct, which I raised with the Leader of the House in business questions last week. With the privilege of being elected comes a duty, and that does not involve sexist language and behaviour, because all of us who have been elected know the power that we hold.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I deeply regret the horrible experience she has had in recent weeks merely for trying to raise her own disgust at the sexual harassment going on.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Parliament must act, but all political parties must act, too. Does the Leader of the House agree that every party should introduce independent reporting, so that women have the confidence to come forward not just in Parliament, but in local councils and our party activist bases, too?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a really interesting point, which I will certainly take away and think about. My perspective is that we need independent review, because the problem with parties marking their own homework is always that that can in itself create an underlying lack of confidence on the part of victims. Having an independent review—a third-party, professional view—will be very important in resolving this.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) was quite right to talk about confidence. There needs to be confidence in the system, and that is why there needs to be an independent body, because justice must not only be done but be seen to be done. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) talked about witch hunts, and we have to be careful to avoid them. One of the advantages of having an independent body is that it avoids just that: allegations made will have to be properly substantiated.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. We do not want false allegations to be made and then become “facts” just as made, so absolutely proper investigation is essential to get to the bottom of allegations and find out whether or not they are true.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your leadership on this issue. I think we need to be clear that we are talking not just about activities that are criminal, but about making sure that a culture of sexual violence, harassment and misogyny and not believing those who come forward is not considered the norm. To do that means being clear about what happens not just to those who come forward, but to those who participate. Following up on the questions asked by my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), I would like to hear from the Leader of the House a bit more clarity about what measures she expects political parties to take to make sure that we keep employees and volunteers not just safe from illegal activities but protected from a constructive dismissal case, or are we simply expecting the electorate to pick up the slack?

Andrea Leadsom: I have been clear that the issue is around, first, those who are made to feel uncomfortable: I am setting the bar significantly below criminal activity. If people are made to feel uncomfortable, that is not correct. In terms of the consequences for the perpetrators, I have also been clear that staff could forfeit their jobs, Members of Parliament could have the Whip withdrawn and Ministers could be fired from ministerial office.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): If we do not call out bad, irresponsible or criminal behaviour, which we do weekly in our constituency surgeries, we are all part of the problem. The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) rightly raised the question and has used her gravitas to highlight the issue. I have the pleasure of serving on your diversity committee, Mr Speaker, which looks at these issues, and we have made some great strides in making this a positive workplace for all.

Can I ask the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister to work with me and all Members from all parties to make sure that we have a strong voice on all the separate issues—whether misogyny, poor language or criminal behaviour—and do everything to give the public confidence in every party?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has been a great champion of treating others with respect, and I would personally be delighted to work with her on this.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Will all cases that have been reported and not actioned—not just the one in north Wales, but others—be reopened? Will anybody who has been sexually assaulted have the right to say, “No, I don’t want the issue to go to the police. I want it treated in other ways?” In other words, will the victim control what the action is? Will compulsory training on the implications of the duty of care under the Equality Act be brought in immediately for all MPs, and if someone wishes to have trade union representation to assist them, will that be allowed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises some really important and sensible ideas, and I will look carefully at them all. I urge anyone who has been made to feel uncomfortable or who feels that they have been improperly treated to come forward, and those issues will be taken up through the right channels. Until we have a proper independent grievance policy and a group of people able to take that up, the existing policies of the employee helpline, which can be expanded, and my offer that people can come to me personally will be appropriate ways to take things forward.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): May I gently remind the House that this issue is not just about sexual harassment and it is not just about women? Bullying is systemic in the House. Earlier today, I received a text from someone describing a problem that he saw in this place. It said of a current Member:

“He is utterly foul and I am sure it’s a pattern of behaviour on his part, but in this instance I don’t think it would be fair on the woman in question”

to name him. My friend continues:

“Still, do your best to widen this to bullying and treating your staff like”—

I think he means dirt. I ask the Leader of the House to widen this issue to bullying, including historical allegations.

Andrea Leadsom: It is absolutely the intention that the review look at all issues of misdemeanour and misconduct, including sexual harassment and bullying, as well as other forms of uncomfortable behaviour that is perpetrated on members of staff in this place.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When I was a curate in the Church of England 30 years ago, one of my very close colleagues confided in me that he had been raped by a very senior member of the Church of England clergy. My friend was understandably terrified about telling the police or anybody else that this was the truth. He felt suicidal. He did not want others to know what had happened to him, quite understandably—he was the victim, not the perpetrator. I make absolutely no criticism of my friend. The senior cleric concerned had a great deal of protection from the establishment, including from certain members of the royal family. He subsequently—thank God—went to prison. The Church's instinct was to protect itself as the institution. Is that not always the danger? Is not the one thing we must learn from all this that the best way to protect the institution is actually to protect the victims and to put our own house in order? May I make just one tiny suggestion? Anytime an MP interviews somebody for a new job, they should have a human resources professional sitting alongside them at the interview.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a terrible and horrifying case. He is right to point out that the victim should not be the one to suffer in the way that his friend obviously did. The point he raises is very important. We need to ensure that this is not the House protecting itself, but Parliament protecting all those who come here to work and to try to make their country a better place.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on asking the urgent question and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House on her response. How many calls have been made to the confidential helpline? If we are to get rid of this unacceptable behaviour, would a good place to start not be to contact those who have contacted the confidential helpline, to see how their cases might now be taken forward?

Andrea Leadsom: The employee assistance programme is intended as a safety net to complement the existing pastoral care and internal processes put in place by MPs themselves and the main political parties. In response to my hon. Friend's specific question about how many calls have been made to it, I do not know but I can find out and place the figures in the Library.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): When I visit one of the schools in my constituency, as we all often do as MPs, I am required to sign in and I am made aware of the safeguarding policies each and every time. I recognise that Parliament is not exactly the same as a school, but I am concerned that visitors brought on to the estate to socialise late at night must also be held responsible. How will the Leader of the House ensure that this is a safe place for all, by all, all the time?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a different but equally very important point, which is the safety and protection of those who come on to the estate. I am looking at that carefully. As I mentioned to the hon.

Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), I will be meeting Lord McFall tomorrow to discuss exactly how we protect those who come on to the estate to socialise, often quite late at night.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I came to this place after working for some years at the BBC, an institution that has had its own challenges in this area. With that experience in mind, I want to endorse what the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, have said about the importance of this institution having a robust procedure. It must not be left to individual components, whether individual employers or political parties. It is this institution, Parliament, that has to have a robust governance procedure. There are a few specific categories of people that this process must be sufficiently fleet of foot to be able to help. The first is members of staff who work in our constituency offices, who often feel isolated and vulnerable. The second is students who come here on work experience or to do internships. I would like to suggest that whenever a student, an intern or someone on a work placement begins here, there should be, as part of the basic induction process, a very simple instruction about where they go if, at any time, they feel vulnerable. I think that that is lacking at the moment.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes. My hon. Friend is right. I think some of us do have clear guidelines for the very often quite young people who come to this place for work experience. Having something we can all give to young people to provide them with reassurance is an extremely good idea.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I think across the House we all recognise that this is a fault of undiluted power: when someone holds another's entire future in their hands, it is difficult to refuse or speak out. While it is sexual abuse and harassment that has brought this issue to people's attention today, it is also about misogyny, dismissal and gender discrimination—and it is not just here. This place needs to start the change, but in the law, in the NHS—in any hierarchical system—we need to see change.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right that it starts at the top. If those in power abuse those beneath them, it creates a culture where abuse becomes endemic throughout the system. I would not say it is only from the top, but that is certainly where it starts and where leadership needs to be shown.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Those of us who have been in this place long enough to have seen the expenses scandal saw how that long-drawn-out process, often subject to apparent obfuscation by this place, was deeply damaging to the integrity not only of this institution but, by implication, of every Member, despite how innocent they might have been. Does the Leader of the House agree that if we are to tackle this problem, it is absolutely essential that our response be swift, robust and wholly transparent? We send out a message to the way the rest of society happens, and we all, however innocent, have a duty to perform in that.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It is absolutely our intention to make very swift progress—within days. He is also right to point out that there is agreement across parties that this needs to be resolved, and I think, if we all work together, it can be.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your statement and the Leader of the House for her very forthright statement. She said earlier that this issue not only focused on Westminster but applied to politics across the country. In my own local authority, two female councillors were recently abused in a most sexually derogatory manner online, and the abuse was initiated by a fellow councillor. Will she talk to her colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government to ensure that the same robust policies and procedures she is outlining for this House apply equally to local government—councillors and staff?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government would be happy to meet him to discuss it.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I welcome the cross-party approach discussed today. As a doctor entering the House, I was quite concerned from my constituency experience to find that disclosure checks are not mandatory for staff in constituency offices, although such checks are quite rigorous for those working in Parliament. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is important that staff are kept safe right across the board and that we have a duty to protect constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very interesting point, and I will certainly look into it.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I draw the Houses' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. You, Mr Speaker, and many other Members have mentioned the fundamental imbalance between parliamentary staff and Members' staff. The former have one employer and are members of recognised trade unions, if they wish to be. There is, however, an active and well-organised trade union representing Members' staff—I know because I used to be branch secretary. Would you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House be willing to meet that union to discuss recognition? Such a thing would not be without precedent.

Andrea Leadsom: I cannot speak for you, Mr Speaker, but I certainly would be happy to meet the union.

Mr Speaker: Similarly, I am very happy to meet the union, and I look forward to hearing from the hon. Lady. There should be an opportunity for a troika, a quartet, or perhaps something larger—I don't know. It is important and should happen sooner rather than later.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Many employers, as well as independent grievance procedures, have stand-alone independent bullying and harassment policies, so that complaints of bullying and harassment are dealt with separately under a different procedure. Is the possibility of a separate policy being explored, and does the Leader of the House agree that trade unions, if they have any Members' staff coming to them with complaints, should be invited to bring them to you, Mr Speaker, and herself?

Andrea Leadsom: As a constituency MP myself, I am certainly aware that some trade unions have done excellent work in protecting their members from bullying at work,

and in doing so they fulfil a vital role. As for how we should go about resolving our own House issues, I incline towards a two-House solution. I think that there should be an independent grievance procedure, allowing anyone to make any allegations about bullying, intimidation, sexually inappropriate behaviour and so on, rather than separate streams of activity.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House consider providing assertiveness training for staff, so that they may be better equipped to decide for themselves what constitutes good-humoured high jinks and what constitutes sexual harassment?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a very good suggestion, and I would certainly support it. Such courses are often made available, and individual Members can choose to send staff on them. I myself have sent staff for assertiveness training. Another Member raised the issue of training for Members of Parliament in how to treat their staff, and I think that that has equal merit. All these suggestions should be up for discussion.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I add the support of DUP Members to the cross-party focus that we have seen this afternoon? May I also introduce a note of caution, and ask for a bit of clarity? Earlier, we were promised a completely confidential reporting mechanism. Can I assume that that would focus solely on the lack of reporting or publication of the name of a victim? I cannot see how it would be possible to proceed with a full accusation without revealing the victim's identity.

Andrea Leadsom: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. What I suggested was that it should be possible for the accuser to remain anonymous, at least in the early stages. All too often, people have been afraid to come forward for fear of their names being all over the front pages of the newspapers.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): When reflecting on the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), will the Leader of the House also take into account the fact that if we take a step forward here in Westminster, it will further perpetuate the gap, in terms of protection, between people who work in this place and our wider political constituencies—in other words, the culture of our political parties? We have a real duty of care to those activists, and bullying, intimidation and other forms of bad behaviour can often spread very easily against the background of a culture in which political parties seek to shut down allegations rather than bringing them into the light.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that point. I hope that if we can show leadership in this place, we shall then be able to tackle the wider ramifications throughout the country.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I agree with much of what has been said today, but I find it hard to believe that other Members were unaware of allegations such as those that have been made in recent days. The fact that incidents of this kind have not been reported until now indicates not only the macho

image and atmosphere of this place, but the unwillingness of far too many men to report such behaviour. Does the Leader of the House agree that, in some cases, the men who remain silent are just as culpable as the perpetrators, and that men in this place and elsewhere must come forward to challenge and report abuse if we are to stamp it out once and for all?

Andrea Leadsom: I urge those who feel uncomfortable, and feel that they have been abused, bullied, intimidated or harassed, to come forward. However, I do not think the hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that the victims are somehow themselves guilty of anything in failing to come forward.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House ensure that the promised new procedures involve action on racism, misogyny, homophobia and bullying as well as sexual harassment? None of those types of behaviour has any place in our democracy. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) mentioned local government. Can guidance be issued so that other levels of government adopt similar procedures? We should also bear in mind the fact that Members of the European Parliament still exist. Unless swift action is taken, politics as a whole will be brought into disrepute.

Andrea Leadsom: I can absolutely confirm that all issues involving homophobia, racism, bullying, sexual harassment and so on will be within the scope of the work involved in the creation of an independent grievance procedure. The hon. Lady is exactly right: treating one another with respect throughout our politics is absolutely essential, and we will see what more can be done to ensure that that happens.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome your leadership on this important issue, Mr Speaker, and the statements from hon. Friends on both sides of the House.

Is the Leader of the House aware of any allegations that would warrant police investigation?

Andrea Leadsom: I am not aware of any specific allegations that would warrant criminal investigation.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): With my teacher hat on, I endorse what has been said about young inexperienced staffers often not knowing their rights, and also the idea that there should be some kind of induction. This House should be leading from the front, and there is something else we can do: ensure that sex and relationship education in schools is finally enacted so we can start to tackle this from the bottom up as well.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady's concern that we need to set a good example and be good role models, and we need to do more to protect children and young people. On sex and relationship education, I agree with her up to a point: it is vital that relationship education is put up alongside sex education and the two are taught hand in hand.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am beginning to realise the scale of the challenge you face in your attempts to modernise this place, Mr Speaker.

Will the Leader of the House work with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, by way of example, to audit fully what procedures are in place and ensure that best practice is introduced, and to help modernise and professionalise this place?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman's view will be shared by many across this House, in that it is difficult to pin down exactly who is responsible for what, which is why this urgent review is absolutely necessary. We are determined to come up with a coherent grievance procedure to which all Members and staff across both Houses can refer.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The proposal for an independent grievance procedure is a positive step, but we also need to consider what happens after it has been completed. It is quite possible that the complainant will still be employed by the person they have made a complaint against, which will make employment relations very difficult at best, and at worst they will have completely broken down. The Leader of the House has said that in certain circumstances the whip might be removed from a Member, but if the person who has made the complaint is still employed by that Member, that would put them in an impossible situation. Surely that cannot be right.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman's concern, and he will be aware that members of staff often move around and work for other Members of Parliament. Clearly, there should be different outcomes for different situations, but it is very important that victims feel that they are heard, understood, listened to and supported, and that their concerns are then acted upon.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for your statement today, Mr Speaker.

May I caution the Leader of the House about her focus on mediation? Mediation assumes there is an equality of power. Where there is a perpetrator and a survivor of sexual abuse there is a clear inequality of power. Will she look at this again?

Andrea Leadsom: To be clear, I am not talking about mediation; I am talking about an independent grievance procedure where independent people would investigate a particular situation, quite apart from the Members in this House. The victim would absolutely not be mediated with the alleged perpetrator of the crime against them.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I welcome the Leader of the House's constructive proposals to tackle this serious issue, but over the weekend I read some worrying articles saying that Whips' offices from all political parties and senior members of the Government held information about sexual misconduct by their own MPs but stayed quiet for fear of sabotaging their career and bringing the Government into disrepute. Is the Leader of the House aware of these reports, does she believe them to be true, and if so, what is she going to do about them?

Andrea Leadsom: I am absolutely not aware of any such wrongdoing, and I am absolutely confident that anybody who had serious allegations would be directed by the Whips Office or by Members of Parliament to go directly to the police.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Further to that question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), may I press the Leader of the House a little further? Just yesterday, a current Government Minister appeared on the broadcast media and said that he was clear that what went on in the Whips Office stayed in the Whips Office. Can the Leader of the House tell us whether she still considers that approach to be appropriate in the light of these serious allegations? Furthermore, can she respond to the suggestion that the Prime Minister receives a briefing every week, perhaps from the Chief Whip, to advise her about spurious behaviour within the House?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady should really consider the logic of what she is saying, if she really thinks that the Prime Minister would be sitting there chatting with the Chief Whip in the way that she suggests. That is quite clearly not true. It is absolutely vital that we all take this seriously and give proper consideration to the allegations against Members of Parliament by their staff. Anybody who had prior knowledge of those things would encourage those individuals to go to the police or provide them with the support that they need. There is absolutely no covering up going on.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Leader of the House has rightly recognised that these situations arise out of imbalances and abuses of power, and I therefore endorse the question from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about

completely outlawing the use of mediation in the circumstances. Its use would be wholly inappropriate. Does the Leader of the House not recognise that this goes to the heart of the victims being believed when they make their allegations, and that it is important that that message is sent out loud and clear as part of this exercise that she is now undertaking?

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that it is important that there are independent investigations of allegations, not mediation, and that we use every effort to ensure that those who make allegations against another individual are properly listened to and supported, and that those allegations are properly investigated.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): On the way to this debate, I overheard two Members joking about this issue and asking, in humour, about whether they had “fessed up” to their sexual harassment. As a man, I stand up to call that out. It is not “bantz”; it is unacceptable. I also understand that in response to some journalists presenting testimony from victims with evidence of sexual harassment, some Members of this House have instructed lawyers to gag the stories that those journalists are pursuing. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the members of staff who use this service will have access to legal advice? What will she do to ensure that victims’ voices are not silenced due to legal process?

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that it is vital that we take a grip of this issue and that we look quickly—I mean in a matter of days—at what can be done cross-party to establish a proper, independent grievance procedure that all staff across both Houses can access, so that their concerns can be heard, properly investigated and properly acted upon.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to all colleagues who have participated in this important exchange.

Independent Review: Deaths in Police Custody

4.48 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to the House on the publication of Dame Elish Angiolini's independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody and this Government's substantive response to the report and its recommendations.

In 2015, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, then the Home Secretary, met the relatives of Olaseni Lewis and Sean Rigg, who had died tragically in police custody. The families' experiences left her in no doubt that there was significant work to do not only to prevent deaths in police custody but, where they do occur, to ensure that the families are treated with dignity and compassion and have meaningful involvement and support in their difficult journey to find answers about what happened to their loved ones. I know that everyone in the House will want to join me in expressing our sorrow and sympathy for all those families who have lost loved ones who died in police custody.

It is essential that deaths and serious incidents in police custody are reduced as far as possible and, when they do occur, that they are investigated thoroughly, agencies are held to account, lessons are learned and bereaved families are provided with the support they need. The House will want to join me in acknowledging the incredible efforts of our country's police forces and officers, the vast majority of whom do their jobs well to give substance to the Peelian principle of policing by consent. However, when things go wrong, policing by consent can have meaning only when swift action is taken to find the truth, to expose institutional failings and to tackle any conduct issues where they are found.

It is for those reasons that the Government commissioned in 2015 the independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody and appointed Dame Elish as its independent chair. Dame Elish concluded her review earlier this year and, having carefully considered the review and its recommendations, the Government are today publishing both her report and the Government's response. The report is considerable in scope and makes 110 recommendations for improvement, covering every aspect of the procedures and processes surrounding deaths and serious incidents in police custody. It is particularly valuable in affording a central role to the perspective of bereaved families and demonstrating beyond doubt that their experiences offer a rich source of learning for the police, investigatory bodies, coroners and many others with a role to play when these tragic incidents occur. As for the Government's response, I stress to the House that the issues identified in Dame Elish's report point to the need for reform in several areas where we have begun or set in motion work today, but her report also highlights complex issues to which there are no easy answers at this time. The Government response that I outline today is to be seen as the start of a journey—a journey which will see a focused programme of work to address the problems identified.

As the House will understand, I do not intend to go into the detail of the Government response in respect of all the report's recommendations. Instead, I will highlight key areas of concern and our approach. The first relates to inquests, which are intended to be inquisitorial, to find

out the facts of a death, and should not be adversarial. Despite that, Dame Elish finds that inquests currently involve legal representation for interested persons, particularly those connected to the police force, and little or no help for bereaved families. The Government recognise that legal advice and representation may in some circumstances be necessary in the inquest process, which is why we have protected legal aid for advice in the lead up to and during inquest hearings. However, it is also clear that the system needs simplifying so that legal representation is not necessary in all cases, and the Government will investigate how we can meet this ambition and take it forward over the coming months.

As an initial step towards addressing those concerns and ensuring that the bereaved can have confidence in the arrangements, the Lord Chancellor will review the existing guidance so that it is clear that the starting presumption is that legal aid should be awarded for representation of the bereaved at an inquest following the non-natural death or suicide of a person detained by police or in prison, subject to the overarching discretion of the director of legal aid casework. In exercising the discretion to disregard the means test, it will also be made clear that consideration should be given to the distress and anxiety caused to families of the bereaved in having to fill out complex forms to establish financial means following the death of a loved one. That work will be completed by the end of the year.

As a next step, the Lord Chancellor will also consider the issue of publicly funded legal advice and representation at inquests, particularly the application of the means test in such cases. That will form part of the upcoming post-implementation review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, due to be published next year. Although there are cases where legal support is required, we believe we can go further towards building a non-adversarial inquest system, which I hope the House will agree is better for all involved. The Lord Chancellor will also consider, to the same timescale as the legal aid review, reducing the number of lawyers who attend inquests—without compromising fairness—and making inquests more sympathetic to the needs of the bereaved.

This country is proud to have world-leading police forces. The police put themselves in harm's way to protect the public with honesty and integrity, upholding the values set out in the policing code of ethics. Police integrity and accountability is central to public confidence in policing, and a system that holds police officers to account helps to guarantee that. The Government must ensure that the public have confidence in the police to serve our communities and keep us safe.

When things go wrong, swift action is needed to expose and tackle any misconduct. Action must be open, fair and robust. The Government will therefore implement legislation later this year to extend the disciplinary system to former officers so that where serious wrongdoing is alleged, an investigation and subsequent disciplinary proceedings can continue until their conclusion, even where an officer has left the force. We will also make publicly available a statutory police barred list of officers, special constables and staff who have been dismissed from the force and barred from policing.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission has an important role to play, and it has undergone a multi-year major change programme that has seen a

[Mr Nick Hurd]

fivefold increase in the number of independent investigations it opens each year compared with 2013-14. On Friday 20 October, we reached another major milestone in reforming the organisation, with the announcement of the first director general of the new Independent Office for Police Conduct. The new director general will start in January 2018, when the reforms to the IPCC's governance are implemented and it is officially renamed the IOPC.

The Government are strengthening safeguards in the custody environment. It is clear that police custody is no place for children. Provisions in the Policing and Crime Act 2017, shortly to be brought into force, will make it unlawful to use a police station as a place of safety for anyone under 18 years of age in any circumstance and will further restrict the use of police stations as a place of safety for people aged 18 and over.

The work of the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs Council to improve training and guidance for police officers and staff in this area is to be commended. Also drawing on learning from the IPCC's independent investigations, their work has contributed to a significant reduction in the number of deaths in custody in recent years.

Making improvements in other areas, however, requires us to tackle entrenched and long-standing problems that cut across multiple agencies' responsibilities. The Government will not shy away from the long-term collaborative work that that requires, which is why we commissioned the Ministerial Council on Deaths in Custody to play a leading role in considering the most complex of Dame Elish's recommendations—those on healthcare in police custody, on inquests and on support for families.

The ministerial council is uniquely placed to drive progress in those areas and has been reformed to ensure an increased focus on effectively tackling the issues that matter most. It brings together not only Ministers from the Home Office, the Department of Health and the Ministry of Justice but leading practitioners from the fields of policing, health, justice and the third sector. In addition, the ministerial council's work is informed by an independent advisory panel that brings together eminent experts in the fields of law, human rights, medicine and mental health. This will introduce necessary oversight and external challenge to ensure that lessons are learned.

In my role as co-chair of the ministerial board, I am personally committed to helping drive through the ministerial council's new work programme, and I will do so in a way that is transparent to the families. Every death in police custody is a tragedy, and we must do all we can to prevent them. The independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody is a major step forward in our efforts better to understand this issue and to bring about meaningful and lasting change.

I thank Dame Elish Angiolini for her remarkable contribution on this important issue, as well as Deborah Coles for her continuing commitment to preventing deaths in police custody. But I particularly thank the bereaved families who contributed to Dame Elish's review. They have laid their experiences bare in order for us to learn from them and to spare other families the suffering they have endured, and I cannot commend them highly enough.

In addition to publication on gov.uk, I will place in the Library copies of the report of the independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody,

its accompanying research documents, the Government's response to the review and the concordat on children in custody.

I commend this statement to the House.

4.59 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): There are many aspects of the Government's statement to welcome, but does the Minister agree that this long-standing issue of deaths in police custody is of particular concern to our urban communities and has been for decades? In my constituency, this goes back as far as the death of Colin Roach in 1983, and this year we had the very sad death of 20-year-old Rashan Charles, who died in July following contact with the Metropolitan police in Dalston. I, personally, have had to comfort too many families who said goodbye to their son in the morning and he never came back.

Can the Minister explain why we have had to wait two and a half years for the publication of this report, which I understand was completed 15 months ago? Does he agree with the United Families and Friends Campaign that officers must be held to account? In that context, however, I welcome what he said about dealing with former officers, as it will give some comfort to families. Is he able to explain why a disproportionate number of these deaths in custody happen to black men? The Minister has said that this is the start of a journey, but does he appreciate that this must be a journey with an end? Families want to see some prospect of the recommendations being implemented, or at least an explanation of why they are not implemented, and an end point to this journey? Does he agree that we pride ourselves in this country on policing by consent but if that is to be real for every community, we must deal with this long-running issue of deaths in custody? May I assure the Minister that I campaigned on this issue long before I was a Member of Parliament, and in my current role as shadow Home Secretary I will be pursuing him, both on the overall burden of his statement and on all the detail?

Mr Hurd: I thank the shadow Home Secretary for her constructive approach and for putting me on notice that she is going to hold my feet to the fire—I welcome that, because she has worked with victims of these tragedies. Together with the Home Secretary, I have met some of the families, and their accounts are overwhelming in terms of what they have had to endure, not just with the original loss, but the journey from that point. It has been absolutely unacceptable and the report is devastating, because it is a story of system failure and human failure going back over many, many years. This was recognised by the current Prime Minister and she was absolutely right to commission this report, and it is our responsibility now, after all these years of failure, to tackle this and do something right for families in the future—I am absolutely committed to that.

We did take some time to publish this review, because it is a very comprehensive review, with more than 100 recommendations that needed to be looked at seriously and worked through properly. It is a cross-government response, and I hope the shadow Minister will see it as substantive. On the accountability of police, yes, the families are very clear about that; they have worked and had to endure journeys of nine years to get nowhere in terms of a conclusion, and that is unacceptable.

I beg to differ a little on the point the shadow Home Secretary made about black and minority ethnic people being more likely to die in police custody; that is not what is suggested by the data I have seen, which is that the proportion of black people who die in police custody is lower than the proportion arrested. I believe the Independent Police Complaints Commission has published results of a 10-year study that bears that out, but I am more than happy to discuss this with her personally. But the most important point is that this report has to be a catalyst for change, and I hope that on both sides of the House we work together to make sure that finally happens.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I applaud my hon. Friend's statement. He is clearly a man on top of his brief. As someone who has had the privilege to serve as a special constable in the past and who spent 25 days with Northamptonshire police under the police parliamentary scheme, may I say that we should applaud the work of the vast majority of custody sergeants up and down the land who take their job incredibly seriously and serve thousands of prisoners well each and every year?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, drawing on his own experience. As I said in my statement, on every day in every force, the vast majority of the work that the police do is absolutely fantastic and is conducted to the highest levels of integrity and professionalism. Nevertheless, when things go wrong—and they do go wrong—we have to get to the truth and there has to be accountability. The report demonstrates that in the past the journey has been too difficult, there has been too much defensiveness and there has not been a strong enough feeling that the system is on the side of the families and the victims. That is what we have to change.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his statement, and like him I thank Dame Elish Angiolini and her colleagues for their invaluable work. In her report, Dame Elish speaks of the humbling dignity and tenacity of the families of those who have died in police custody, and like the Minister and the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), I pay tribute to them and those who have supported them.

I have three questions. First, the report suggests that a national coroner service is required to overcome inconsistencies in funding and practice between different local authorities. What is the Government's initial thinking on that? Secondly, the report emphasises how vital what happens in the immediate aftermath of a death in custody is. Will the IPCC be funded to ensure that an officer or a team can attend quickly after a death in custody to co-ordinate the initial steps, as recommended in the report? Finally, the report reminds us that we must also remember that in 2015 there were 60 deaths of individuals within two days of their leaving police custody. What steps will be taken to ensure that the risks of that happening are properly assessed and reduced?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman makes three important points. The recommendation on a national coroner service is one of the recommendations on which the Government are least persuaded at this time. The ministerial

council will explore the idea, but the Government's first instinct is to explore what further role the Chief Coroner can play in meeting some of the report's recommendations and requests.

The hon. Gentleman asked about what happens after an incident and the role of the IPCC, and he is clearly critical of that. If he reads some of the Family Listening reports that came out with the review, he will see some really shocking stories of how bereaved families are treated at that deeply traumatic moment. That has to change, and it is one of the things I will be discussing with Michael Lockwood, the first director general of the new Independent Office for Police Conduct.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the report and the Government's response. In West Yorkshire, we had the tragic case of Mark Camm, who died as a result of being held in police custody when he should have been sent to hospital as an emergency. His family campaigned for many years to uncover the truth about the lack of monitoring of him in a police cell. They also endured real difficulties because of the failure of the IPCC to investigate properly and in a timely way and ensure that lessons were learned from the case. I therefore welcome the Minister's statement. Nevertheless, the report states:

"NHS commissioning of healthcare in police custody was due to have commenced in April 2016, but was halted by the Government earlier in the year. This report strongly recommends that this policy is reinstated and implemented."

Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing in response to that recommendation? It is clear that appropriate emergency healthcare is immensely important in these cases.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more with the right hon. Lady. Underlying a number of these tragedies is the fact the victims of these incidents were in the wrong place. They should not have been in police custody. We are trying to change the regulations to make it clear that police cells can be considered a safe place only in the most exceptional circumstances, and never for children. On healthcare in custody, there is different practice throughout the country. The short answer to her question is that it is one of the areas of complexity that we are taking to the ministerial council, which I co-chair. Its first meeting is on Wednesday.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right that the provision of adequate healthcare is fundamental, but that must include mental healthcare. We know that far too many people who end up in police cells should be in mental healthcare somewhere else. What can be done that is practicable? This must go beyond simply policing. The second issue is that the delays in the Independent Police Complaints Commission and the coronial system are unacceptable both to families and police officers. We must shorten the time. Will resources be made available to ensure that that happens?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman uses his experience to make a very important point. I am sure that he is aware that additional funding worth some £30 million has been made available to secure alternative places of safety and I welcome that. On his broader point about mental health, he knows that, at long last and as a result of campaigning across the House, more investment is going into mental health. He will also know from

[*Mr Hurd*]

talking to his local police force that more and more police time is being spent safeguarding and looking after people with various mental health conditions and that should not be their job. The discussion for us, both at a local and national level, is about responsibility, investment and resources to make sure that those who are suffering on the spectrum of mental health, anxieties and disorders are being treated in the right way and in the right place.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement, his personal commitment to following this matter through, and especially the better support for bereaved families. May I take him up on his point about making sure that we find the right places in which to detain people? We have heard about it in respect of people with mental health problems, but I want to press him on the point about those who are intoxicated. Dame Elish makes a very strong recommendation—recommendation 22—that the Government should consider drying-out centres, which international evidence suggests may be safer and cheaper than police custody. What is the Government’s response to that specific recommendation? Could not this idea reduce pressure on the police and A&E and provide a much safer environment for these people?

Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point. I am very committed to this matter. Having sat and listened to families talking about their ordeal, it is impossible to leave the room with any sense of neutrality or indifference. This is the moment when we must drive change. On his point about drying-out centres and alternative places of safety and support, the Government must be open minded. If there are good examples of places where that works, and the evidence supports it, we must consider it. That will be something that we take to the ministerial council, which has been charged with the follow-up to this review.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I associate myself with the positive remarks about Deborah Coles, who is my constituent? What is the Minister’s expectation of bringing the perpetrators of violence in police custody to genuine justice—not just retirement and what appear to the average person who sees it as a nod and a wink?

Mr Hurd: May I add my congratulations to the hon. Lady’s constituent, whom I am meeting again later this week, on doing a great job over many years? The hon. Lady raises an important point. The critical thing is that the investigations are, and are seen to be, genuinely independent of the police. She will know from accounts and from listening to families that that is not the perception. Things have changed, and they are moving in the right direction. The new director-general of the IPCC has the powers and the freedom to move the matter on further, and that is critical to building some trust in the system, which, for reasons I completely understand, is lacking at this moment in time.

Mr Speaker: I note what the hon. Lady says about Deborah Coles being her constituent. Clearly, Deborah Coles can be a constituent of only one Member, but I did know her at university 30 years ago, as did the hon.

Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin). She was a formidable campaigner for social justice then, and she is clearly a formidable campaigner for social justice now.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. The Police Service of Northern Ireland has an average of one death in custody every two years, and I have no doubt that it will learn lessons through the National Police Chiefs Council. Given that there are three separate legal jurisdictions in this kingdom, what thought has the Minister given to the devolution issues, particularly when we are seeking to give assistance through legal aid for inquests and families who most need that assistance?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman raises the important point of devolution, which I will certainly take to the ministerial council. I note the statistics for Northern Ireland. The figures for England and Wales are obviously significantly worse, so I am open to learning from examples of good practice in Northern Ireland.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): One point that the Minister made about supporting bereaved families was the starting presumption that legal aid should be awarded for representation at inquest. Can he give me an indication of which facts would actually rebut the presumption that legal aid would be granted?

Mr Hurd: As I said, the director of legal aid casework will have some discretion. The key thing is to shift the default setting. At the moment, legal aid is available only in exceptional circumstances, and this is a shift in the assumption so that bereaved families in these situations will have access to legal aid. The Justice Secretary is working through the details of how that will work and the underpinning guidance, which will be published before the end of the year.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Every death in custody is a tragedy, and I hope that the journey to which the Minister refers is a quick one. There are 110 recommendations in the report. Will he confirm that the Government will respond to each and every recommendation? When will the response be forthcoming? He has not been specific in that regard.

Mr Hurd: I did make it clear in my statement that we published our response today and I am placing it in the Library. When the hon. Lady reads it, I hope that she will see that it is a substantive response to all the thematic considerations that Dame Elish has brought forward.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): In Croydon, we had the tragic death of Seni Lewis in a mental health hospital, which was one of the cases that led to this important review. Following the lessons from the Seni Lewis case, does the Minister agree that non-natural deaths in a mental health setting should also trigger an independent investigation—with the emphasis on independent—as already happens when a death occurs in police custody and in prisons? Will the Lord Chancellor’s review of legal aid for bereaved families, to which the Minister referred, also cover the deaths of people in mental health custody?

Mr Hurd: I met the Lewis family, and it is impossible not to be moved by what they have had to endure. The announcement today about a change in assumption regarding access to legal aid refers to deaths in police custody and prison. The Justice Secretary is conducting a wider review of access to legal aid in other situations.

Balfour Declaration

5.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Balfour declaration—issued on 2 November 1917 by my predecessor as Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour—and its legacy today.

As the British Army advanced towards Jerusalem in the last 12 months of the first world war, with the aim of breaking the Ottoman empire’s grip on the middle east, the Government published their policy concerning the territory that would become the British mandate for Palestine. The House will recall the material sentence of the Balfour declaration:

“His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

A century after those words were written, I believe that the Balfour declaration paved the way for the birth of a great nation. The state of Israel has prevailed over every obstacle, from the harshness of nature to the visceral hostility of its enemies, to become a free society with a thriving and innovative economy and the same essential values that we in Britain hold dear. Liberty, democracy and the rule of law have found a home in Israel—more so than anywhere else in the middle east. Most of all, there is the incontestable moral purpose of Israel to provide a persecuted people with a safe and secure homeland.

We should not brush aside how the pernicious extent of anti-Semitism in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—decades before the holocaust—created the necessity for the Balfour declaration. It was in 1881 that the most powerful adviser at the court of Tsar Alexander II vowed that one third of Russian Jews would be forced to convert, one third would emigrate and the remainder would be left to starve. The moral case for establishing a

“national home for the Jewish people”

was to provide a haven from such horrors. So Her Majesty’s Government are proud of Britain’s part in creating Israel, and we shall mark the centenary of the Balfour declaration on Thursday in that spirit.

I see no contradiction in being a friend of Israel and a believer in that country’s destiny while also being profoundly moved by the suffering of those who were affected and dislodged by its birth. That vital caveat in the Balfour declaration—intended to safeguard the rights of other communities, by which, of course, we mean the Palestinians—has not been fully realised. In the words of Amos Oz, the Israeli novelist, the tragedy of this conflict is not that it is a clash between right and wrong, but rather a “clash between right and right”.

The Government believe that the only way of bringing peace is through a two-state solution, defined as a secure Israel, the homeland of the Jewish people, standing alongside a viable, sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state, the homeland for the Palestinian people, as envisaged by UN General Assembly resolution 181. For Israel, the birth of a Palestinian state would safeguard its demographic

[Boris Johnson]

future as a Jewish democracy. For Palestinians, a state of their own would allow them to realise their aspirations for self-determination and self-government.

When the parties held their first peace conference in Madrid in 1991, the leader of the Palestinian delegation, Haidar Abdul Shafi, described those aspirations as follows:

“We seek neither an admission of guilt after the fact, nor vengeance for past iniquities, but rather an act of will that would make a just peace a reality.”

I believe that a just peace will be a reality when two states for two peoples co-exist in the Holy Land, and that is the goal we must strive to bring about.

The House knows the troubled history of the peace process so far. The truth is that no direct talks have taken place between the parties since 2014. But the US Administration have shown their commitment to breaking the deadlock, and a new American envoy, Jason Greenblatt, has made repeated visits to the region. The Government will of course support these efforts in whatever way we can, and we urge the parties to refrain from acting in ways that make the goal of two states ever harder to achieve. For Israelis, that means halting settlement activity in the occupied territories. The pace of construction has regrettably accelerated, notably with the approval of the first new housing units in Hebron for 15 years and the first completely new settlement in the west bank since 1999. For Palestinians, it means restoring full counter-terrorism co-operation with Israel, in line with UN resolution 2334, and implementing the recommendations of the Quartet report on curbing incitement.

Britain is one of the largest donors to the Palestinian Authority, with the primary aim of strengthening the institutions that would form the basis of any future Palestinian state. It may be helpful for the House if I set out the Government’s view of a fair compromise between the parties. The borders between the two states should be based on the lines as they stood on 4 June 1967—the eve of the six-day war—with equal land swaps to reflect the national, security, and religious interests of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. There must be security arrangements that, for Israelis, prevent the resurgence of terrorism; and, for Palestinians, respect their sovereignty, ensure freedom of movement, and demonstrate that occupation is over. There needs to be a just, fair, agreed and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee question, in line with UN resolution 1515. In practice, this means that any such agreement must be demographically compatible with two states for two peoples and a generous package of international compensation should be made available. The final determination of Jerusalem must be agreed by the parties, ensuring that the holy city is a shared capital of Israel and a Palestinian state, granting access and religious rights for all who hold it dear.

This vision of a just settlement finds its roots in another British-drafted document: UN resolution 242, adopted 50 years ago this November, which enshrines the principle of land for peace based on the 1967 lines. That essential principle has inspired every serious effort to resolve this conflict—from the Camp David peace treaty signed by Israel and Egypt almost 40 years ago, to the Arab peace initiative first placed on the table in 2002, which offers normal relations with Israel in return for an end to occupation.

I believe that the goal of two states is still achievable, and that with ingenuity and good will, the map of the Holy Land can be configured in ways that meet the aspirations of both parties. A century after the Balfour declaration helped to create the state of Israel—an achievement that no one in this House would wish to undo—there is unfinished business and work to be done. We in this country, mindful of our historic role, and co-operating closely with our allies, will not shirk from that challenge. I commend this statement to the House.

5.28 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. As we approach the centenary of the Balfour declaration, Labour Members are glad to join him in commemorating that historic anniversary and expressing once again our continued support for the state of Israel.

In 1918, Labour’s first Cabinet Minister, Arthur Henderson, said:

“The British Labour Party believes that the responsibility of the British people in Palestine should be fulfilled to the utmost of their power...to ensure the economic prosperity, political autonomy and spiritual freedom of both the Jews and Arabs in Palestine.”

The Labour party has adopted that position, not least in recognition of the egalitarian goals that inspired the early pioneers of the Israeli state. We think, in particular, of the kibbutz movement—a group of people dedicated to establishing a more egalitarian society free from the prejudice and persecution that they had experienced in their home countries. Even today, despite the challenges that I will address in respect of its relationship with the Palestinian people, modern Israel still stands out for its commitment to egalitarianism—in particular, its commitment to women and LGBT communities in a region where these groups are far too often subject to fierce discrimination.

Today, it is right to think about the successes of Israel, but we must also be aware that 100 years on, the promise in the Balfour letter cited by the Foreign Secretary—that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”—

remains unfulfilled, and we have more to do. I urge the Foreign Secretary to take the opportunity of the centenary to reflect once again on Britain’s role in the region, as his predecessor did 100 years ago, and ask whether we could do more to bring about lasting peace and stability in the middle east. Can we do more to ensure that the political rights, as well as the civil and religious rights, of Palestinian people are protected, just as Mr Balfour intended all those years ago?

On that point, as the Foreign Secretary well knows, I believe that there is no better or more symbolic way of marking the Balfour centenary than for the UK officially to recognise the state of Palestine. We have just heard the Foreign Secretary talk in explicit terms about the benefits for both Israel and Palestine that the birth of Palestinian statehood would bring. Surely we can play more of a part in delivering that by formally recognising the Palestinian state.

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman knows that in 2011, one of his other predecessors, William Hague, said:

“We reserve the right to recognise a Palestinian state...at a moment of our choosing and when it can best help to bring about peace.”—[*Official Report*, 9 November 2011; Vol. 535, c. 290.]

Almost six years have passed since that statement—six years in which the humanitarian situation in the occupied territories has become ever more desperate, six years in which the cycle of violence has continued unabated and the people of Israel remain at daily risk from random acts of terror, six years in which the pace of settlement building and the displacement of Palestinian people have increased, and six years in which moves towards a lasting peace have ground to a halt.

Will the Foreign Secretary tell the House today whether the Government still plan to recognise the state of Palestine and, if not now, when? Conversely, if they no longer have such plans, can the Foreign Secretary tell us why things have changed? He will remember that on 13 October 2014, the House stated that the Palestinian state should be recognised. The anniversary of the Balfour declaration is a reminder that when the British Government lay out their policies on the middle east in black and white, those words matter and can make a difference. With the empty vessel that is the American President making lots of noise but being utterly directionless, the need for Britain to show leadership on this issue is ever more pressing.

Will the Foreign Secretary make a start today on the issue of Palestinian statehood? As we rightly reflect on the last 100 years, we have a shared duty to look towards the future and towards the next generation of young people growing up in Israel and Palestine today. That generation knows nothing but division and violence, and those young people have been badly let down by the actions, and the inaction, of their own leaders. Will young Israelis grow up in a world in which air raids, car rammings and random stabbings become a commonplace fact of life? Will they grow up in a country in which military service remains not just compulsory but necessary, because they are surrounded by hostile neighbours who deny their very right to exist? Will young Palestinians grow up in a world in which youth unemployment remains at 58%, reliant on humanitarian aid and unable to shape their own futures? Will they inherit a map on which the ever-expanding settlements and the destruction of their own houses make it harder and harder to envisage what a viable independent Palestine would even look like?

I do not know whether the Foreign Secretary agrees with the Prime Minister about whether it is worth answering hypothetical questions, but as we mark the centenary of the vital step taken by a former British Foreign Secretary in recognition of Israeli statehood, I ask this Foreign Secretary how he believes he will be remembered in 100 years' time. Will the Government in which he serves be remembered for recognising the statehood of the Palestinian people and taking a similarly vital step towards correcting an historic wrong? I can assure him that if the Government are not prepared to take that step, the next Labour Government will be.

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the spirit in which she addressed the questions. She asks, if I may say so, the right questions about the way ahead. The UK is substantially committed to the support of the Palestinian Authority and to building up the institutions in Palestine. British taxpayers' cash helps about 25,000 kids to go to school, we help with about 125,000 medical cases every year and the Department for International Development gives, as she knows very well, substantial sums to support the Palestinian Authority with a view to strengthening those institutions.

When it comes to recognising that state, we judge, in common with our French friends and the vast majority of our European friends and partners, that the moment is not yet right to play that card. That on its own will not end the occupation or bring peace. After all, it is not something we can do more than once: that card having been played, that will be it. We judge that it is better to give every possible encouragement to both sides to seize the moment and, if I may say so, I think the right hon. Lady is quite hard, perhaps characteristically, on the current Administration in Washington, which is perhaps her job—

Emily Thornberry: It ought to be your job, too.

Boris Johnson: Indeed, and I am hard where it is necessary, but there is a job to be done. At the moment, as I think the right hon. Lady would accept, there is a conjuncture in the stars that is uncommonly propitious. I will not put it higher than that, but there is a chance that we could make progress on this very vexed dossier. We need the Americans to work with us to do that and we need them to be in the lead because, as she will understand, of the facts as they are in the middle east.

We need the Palestinian Authority, with a clear mandate, to sit down and negotiate with the Israelis and do the deal that is there to be done, and which everybody understands. We all know the shape of the future map and we all know how it could be done. What is needed now is political will, and I can assure the right hon. Lady and the House that the UK will be absolutely determined to encourage both sides to do such a deal.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Of course it is right to mark the centenary of the Balfour declaration, but as we have already heard, we often concentrate too much on the first part of the declaration at the expense of the second. Does anyone really believe that the statement—the very clear statement—that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine” has been adhered to? Does my right hon. Friend not agree that a positive way in which to mark this important centenary would be for the UK finally to recognise a Palestinian state, something many of us in this House believe would honour the vision of those who helped bring about the state of Israel in the first place?

Boris Johnson: I agree very much with my right hon. Friend that, as it were, the protasis of the Balfour declaration has been fulfilled, but the apodosis has not. It should have spoken of the political rights of those peoples and, by the way, in my view it should have identified specifically the Palestinian people. That has not yet happened, and it is certainly our intention to make sure that Balfour does not remain unfinished business. As I have said, we want to recognise a Palestinian state as part of a two-state solution, but we judge that the moment to do that is not yet ripe.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): While the historical context is complex, we have stressed the need to learn some important and relevant lessons from the Balfour declaration. There is plenty of room for lessons to be learned, and for historic and moral responsibilities to be assumed for the betterment of all the peoples of the middle east today. This must start with the recognition of the state of Palestine as a fundamental stepping stone towards a lasting two-state solution.

[Chris Law]

I welcome the Foreign Secretary's words, at least in principle, on that solution. However, we deeply regret that the UK Government have not fulfilled their commission in the declaration that, as we have already heard,

"nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine".

The consequence of this failure remains all too clear. We hope that the centenary of the Balfour declaration will serve as an opportunity for reflection and a reinvigorated peace process across the middle east.

The Scottish National party supports the European Union position of a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders, and we firmly encourage Palestine and Israel to reach a sustainable, negotiated settlement under international law, based on mutual recognition and the determination to co-exist peacefully. The SNP has consistently condemned obstacles to progress in the peace process, such as the indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israel or the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied territories.

Opposition Members have repeatedly called on the UK Government to use their influence to help to revitalise the peace process. I repeat those calls and ask the Foreign Secretary what efforts he is making to use his influence to bring about a renewed effort to break through the political deadlock and bring an end to this conflict.

The Scottish Government have been clear that they would welcome a Palestinian consulate in Edinburgh. Will the Foreign Secretary take this opportunity to recognise formally a Palestinian state as a fundamental stepping stone to a two-state solution by enabling the opening of an embassy?

Boris Johnson: Of course we are doing everything in our power to push on with a two-state solution. I have spoken about the outlines of a deal that everyone can imagine—the land swaps for peace that can be arranged—but it is also vital that we remember that Israel has a legitimate security interest. If we are to get this done, I am afraid it is essential that not just Fatah and the PA but Hamas as well have to understand that they must renounce terror, their use of anti-Semitic propaganda and the glorification of so-called terrorist martyrs. They must commit to the Quartet principles, and then there is genuinely the opportunity to get both sides together.

The hon. Gentleman asks rightly about what this country is doing specifically to advance this, and we are engaged heavily in the diplomacy. Not only is the Israeli Prime Minister coming this week, as is proper, to mark Balfour, but Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, will come next year. We look forward to an intensification of contacts with them in the run-up to that visit.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best route to rediscover the unique moral authority associated with the Zionist project, delivering after two millennia a safe place for global Jewry in the remarkable state of Israel, is for the state of Israel itself, secured by the support of the world's pre-eminent power of 2017, to take on responsibility for the delivery of the unfulfilled part of the Balfour declaration by the world's pre-eminent power of 1917, which it plainly is not in a position now to deliver itself, and for Israel to share the security and justice it has achieved for global Jewry with their neighbours?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I recognise the great learning and expertise he brings to discussion of this issue and his passion for the cause of finding a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is something that I agree strongly is in the hands of this generation of Israeli politicians, and they are certainly aware of that. But it is also in the hands of the Palestinians, and as I said a moment ago, they must do certain things if we are to get this process moving. It is also vital, as my hon. Friend rightly observes, that the greatest patron, ally and supporter of Israel—the United States—should play its full role in moving this process forward.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Balfour declaration recognised the rights of the Jewish people to national self-determination in their historic homelands, which go back more than 3,000 years. Does the Foreign Secretary believe that there are now new opportunities in the middle east to start again to try to secure a negotiated solution to this intractable conflict, so that the Palestinian people as well as the Jewish people can have their own states in the region?

Boris Johnson: I do indeed recognise the opportunity the hon. Lady identifies. I believe there is an unusual alignment of the stars. Effectively, we have the chance to proceed now with a version of the Arab peace plan that has been on the table since 2002. Nobody ever got rich by betting on a successful conclusion of the middle east peace process, but there is an opportunity and we must do whatever we can to persuade both sides that this is their moment for greatness. That is certainly the case we are making to both of them.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): As we celebrate 100 years of the Balfour declaration, does the Foreign Secretary agree that this event can be regarded as an act of great diplomatic skill on the part of his illustrious predecessor, Lord Balfour, in so far as it triggered a process leading to the creation of Israel, thus providing a strong, stable, democratic and non-sectarian ally for the UK in the heart of the notoriously unstable middle east?

Boris Johnson: I agree totally with my hon. Friend. The Balfour declaration was an historic event that led to a giant political fact: the creation of the state of Israel, which I believe to be one of the most stunning political achievements of the 20th century. As I said, I do not think anybody in this House could seriously wish the undoing of that fact. Nobody looking at Israel—a democracy and a liberal, tolerant society in the middle east—could seriously wish away that achievement. We should celebrate the existence of the state of Israel—we certainly celebrate our relationship with the state of Israel here in this country—but we must recognise and accept that for others the fact of the Balfour declaration carries very different overtones. They remember it in a very different spirit, so it is important we mark this anniversary with sensitivity and balance.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): The best legacy of the centenary of the Balfour declaration would be to make concrete progress towards the two-state solution we all want to see. Does the Foreign Secretary agree, in this centenary year, to support and properly invest in the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace,

which could help us to take that big step? I desperately want to see a Palestinian state and have campaigned for that all my life, but it is very important that Members understand there is no legalistic, unilateral or bureaucratic route to that objective. It will not be achieved by being imposed from the outside or by unilateral declarations here or anywhere else. It will only be achieved by getting Israelis and Palestinians to work together to build trust, to negotiate and to compromise, and for economic development and trade in the west bank, and the reconstruction and demilitarisation of Gaza.

Boris Johnson: I completely agree with the aspiration the hon. Gentleman sets out. I believe that the future is economic interpenetration and mutual prosperity. That is why next year we are investing £3 million in co-existence projects of exactly the kind he describes.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is there anything we can do about illegal settlements beyond saying that we are very, very cross?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who makes a valid point. Beyond our repeated statements of disapproval, Members may recollect that we led the way just before Christmas last year with UN resolution 2334, which specifically condemned new illegal settlements. The Prime Minister and I have been at pains to point out to Prime Minister Netanyahu, both here in London and in Jerusalem, our view that the settlements are illegal. That is a point on which we will continue to insist.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is certainly right that the House celebrates the creation of the state of Israel, but it cannot celebrate—in fact, it must condemn—the failure of successive UK Governments to help safeguard the rights of Palestinians. Given our historical role, will the Foreign Secretary set out what single, concrete international initiative he intends spearheading to help secure a viable Palestinian state, and will he set out what conditions would have to be met for the UK to recognise Palestine?

Boris Johnson: I have been pretty clear with the House already that we see the most fertile prospects now in the new push coming from America, and we intend to support that. As and when it becomes necessary to play the recognition card, we certainly will do it—we want to do it—but now is not yet the time.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Notwithstanding the challenges of unfinished business to which my right hon. Friend rightly referred, does he agree that centenaries can be a powerful way to draw people together, thoughtfully and respectfully, even where, as here, the history is complex and nuanced?

Boris Johnson: I strongly agree. It has been salutary for people to look back over the last 100 years at the many missed opportunities and at the reasons Balfour thought it necessary to make his declaration. It was not, as is frequently said, simply that Britain wanted to solicit American support in the first world war; it was genuinely because of a need, an imperative, to deal with the pogroms and the anti-Semitism that had plagued Russia and so many parts of eastern Europe for so long.

It was vital to find a homeland for the Jewish people, and history can be grateful that Balfour made the decision he did, though we have to understand at the same time the injustice and suffering occasioned by that decision.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): In the same week we celebrate the centenary of the Balfour declaration, will the Foreign Secretary take the opportunity to condemn the actions in Abu Dhabi in recent days, when five Israelis who won medals at the judo grand slam were denied the chance afforded to other athletes of celebrating with their country's flag and anthem during the awards ceremonies and when one athlete refused to shake the hand of an Israeli athlete? There can be no place for this type of discrimination. If we are to see peace, we have to acknowledge and support both the Israeli and the Palestinian people.

Boris Johnson: I completely agree. We condemn anti-Semitism and displays of such prejudice wherever they occur. The example the hon. Lady gives shows the paramount need to sort out this problem and end this running sore.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only is Israel a beacon of hope and democracy in the middle east but that our strategic partnerships in the fields of security and defence are vital to the safety of both our nations and should be enhanced and developed?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is completely right. We have an intensifying commercial partnership with Israel. It is a country at the cutting edge of high technology of all kinds. We co-operate in financial services, aviation and all kinds of fields, as well as, very importantly, security and intelligence, as he rightly identifies.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's measured tone in recognising the rights of Palestinians and the obligations that the Balfour declaration places on the UK Government. When he has dinner with the Prime Minister of Israel, may I suggest that he says that sustainable peace in the middle east can be built only on the basis of equal rights, equal dignity and respect for all, Israelis and Palestinians alike? On the UK Government's role, will he point out that we will uphold the Geneva convention, which Britain co-wrote and ratified after the second world war, in that we will not trade with settlements that he himself has said are illegal? Finally, may I point out that the House considered the issue of recognition at length and, following considered debate, voted by 274 votes to 12 that the UK Government should recognise the state of Israel alongside the state of Palestine as part of our moral obligation to the Palestinian people, as set out in the declaration?

Boris Johnson: I certainly agree with the majority view of Members of the House that we must, in time, recognise the Palestinian state. I have to be honest, however: I do not happen to think that now is the most effective moment to do that. In that, we are at one with our partners around the EU. The hon. Gentleman makes a point about boycotts. I do not think that that is the right way forward. I do not think that boycotting Israeli products makes sense. The biggest losers would

[*Boris Johnson*]

be the workers from Palestinian and Arab communities who benefit immensely from the economic activity generated by those Israeli companies.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): As my right hon. Friend rightly says, we have a long way to go to achieve an end to violence and a two-state solution, but does he agree with me and many of my constituents that this anniversary is an opportunity to celebrate modern Israel, its vibrant economy, its liberty and diversity, its democracy and, above all, the fact that at a time of rising anti-Semitism, it still provides a safe home for the Jewish people?

Boris Johnson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on speaking up for his constituents. He is right to want to celebrate the existence of the state of Israel, though he must recognise that in celebrating the Balfour declaration we must also accept that the declaration itself, on 2 November 1917, today has different echoes for different people around the world, and it is important that we be balanced and sensitive in our approach.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): For a change, will the Foreign Secretary tell me what the Israeli Government have to do to get a peace settlement? A lot of emphasis is put on the Palestinians. How does he think that Donald Trump can resolve the problem, when he has failed to put pressure on the Israeli Government to stop the settlements?

Boris Johnson: I think the hon. Gentleman answered his own question as he sat down. The Israeli Government need to stop the illegal settlements. They are not yet making it impossible to deliver the new map, but every time they build new units—as he knows, there are new units going up in Hebron in east Jerusalem—they make that eventual land swap more difficult and move us further from a two-state solution. That is the point we make to our Israeli friends—and, by the way, that is the point made by many allies around the world.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It is clearly true that residents of the occupied Palestinian territories do not enjoy the full civil rights promised to them in the Balfour declaration, but is it not also true that neither do the more than 800,000 Jews expelled from countries in the middle east and north Africa? We must remember that 21% of the population of the current state of Israel are Arab Palestinians, whereas there has been wholesale ethnic cleansing of Jews from Arab and north African countries, starting in 1948.

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend has an excellent point and alludes to the third leg of the Balfour declaration. Balfour spoke of the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities and then of course of the rights of Jewish communities elsewhere around the world. As my hon. Friend rightly says, hundreds of thousands of them were expelled from their homes, too. They will also benefit from a lasting peace between the Arabs and Israelis. That is what we want to achieve and what we are pushing for.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is impossible to reject the Balfour declaration in its entirety, as some may seek to do, and support a two-state solution?

Will he therefore join me in celebrating Balfour and commit to redoubling our efforts to achieve a two-state solution and peace in the region?

Boris Johnson: I certainly share the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for and passionate belief in the vital importance of the state of Israel, which, as I told the House earlier, I believe to be one of the great achievements of humanity in the 20th century, given all the suffering the Jewish people had been through. It is a great immovable fact—I hope—of geopolitics. We also have to recognise, however, that in the course of creating that wonderful experiment, huge numbers of people suffered and lost their homes. Their wishes and feelings must also be respected. It is in that spirit that we mark Balfour today.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Is it not the case that the rights of non-Jews in the state of Israel are 100% protected as per the Balfour declaration? Does the Foreign Secretary not agree that it would be wholly inappropriate and wrong for anyone to seek to use this centenary to perpetuate the myth and falsehood that the failure to establish a Palestinian state is wholly the responsibility of Israel, because to do so would be to deny the role of neighbouring Arab countries in 1948 in attacking Israel and preventing the existence of an Arab state, and also the failure of the Arab leadership to grasp peace plans as they have been offered?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is completely right. That is why I speak in the terms that I do about the state of Israel. It is a pluralist society, a society that protects the rights of those who live within it. It is a democracy. It is, in my view, a country to be saluted and celebrated. My hon. Friend is, of course, also right in pointing to the many failures of diplomacy and politics that I am afraid have been perpetuated by the Palestinian leadership for generations. We have to hope now that the current generation of leaders in the Palestinian Authority will have the mandate and the momentum to deliver a different result.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Some Members will be aware that I spent nearly a year and a half in Gaza working as a surgeon in 1991 and 1992. I was there when the Madrid peace process started, and by half-past 4 in the afternoon, young men were climbing on to armoured cars with olive branches. When I came back four weeks ago, my feeling was that we were further from peace than we had been a quarter of a century earlier.

When I spent time on the west bank recently, I saw settlements expanding at an incredible rate. We blame America, and we expect America to come up with a solution, but people in Israel look to Europe, because they see themselves as part of Europe. I think the United Kingdom and Europe need to use their power to secure a new peace process, and part of that is to do with recognition. How can we talk about a two-state solution if we do not recognise both states?

Boris Johnson: Obviously, I have great respect for the work that the hon. Lady has done in Gaza, and I appreciate the suffering that she has seen there. There is no doubt that the situation in Gaza is terrible. As the hon. Lady knows, the UK Government do a lot to try to remedy affairs by supporting, for instance, sanitation projects

and education, but in the end a trade-off must be achieved. The Israelis must open up Gaza for trade and greater economic activity to give the people hope and opportunity, but before that happens, Hamas must stop firing rockets at Israel. Hamas must recognise the right of the Israeli state to exist, and it must stop spewing out anti-Semitic propaganda.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Last year I had the privilege of visiting Israel and the west bank with members of Conservative Friends of Israel. I am bound to say that I was disappointed by the lack of impetus, or of willingness, on the part of both sides to engage and get round the table. Does not the centenary commemoration present an opportunity both for the resumption of direct peace talks, and for the United Kingdom to continue to engage and encourage the fulfilment of that two-state solution?

Boris Johnson: I absolutely agree. I hope that both sides of the equation, the Palestinians and the Israelis, will study my statement with care, because I believe that it offers a way forward that would be massively to the advantage not just of their countries, but of the whole of the middle east and, indeed, the world.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome much of what the Foreign Secretary has said this afternoon, and the sensitivity with which he has said it, although I think he is making the wrong decision about recognition.

During his visit, will the Foreign Secretary raise with Prime Minister Netanyahu the issue of legislation relating to the annexation of settlement blocs in Jerusalem, which would displace 120,000 Palestinian people? That is clearly an impediment to the achievement of the viable two-state solution that is wanted by Members on all sides of the argument.

Boris Johnson: I can answer the hon. Lady's question very briefly. I will certainly raise that issue, as I have raised the issue of illegal settlements in the past, directly with Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is deeply disappointing that the Leader of the Opposition will not attend a dinner to mark the centenary of the Balfour declaration?

Boris Johnson: I believe that it is disappointing. The vast majority of Members on both sides of the House have said this afternoon that this occasion is of huge importance to the world, because it marks an event in which our country played an enormous part—and, indeed, we still have a large part to play. One would have thought that the Leader of the Opposition would at least be interested in trying to achieve a solution to a problem that has bedevilled the world for so long, and would not, by his absence, be so blatantly appearing to side with one party and not the other. I must say that I find that unfortunate.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary's refusal to treat Palestinians and Israelis equally, as shown by his refusal to recognise Palestine as a state alongside Israel, is exactly the reason the Israelis are building in Hebron and, last week, annexed further settlements in the Jerusalem municipality. What will the Government actually do to honour Balfour's assurance

to non-Jewish communities? So far, apart from warm words, all I have heard is that the Foreign Secretary seems to support trade with illegal settlements, that he is setting new conditions for the Palestinians, and that he is blaming the Palestinian leaders for their own occupation.

Boris Johnson: It is wholly untrue to say that we have offered the Palestinians nothing but warm words. The hon. Gentleman should consider the huge sums that the UK gives to the Palestinian authorities, the massive efforts that we make to help them with their security concerns, and the intimate co-operation that takes place between the UK and the Palestinian Authority. We are doing everything in our power to ready the Palestinians for statehood, but we do not consider that they are ready for recognition yet. This is obviously not the moment, given the problems that Mahmoud Abbas is experiencing. We think that a much more productive approach would be getting both sides together and beginning the process of negotiation on the basis of the programme that I have outlined today, leading to a two-state solution. That is what we need.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's measured statement, and his optimism about the prospects for a two-state solution with Israel, rightly, living in security. Does he agree, however, that the accelerated settlement-building is not just to be gently deprecated but is truly egregious, illegal, and a growing obstacle to peace?

Boris Johnson: I totally agree with my hon. Friend, and that is the language that we have been using. It is what my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East has said time and again during his trips to the region. Indeed, whenever representatives of either party have come to this country we have strongly condemned the building of illegal settlement units, and we have denounced the recent acceleration in the building of those units. We think that that is making it more difficult to achieve a two-state solution, but it is not yet impossible, which is why we want to seize this opportunity.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am proud to sit on these Benches as the first ever British Palestinian Member of Parliament. My family are from Jerusalem. They were there at the time of the Balfour declaration, but, like many others, they had to leave as part of the diaspora.

When it comes to recognition, the Foreign Secretary speaks of playing a card, but this is not a game. He speaks of a prize to be given for recognition, but it is not something to be bestowed; it is something that the Palestinians should just have. Can he not see how Britain leads the world on foreign policy? If we are to have a true peace process, we must ensure that both sides are equal as they step up to the negotiating table.

Boris Johnson: I strongly agree with the hon. Lady's last point. I am full of respect for the suffering of her family in the face of what took place following the creation of the state of Israel, and I know that the experience of many Palestinian families was—and indeed still is—tragic, but our ambition in holding out the prospect of recognition, working with our friends and partners, and trying to drive forward the peace process

[Boris Johnson]

leading to a two-state solution is to give Palestinian families such as her own exactly the rights and the future that they deserve, in a viable, contiguous, independent, sovereign Palestinian state. That is what we want to achieve.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know the Foreign Secretary will agree with me that a prosperous democracy where people can freely practise their religion in Israel is part of what we want to see ultimately in the Palestinian state as well. Can he confirm that he will use every opportunity of this centenary of the Balfour declaration to push forward that long-term goal?

Boris Johnson: Absolutely: that is the ambition and the goal, and clearly we hope that the state of which I just spoke will be a democratic, liberal state, just as Israel is.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let us have the busiest MP: Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: As a friend of Israel, I look forward to the day when the Palestinian people can enjoy the security of a sovereign state on the successful conclusion of a negotiated two-state solution. One of the biggest obstacles to achieving that is the Palestinian Authority's counterproductive unilateral steps to gain statehood recognition through international bodies, so will the Foreign Secretary join me in calling for the PA to stop those harmful measures and instead to express support for the renewal of direct peace talks, because that really is the only way forward?

Boris Johnson: By far the better way for the PA to achieve what it wants is not to go through international bodies, but to get around the table with the Israelis and begin those crucial negotiations.

Point of Order

6.12 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last week in his evidence to the Exiting the European Union Committee, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told us that the list of sectors for which an analysis of the impact of Brexit was completed would be made available imminently. He said:

“I have signed a letter to the Lords committee on it, which includes the list. If it has not gone yet, it will go soon.”

On Thursday, when I inquired of Department for Exiting the European Union Ministers, who were then giving evidence, about the list, they said: “I know as much as you do in terms of what the Secretary of State said yesterday. I know that there is a list, and as I think he said it has been signed off to go, so it should be with both your Committees before too long, I suspect.”

A couple of hours ago the list finally arrived in the Lords, buried in a 25-page document, but it has not been sent to the Commons Select Committee for Exiting the EU, as promised. In fact, it only received it after being sent the document from my office.

Given that the publication of this list has been promised “shortly” at least since June in this House, including by the Prime Minister in October; that over 120 MPs wrote to the Secretary of State requesting it just some weeks ago; and that the overwhelming interest that Members of Parliament will have, for businesses and families in our constituencies, in the studies the Government are undertaking on the impact of Brexit on our economy, would it not have been in order for the list to have been, at a minimum, published in a written ministerial statement, so that it is equally and easily accessible by all Members of this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is not a matter for the Chair, but it is definitely on the record now. I am sure people have heard what the hon. Lady had to say, and hopefully they will respond as they have done for the Lords.

Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill [Lords]

[Relevant documents: *The Eighth Report of the Defence Committee Session 2016-17, SDSR 2015 and the Army, HC108; and the Government response, HC311, of Session 2017-19*]

Second Reading

6.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We have the best armed forces in the world. From their service in Afghanistan, and their support to the coalition to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria, to being at the forefront of the humanitarian response to hurricane Irma, their courage and professionalism are renowned the world over. We are investing some £18 billion a year in new ships, submarines, aircraft and armoured vehicles, but it is not enough just to modernise our armed forces with new equipment; we need to ensure that service within the armed forces reflects a modern lifestyle.

We know that one of the main reasons why people choose to leave the armed forces is the impact of service on their family life. At the moment, many regular personnel who are unable to meet their unlimited military commitments for periods of time have no other choice than to leave the service. They lose a good career; we lose their hard-won knowledge, skills and experience.

It is a fact that today people want greater choice over how they run their lives, and when and where they work. If we are to compete for, and retain, the best people, our armed forces need to respond with greater flexibility, making the lives of those who proudly serve our nation easier.

Total and unlimited choice is not, of course, possible in the disciplined environment of the armed forces, where the requirement to serve the needs of the country is paramount. So maintaining operational effectiveness is our absolute red line, but that does not mean that we should not offer our people more choice about how they live and work.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I could not agree more with what the Secretary of State has said so far about both the professionalism of our armed forces and the need for greater flexibility, but does he recognise that one of the reasons why many people have left, and one of the reasons why there has been such an impact on their family life, is the huge reduction in armed forces personnel numbers and the increasing expectation on those people, with all that is going on? That has been one of the causes of their having such poor family lives.

Sir Michael Fallon: The armed forces continue to meet what are called the harmony guidelines and we have stabilised the size of the armed forces—the hon. Gentleman referred to reductions—but I also recognise that we are asking ever more of our armed forces each successive year, with the deployments in different parts of the world.

The 2015 strategic defence and security review committed us to an ambitious programme of modernisation of our personnel policies. There are already a range of initiatives in place to support flexible working. Subject to chain of command approval, service personnel have already been

able to work compressed hours or vary their start and finish times. They can also take unpaid leave for up to three months and longer-term career breaks to help meet life's commitments—for example, when a partner is posted overseas—and, in certain circumstances, they are even able to work from home.

We know that these existing initiatives are popular: in the six months to July 2017, 1,400 personnel had taken advantage of them. This Bill will take these initiatives a step further and provide more formal arrangements and certainty, including allowing personnel to work shorter hours.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State might come on to answer this question: I acknowledge that members of the armed forces can already apply for flexible working, as he has stated, including late starts and working from home, but it would be helpful to hear more about the gap the Secretary Of State sees being filled by the new forms of flexible working he is introducing.

Sir Michael Fallon: The hon. Lady anticipates my speech, as I will be coming on to that. If I do not do so adequately, I am sure she will have the chance to intervene again.

More flexible working than we have at present would help alleviate some of the strain people face at critical times in their career, whether because of family responsibilities, caring needs, or a desire to pursue further educational opportunities. It will help us to recruit and retain more of the people we need, and make our services more representative of the society they serve.

In particular, we are committed to see women account for 15% of our new recruits by 2020, and evidence suggests that they see greater opportunities for flexible working in the services as particularly attractive. Two thirds of the applications approved in our ongoing flexible duties trial are from female service personnel. We are on track to meet our 2020 target, with the latest figure for all services at 11.4%, but I want to do better than that, and the Bill will help. We have opened up every single role in our armed forces to women so that talent, not gender, determines how far anyone can go. That means ensuring that they are able to stay to achieve their potential. At the core of the Bill is our wish to ensure that the armed forces are seen as modern and attractive employers, but that is getting harder to achieve against an increasingly competitive backdrop, with the competition for talent expected to increase in the years ahead.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as one of those Members on the armed forces parliamentary scheme; I am currently doing the RAF one. Through the scheme, I have had the chance to meet soldiers and RAF personnel, and I have heard lots of things. Two things have come up on recent visits. The first is a need to ensure that the accommodation is right. Much of the accommodation is not right for families. In particular, it does not suit people who come into the armed forces when they are single and subsequently get married. The second point relates to training. Some of the RAF personnel are saying that they are not getting the training they need to work on the new F-35s. Will the Secretary of State address those two points?

Sir Michael Fallon: We are addressing the important issue of service families' accommodation, with various new arrangements for ensuring that they have improved accommodation. We are also putting a number of RAF personnel through the F-35 training programme. We have more than 100 personnel in the United States training up and learning how to support and maintain the F-35s, of which we have purchased more than a dozen so far.

More flexible working will help the services to compete and to attract and retain a better mix of people and skills. That will not only enhance operational capability through improved retention but provide a more diverse workforce. I am absolutely clear that a diverse workforce, with more women and more people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, will be a more operationally effective workforce.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I entirely concur with what the Secretary of State is saying about the roles that women can play in our armed forces, about the importance of diversity and about what the Bill can do to provide opportunities for flexible working. Does he really think, however, that this is going to be the silver bullet to deal with the recruitment crisis that exists, particularly within the Army? Figures released by the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) this summer showed that we are under-recruited on every course. When we look at the line infantry, the Guards and the Paras, and when we look at Army Training Regiment Winchester and Army Training Regiment Pirbright, we see that they are significantly below the required recruitment levels and participation levels in those crucial training courses.

Sir Michael Fallon: I have made it clear that the Army faces a recruitment challenge as the economy continues to grow. The Army is about 95% recruited and I am told that Sandhurst places are now filled for the coming courses, but we need to do more. We need to continue to ask ourselves why we are not attracting some of the people we want to attract.

Flexible working for the armed forces is principally about recruitment and better retention. I want to emphasise that this is not a method of saving money. So what does the Bill do? There are two main provisions. Clause 1 makes amendments to section 329 of the Armed Forces Act 2006, which makes provision regarding terms and conditions of enlistment and service. Service personnel will be able to temporarily reduce the time they are required for duty—for example, by setting aside one or two days a week on which they will not work or be liable for work—or to restrict the amount of time that they spend separated from their normal place of work. The amendments extend the existing regulation-making powers in section 329 to allow the Defence Council to enable forms of part-time service and protection from being separated from a home base for prolonged periods for people serving in the regular armed forces. Clause 1 also enables regulations to be made about the circumstances in which these new arrangements can be varied, suspended or terminated.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I represent a constituency with a long and proud military tradition. I recently tabled a parliamentary question to ask for the number of people from my constituency who had recently been

recruited to join the armed forces, but I was surprised to be told that that information was not held centrally. That seems absolutely extraordinary. It is important that our communities should be linked in to the armed forces and that we should know what sort of connections our constituencies have with them. Will the Secretary of State please look into this and check again whether that information is held centrally? If so, please could he let me know how many of my constituents want to join the armed forces?

Sir Michael Fallon: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern, but there is nothing sinister about this. Different regiments recruit in different ways, and my understanding is that the data are not collated on a constituency basis. However, I would be very happy to have another look at that.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much support this measure; it is absolutely right to compete for workers in the 21st century. However, terms in the guidance notes such as "back-filling" are troublesome. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would agree that it is necessary to maintain whole-time equivalents in our armed forces rather than relying constantly on back-filling. My 35 years' experience in the regulars and the reserves tells me that back-filling usually means colleagues filling in for others. Does he agree that that is guaranteed to demoralise people and cause the retention problems to which he has referred?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend has a great deal of experience in these matters. I know that when the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), winds up the debate, he will want to address that question about back-filling. This is not about making other members of a unit, a platoon or a section do more work to compensate. It is about arranging people's time in a more satisfactory manner.

The Government acknowledged the strength of feeling in the other place about ensuring that the new regulations would be subject to the affirmative procedure, so my colleague the noble Earl Lord Howe accepted Labour's amendments to that effect. It is of course important that Parliament ensures appropriate scrutiny of the forthcoming regulations. In practice, the arrangements will be temporary, limited to defined periods, and always subject to service needs to maintain operational capability. I want to be absolutely clear that maintaining operational effectiveness is our absolute red line.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I hope to speak later in the debate. My husband served in the armed forces, and I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would agree, given that the Government spend a lot of time looking at the hardware and infrastructure in the armed forces, that it is only right and proper that we also look at support for our armed forces personnel and their families. That is why this Bill is so important.

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, this proposal has the support not only of the service chiefs but crucially of the service family federations. They, too, see the advantage in it.

As I was saying, maintaining operational effectiveness is a red line. The Bill therefore also provides for the services to vary, suspend or terminate the new arrangements in circumstances to be prescribed in new regulations—

for example, in the case of a national emergency or a severe shortage of specialist personnel. There will also be instances where flexible working arrangements are simply not practicable—for example, while serving at sea, serving in a high-readiness unit or serving in a unit that is on the brink of deployment. Let us therefore be clear that the Bill will not enable every service person to work flexibly. It will, however, create an obligation for the services to consider applications from personnel to serve under the new flexible working arrangements. It will also require the services to record the terms of an approved application so that there is clarity for both parties in the arrangements. Clause 2 of the Bill will make small consequential amendments to existing legislation to provide for regular personnel temporarily serving under flexible working agreements to continue to be automatically excused jury service.

The Bill was developed with the three services, and the proposals have the support of all the service chiefs. They have been designed—and will continue to be developed—by the services and for the services. And, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) has just said, we should not forget the bedrock of those who follow and support our armed forces—namely, their families. I am particularly pleased that the families’ federations have welcomed our plans to improve flexible working opportunities in the armed forces. I quote:

“Improving family stability amongst Service families is one of our focus areas and we look forward to the implementation of this initiative”.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sir Michael Fallon: No, I am just concluding.

The Bill will not address all the challenges of recruiting and retaining personnel—it is not the silver bullet that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) thought it might be—but we believe that it will pave the way, in modernising the armed forces, to better reflecting today’s lifestyles and aspirations while ensuring that we retain a world-class fighting force. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.30 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I echo the Secretary of State’s words about the outstanding professionalism of our armed forces and our huge indebtedness to them. I want to make it clear at the outset that Labour supports the Bill in principle. Our scrutiny and questions will be in the spirit of seeking clarification and improving it, rather than opposing it. Furthermore, given that the Bill was introduced in the other place, some of our initial concerns have already been debated and clarified to some degree, which will help to expedite its passage in this House.

I am grateful to my good friend Lord Touhig, who speaks for the Opposition on defence matters in the other place, for his excellent work on this Bill. I am particularly grateful to him for pressing an amendment, which I am glad that the Government have accepted, as the Secretary of State confirmed, to ensure that the finer detail that is introduced in subsequent regulations will be subject to the affirmative procedure. In other words, we will get the opportunity to scrutinise any delegated legislation, which is an important safeguard because the

devil is so often in the detail. Having set such a good example, I wonder whether the Secretary of State could prevail upon his colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union to accept amendments to provide the same sort of transparency on important matters such as workers’ rights and environmental protections in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

Returning to the Bill in hand, the title is somewhat confusing at first sight, because the term “flexible working” already has connotations, usually referring to a situation where contractual hours remain the same but there is the opportunity to vary starting and finishing times or to work from home. This Bill is not about the right to request that sort of flexible working. That opportunity already exists for the armed forces, as do maternity and paternity leave and the opportunity to request a period of unpaid leave to undertake study, for example. The purpose of this Bill is to allow members of our armed forces to request to work for a defined period in a part-time capacity with the necessary contractual changes that that would entail and/or to request limits to separated service—deployment—for defined periods. As I have said, we welcome this Bill, because we support effective ways of improving conditions for those who serve in our armed forces, and we also want to enable the forces to draw from the widest possible pool of talent when recruiting personnel to serve.

We all recognise that the complexities of modern life mean juggling work and home responsibilities, and childcare arrangements are often complex when both parents work full time. In such circumstances, it does not take much to upset that delicately balanced situation, and the emotional turmoil of learning that a child, partner or parent is seriously ill is compounded by practical difficulties, which might mean frequent medical appointments or a stronger parental presence in the home. Many of us have faced such situations. For me, it was when I was very young, before I started my first job, when I stayed at home to look after my father and teenage sisters and nurse my mother through her terminal illness. Family issues are all the more complex for service personnel, with the expectations of constant readiness and deployment, and it is understandable that personnel sometimes feel forced to give up the service they love for civilian jobs that offer greater flexibility. However, it makes no sense to lose someone simply because they need a more flexible working arrangement for a specified time after all the investment that has gone into their training. That is where this Bill comes in, offering the possibility of consideration for part-time hours or limits to separated service. We agree and understand that there must always be regard for operational capability when assessing requests for such working.

There is a recruitment and retention crisis in our armed forces. The reasons why personnel leave are many and complex, but the 2017 armed forces continuous attitude survey found that the impact on family and personal life remains the top reason for leaving. A third of personnel have said that an option to work part time would strengthen their intention to stay, and a similar proportion say that an option for reduced separated service, including operational deployment, would make them more likely to remain in the forces. If the options available through the Bill can help to retain some of those personnel, that would clearly be beneficial.

[*Nia Griffith*]

I understand that assurances were given in the other place that the fact that someone had availed themselves of the opportunity to work part time would not count against them for promotion, and that assessment of applicants would be made on the basis of their skills, experience and future potential, regardless of any period of part-time or geographically limited working. That is vital to ensure that our services do not miss out on excellent candidates simply because they have taken a period of part-time work and that personnel are not disadvantaged. It is also important because we may find that women in particular will avail themselves of this part-time option, and we want to see more women not only recruited into the services, but retained and reaching senior ranks. Treating with parity those who have opted to take a period of part-time working will need more than a policy about its not affecting promotion prospects; it will need a cultural shift.

I also understand that assurances were given in the other place that personnel availing themselves of the options in this Bill would not lose their service accommodation. Clearly, a period of family difficulty is not a time to have any additional worries about accommodation. I would therefore be grateful if the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), could provide additional assurances in both those areas when he gets to his feet at the end of today's debate and explain how he proposes to engender the cultural shift that will be required.

Ian C. Lucas: Does my hon. Friend agree that many of the welcome initiatives in the Bill are being undercut by the increasingly strong movement of the armed forces to the M4 corridor and away from local communities? In my constituency, for example, the local Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers headquarters is being shifted from north Wales to Bristol. The armed forces are maintaining fewer and fewer connections with local communities.

Nia Griffith: I share my hon. Friend's concern. If we see the likes of REME in Wrexham and Prestatyn close, opportunities for the whole of north Wales will effectively be withdrawn. That will impact badly on recruitment to our reservist forces and lead to the loss of buy-in from those communities, both of which are serious issues that need addressing.

Dr Murrison: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is far more important for families to have some sort of certitude about where they are going to be based for a protracted period of time? Moving around the country in the old way was hopeless in that respect and was one of the principal reasons why people decided to leave.

Nia Griffith: I think we are talking about two slightly different things. In the cases of Wrexham and Prestatyn, we are talking about particular reservist bases, and my worry is that if we do not draw reservists from across the country, we will miss out on talent. However, I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the other issue.

If the beneficial impact of this Bill is to be fully felt, it is also vital that every effort is made to ensure that service personnel are made aware of the options it affords. We know that individuals are often reluctant to talk about difficult family circumstances for fear of that

being seen as a sign of weakness, so it is vital that personnel know about the new options that the Bill introduces before they need to access them. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister outlined how service personnel will be made aware of the options open to them through the Bill.

A decision to take up the option of working on a part-time basis, with the consequent reduction in pay, is not something that anyone would undertake lightly, but it is a decision that may have to be taken at a time of particular stress or difficulty. The Ministry of Defence, as an employer, therefore has a duty of care to ensure that individuals are fully aware of the financial implications of any request and to point out to them that they may wish to take independent financial advice because, although everyone would want to calculate the immediate impact of going part time on their take-home pay, the effect on pensions is not so obvious. Even a limited period of lower contributions could have an effect later in life on what a person receives in every single year they draw their pension. I would be grateful if the Minister set out how the new framework established by the Bill will be made clear to personnel. What assurance can he give that the impact of any change in service arrangements will be highlighted appropriately?

Although we welcome the Bill, it is not a panacea for the very real challenges of recruitment and retention in our armed forces. Members on both sides of the House share my concern that numbers continue to fall in every single service. The trade-trained size of the Army is now well below the 82,000 target that the Conservative party promised to maintain in its manifesto, and intake rates are falling in each of the reserve forces, too. Indeed, a recent report by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), commissioned by the Government, found that recruitment to the armed forces is "running to stand still," resulting in the "hollowing out" of the services.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making an important point. Has she had a chance to look at the figures that the Minister for the Armed Forces released to me earlier this year? They show that at Catterick, for example, not a single common infantry course this year was filled. In one month, April, only 14 of 96 places were filled. The course was not filled in any month this year. Does my hon. Friend think the Government have a grip on the recruitment crisis they are facing?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I hope Ministers are listening to that major concern.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for kindly mentioning my report. One point it raises is that, although recruitment is definitely under pressure, there is quite an optimistic picture for the reserves, and the picture has been getting better, not worse.

Nia Griffith: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but his report also mentions the concern, which Opposition Members share, about the MOD's recruitment contract with Capita.

The Public Accounts Committee recommended back in 2014 that the MOD

"should ensure that it is able to hold Capita to account for its performance in delivering the Army recruitment contract".

I would be grateful if the Minister set out how exactly Capita is being held to account for its persistent and inexcusable failure to meet the targets.

Earlier this month we read reports that said that the serving reservists who staff recruitment offices will be replaced by civilian staff from Capita, further weakening the link between those who serve in our forces and the recruitment process. It is clear that intake rates cannot be allowed to continue falling year on year, and I would be grateful if the Minister also set out what specific action he will take to address that.

One important way of beginning to deal with the crisis in recruitment and retention would be to lift the public sector pay cap and give our armed forces the pay award that they deserve. Our personnel serve with courage and distinction and, particularly at this time of year in the run-up to Remembrance Sunday, we remember the sacrifices that they make on our behalf. Yet their pay was frozen for the first two years of the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, and it has risen by just 1% a year from 2013. When inflation is factored in, the starting salary of an Army private has been cut by more than £1,000 in real terms since 2010, yet accommodation costs have continued to rise and personnel and their families have lost out due to cuts in social security payments.

The Armed Forces Pay Review Body observed that the “perfect storm” has resulted in few personnel feeling that they get anything resembling a pay rise each year. Indeed, the latest armed forces continuous attitude survey found that satisfaction with basic rates of pay and pension benefits is at the lowest level ever recorded, with only a third of personnel satisfied with their basic pay.

Toby Perkins: If a business had huge shortages in certain skills because people with those skills were leaving for competitor organisations, would it not be incredible if that business was simultaneously spending huge amounts of money training new people to replace those who had left while, as part of its recruitment and retention strategy, keeping wages below inflation when all its competitors are increasing wages?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend, with his business experience, makes a valid point.

Of course, our armed forces do not have a trade union to lobby on their behalf, but I know from my conversations with personnel that there is considerable interest in the Government’s policy on pay. That is an area on which we want to work constructively with the Government, and I have already said that if they are prepared to amend the Bill to give a fair pay rise to our forces personnel, or even to allow the Armed Forces Pay Review Body to conduct an in-year review without the cap in place, the Government can certainly count on Labour support.

We welcome the Bill, which has support on both sides of the House. I look forward to working with Members to scrutinise and improve it appropriately.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

6.45 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As the Front-Bench speeches have indicated, there is a high degree of cross-party consensus on this initiative. That consensus was also evident in the report of the outgoing Select Committee on Defence published in April 2017, “SDSR 2015 and the Army”. The report concluded:

“We support the Chief of the General Staff’s commitment to changing the culture of the Army through initiatives on employment, talent management and leadership. Successful implementation of these initiatives could provide a structure within which all soldiers can achieve their full potential. However, we recognise that this must not be to the detriment of the Army’s ability to undertake its core role of warfighting. We note the concerns expressed about cultural resistance within the Army to this agenda, particularly in respect of Flexible Engagement.”

In their reply, the Government referred to their

“programme to widen opportunities for all, thereby better reflecting the demands of a modern society. This programme includes promoting a culture of inclusivity in which every Service person is treated with respect and is able to access a range of employment opportunities, including flexible working.

The Flexible Engagement System continues to be considered to be a positive and appropriately contemporary employment system.”

In the opening speeches, we heard reference to a point made by the Chief of the General Staff, Nick Carter, back in February 2015:

“We have a career structure at the moment which is fundamentally a male career structure. It has a number of break points which sadly encourage women to leave rather than encouraging them to stay.”

Although one aspect of the Bill, to do with presentation, was controversial in the upper House—I will come to that in a few moments—it is notable that the people who were concerned about that presentational point are four-square behind the substantive principles of the Bill. For example, Lord Stirrup, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, stated in the debate on the Queen’s Speech:

“Too many talented people, especially women, are leaving early because the terms of their service are not flexible enough to accommodate their evolving personal circumstances and the associated pressures. We cannot afford such waste: it is expensive in terms of training replacements and it impacts on our operational capability.”—*[Official Report, House of Lords, 22 June 2017; Vol. 783, c. 91.]*

When considering what my reaction should be to the central proposals in the Bill, I came up with the following five questions. First, will an arrangement be overridden in cases of emergency? The Government have been absolutely clear from the outset that it will be overridden. There is no question that people will not be available to serve in the armed forces in a national crisis, when required, no matter what arrangements they have entered into for flexible working.

The next question I ask is: will skills be diminished? It appears from the scheme’s structure that that is not a significant danger, because the idea of flexible working in this way will involve people doing so only for a finite period after full-time service and before further full-time service. So the range of skills ought not to be diminished, and I believe that that safeguard is sufficient.

Where I am a little more concerned and would welcome further contributions is on my third question: will bureaucratic logjams be caused by appeals? The Government have done well in their briefing material, and it may be that some of it was prepared in response to the advantage of having had this Bill considered in

[Dr Julian Lewis]

the upper House by senior former heads of the services and even former Chiefs of the Defence Staff. Government briefing material has been very full and they have set out a complex scheme of how appeals will work. I am still in need of reassurance that we will not become bogged down in bureaucratic trials and tribulations, possibly going all the way up to ombudsman level. That is one danger that needs further commentary.

My fourth question is: will this send a positive or a negative signal to—

Toby Perkins: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am apologetic for interrupting the right hon. Gentleman. I was waiting for him to take a natural pause, but one did not appear. Am I right in saying that there is a convention in this House that speakers should remain in their place for two speeches before they leave? The Secretary of State has left after only one speech, and the Chair of the Defence Committee is speaking. Have you been notified of any reason why the Secretary of State has had to leave so soon, when many of us would have expected him to want to know what was being said?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The Secretary of State went at such speed that he did not even say goodnight or anything, so I am not sure why; he may well be coming back. He may have been taken short, given the speed he went at. It is convention that Members normally hear at least two speeches, and it is normal for Ministers to stay around to hear a bit more. Of course, when we have such a learned Member as the Chair of the Select Committee, we all wish to hear him. I had better bring him back on.

Dr Lewis: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I must say in defence of the Defence Secretary that he spent no fewer than two hours and 25 minutes before our Committee last Wednesday afternoon, and I felt that was—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is no reason for him not to be here—let us put that on the record now.

Dr Lewis: But I did feel it was somewhat beyond the call of duty, and I believe that the whole Committee appreciated it.

My fourth question is: will this new system send a positive or a negative signal—first, to recruits and, secondly, to potential adversaries? That is where the controversy arose in the upper House, as grave concern was expressed about the Bill's repeated use of the terminology of "part-time service". To give a brief example of the dangers of the use of such terminology, I take a moment to refer to the lyrics of a "Glee Club" song composed by Liberal Democrat activists at their 2014 conference, sending up their party's policy of sending nuclear submarines to sea either without warheads—we appear to be without Liberal Democrats, too—or only for part of the time. I will not sing it, the House will be glad to hear. [HON. MEMBERS: "Do!"] It is done to the tune of "Yellow Submarine" and, talking of the boats, one of my favourite verses goes, "We can send them back to base if we're really up the creek and request the war's postponed until the middle of next week." The chorus then is, "We believe in a part-time submarine, a part-time submarine, a part-time submarine," and so on. Members can, thus, see the potential for the

use of "part-time" in relation to armed forces to allow our adversaries and our critics in the media to suggest there is something less professional and less committed about the way in which we are conducting ourselves. Lord Craig of Radley, former Chief of the Air Staff, did suggest an alternative wording, which I hope might still be considered in Committee.

My final question is: will it be possible to apply to go on so-called part-time service just in time to avoid an operational deployment? The answer to the first question about emergency service clearly covers the issue of whether someone about to be deployed to a war zone could use this scheme to get out of it—clearly, they could not—but I would like a little more clarification from Ministers on whether there is any risk that some people might see a less popular deployment looming up on the near horizon and decide that the time was appropriate to start thinking about applying not for so-called part-time service but for a change, a reduction or an alternative to full-deployment just at that point.

Subject to those caveats, I wish the Bill well. I look forward to hearing further elaboration on the points I have raised, perhaps in the closing speech from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who I believe will be summing up. I endorse the commendation of both Front Benchers for this measure.

6.56 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to speak for the Scottish National party today on flexible working in the armed forces. I will start by declaring an interest: my husband is a retired Royal Navy officer with 17 years' service. Many of the issues raised today affected our family. In his last year of service, my husband had only six days' leave, and that included weekends. That sort of leave entitlement is clearly unsustainable, and many service personnel, particularly parents, eventually have to decide between career and family.

We in the SNP very much welcome the move towards flexible working for the armed forces. This is a real opportunity to modernise and reform the armed forces, particularly the work-life balance of the brave men and women who choose to serve. Any moves towards a more family-friendly environment have the potential to be transformational, so we enthusiastically support them. However, as has been said by the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), with any legislation the devil is in the detail.

We broadly support the aims of clause 1(3)(a), but I am struggling to understand how it would work in reality. If, as it appears, it applies to non-frontline posts only and is not applicable to branches that are deploying on operations, I believe this is a missed opportunity. By applying a little creative thinking, we could find ways in which it could operate in these circumstances. For example, if a unit is sent to a conflict zone, a person could deploy for a proportion of a tour that corresponds with their agreed service. That raises other difficulties relating to gaps in the unit and possible unfamiliarity with the territory, but perhaps we could then consider people deploying on every second tour.

Although I accept that that would be alien to many who are currently serving and it will need an entirely new mindset, the continuous attitude survey shows that

the impact of service on family and personal life remains the top reason for leaving. When we find ourselves in a situation where only 10% of personnel are women, clearly action must be taken. I am pleased that the flexible working trial in the Army has been well received, and the fact that two thirds of the applicants were female suggests this legislation is long overdue.

According to the explanatory notes, clause 1(4) will give a commanding officer

“the ability...to vary, suspend or terminate the arrangement in prescribed circumstances, for example: national emergency or some form of manning crisis”.

That causes me some difficulty. I do not think anyone would have a problem with the suspension of the agreement during times of national emergency, but we know already that there are acute shortages in some key areas, such as the submarine service, where my husband served. Additional submarine pay and retention bonuses have not addressed this problem. Such a “manning crisis” could apply to the whole submarine service. If someone happens to serve in a branch that is struggling to recruit and retain, will part-time working not be applicable to them? If that is the case, although the Bill is well intentioned, it will not address any of the shortages and retention issues that many branches experience.

I wish to digress slightly for a minute. At the weekend, we heard the shocking news that nine submariners had tested positive for drugs. The Secretary of State was absolutely correct to take the swift action he did, but where does this leave the UK’s continuous at-sea deterrent? It is a pity the Secretary of State is no longer present, because I would like to know what guarantees he can give that if a branch is already operationally stretched, the committed personnel will not suffer leave curtailment and non-flexible working as a result of shortages or because of the behaviour of others.

Concerns have already been expressed that flexible working should not become a way for the Ministry of Defence to save money on an already overstretched defence budget. Flexible working should never become a way for employers to reduce their employees’ hours against their will. Will the Minister assure us that no part-time contracts will be imposed on any service personnel? It is clear that those granted part-time contracts will have pay and pensions reduced to a pro-rata value. Will the Minister clarify that that will not result in service personnel losing other benefits, such as service accommodation?

The geographic restriction in clause 1(3)(b) is a welcome step, but again I seek more detail on the specifics. Earl Howe stated that personnel will not be separated from their home base for more than 24 hours at a time any more than 35 times in a given year. Perhaps I am confused, but more than 24 hours could mean 25 hours or it could mean a fortnight. For the provision to have any real punch, there needs to be a maximum time limit. Will the Minister clarify how the Government came to the conclusion that 35 times a year would be the appropriate limit? Will there be a maximum time limit for these separations?

If the Bill is to be properly implemented and achieve the required outcomes, personnel need to be properly represented within the military and with defence policy decision makers. Putting an armed forces representative body on a statutory footing is the norm for many countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland

and the Scandinavian countries. Interestingly, the armed forces in the Netherlands are represented by four trade unions. Service personnel there who are over 50 have to be encouraged to leave to make space for younger recruits. What a luxurious situation they have.

Recognised representation is a key way for the UK Government to better understand the needs and requirements of our armed forces and their families. If the Government are serious about improving the lives of our armed forces in every respect, from pay and conditions to the standard of housing, they should put the armed forces representative body on a statutory footing. I plan to raise that issue again in Committee. The measures in the Bill are a step in the right direction, but the UK Government could use this opportunity to do more for service personnel and their families.

7.4 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): The Bill is the result of successive reports and surveys carried out by the MOD. All have shown that there is a strong desire to change the working options of serving regulars. In the 2017 armed forces survey, 18% of the personnel who took part said they would take up the option of flexible working, with 36% suggesting they would consider it in future. As in the business world, it is important that we adjust our policies to recruit and retain the best people.

Last week, I met a constituent, Chief Petty Officer Donna Chapman, when she received an award for her achievement in leadership at the Fleet Air Arm awards. We spoke about her career serving in the armed forces, and through our conversation I began to understand the sacrifices she has made to serve our country, not least in leaving her young daughter in the care of her mother for seven months while she was deployed at sea. She told me that separation is part of the job but flexibility at other times is crucial to her wellbeing and that of her daughter.

Donna’s story of dedicated service is not unique in the military. Figures from this year’s MOD attitude survey show that just under two thirds of service personnel feel that family and personal life might influence their decision to leave. A third said that reduced separation would increase their intention to remain, and a similar number would be more likely to remain if they had the opportunity to work part time. The Bill will address those issues.

I found myself in a similar position when I spent eight years working in Madrid, travelling the world for work, with my husband doing exactly the same from a different base in a different country. It is tiring travelling the globe and spending extended periods away from one’s family. Distance and travel is not always the issue.

As we know, life is rarely a smooth ride and there is no way to predict what is thrown at us. I recently met staff from a local charity, the Sussex Snowdrop Trust, which cares for children with long-term, life-threatening illness. It made me think about what a serving mother or father is supposed to do when confronted with such a situation. They need to maintain their income and be at home to care for and support their family. They need flexibility.

For those people in the armed forces who handed in their notice, the most-cited reason was the impact of service on their family and personal life. The Bill will

[Gillian Keegan]

provide in-work flexibility to allow our servicemen and servicewomen to react to changes in their circumstances, or to adopt a change of pace, as is sometimes required. Importantly, it will mean that we do not lose our highly trained and skilled military workforce. Furthermore, we the people will be kept safe, because they can be pulled back into full-time service in a time of national emergency, when their expertise is most needed.

There is a clear case for such a change, as seen in the business world, with 24% of the UK labour market now working part time and 96% of all UK employers offering the option of flexible working. With unemployment at levels not seen since 1975, at just 4.3%, companies compete for talent globally and the military needs to adapt to attract the brightest and the best. Chief Petty Officer Donna Chapman highlighted that when she told me about a careers event held in Canary Wharf on HMS Iron Duke, which was attended by a group of 500 young girls who were eager to explore the career options open to them. When discussing a future in the air fleet, their biggest concerns were about work flexibility: they cited concerns about balancing such a career with starting a family. We know this is a likely cause of concern for women, especially as 42% of the 15.1 million working women in the UK are in part-time employment.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent contribution. There has been mention of the hope that the Bill will help to recruit and, crucially, retain women in our armed forces. The Government aim is for women to make up 15% of the armed forces by 2020. Does the hon. Lady agree that when statistics are produced, it should be made clear whether personnel are part time to ensure that the figures are not unintentionally inflated?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, and I am sure that that will be the case.

We currently average just 10% women personnel across the three branches of our armed forces. Policy changes such as those we are discussing have already been implemented in countries such as New Zealand, Denmark and the Netherlands, with all citing increased retention and recruitment. Australia is currently implementing flexible working opportunities and has seen a steady rise in the engagement of women in the military from January 2016 to February 2017—an increase from 15.4% to 16.1% across the entire Australian defence force.

I recently spoke to Charlotte, a 25-year-old constituent, who has just completed her reserves training at Sandhurst for the Engineering Corps. This first-class Cambridge engineer, who is fully employed, was able to become a reserve as the role fitted in with her other work commitments. That model is used successfully by the reserves and should be offered in some form to the regulars. Allowing people to join the services on a part-time basis is likely to lead people with highly sought after skills—such as Charlotte—to becoming regulars in future, bringing their skills and experience from the private sector to tackle the challenges of the modern military. This same ethos of pulling in talent can be extended to other areas where we struggle to recruit enough specialists, such as in cyber-security.

Another avenue that this Bill will open up is allowing individuals to gain further skills outside the parameters of the forces. It is common practice across many industries to take time to do further study—I have chosen to do that several times over my career. This is widely encouraged in business as it benefits not only the individual but the employer, as newly learned skills diversify the talent pool and bring in new skills, fresh ideas and fresh thinking.

Potentially, this Bill is the start of a journey of modern working for the military. This is the 21st century and companies around the world are using technology to allow for greater employment flexibility. Such a move should not be restricted to the civilian population and could act as a catalyst for greater productivity and satisfaction in some areas of service. Work UK published a paper in January entitled “Workspace revolution” based on information attained from more than 20,000 business leaders and owners. Its findings on flexible working shed light on the business implications for the use of new technology. It is an important aspect that businesses consider when seeking to acquire top talent, as today’s workers are reporting that it is not just salary that makes a difference to their career choice. If we add to that the fact that research shows that improved concentration levels and productivity are benefits of flexible working, the business case is made.

As more workers wish to work flexibly, and with technology available to enable them to do so productively, it is hardly surprising to find that many businesses are marrying their need for greater agility with helping workers achieve greater personal happiness and work-life balance. That will become increasingly important as we extend our working lives into our late sixties and beyond.

This Bill is a fantastic opportunity for the armed forces to retain the highly skilled personnel who may otherwise leave; to recruit the best and brightest who may well not want a full-time enlisting into the regulars; to encourage others, especially women, to feel that it is a career path with flexibility built in to take account of their life plans; and to provide opportunities to increase the skills of serving personnel and diversify the regulars with more private sector staff.

In conclusion, this Bill goes some way towards creating a more modern and future-looking military force. I want the 890 regulars who live in my constituency to feel that they have flexibility and freedom in work—whether they are based in Thorney Island, or neighbouring Portsmouth or Aldershot. This legislation will address the military’s ability to recruit and retain the best of the best, which we all agree is vital to national security. The nature of the threat that we face from those who seek to do us harm is changing. Today, we live in a world in which technology, skills, talent and experience are just as important as the military equipment that our armed forces need. In a world in which we see state-sponsored cyber-warfare as a normal occurrence, it is even more important that we attract and retain the brightest and the best in our armed forces. The Bill helps Britain to achieve those outcomes as well as to maximise the employment opportunities available to women in our armed forces. I therefore look forward to supporting the Government to deliver this change.

7.14 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). In the role that I am privileged to hold as chair

of the all-party group on the armed forces covenant, I welcome the Bill's key measures. However, as far as I am concerned, this is the just beginning of the process, not the end. There are four issues that we need to explore further, most of which have already been touched on by Members on both Front Benches. I am talking about recruitment, retention, family life and the development of female personnel.

A challenge lies ahead: we have a 5% deficit in our armed forces personnel and this Bill, while I welcome it wholeheartedly, will require us to appoint and recruit even more people to ensure that flexible working is more than just a phrase and that it is a reality. We will simply need to recruit more people to make this policy work, which, given where we are, will provide additional challenges.

On recruitment, a third of our armed forces cite flexible working as a reason why they will stay in the forces. Of great concern is the fact that, within the Royal Navy, 46% of service personnel cite the lack of flexible working as a reason why they would consider leaving. Those are not our figures, but their figures, which gives us cause for huge concern.

Then there is the issue of family life. None of us, especially those who serve in this House, operates without the support of others to enable us to do our job. That should be no less the case for those who are serving every day to keep us safe. We need to look not just at flexible working but at other issues, including the delivery of the covenant and making sure that it is tangible for our armed forces personnel. In the last Parliament, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who was then chair of the all-party group, introduced the Children of Armed Services Personnel (Schools Admission) Bill, which focused on how children could get school places when families were redeployed very quickly. It is issues such as that which cause retention problems and which are the bread and butter to our families and our service personnel. Unless we make some significant changes—and even some minor ones—to how the system operates, we will continue to lose our armed forces personnel.

We also have the unfortunate reality of the service family accommodation model. I am talking about the reality of trying to get accommodation to work for personnel and their families; of trying to ensure that they can get the right property in the right place at the right time and in the right school district; and of trying to ensure that properties have boilers that work, hot water and all those other things that people require. We would not put up with not having those things, so why should those people who are keeping us safe and their families do so? The reality is that the contract with CarillionAmey needs to be greatly improved, otherwise the actions that we are calling for today become irrelevant and we will continue to have a recruitment and retention challenge in our military.

Mr Francois: On the point about CarillionAmey, does the hon. Lady agree that, when we speak to serving personnel, it becomes clear that they are not exactly enamoured of that company? The Ministry of Defence needs to compel its contractor materially to raise its game. If the contractor does not do so, it should lose the contract.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with the right hon. Gentleman. In fact, one thing that has proved to be both a huge honour and a heart-breaking experience

is that, as chair of the all-party group, service personnel families contact me on a regular basis to detail their experiences. What goes on is simply not good enough. I have had representations from some of the service personnel charities, even as late as last week, and they are now worried about what happens next. Just as CarillionAmey seems to have woken up to the fact that it has some responsibilities, the charities are now concerned that, if things are put on a regional basis, we will have to start all over again explaining the needs and requirements of our personnel. Therefore, as bad as it is now, we are concerned about what happens next. We in this House have a responsibility to ensure that the MOD understands the concerns and the fact that it is simply not acceptable for a family to have to wait eight days for their boiler to be fixed.

The concerns that we are talking about relate not just to those experiences, but to how much people earn. Members will appreciate, from the trial of flexible working, that there were concerns about how tour bonuses were to be paid and how reduced hours would have a knock-on effect on salaries. These issues are compounded in the current climate by the mini defence review. It has been raised directly with me that serving personnel are concerned about losing their tour bonuses and what will happen to them next. Owing to a lack of communication, they are being told by senior officers that they might lose some of their core terms and conditions. That would mean that flexible working will become just words and will not help to fix the problem.

Toby Perkins: Flexible working would be great if it resulted in more people choosing to stay in our armed forces, but what if it makes work more flexible only for those who are already in the armed forces? The impact could be even greater demands on those who are not on flexible working contracts. Does my hon. Friend share my concern?

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more. We need to be careful about how we roll out flexible working to ensure that the whole workforce is covered from day one in 2019. We now have about a year until that date in which to recruit in order to ensure that staff are not increasingly overstretched. It has to be a whole-force approach. As with any business that implements flexible working options, a full complement will be needed to deliver flexible working, otherwise it will not work.

I will briefly mention women in the armed forces. The number of women currently serving is a key issue; 10.2% of our armed forces are women, which is a significant development from the situation 20 years ago, but it is simply not good enough. I think that many colleagues on both sides of the House—especially after debates earlier today—would suggest that more women everywhere would be a very good thing. But the reality is that there will not be senior female personnel, such as a female Chief of the Defence Staff, until women have progressed through the ranks. To do that, we need to ensure that they and their families, whether serving or not, have support around them.

The fact that only three women are at two-star rank is simply not acceptable. We need to look at the additional support they need, which is why this has to be the beginning, not the end—[*Interruption.*] The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is correcting me. There are, in fact, four women at

[*Ruth Smeeth*]

two-star rank. The right hon. Gentleman will have to tell me who has been promoted; I celebrate and welcome all promotions. There are additional strains on family life for all women who serve, but there are also clear moments where career breaks are necessary. Women should not have to leave the forces to have a family or to look after ageing relatives.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): At the heart of the Bill and at the heart of what my hon. Friend is saying is that the Government's proposed legislative change will require a cultural change in the armed forces. Is that not what is needed for the very fine and good aspiration of this legislation to be delivered in practice?

Ruth Smeeth: We are talking about a cultural change and a legislative change, but it is also a financial change. In order to ensure that our armed forces can protect us when we need them to, we need to deliver for them and look after them. That is the least we owe them. To get past these challenges and deliver for our armed forces, this legislation must be the beginning of reviewing their terms and conditions, not the end.

I wholeheartedly welcome the Bill, but—there is always a but—we need to look at the armed forces' overall broader package of terms and conditions, and at how much they earn. We need to look at the 1% pay cap because, as the shadow Secretary of State said, there is no trade union that can advocate for our armed forces. It is down to us in this House to ensure that they are well paid, and it is down to us to fight their corner because no one else is going to do it for them. While our service personnel are protecting our national security at home and abroad, we must ensure that we are looking after them and their families.

7.24 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who serves with me on the Select Committee on Defence. I thought she gave a rather good speech.

This is a brief but nevertheless important piece of legislation that has implications for recruitment and retention in Britain's armed forces. Across this House, we all greatly value what our armed forces do for us. Therefore, I have to say that it is a shame that there is not one single Liberal Democrat Member present in the Chamber to talk about what our armed forces do for us. My contribution will focus on the recruitment challenges faced by our armed forces and how the Bill can help to address them, and I will make some observations on its potential for aiding retention.

Our armed forces are the best of British, but they are currently under pressure. As of May 2017, the total strength of the regular armed forces was 138,350—some 5% below their establishment strength—although shortages are far worse in specialised pinch-point trades. In the year to April 2017, 12,950 people joined the UK regular armed forces, but in the same period 14,970 left—more than 2,000 more. Partly as a result of these trends, I was commissioned by the Prime Minister last year to conduct a study into the state of recruiting into the British armed forces, both regular and reserve.

I submitted my report, entitled "Filling the Ranks", to both Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence in July, and a copy of the report was subsequently published on my parliamentary website in September 2017. I would like to take this opportunity to place on record my thanks and appreciation for all their assistance in compiling the report to: Colonel Simon Goldstein, an Army reserve officer who acted as my staff officer on the report; my parliamentary assistant and researcher, Miss Sophie Bond-Jones; my personal assistant, Mrs Adele Jacquin; and, lastly, Wing Commander Paul Maguire, who acted as my liaison officer with the MOD. I made 20 recommendations and I am pleased to say that I have recently heard that the MOD has accepted all of them, for which I thank the Secretary of State.

As the report argues, a combination of lower than expected retention and failure to achieve recruiting targets means that the under-manning in the armed forces is worsening and has been for some time. The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force are now running at around 10% below their annual recruiting target, while the shortfall for the Army is more than 30%. This continuing process of hollowing out in the ranks costs the armed forces valuable experience and threatens to compound the problem by increasing the pressure on those personnel who remain. In order to address these problems, the MOD needs to increase its recruiting performance, particularly among black, Asian and minority ethnic personnel and female personnel. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State mention that in his speech.

The strategic defence review 2015 established the people programme to seek new ways of modernising the MOD employment offer to potential new recruits. I confess that I do have strong reservations about one element of the people programme—namely, the future accommodation model, which deals with the provision of service housing. Suffice it to say, I humbly advise Ministers to think again carefully about proceeding with FAM, at least in its current form. However, one area I very much agree with is the future engagement strategy, which the Bill seeks to give effect to. By offering recruits the opportunity to vary their service over the lifetime of their career, especially if their family circumstances change, the FES offers a more welcoming prospect for people thinking of joining the armed forces.

The Bill should help to create a more fluid market for personnel seeking to transfer between regular and reserve service and vice versa. Regular personnel transferring to reserve service can often bring with them tremendous experience to help to bolster the strength of reserve units. Conversely, reserves transferring to the regulars often bring with them remarkable enthusiasm to make a meaningful contribution to their new units. For those reasons, the Bill will be an important addition and advantage for the MOD's future recruitment efforts.

The Bill and the flexible engagement strategy could also assist the MOD and the armed forces in the increasingly challenging field of retention. Although more personnel continue to leave each year than to join, the recruiting organisations across all three services are increasingly running to stand still as they try to fill the gaps in the ranks, as the shadow Secretary of State pointed out. The most serious problems remain in the Army, but this is also likely to prove an increasing challenge for the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, as both their establishments are due to increase by several hundred over the next few

years in order to accommodate new equipment such as the two new aircraft carriers and the new P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft.

We know from the armed forces continuous attitude survey that pressure on family life is one of the chief reasons for personnel leaving the services. Other factors include the effect on spousal careers; to a certain extent, pay; and the quality, or otherwise, of service accommodation. However, the challenge of long hours and/or separation from families is a particular reason why service personnel—especially more experienced personnel—eventually decide to jack it in.

In that respect, the Bill can be of real assistance by allowing personnel to vary their commitment for a time to suit their family circumstances—perhaps following the birth of a child or to allow people to help provide care for an elderly relative. It should be particularly beneficial to female personnel who wish to take a temporary career break to raise young children.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My constituent Flight Lieutenant Ron Smyth, who was a veteran of the Battle of Britain, died last week at the age of 96. People like him ensured that we have the freedom that is so important to our society. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Bill is very important in recognising such sacrifices and encouraging more people to enter the armed forces?

Mr Francois: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that we should never take living in a free country for granted. That is why we need armed forces of the highest calibre, and I pay tribute to his late constituent. Anything that can improve the quality of our armed forces is to be welcomed, and as I shall argue, the Bill can help to do that.

Without moralising, let me say also that the Bill might, to some extent, help to address the unfortunately relatively high divorce rate among service personnel, although that could also be addressed by a massive increase in performance by the MOD housing and maintenance contractor CarillionAmey, to which reference has been made this evening. If I were to summarise its performance, I would say that I would not trust that company to organise a social function in a beer production facility.

From what I gathered as a Minister in the Department, the decision to stay or leave—to stick or twist, as someone once described it—is often taken in the round, based on a variety of factors. As an example, hon. Members should picture the scene around the kitchen table one evening, when the kids have been put to bed, and a female corporal and her husband are discussing whether she should leave the Army. The factors they take into account include the progress of her career and the likelihood of further promotion, the effect on her husband's career, the implication for the schooling of their children, the ability to care for an elderly relative who is increasingly unwell and the fact that the family has not been able to take a holiday for the last three years because of the couple's future work commitments, including the wife's extended deployment overseas. They are, in short, a family under pressure. What the Bill does, on a practical level, is offer an extra option in that scenario to help relieve the pressure on the family. That could be both family and retention-friendly, and thus help to keep an experienced and expensively trained non-commissioned officer in the service of the Crown.

Our armed forces, to whom I willingly pay tribute this evening, face very real pressures in recruitment and retention. Both those important issues must be addressed if we are to prevent further hollowing out in the ranks, which, if left unchecked, will increasingly impact our operational capability. We can buy all the expensive kit in the world, but if we do not have the people to operate it, we are at a disadvantage.

The Bill and the flexible engagement strategy, which it enables, seek to help alleviate pressure in both those vital areas. The measures are designed by the services for the services. Over time, the Bill, by allowing flexible working, and by allowing commanders to take into account the personal pressures on their personnel, could make a real difference to recruitment and, particularly, to retention in our armed forces.

In summary, these measures help to mirror best practice in the public and private sectors and to create terms and conditions of service that are fit for the 21st century. On that basis, I am happy to offer my support for this important piece of positive legislation, and I wish it Godspeed.

7.35 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure, as always, to follow the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who spoke knowledgeably and pragmatically on the Bill. I share many of his views about not only the opportunities it presents but the many reasons why there should still be reservations about the recruitment and retention prospects of our armed forces. I am also glad my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) indicated that the Opposition will support the Bill on Second Reading, while outlining areas that are still a cause for concern.

It is fitting that we should be considering this incredibly important aspect of the development of modern working practices in the run-up to the Remembrance Day period, when we will all be in our constituencies reflecting on the contributions made to our armed forces in the recent and the more distant past. In my contribution, I would like to speak a little of the pride that I and the vast majority of my constituents feel for our armed forces and of what more we in this place could do to repay our debt of gratitude. I would also like to reflect more on the pressures affecting our serving personnel and their lives, which I have observed in the considerable number of exchanges I have had with serving personnel, both within and outside the excellent armed forces parliamentary scheme, which I have had the pleasure of enrolling in for the last two years. I would also like to outline what more the Government could do to ensure that firms that benefit from the skills of people in our armed forces contribute back. Finally, I would like to say more about the Government's performance on recruitment to the armed forces.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli spoke about the importance of the public sector pay cap and the impact pay has on armed forces morale, and she was absolutely right to do so. There is no question but that most of the people who serve in our armed forces could earn more money elsewhere. We are not saying that they are merely in it for the money, but it is important that we send a real signal from this place that we value the role these people play. When we all speak so positively about them, it is not unreasonable that they should look

[Toby Perkins]

at not just our words but our actions, and when they see the public sector pay and the fact that their wages have risen by less than inflation on a like-for-like basis annually under this Government, that is important.

The Government have overseen a monumental reduction in armed forces personnel, as the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford just said. Let us be absolutely clear that that includes breaking the manifesto promise on which the vast majority of Conservative Members stood in 2015—not to allow the Army to fall below 82,000. However, simultaneously, there have been ever-greater expectations in terms of the role our armed forces will play.

Members on both sides of the House will go out on Remembrance Sunday, and we will lay our wreaths and wear our poppies with pride, but we also need to consider the impact that the choices we make in this place have on morale in the armed forces. I have referred to pay, and pensions have been mentioned, but other important considerations include the ability of members of the armed forces to enjoy a family life; the investment they see in equipment; the extent to which we do what we say we are going to do in terms of our commitment to them; the opportunities for them to progress their careers; and issues such as housing and schooling, which have been mentioned.

I would like to say how impressed I have been with all aspects of our armed forces personnel in the many exchanges that I have had with them. I spent time with those on board HMS Sutherland—a Type 23 frigate under a female captain—which I was able to witness on exercises in southern England last year. Also last year I saw personnel on HMS Dragon preparing for their FOST—flag officer sea training—and I saw the naval training provided on HMS Collingwood. The Army's 1st (UK) Division recently ran an open day to discuss their persistent engagement work, and many of us were able to watch the war-fighting 3rd (UK) Division performing urban warfare exercises recently. I saw the infantry training regime at Catterick where they are training up new recruits who were incredibly impressive in their commitment and maturity at a tender age very early in their Army careers. Like many other Members, I have taken tremendous pride in the meetings that I have had with local servicemen and women at a variety of important civic engagements that they have undertaken in Chesterfield. I am absolutely certain that the commitment and professionalism shown by our armed forces personnel remain of a very high standard, and Britain is right to have tremendous pride in all those who wear Her Majesty's uniform.

As we head towards Remembrance Sunday I will give a brief plug for the ceremonies that will be taking place in my constituency, in Staveley on the Sunday morning and in Chesterfield on the Sunday afternoon, as well as the remembrance festival that we hold in Chesterfield for a packed house on the Thursday following Remembrance Sunday, at which all the old war favourites are sung along with a more solemn service. At such events we really get a strong sense of the pride that people across our communities have for the armed forces.

Many of the issues that face our armed forces are societal and issues of skills that would exist outside Government policy, but it is important that in many of

the areas that Government are able to influence, they should take their share of responsibility for recruitment and retention. The armed forces are fishing in a very competitive pool when it comes to recruiting personnel. I sense that a great many more people now see their service life as a component of their career, rather than its mainstay. That is different from the past so any steps that can be taken to ensure that the armed forces are, as much as possible, a family-friendly employer where people can continue to develop their career, and are offered a variety of different ways of serving, are absolutely crucial.

Flexible working is not just an issue for women—it is also very much an issue for men. Many of the men I spoke to who are thinking of leaving the armed forces say that it is because of the pressures on their families. When we talk about flexible working, it is important that we do not see it as purely a female issue, about how we get more women into the armed forces. Important as that is, we must also keep men in the armed forces.

It is also important to consider the alternative opportunities for people if they choose to leave the armed forces. Particularly within the Navy, but in all areas of the armed forces, there are huge numbers of people in engineering posts who reach a certain level, then realise that there are many better-paid opportunities outside and that their career progression is stalling, and move on as a result. It is really important to make sure that we do all we can to continue to create new opportunities within all levels of the armed forces.

The Government's commitment to the reserves is perfectly sensible. It needs to be born, not from a response to austerity as a reason to reduce the regulars, but from a recognition that it makes sense in its own right. It is incredibly important that we encourage all companies, but particularly those that are suppliers to the MOD, to do all they can to encourage their members of staff to join the reserves. They should not just encourage them to join, but they should value the work that their members of staff do in the armed forces and see it as a way for them to progress their careers rather than something that they merely tolerate. MOD suppliers, who recruit a huge number of people from the armed forces, need to recognise that there is a real benefit to them from allowing the armed forces to spend all the money training people up and for them to end up being, in effect, poached by the private sector, which is simultaneously making a lot of money. When recruiting someone from the armed forces there should be much greater recognition of it being a two-way street and of the fact that people have the opportunity, through the reserves, to go back and continue to serve.

This is a very welcome Bill, and I support it. It is not going to solve all the problems, but if the issues that have been raised are addressed, it can play an important part.

7.45 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), who, as usual, spoke eloquently on a subject that is clearly very close to his heart.

I am very glad to be speaking on this Bill, because it is important to remember not just what goes into forming the armed forces but what exactly they are for and why flexibility matters. I intend to speak briefly, if I may,

about a few of the operational commitments that we are currently engaged in. If we look at NATO's work in Estonia, where a British battlegroup is currently in Tapa on the border with Russia, or the work we are doing in supporting the Ukrainian Government just a little further south, we can see that we are hiring not just soldiers but diplomats—people who can engage not just in a traditional battle of military might but a battle of ideas and messages. We are not merely taking young men and giving them a weapon—we are giving them ideas with which to combat the enemy.

That requires very special people. It requires people who can train themselves not only to a state of physical fitness so that they are able to carry the body armour, the Bergens, the weapons, or whatever it happens to be, but to a level of mental fitness such that even in exhausted situations after weeks of arduous training—or indeed, should the worst happen, operations—they are able to think hard and out-think the enemy. In areas like Ukraine, they can think through the complexities that are required when talking to a young man in a language that they do not speak and two weeks later have him ready for the frontline and Russian-backed militias.

We are asking an awful lot of these people, not only in that respect but in terms of endurance. With continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence, we are asking people to stay at sea in a state of preparedness for six months at a time, day in, day out, as we have done for the best part of 40 years. It is not just hard to be on operations—it is really hard to maintain a level of readiness when you think you probably will not need it, but you just might. That requires a level of command and discipline that is very difficult to imagine in other walks of life. Yet we expect it daily—in fact, we are expecting it right now—of the sailors who are at sea. We also expect it of the sailors who are conducting other operations in submarines, whether they are approaching enemy coasts or preparing our intelligence services to be informed of the next terrorist action—listening, perhaps, off the coast of a foreign shore.

Those may not sound like traditional military skills, because so many of us grew up with things like—I am going to date myself now—“The Guns of Navarone” and other such fabulous movies from the 1960s and '70s—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Fake news!

Tom Tugendhat: Thank you. We are still going to watch “Star Wars” at some point.

We are looking to train people in skills that are very much of the 21st century. Indeed, we have seen those skills being put to use around the world when we look at places like Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or the level of engagement that is required not only with foreign armies in places like the Sahel, where several European armies are working together in a multilingual, multinational brigade, but with local forces, some of whom, frankly, barely qualify for the term “militia”, let alone “army”.

As we ask those people to do such extraordinary things, we are also trying to prepare them for the threats of which we are increasingly becoming aware in the cyber-domain. Attacks in the cyber-domain are not limited to election time in the United States, nor to espionage against us in the UK or attacks on our NATO allies,

as was the case in Estonia. They happen all the time and everywhere. The cost of cyber-attack has reduced to such an extent that a relatively well-resourced sub-Saharan state could fairly easily hire a Russian hacker to damage our soldiers and our infrastructure in a peacekeeping mission.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I am enjoying my hon. Friend's guided tour of British military deployments. Does he agree that it is critical for us to ask what we, as a nation, want for our forces, what they are for and, crucially, what they are not for? We need to define our role in the world, stick to it and deliver on foreign policy.

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. and gallant Friend is, unsurprisingly, right. Having served around the world, he knows well that to command and to lead is to choose. As we set out what is global Britain, we must choose our priorities and make sure that our armed forces are fit to serve the needs of our country in the coming decades. It is absolutely essential to ensure that we have the right people—men and women, regular and reserve—to provide that service. I declare an interest: I am still a serving reservist. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you. Flexibility is required to move from one form of employment to another, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) mentioned, and people who do so bring other skills with them. That will be essential to securing the skills that we need at the level of preparedness that we require. Let us be honest: that level of preparation cannot truly be maintained if we focus simply on ensuring that everybody can speak enough Arabic—or French, or German, or whatever language it happens to be—that should anything come up, we can go off to a country in which that language is spoken; or on ensuring that everybody has enough skills in cyber or humanitarian reconstruction. Those skills are very hard to maintain at readiness, because doing so is expensive. If we maintain them at a slightly lower level and call on reservists who have them, we will have a force that is not only up to date but—let us not forget why we are here—cost-effective for the people who have sent us here to judge how best to deploy this country's resources.

I welcome the Bill very much, and I welcome the fact that my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) is sitting on the ministerial Bench this evening. He knows more than anybody the role that the armed forces can play not only in humanitarian reconstruction, war and information operations but in a whole range of other tasks from diplomacy and education to reassurance and—perhaps the most important task that we ask our armed forces to carry out—detering our enemies so that we can live in peace.

7.53 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It seems almost cruel to inflict myself on the House following the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I digress briefly from the content of the Bill to say that if any Member has yet to read the recent interview that he gave, a copy of which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) is showing us just now, it is a must-read. He gave a thoughtful speech, as he always does, augmented by the support of his Conservative friends around him.

[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) I welcome the general principles of the Bill. It is about time that as an employer, the Ministry of Defence hauled itself into the 21st century. Like the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, we believe that the Bill should represent the beginning, rather than the end, of the many reforms and changes that the Ministry of Defence needs to make to keep up with the pace of change. That is what society expects it to do, as an employer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West has done, I impress on the Minister—he has just shuffled off along the Bench, but I see that we have been joined by the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin)—and, indeed, on all Ministers the need to look at examples of how such reforms have been made elsewhere, in places such as Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

As several Members have mentioned, pay and conditions also need to be considered. In the Scottish National party's manifesto for the election earlier this year, we committed to pushing for a representative body on a statutory footing for members of the armed forces. I see no reason why that cannot happen, and there seems to be some support across the House for the idea. I do not know whether the body should be something similar to the Police Federation or an actual trade union—if the Netherlands can manage four, surely we can manage at least one—but we should at least debate that.

On pay, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling outlined what we expect of members of our armed forces, and he put it better than I could ever hope to do. For goodness' sake, let us pay them properly. Let us end the public sector pay cap—it is, in reality, a cut to their pay—for members of the armed forces and pay them properly. I am hopeful that the Government will introduce some plans on that in the upcoming Budget.

As has been mentioned, not least by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West, we need to consider support for families. My hon. Friend knows well the challenges that many face with deployment and education, which she and other Members illustrated. Improving those things, as well as providing better support for veterans, all helps to improve the reputation of the Ministry of Defence as an employer.

One hon. Member, the name of whose constituency has escaped me, mentioned that we would not trust some private housing contractors to run certain refreshment events in breweries. We would not want to house even a dangerous dog in some of the housing that we expect our armed forces personnel to live in. Although the Bill is concerned solely with flexible working, housing is an area that would merit more of the House's attention.

I welcome some of the work that is being done not just by the Government, but by councils and devolved Governments across the United Kingdom. I am very pleased that in the Scottish Government, we have a Minister with responsibility for veterans' affairs, Keith Brown. This is no criticism of previous Administrations, but that is something that came 10 years into the devolution settlement. It provided a real local focus in Scotland, delivering good and positive results in conjunction with the third sector, local authorities and other partner agencies. In reality, however, we need the Ministry of Defence to step up to the plate in supporting veterans.

Although we do not oppose the Bill—we welcome it and look forward to its progression through the House—we look forward to trying to make amendments in Committee. I echo the shadow Defence Secretary by saying that we will do so with an open mind, to try to make the Bill as good and robust as possible, not to be oppositionist. This sort of stuff is far too important. With that in mind, I hope that the Government will hear our suggestions with an open mind and an open heart, so that we can really get a Bill that is fit for purpose and fit for our fine armed forces.

7.59 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). At first glance, the Bill seems slightly paradoxical; we are debating flexibility in the context of Army discipline, which is traditionally extremely rigid. Judging by all the knowledge that has informed contributions in the Chamber this evening, I think that a lot of right hon. and hon. Members have an understanding of the nuance of our fine tradition of military discipline and operational effectiveness. This is not all about discipline, but about the light flexibility that has traditionally gone with it.

I will illustrate that point by quoting a very short piece of writing by a distinguished soldier who served in Aldershot. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that my constituency of Aldershot—as the home of the British Army, with some 10,000 servicemen and women and their families—has always been at the heart of our glorious military tradition. There is no better account of the soldier's experience of Aldershot than this very fine book. It was actually written in the 1930s, but it was reflecting on the late Victorian age.

The book was referring to 1895, when a certain young cavalry officer found himself posted to Aldershot. In those days, young cavalry officers were regimented into their unit by being trained with the soldiers. In modern parlance, they were beasted, basically, with their troopers. It was a means both to improve their riding and to show the troopers that the officers were, to some degree, at their level. They were ridden round the riding school without a saddle and with their hands behind their back.

The book states:

“Many a time did I pick myself up shaken and sore from the riding-school tan”—

the sand in the riding school—

“while twenty recruits grinned furtively but delightedly to see their officer suffering the same misfortunes which it was their lot so frequently to undergo.”

That very elegantly captures the eternal truth that, in all the command relationships in the British Army, authority is not bestowed on officers, but earned by officers working with their men. At the heart of that is, of course, a certain sense of flexibility and a sense that commanders, at whatever unit level, will always look after the interests of those under their command.

I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, and others will have recognised that the quote was written by Winston Churchill. It is from a very fine book, which I am sure most right hon. and hon. Members will have enjoyed, called “My Early Life”.

It sees him go on from Aldershot to be posted first to Cuba and then to British India, and it is highly recommended as a read.

The quote illustrates the importance of flexibility in the broadest sense, and I also want to talk about the impact on families. I have talked about commanding officers and those who have the power to make judgments about the working routine of the soldiers under their command, but we must also recognise that the burden, especially of operational soldiering, has a huge impact on the lives of not only the soldiers but their families.

I am really encouraged by the provisions in the Bill to allow a greater degree of planned family time for soldiers. It is very important to be able to plan, especially for those coming back from operations. If they can sit down and plan with their spouse who will be doing the school run for the next year, it is amazing what a difference that can make to the viability of their relationship and to the ability of that person to continue to serve. To that extent, the provisions are what we call a force multiplier: they will make our soldiers—our men and women across all three services in the armed forces—more effective.

We should be very pleased about that because using and deploying our armed forces is no longer a luxury. We have to be prepared for very large-scale deployments of conventional forces in the future. If anyone thinks that that is not the case, they need to learn from history. Again, it is interesting to comment on another parallel with the late Victorian age.

Winston Churchill wrote that book in the 1930s, but it was reflecting back to the 1890s, when he and his fellow officers were absolutely certain that they would not deploy to mainland Europe. Because of the size of the Army, they were absolutely convinced that they would not go to Europe. He and his fellow officers drew the

“conclusion that the British Army would never again take part in a European conflict. How could we, when we only had about one army corps with one Cavalry Division”?

That was in 1895, and 20 years later that entire generation was of course swept up in the conflagration on the European continent. We must never fall into the trap of thinking that large-scale deployments on a conventional basis are not likely.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the powerful and eloquent speech he is making, particularly from his own experience as a soldier in the British Army. Does he feel that the increased flexibility brought about by the Bill is one key step in maintaining the high levels of recruitment into our armed forces that I am sure Members on both sides of the House want to see?

Leo Docherty: Yes is the answer—absolutely. The Bill is about retention, recruitment and the attractiveness of the whole proposition. I am very encouraged—I shall mention this again in a minute—by the greater specialisation that we will have under Army 2020.

As I have said, we need to draw a parallel with the 1890s. Back then, officers regarded their force as very small by Victorian standards. We are in a similar situation in the sense that we have a very small conventional force, but we must not fall into the trap of thinking that we will not need to deploy it in the near future. If we

unroll the map and do a world tour, we can see that the middle east is in flames, that there is a resurgent Russia probing NATO’s eastern flank and that there is a possible nuclear conflagration in North Korea—a whole range of very serious challenges.

Our response to those challenges will be twofold. We clearly have a hard-power response using equipment. We will have some very impressive new equipment and capabilities coming through over the next 10 years. We have the magnificent carrier strike force with carrier-enabled power projection, although that will not come on line until 2026. We have the magnificent F-35s, which are part of that force, and we have a new armoured vehicle for the Army, so there is an amazing range of new kit and equipment.

The other side of that hard power is having the people to go with it, and the human element represents a new form of soft power that will be all the more important. We have the specialised infantry battalions that will be part of the new strike brigades. I had the pleasure last week to meet the commanding officer of one of the new specialised infantry brigades, 4 Rifles, in Aldershot. This kind of specialist infantry battalion will require a greater degree of expertise, and the prospect of serving in one of them will be a very strong motivation for people to be not only retained but recruited in the first place.

For me, the measures in the Bill are not a luxury; they will be important in ensuring that we have a sufficient force. No one in the Chamber should be under any illusion that we will not need large-scale conventional deployments in the near future. For those to be successful, our people must be at the heart of this. That is the golden thread: the great genius of the British military is our people. It was true back in 1895, during the first and second world wars, in 1982 and throughout our deployments in Iraq and Helmand. I am very pleased that the Bill will help to maintain the critical relationship between the MOD and our commanders at every level and the people who serve under them.

8.8 pm

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real privilege to follow the hon. and gallant Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty). His constituency has a fine military tradition, and his speech was a very illuminating and interesting discussion of the Bill. I echo the sentiments expressed by Members on both sides of the House in welcoming the principles of the Bill. On reflection, I think that it is part of the longer-term trend we have seen in our armed forces in recent years.

I want to reflect on joining the Territorial Army at the age of 17 in 2006, the year in which the Royal Regiment of Scotland was formed. At the time, it was part of a very controversial exercise in the restructuring of the armed forces and the Army in particular. The change to the regimental system was met with much dismay among those who held true to the traditions of the regimental golden thread, as it was known. However, after a decade of experience of this new multi-battalion regimental system, it has broadly been seen as a successful development in the British Army’s history, primarily because it has offered increased career flexibility for those serving in the multi-battalion regiments. That move to a true one Army structure was excellent, and this feels like a continued evolution of that agenda.

[Mr Paul J. Sweeney]

The Bill could look at a more formalised structure between the regular and reserve components and how that might play out. My friends and colleagues in the Army reserves, for example, have transitioned between regular battalions and reserve battalions. While they have developed great experience—I include myself in that—in their attachments to regular battalions and serving alongside them in exercises around Europe, a stigma is still attached to reservists transitioning to more long-term service with regular battalions. For example, someone who is commissioned on a reserve commissioning course at Sandhurst cannot then take a command role in a regular battalion, as they are seen as not having had the necessary training to develop their competence. I would like to see that opportunity explored in more detail during the passage of the Bill. It is an excellent opportunity for greater synergy between our regular and reserve forces which we should examine.

One of the key developments in recent years in the multi-battalion structure for infantry regiments has been the end of the arms plot, which was one of the worst experiences for regular soldiers. The entire battalion would be uprooted, lock, stock and barrel, every couple of years and moved to a different part of the UK, to Germany or even to Hong Kong. Their family lives and the careers of their dependants were uprooted, and it was viewed as a pernicious aspect of serving in the armed forces. It is great that Labour brought in reforms to the Army's structure that ended the arms plot and stabilised the location of Army battalions. The Bill is a further development in providing stability for families who rely on building a relationship with the local community without a unit, and that is welcome.

I would also like to see greater emphasis on the legal status of those pursuing civilian opportunities while still serving in a regular unit. I know from personal experience that many reservists experience regular discrimination when looking at civilian career opportunities. I remember when I was at university looking for a part-time job. I could tell that the interviewers were not interested as soon as I mentioned being a reservist, and I was not offered the job. It is important that we promote the skills and experience of service in the reserves and that we provide legal protected status for such service. That should feed into how the Bill treats regulars transitioning to some form of civilian employment as well as serving in a regular capacity.

I was heartened to hear that, in surveys, 32% of regular personnel consider that the change would be a positive development and encourage them to retain their career development in the armed forces. That is encouraging.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): On the point about retention, as a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have been very impressed by the dedication, skills and bravery of the armed forces, but there is no doubt that the pressures of balancing family life with a career in the forces are hard, particularly for those who move around frequently or do long tours of duty. In welcoming the Bill, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it will improve the retention of not only reservists but those in the Regular Army?

Mr Sweeney: I am sympathetic to the sentiments that the hon. Lady has offered the House on that aspect of the Bill. In fact, this weekend a close friend celebrated an early Christmas with his infant daughter because he is about to deploy on active service in Afghanistan—an insight into the extraordinary depth of the commitment and sacrifice that members of our armed forces make. They are unlike any other public servants, and we should recognise that—as other hon. Members have said—when it comes to respecting the covenant, the pay cap and the remuneration of our armed forces. They serve without fear or favour 24 hours a day on exercise or operations overseas. Does the compensation they receive from such a severe dislocation from civilian interaction and family life really reflect the commitment they make? We should also consider that broader point.

What effect will the Bill have on progression in a career in the regular forces? Consideration for promotion in the reserves, for example, is largely predicated on how often someone can commit to attending career courses, weekend training events and annual camps. Given the demands of civilian career development, progression within reservist forces can be prejudiced. I wonder whether that subtle effect also has an impact in the Regular Army when people are considered for promotion—it might be a lowest common denominator effect when it comes to progression in the ranks.

I would like to address the cap badges issue and how this might play out in different branches of the service. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) made a critical point about the severe under-manning, especially in key pinch-point trades and services in the armed forces. Ironically, those are areas where we could leverage skills into the services from civilian life. It would be interesting to see more scrutiny of how the Bill could help to promote the adoption of flexible working in different branches of the Army. For example, the infantry or the cavalry have a very traditional, bottom-up career progression built on experience and the highly specialised nature of their roles, and there might be a better opportunity for the infusion of civilian talent, skills and experience in some of the more technical arms and services—for example, the intelligence corps, cyber and the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers might benefit from greater cross-pollination between the private and defence sectors and the armed forces. That might be an interesting way to explore potential scenarios and the impact they might have on certain trades or cap badges.

When the Army structure was proposed back in 2006, with the end of single battalions and the move to multi-battalions, we also saw a reduction in the regular battalions of infantry from 40 to 33. That was an unfortunate exercise. Although we realised more capability from ending the arms plot and the transition in roles of each battalion, we lost a critical mass of capability in the Army as a whole. As for the reforms to the reservists, I remember vividly serving in the Territorials one year when we were told to stop training because the MOD had run out of money—an atrocious example that demonstrates the contempt that the reserves were held in for a long time. It is nice to see that that has now changed and the Army Reserve, as they are now known, are critical and integrated into the Army's capability.

I would like to see greater opportunities explored, so that we do not just use the Bill as a cost-cutting exercise but as a way to enhance the capability of our armed forces, especially our Army, given that the staffing and manning levels have fallen below the target of 82,000 to 80,000. If the Bill can be a harbinger of a greater enhancement of the armed forces in the future by harnessing the potential of our people in both civilian and military life, to add to our military capability, it would be a welcome move forward for our armed forces. Many of our regulars experience pressure and stress when moving to civilian life, and perhaps the Bill could be used as an opportunity to help the transition of people leaving the armed forces to a civilian career opportunity, instead of the cliff edge of being thrown out or leaving the Army suddenly after 20 or more years of institutional service. I would welcome it if those aspects could be considered in more detail during the passage of the Bill, and I am happy to support its progression.

8.18 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak this evening, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who was able to draw on his experience of the reserves and that of people he served with.

I welcome the Bill. It is important that we do everything we can to support our armed forces personnel and ensure that we attract and retain talent—an issue I will discuss in more detail shortly.

I would like to start by echoing the Secretary of State's opening remarks that we have the best armed forces in the world. I place on record my thanks to our brave servicemen and servicewomen for their courage and professionalism, for the fact that they put their lives on the line to defend and protect our country, and, as we have spoken about this evening, for often making compromises in their work-family balance. I also pay tribute to the two reservist units based in Cannock: the Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers and the Royal Military Police.

Before I come on to talk about the Bill, I would like to touch on a local issue in relation to the armed forces. Staffordshire has a proud military history. We were home to the Staffordshire Regiment, better known as the Staffords. Although it was disbanded and merged with the Mercian Regiment, our regimental mascot, Watchman V, a Staffordshire bull terrier, is now the mascot for the Staffordshire Regimental Association and was last year's winner of the public vote at the Westminster dog of the year show. On a more serious note, Watchman V—or should I say Sergeant Watchman V—and his handler Greg Hedges regularly attend regimental events, military parades and remembrance services.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady about the wonder of Watchman V, having had the privilege of being with him at the launch of the Staffordshire poppy appeal last week in the constituency of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). He does Staffordshire a true service and I am delighted the hon. Lady has mentioned him in the House.

Amanda Milling: I am grateful to one of my constituency near neighbours. I also see the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Tracy Brabin) in her place, whose dog is the

new winner of the Westminster dog of the year. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) makes the important point that they are fantastic ambassadors for the Staffordshire Regimental Association, our military history and our armed forces.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I will now address the Bill, which I welcome. I understand its purpose: we need to find more ways to provide flexible working arrangements. We need to ensure that our armed forces better reflect modern life, and we need to secure a better work-life balance for service personnel and their families. As many Members have said, this is about attracting new talent to the armed forces, including women, so we can reach the 15% target by 2020, but it is also about retaining talented servicemen and servicewomen. People are leaving the forces because of the impact on their family life. I have seen this at first hand. Friends of mine have decided to leave the armed forces for family reasons: a better work-life balance and more stability in where they live. This is a massive gain for other public sector organisations and the private sector, but a huge loss to the armed forces. We are losing skills and expertise following significant investment in training throughout their career. I would like to touch on training a little more.

In the past couple of months, like many other hon. Members I have had the honour and privilege of taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I place on record my thanks to everyone involved, on a day-to-day basis, in setting up and organising the scheme. I also thank those who have hosted our visits so far. I am taking part in the Army scheme and have learnt so much in a very short space of time. It is on these visits that we have seen the importance of training in getting our servicemen and servicewomen up to speed and ensuring they have the necessary skills. The first half of the scheme between now and Christmas is focused on recruitment and training. I have visited the Army Aviation Centre in Middle Wallop, the Infantry Training Centre at Catterick—that has already been mentioned this evening—and the Land Component briefing day. Next week, a number of us will be visiting the British Army training unit out in Kenya.

We have learnt so much at each of those sessions by virtue of speaking to officers and soldiers, who have welcomed us and shared their experiences of serving. They have given us a real insight into life in the armed forces. What is evident is the investment in training. That is not surprising: we need to make sure that personnel are fully trained if they are to be deployed. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks, we need to ensure that our servicemen and servicewomen have not only the right equipment but the right skills. Those skills need to be constantly updated.

That investment in training means that we have highly skilled and highly experienced personnel, so retention is critical. As I have said, one of the main reasons why we lose armed forces personnel is the impact on their family lives. That is why the measures in the Bill on flexible working are so important. It is equally important to continue to ensure operational capability and effectiveness in our armed forces. I recognise that the Bill contains measures to introduce flexible working, while at the same time maintaining the key principles of the armed forces, with a degree of temporary measures included.

[Amanda Milling]

Members have mentioned the extent of the consultation on flexible working. There have been the flexible duties trials, we have had surveys and we have had focus groups. Before I was elected to this place, I was a qualitative market researcher conducting focus groups. Thirty two groups across 16 locations is a very large-scale survey and it will help to ensure all views are incorporated into the Bill.

As I mentioned, a number of us will be visiting troops in Kenya and marking Remembrance Day with them, so I would like to take this opportunity to wish all those involved in services across Cannock—there will be plenty—all the very best for their services over Remembrance weekend. I would also like to thank all the volunteers from the British Legion, such as those from the Great Wyrley Bridge branch who I joined in Sainsbury's in Cannock on Saturday. They work tirelessly this time of the year raising money for the poppy appeal.

To sum up, I welcome the Bill, which contains measures to create more flexibility and so help to attract and retain talent.

8.28 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), who spoke passionately about the need to retain and recruit personnel to our armed forces.

This is a welcome Bill. I remember growing up in Plymouth as a young man. Back then, the armed forces were not always an open and welcoming place for many people in our community. The progress made over many years for the lesbian, gender, bisexual and transgender community, the BAME community and women is to be welcomed and supported. We have made an awful lot of progress in terms of both legislative equality and—perhaps more importantly—cultural change and how those laws are put into practice. I pay tribute to those in the armed forces who have sought to break down walls and challenge convention in order to welcome people from diverse backgrounds who wish to serve our country.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the steps forward that the armed forces have taken. Does he also welcome the news, which broke about three hours ago, that President Trump's attempt to exclude transgender people from the military has been defeated by the courts?

Luke Pollard: We should send a clear message from this House that those from the LGBT community are welcome in the UK armed forces. That sends a strong signal to our allies and opponents about our clear vision for an armed forces that represents all parts of our community.

At the heart of the Bill, though, there is a need for greater recognition of the personnel crisis in the UK armed forces. It is right that we reflect the different reasons people join the armed forces and their different rationales for continuing to serve their country in the way we structure both the recruitment regulations and the terms and conditions. Hon. Members have spoken already about pay, but it is worth my looking again at that and at terms and conditions.

People do not join the armed forces for the pay, but it is definitely a contributing factor, especially at key life moments—for instance, when people are expanding their family, looking to invest in property or going on the housing ladder. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have spoken about armed forces housing. In Plymouth, this remains a national scandal on which we need to do much more. CarillionAmey is not doing its job properly. It is important that the Government send a strong signal to CarillionAmey that the service it is offering is simply not good enough and that our armed forces families deserve the very best.

One of the keys to the personnel crisis are the pinch points, particularly in the Royal Navy, which is of great interest to the patch I serve, as I represent Devonport dockyard and naval base. I am talking about engineers and nuclear skills in particular. As we look to invest more in our armed forces and buy ever more expensive bits of kit, it is vital that we recruit and retain the talent to make sure that those bits of kit can be used in the way they are supposed to be used. I am concerned, however, about our continuing skills shortage in engineering grades.

It is important that we recognise our friends and NATO allies, especially those from America, who have transferred personnel to serve in our UK armed forces in engineering grades. In particular, I welcome the transferring of people from the US Coast Guard to serve in the Royal Navy. There remains much more to do, however, and I would welcome a greater effort from Ministers in terms of how we invest more in engineering. That is especially a concern in nuclear engineering skills, particularly as the new generation of nuclear new build power stations comes online and there is a temptation to poach people by offering them better pay, terms and conditions and lifestyle.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about skills, particularly in critical areas such as nuclear engineering. It is worth noting that generally during the build of a large complex programme, such as the Astute-class submarine, there are large-scale secondments of personnel from the Royal Navy, working alongside engineering staff with defence contractors such as Rolls-Royce or BAE Systems. Essentially, they are on a job-share initiative between the defence contractor and their normal service location. Might the Bill be an opportunity to formalise that arrangement, increase their compensation and build their industry experience as well as their service experience?

Luke Pollard: It is crucial in structuring the regulations and operations of armed forces that we recognise the interplay between civilian and military life. It is not simply a one-way street; there are stages in people's careers when they might move between those two different lifestyles.

Flexible working can support the retention and recruitment of military personnel and also add two other important factors: the ability to return to our armed forces and then for their service to be recognised and properly supported. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have spoken about the need to recruit people and to attract the best and brightest from a variety of backgrounds and to retain their service. There are an increasing number of examples, however, certainly in Plymouth and in the Royal Navy, of armed

forces personnel who have left the service returning in a variety of different contracts in different roles. I hope that the Government will consider specifically what additional support will be needed by people whose previous backgrounds will have been very different, and what can be done to persuade more people to return to parts of the service where there is currently a shortage of skills, particularly engineering skills. I think that Members on both sides of the House agree on the importance of recognition in the armed forces, and there is certainly more to be done about veteran support.

Our armed forces do not operate in a bubble, and the rules and regulations governing recruitment, retention and flexibility should reflect the existence of a more competitive environment. The forces should attempt to be the best and brightest employers, offering both openness and quality, and they should be family-friendly. We should not give flexible working a new status if we are not yet sure about the possibility of stigmatisation. I hope that Ministers will have a think about the definitions that are being used, because it worries me that those who take up the option of flexible working as part of their contracts could be stigmatised by their colleagues, and that a stigma could also be attached to the cultural setting in which they found themselves. I know that that is not the intention behind the Bill, and I hope that Ministers, and others who scrutinise it, will give some thought not only to the definitions, but, more important, to how they can be translated into action to ensure that we can recruit, retain and return talent without that accompanying stigma.

Anyone who travels from Plymouth on Sundays will be familiar with the line-up of new recruits who arrive at the station on Sunday evenings to join HMS Raleigh. That is normally the moment when they have left their families, and they line up in their smartest suits awaiting their first proper day in the Royal Navy. I have spoken to many of those new recruits as they work out which station they should be going to and how they are to get there. I remember, on one occasion, helping a young man to tie his tie, because he was very nervous and wanted to make a good impression.

New recruits join the Royal Navy, and the armed forces in general, for a variety of reasons. Some want a better life than they have previously endured, some simply want to serve, and some want to follow family members or contribute to our country. There are many stories that they can tell about the hope and excitement that they feel. It is important for us, in this place, to create rules and regulations that do not discriminate against those who want to join the forces—regardless of their background, their sexuality or their gender—and to support them throughout the various moments in their lives, and those of their families, that they will experience during their service.

I should like to know how the Government will address personnel shortages, and how those life moments and the requirements of flexible working can be phased and dialled up and down so that we can bring back the talent that we need as and when it is required. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said that flexible working might be a good way of ending the “cliff edge” that is sometimes encountered by people when they leave the services, but we should bear in mind that it could also enable us to bring people back into the armed forces at some future date.

This short Bill is a welcome example of the progress that our armed forces have been making for many years, and I think that it is a step forward, but I also think that a few elements could be tweaked to ensure that it is implemented in the best way possible. I hope that the Minister will think about how we can not only recruit and retain personnel, but return them to our armed forces.

8.39 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): This debate is very important for our armed forces, and I am pleased to follow some wonderful speeches, particularly those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who is no longer in his place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I am also extremely proud because, since being elected to the House, one of my members of staff has trained to be a reservist; he has passed his exams—for want of a better phrase—and is now a full reservist. So I am doing my bit for the armed forces.

I am extremely pleased that the Government have introduced this Bill, which recognises the special sacrifice and commitment our armed forces make to our country. I am extremely privileged to represent the place where I was born, a constituency within the towns of Medway, where we have a long and rich history with our armed forces. We have had the Royal Marines; we have our naval dockyard, which is known for the building of the famous Victory; and in later years we have the nuclear submarines. There is also of course our beloved Royal Engineers, with the Royal School of Military Engineering at Brompton Barracks within my constituency. We also have a reserve unit. Although the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), is not in his place, I want to say that Conservative Members are extremely proud to have in him a Royal Engineers colonel.

Our armed forces have changed very much since I was a young girl growing up in the Medway towns. My great grandfather, who served in the Boer war, was stationed at Kitchener Barracks in Chatham, which is now closed and being developed into houses. When I left school, I remember saying to my parents that I wanted to join the Navy and my mum dutifully took me down to the recruitment office in Chatham. I realised that the Navy would not be the best place for me. My father said it was probably because I could not handle being shouted at—there we go.

At the time, women were not allowed to work on the submarines, be a boatswain or fly helicopters. How things have changed. So it is right that we recognise that our armed forces have changed and everyday life has changed, and it is right that the individuals who commit, and make the sacrifice to serve their country, are afforded some flexibility during their careers.

The Bill's provisions represent a balance that affords the opportunity for serving personnel to apply for flexibility, whether it be after the birth of a child, a family bereavement, illness or just a change in life circumstances, while maintaining the principle that servicemen and women are always ready for duty.

Last year we celebrated the 300th anniversary of our “proud Sappers”, with over 200 years at Chatham, with Her Majesty the Queen visiting Chatham Brompton Barracks. Such is the history and the international regard in which our Engineers are held that we continue

[Kelly Tolhurst]

to attract the best men and women into our armed forces. Currently our Engineers are deployed on 18 operation across the world, and, notably, are currently involved in the Caribbean after the recent hurricane. All of our Engineers will have passed at some stage through the royal military school at Chatham.

Allowing these opportunities for flexible work in the future will help to continue to attract people to a career in the services, particularly women. Anything that promotes a job offering unique skills and experiences is worthwhile. It will help with recruitment as the armed forces will now be attractive to someone who might have dismissed such a career because of the time commitment.

Our Engineers in Chatham recently held a mock demolition of Rochester bridge with local people watching on—although, to the disappointment of local people, the Engineers did not actually blow the bridge up.

Daniel Kawczynski: My hon. Friend started her speech with the important remark that one of her researchers is a reservist. I am very proud that my long-standing researcher, Mark Oates, is also training to be a reservist. These people will become increasingly important for our armed services. Does my hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done to encourage private and public sector companies to do whatever they can to support Army reservists working for them, as Members of Parliament do?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to do more to encourage organisations to support their workforces to volunteer as reservists. As a Member of Parliament, I am here in this House making decisions that have an impact on our military services, and it is therefore only right that I should afford the flexibility to someone working for me to follow something that they want to do.

The armed forces can do a great deal by engaging with our communities, and this can involve an important educational element. Following the exercise on the Rochester bridge, many people who lived in the Medway towns suddenly realised that we had a barracks in the constituency. It is massively important that that connection should continue. The deep relationship that our armed forces have with the places in the UK where they are based provides an opportunity for them to showcase how rewarding a career in the armed forces can be.

I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social work, which is currently conducting an inquiry into social work and female veterans. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), I have had the privilege of hearing about the challenges faced by some of our female veterans and the impact that regular service and being on operation has had on their health and their families. These amazingly strong women are a credit to our country and to my gender. They are supported by the veterans' charity, Forward Assist, of which my hon. Friend is the patron. In short, we need to support our servicemen and women to keep them in their jobs, and we also need to make those jobs attractive.

A career in the armed forces can bring many challenges and difficulties, but it is still a good job and people are less likely to have problems working in that sector than in some other stressful careers. The threat is changing,

and our military is changing. The British forces are regarded worldwide as being the best. I look forward to supporting the Bill, and I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Government on bringing it forward today.

8.47 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate, and to follow two Members who represent constituencies with so much naval history: the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst). Devonport and Chatham have played huge roles in our military history. Some Members will know that there is a little bit of naval history in my own family. My grandfather spent 25 years in the Royal Navy from 1937 to 1962, and my father spent 27 years in Devonport dockyard. He would tell people that he was a painter and when asked what kind of pictures he painted, he would say, "Well, if you would like your picture in submarine black, battleship grey, firebox red or warning sign yellow, I'm your man, but if you want it in anything else, you'd probably better speak to someone else."

The Bill is particularly relevant today. When my grandfather was serving 60 years ago, there was a very traditional structure. He would be out on the fleet and my grandmother would be at home with the family, and they would be expected to follow the service wherever it took them. My father can remember living in Scotland before coming down to Plymouth and living in Devonport more permanently. At that time, people were in different places for long periods of time, and perhaps that generation accepted that, having seen the struggles of world war two. My grandfather saw some of the heaviest action, on the Malta convoy, and he saw further action latterly in the Pacific as Japan's fight against the allies became even more desperate. He also experienced one of the frogman attacks in Alexandria in the late 1930s.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Kevin Foster: Wow! I was expecting a bit of a queue, but—let's do ladies first, then we will do the gentlemen.

Carol Monaghan: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned his grandfather, and I do not want to pass up this opportunity to mention the fact that my grandfather served in the Arctic convoys during the second world war. I want to put Harry Monaghan on the record as well.

Kevin Foster: It is wonderful to hear that piece of family history. It is not always known that a large percentage of the tanks used in the counter-attack at Moscow in 1941 that finally drove the Germans back from threatening the Russian capital were supplied via the Arctic convoys. While Russia did get its industry going and almost achieved a miracle of production between 1941 and the ultimate victory in 1945, the convoys played a huge role in the crucial first months of the war and literally kept the Soviet Union in the fight, laying the ground for the defeat of national socialism in Europe.

Dr Julian Lewis: As proof that great minds think alike, the fact that my hon. Friend referred to the second world war means that I cannot pass up the opportunity to point out that today is the 75th anniversary

of the seizure of vital Enigma documents from the U-boat, U-559. Three young men swam over to that sinking U-boat and went on board in the dead of night. Two of them, Tony Fasson and Colin Grazier, went down with the sinking boat and were posthumously awarded the George Cross, and the third, a 16-year-old called Tommy Brown, who did not survive the war, was awarded the George Medal. By their sacrifice and bravery, thousands upon thousands of allied lives were saved.

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reminder of the sacrifice that people made—breaking those codes made a huge difference in the battle of the Atlantic. It also brings us to a slightly sadder reminder, which perhaps partly relates to what the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport alluded to, of a time when someone's commitment to this country was not the only thing that we judged them by. Alan Turing also did so much to ensure that the Enigma code was broken and that German messages could be read, probably shortening the war by a year. If it did not shorten the war, it at least turned the war and allowed us to keep vital lifelines open.

Daniel Kawczynski *rose*—

Kevin Foster: I will take one more intervention and then press on, because I am conscious that other Members want to speak.

Daniel Kawczynski: When talking about the breaking of the Enigma code, I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in paying tribute to the Polish codebreakers who joined British codebreakers at Bletchley. They also made sacrifices to ensure our victory in the second world war.

Kevin Foster: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in that. Polish people also fought alongside British forces throughout the second world war after Poland was overrun in 1939. My hon. Friend mentioned his constituent who fought in the battle of Britain, in which the famous Polish squadrons showed such great bravery fighting for this country in the hope of keeping alive the flame of freedom for their own country. Sadly, it took well over 40 years for that flame to be reignited in Poland, but it was that sacrifice that ultimately made it possible for the country to be free again—although it did take until after the collapse of communism, which played such a role in the defeat of fascism.

The Bill is timely and reflects the changes in society since the times that we have just talked about. Those looking to serve our nation now will face a range of pressures, including the importance of their children's schooling. Constantly moving from deployment to deployment might be fine for a single man or woman and maybe for a couple if the partner is in a job that can be flexible. However, if someone's children are starting to come up to their GCSEs or A-levels, they will have that duty as well—no matter how committed they are.

The Bill is not about creating a part-time military. It is nonsense to say that someone will be going home if they are on operational service. This is about allowing the military to retain capability or to bring people with totally unique skills into the regular service. The military may be able to work with private sector companies at the cutting edge of sectors such as encryption, IT, technology or nuclear to allow the military to have that

capability. Like our grandparents' generation and those who are commemorated around the walls of the Chamber, those who sign up now would recognise the need to put the service first and to make themselves available full time at a time of national emergency. This is about people being one step up from a reservist and having a regular role, which builds on work that has been done on the full-time reserve, for example, where someone can be retained to do a specific job. I have been on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and it has been interesting to meet some very experienced people—people with 20 or 25 years in the services—who are retained to do a specific job in order to keep their experience.

As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said, recruiters are sometimes almost hanging around the naval base gates waiting for people who are coming up to their release period. In the nuclear industry, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said, we are about to see a new generation of nuclear reactors built, and people who have been trained in the Royal Navy will be incredibly recruitable. We need to give them an incentive that will allow them to have a family and a naval career, and the Bill gives them that incentive.

If I told my grandfather that, 60 years after he was in the Navy, I would be here talking about cyber, he would wonder what on earth I was doing talking about a sci-fi film. We need that ability. Synthetic training environments could create so many opportunities, particularly for keeping air crews current on particular airframes. There are real opportunities that would potentially allow someone to go part time in their military career while retaining the skills that could give them opportunities for the future, particularly as we look to the type of warfare we might see in the 21st century.

It is welcome that we are now being flexible and that we are judging people by their commitment. The President of the United States is attempting to ban skilled people who want to serve their country. A member of the US navy deployed with one of our ships could be removed if they are transgender, but if they served with the Royal Navy it would be no issue at all for them to do exactly the same job. Today's court ruling is interesting, and I hope it will set the tone that people should be judged by their commitment and their skills for the job, not by any other factor. If we would accept people if the balloon went up in eastern Europe, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who is sitting next to me, why would we not accept them in peacetime, too? I cannot believe that the restriction would be maintained in wartime, so why on earth would it be maintained in peacetime?

It is right that there are some limits on the ability to request flexible working and that the operation of a unit, a ship or a combat-ready unit about to deploy is still the overriding consideration. Such requests can be dealt with by commanders in a sensible and meaningful way. That needs to be in the Bill, because if it were not, we would probably have to create some sort of caveat. It is clear from the start, but I hope a request would not be unreasonably refused, given that the whole point of the Bill is to keep people in service.

Carol Monaghan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: I am short of time, so I will not take any further interventions.

[Kevin Foster]

It is right that there is still a caveat in the Bill, which can be explored further in Committee, assuming the Bill gets its Second Reading tonight. This has been an interesting debate, and it is probably the right time for the Bill, which reflects a changing society, changing patterns of work and changes in the way people have to balance their service and family commitments. The Bill moves away from the idea of a male serviceman going around the world with his family in tow and embraces the likely employment patterns of the future.

Hopefully we will see more committed people wishing to serve in our armed forces, which is the nub of the issue. Yes, flexible working is likely to be more attractive to women, but it will be attractive to many people who wish to serve—those who want to serve our country, who want to be part of one of the greatest armed forces on this planet and who want to give the sort of service that past generations gave in previous times of need for this country, but who have to balance that with their family.

More good women will come in the door because of the Bill. This is not just about being kind to people, being a nice employer or winning an award for being a flexible employer; it is fundamentally about making it possible for more talent to come into our armed forces and, crucially, to be retained in our armed forces. That is why this is the right Bill, and I hope the House will give it a Second Reading this evening.

8.59 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I rise to support the Bill. Having recently served on the Finance Bill Committee, one realises that there is a beauty in brevity, and the two pages of this Bill are indeed beautiful. They are beautiful in what they seek to do, which goes to prove that a Bill does not have to be large in stature to be effective.

During my time in the reserve forces, I interacted with a number of friends and colleagues in the Regular Army and the regular services who dealt on an uncomfortably regular basis with members of their service going to them as their officer to say, “Boss, I am going to have to leave because my recent service has been very intense and if I want to keep my family together, I am going to have to enter ‘First UK Civ. Div.’”. In this place, we would call that civilian employment. I know that a number of my colleagues were hugely disappointed, but they understood that these soldiers, sailors and Air Force personnel would have to put their family first, and they reluctantly let them go. That was the right thing for these people to do, but unfortunately it was a loss to the service.

It is worth remembering that the patterns of military service we are now used to were put in place at a time when a single employer for life was the norm in civilian employment, and the idea that the bloke would go off to earn all the money for the family and the wife would be happy to stay at home looking after the children was also the norm. The world of work in the civilian sphere has changed beyond recognition. It is now perfectly normal to have two working parents in a household. It is now perfectly normal for the woman in the household to have the more significant and high-earning job, and for the man in the household to be the one who bends their working life around the needs—[*Interruption.*] Of the wife, indeed. There are plenty of examples in the

Chamber this evening of that happening, yet until this Bill is passed it will still be the norm in this area for the woman in a relationship to have to sacrifice her career for that of her husband. Surely in 2017 that should no longer necessarily be the case.

I was struck by the point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) that we have few women in very senior roles in the armed forces. That is a shame, and it weakens us at a point in time when we now recognise that the diversity of experience and knowledge is an important element in successful planning for not just operations, but the background work in which our armed forces take part. One Opposition Member made the point—I apologise for not recalling who it was—that it is not enough just to pass this Bill, important though it is; it is also important that we drive through a cultural change in the armed forces. The hon. and gallant Members who have served will know that there is an unwritten rhythm to the perfect military career. Someone becomes a platoon commander at a certain age and a company second-in-command at another, they go to staff college at this point and then become a brigade chief of staff, before going on to command a sub-unit and then hit other markers at other points. That is the route to high command in the armed forces. It is great for completely flexible men, but it is much harder to hit those career markers if you need to take time off to have children, and that massively disadvantages women.

Hopefully the Bill will become an Act, after which the acme of its success will be that if a man needs to take time off from that career rhythm to support his family—his children, an elderly relative or whoever it might be—he still feels that he has as much chance of getting to high command, should his talent lead him there, as a woman. As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said, there must be no stigma for either a man or a woman in taking advantage of flexible working.

Ruth Smeeth: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the cultural change we need to see is a senior officer being the first person to access flexible working? That would send the right message to the rest of the force about how the changes should be implemented and how we should operate.

James Cleverly: That is not something I had thought of, but it is an important point. If not someone at a very senior rank—there might be the implication that they had already cashed in their chips so were fine—I would love it and it would be interesting to see one of the potential high fliers take up flexible working. Those Members who have been involved in one of the numerous all-party groups on the armed forces all have a little shopping list of the people who could be the service chiefs of the future. Were one of those marked people, the future high fliers, to say, “I’m going to take advantage of this and send a really powerful signal that it will not carry any stigma”, that would be important.

I hope that the Bill will drive a change in attitudes towards service leavers. While I was waiting to speak, I took part in an exchange on social media in which someone reminded me that traditionally the armed forces have not been very good at dealing with people on their way out. I have always been massively frustrated by that, because those people are the recruiters of the future.

It is remarkable that someone who might have had decades of happy service, whether in dark blue, light blue or green, and who could have gone on to become a fantastic recruiter for their branch of the armed forces, could get messed about so comprehensively in their last few weeks and months of service that when they finally hit civvy street the only thing they have to say is what an awful experience they had. That seems a massive waste. Perhaps, through this model of flexibility of service, the armed forces will get better at dealing with people as they move from full-time service to part-time or flexible service, from part-time service to reserve service, and from reserve service to civilian life, in such a way that those people become and remain powerful recruiters for their branch of the armed forces.

The changes in the Bill will need careful management, but this agenda should not be avoided just because of that. We will need to make sure that flexible working is not used as a way to duck out of a particularly bad potential deployment—we all know that there are good and bad deployments. We must also make sure that the availability of flexible working is well communicated throughout people's service life, so that they have thought about it before they need to do it, rather than just afterwards. I do not want to see anyone else sacrifice either their career because of their family or their family life because of their career. The Bill is a big step forward and I commend it to the House.

9.8 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. Having heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) about his grandfather's naval experiences and from my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) about his Army background, I am going to bring a little Air Force balance to the debate. I have to take this opportunity to mention both my grandfather Albert Robert Newitt, who was known to everybody as Dennis, and my great-uncle Basil Newitt. They were the bomber brothers of my family and were, respectively, a Wellington navigator and a Lancaster bomb aimer.

Times have changed immeasurably since then. We are now in an age of high technology. Crucially, as my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree rightly mentioned, we are no longer talking about a job for life. People now know that they have choice in their employment experience, and they will take it. It is in that world that we compete today, and that the armed forces must also compete. The armed forces are not immune to those pressures of childcare and job flexibility. Although there is no doubt that a career in the armed forces is loved—those who serve today will no doubt confirm the camaraderie and excitement that they experience—unique pressures do exist. There is the fact that people are moved around without any say in their own living accommodation. That is very off-putting for some, particularly those who have families. That of course leads to a unique job retention crisis.

Suffice it to say that I support everything that this Bill is trying to do. I look forward to further discussions at a later stage.

9.10 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for his contribution to this debate.

As Members on both sides of the Chamber will agree, those who serve, or who have served in the armed forces of our United Kingdom, some of whom now sit on the Benches in this House and who have made full contributions to this debate using their experience and knowledge, should be continually supported throughout their career. An individual who chooses to risk their life for their country will always have the backing and support of this Government.

The package of reforms in our armed forces people programme demonstrates our commitment to service personnel and this Bill ensures that, like those in other industries, they have greater flexibility around how they balance both work and life. Although discretionary flexibility in working has been in place since 2005, there is no ability for regulars to work part-time or have a guarantee that they will not be liable for extended overseas deployment. This Bill ensures that those practices will indeed be formalised. The arrangement works well in other countries. Although the UK leads the way in many areas, we must continually seek to learn from other countries that have successfully implemented policies that we too could benefit from adopting.

We must never forget that, like each one of us, armed forces personnel bear personal responsibilities—whether that be a family, elderly relatives or ill health in the family. As with other careers, we must ensure that we make a role in our armed forces as accessible as possible and open to the widest possible pool of talent.

I had the great pleasure of visiting RM Condor, in my constituency of Angus, and was struck by the high proportion of marines who came from hundreds of miles away to serve in Arbroath. It is right and proper that we in this House give those marines the flexibility they need to deal with the challenges in their home lives—often many miles away from their base.

As other Members have mentioned, further flexibility will encourage more recruits in their late 20s and early 30s and may well move us closer towards the model adopted in the Netherlands, which the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) mentioned. Obviously, I feel passionately that we need to encourage more females and seek to reach that target of 15% by 2020. No career should be skewed towards one gender, and it should not be easier for a male or a female to carry out any role.

One of the most important factors that will drive personnel to take advantage of the flexible working hours is supporting a family. A role in the armed forces and being a visible parent will no longer be mutually exclusive. Although the jobs market in the United Kingdom is increasingly competitive, careers in the public service must also adjust and modernise. As Members have suggested, there have been societal changes to which we must adapt, although operational capability must be at the forefront of the MOD's decisions on any applications.

I cannot overestimate the positive outcomes of this Bill. It outlines this Government's commitment to modernising our working practices, making careers in the armed forces more accessible and workable in modern life, supporting diversity within the workforce, and alleviating strain and external pressures for personnel. Each and every one of these attributes will positively influence the working environment, morale and readiness of our armed forces.

[Kirstene Hair]

We must never forget these service personnel, who sacrifice much more in their service than you and I, who deserve to be able to live a family life as far as possible just like you and me and to feel their selfless commitment is appreciated just as you and I would ask. That is exactly what the Bill achieves. I am delighted to welcome it for the benefit of the Royal Marines in my constituency of Angus, and for all those who so nobly serve in the armed forces across our United Kingdom.

9.15 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): This debate has been an interesting one with a considerable amount of consensus. It has clearly shown how much our armed forces are valued in this House.

We heard from a range of Members, not least the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who reminded us of concerns about retention and the need to avoid bureaucracy and entertained us with the lyrics of a Glee Club song, “Part-time Submarine”. However, I think that I share with other Members a slight disappointment that he did not actually sing the tune.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) mentioned his pride in our armed forces, his many exchanges with personnel including through the armed forces parliamentary scheme and his concerns about the impact of pay on morale. I think that we received an invitation to a service of private thanksgiving in Chesterfield on the Thursday after Remembrance Sunday.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) highlighted concerns about retention, the future accommodation model and particularly about CarillionAmey, which a number of hon. Members mentioned. She expressed concerns that only 10.2% of our armed forces are women. As she said, that simply is not good enough. I am sure that is a sentiment with which the whole House will agree.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said that we need a debate on pay and an end to the pay cap. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) spoke about his study into recruitment and retention and his 20 recommendations. He also had concerns about the future accommodation model.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) spoke about his own experience of joining what was the Territorial Army, and highlighted the need for more formal structures between the reserves and the regulars. He also mentioned the concerns that many reservists face with employment and the need for protected status.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) talked about the progress that has been made in the armed forces, particularly for LGBT and BAME people and for women. He also mentioned the need to look at pay. He commented that it is vital to recruit and retain personnel to match the investment in the new platforms and equipment, and he said that the Government need to address the personnel shortage.

We heard from the hon. Members for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for Cannock Chase

(Amanda Milling), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for Witney (Robert Courts), for Braintree (James Cleverly) and for Angus (Kirstene Hair)—I hope I have not left anybody out—many of whom gave examples of interactions with armed forces personnel, sacrifices of family life and the impact on the work-life balance.

As hon. Members across the House are aware and as was highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), we are facing a crisis of recruitment and retention in our armed forces and something must be done to get to grips with it. The measures in the Bill are part of the new employment model programme that has been established to improve the offer for members of our armed forces and that is looking at four policy areas: pay and allowances; accommodation; training and education; and terms of service. I hope that the Minister will mention in his reply progress being made in other areas, particularly pay, as well as accommodation. Access to good-quality, affordable accommodation is an important part of the overall offer. The lack of detail surrounding the future accommodation model is concerning to many personnel, so I hope the Minister will update us on that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli said, we welcome the principle of flexible working in our armed forces. Anything that makes service life more compatible with personal and family life is a good thing, as in any profession. As has been highlighted during the debate, there are already ways in which members of the armed forces can work flexibly, including compressed hours, late starts or early finishes and working from home. It is the notion of part-time working that is the new element in the Bill, and we still need a number of questions answered about the details of the scheme and how its various aspects will work in practice.

Let me turn to some of the practicalities. Service personnel will have to apply to a competent service authority. Will this be someone who knows the personal circumstances of the individual service member, so that they can make a more nuanced assessment, or will it be somebody removed from them, and if so, will the applicant’s commanding officer make a recommendation alongside their application? Or will applications be anonymised, so that there can be no conscious or unconscious bias on the part of those making the decision?

Will there be clear limits on the number or percentage of those working part time that any specific regiment can have? If somebody applies after that limit has been met, will they automatically be rejected? What will the process be when it comes to the right of appeal? Will there be a timeframe? Will there be a body to deal with that specifically?

Several Members in the other place highlighted the term “part time” as potentially problematic, given that it could imply a service member’s commitment is only part time. Do the Government have any plans to re-examine that term? I am slightly concerned that the Government have not fully envisaged exactly how some of the elements will work, so I hope that the Minister will be able to clarify some of those concerns this evening.

With regard to the other aspect of the Bill—the limits to separated service for defined periods—the results of this year’s tri-service family attitude survey, which was

released just last week, revealed the lack of support spouses and families feel they receive on deployment. There have been decreases in satisfaction with the types of support before operational tours. There have also been decreases in satisfaction with support during and after deployments. One in three spouses did not know where to go for service-provided welfare support while their partner was deployed. More disappointingly, over half of service families do not feel valued by the services. We know how significant families are to the forces community, so it is important to ensure they know how valued they are, and I think that all of us in the House would like to express that today.

Alongside the option to limit deployment, will the Minister tell the House what the Government are doing to improve support and access to support for families while their service member is away on deployment? What are they doing to improve the relationship between families and the forces? I hope that we can iron out in Committee the details I have mentioned, and I look forward to working with the Minister during that process.

I will finish by saying, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli, that we are prepared to support the Bill, but if we are to do so, the Government must be prepared to amend it to give a fair pay rise to our forces personnel or to allow the pay review body to conduct an in-year review without the cap in place. For the Bill to improve recruitment and, crucially, retention, it needs to be supported by investment in our personnel, and I hope the Government will put their money where their mouth is and invest in our servicemen and women.

9.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Despite the time constraints, we have had a welcome, constructive and largely agreeable Second Reading debate. I am grateful for the contributions from both sides of the House, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to some of the points made.

As the Secretary of State said in opening the debate, while we are investing in equipment—in new ships, submarines, aircraft and armoured vehicles—we must also continue to attract and retain the people not only to use that equipment but to learn the skills to leverage its capabilities fully, to ensure that, strategically and tactically, we can continue to meet our defence, security, humanitarian and diplomatic obligations.

Ultimately, this is about people; it is about those in uniform who defend these shores and our security interests abroad. It is about those in uniform whom we call on to respond to new threats and challenges, such as a resurgent Russia, or to provide humanitarian support in the Caribbean. It is those in uniform—their capabilities, their leadership, their courage and their commitment—who truly reflect our operational effectiveness. However, to attract the brightest and the best, we must recognise the modern context in which recruitment and retention take place.

Just as our equipment and tactics advance and modernise, so too must our offering in terms of what it entails to wear the uniform and serve in the Royal Navy, the Army or the Royal Air Force. As the Secretary of State stated, we are now committed to an ambitious programme to advance our personnel policies, and this Bill is an important step towards a more modern lifestyle for our armed forces.

Under our armed forces people programme, there are four key strands: first, our new joiners' offer, developing a new employment offer that better meets the expectations of future recruits; secondly, our future accommodation model, advancing the housing options available both to single and to married personnel, including home ownership; thirdly, the enterprise approach, with a better harnessing of the transition between public and private sector, specifically for those with engineering and high-tech skills; and finally, offering greater flexible engagement through this Bill.

There is not enough time to do justice to all the contributions we have heard, but I join the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) in congratulating those who have spoken. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), who supported the Bill in general, spoke about some of the challenges that our armed forces face to do with childcare, partner illness and so forth. I am pleased with the general tone that she adopted, which was reflected across the House.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, almost broke into song; I think that the House is probably grateful that he did not. Other contributions from across the House highlighted the importance of supporting the people who make our armed forces work.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way because of the time, and I would like to make some further comments.

As has been said, this small but important Bill will help to modernise our armed forces, and it forms part of a package of measures to maintain the attraction of serving our country. Without exception, all Members, from the opening speech by the Secretary of State onwards, stressed the respect that our armed forces command both here in the UK and abroad.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am slightly bemused. Can you confirm whether we have until the moment of interruption for the Minister to continue his remarks?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is not a point of order, but there are 33 minutes to go.

Mr Ellwood: As I said, without exception, all Members from across the House came to support the people in our armed forces today.

For centuries and across continents, our armed forces have been respected—indeed, revered—for their grit, tenacity and courage. When we define who we are as a nation—our standards, our values, our tolerance, our interests and our aspirations—they are neatly interwoven with the reputation of our armed forces and the role that they play on the nation's behalf.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way—I have made that clear.

The Secretary of State spoke, as did others, of our armed forces being the best in the world. The professionalism and capability of our personnel remains the exemplar on which other nations, both friend and foe, rate the professionalism of their armed forces.

In this place, we often refer to Britain's global influence as the world's leading soft power, with the ability to pursue a transparent agenda to help shape the world around us as a force for good through our influence, commitment, political values and foreign policies. That international respect works only if it is underlined by the recognition that it is backed by the hard power that can be called on to support, to lead, to stabilise, or, where necessary, to intervene. Who do we call on to step forward? It is those who are in uniform. This is not just about attracting the brightest and the best in an ever-competitive domestic environment; in a fast-changing and challenging world, it is about retaining the professionalism of our armed forces that helps us to continue to play a critical role as a force for good on the international stage. It is therefore right that we advance our offering to attract the brightest and the best. That is exactly what this Bill, sitting with the other measures that I have outlined, attempts to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ARMED FORCES (FLEXIBLE WORKING) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on 14 November.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 3 to 9 together.

Ordered,

ADMINISTRATION

That Sir David Amess, Sir Paul Beresford, Sarah Champion, John Cryer, Michael Fabricant, Colleen Fletcher, Mrs Pauline Latham, Jessica Morden, Mary Robinson and Mark Tami be members of the Administration Committee.

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY

That Sir William Cash, Douglas Chapman, Steve Double, Richard Drax, Mr Marcus Fysh, Kate Green, Kate Hoey, Kelvin Hopkins, Darren Jones, Mr David Jones, Stephen Kinnock, Andrew Lewer, Michael Tomlinson, David Warburton and Dr Philippa Whitford be members of the European Scrutiny Committee.

FINANCE

That Mr Clive Betts, Chris Bryant, Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Neil Gray, Mr Lindsay Hoyle, Helen Jones, Stephen McPartland, Mark Menzies, Sir Robert Syms, Mark Tami and Mr William Wragg be members of the Finance Committee.

HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Fiona Bruce, Ms Karen Buck, Ms Harriet Harman, Jeremy Lefroy and Mark Pritchard be members of the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Margaret Beckett, Yvette Cooper, James Gray, Mr Dominic Grieve, Dan Jarvis, Dr Julian Lewis, Angus Brendan MacNeil, Robert Neill, Rachel Reeves, Tom Tugendhat, Stephen Twigg and Theresa Villiers be members of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Dan Carden, Vicky Foxcroft, Patrick Grady, John Lamont, Lee Rowley, Sir Robert Syms and Derek Twigg be members of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments.

PROCEDURE

That Nick Smith be a member of the Procedure Committee.—(*Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Post Office Services: Burncross

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

9.31 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The full words of the hon. Lady should be heard. In the inexplicable circumstance of colleagues not wishing to hear her observations, we shall wait until all who are present clearly do, and until they are attending to the Adjournment debate speech, rather than—I say this to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis)—engaging in their own private conversation.

Angela Smith: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is very kind. I know that we have plenty of time for this debate, but I will not detain the House for longer than is necessary.

Tonight I raise an issue that is unlikely to attract a great deal of parliamentary attention. However, for many people in Burncross in my constituency, the loss of their post office is a major issue that threatens serious disruption to their everyday lives. Indeed, it is such an issue that within days of the announcement that their well-used post office was to close, I received a petition from more than 1,400 local residents asking me to help.

Burncross is situated between the small town of Chapeltown and the old pit village of High Green. It is a residential area characterised predominantly by semi-detached homes of mainly private tenure, along with a smattering of local authority homes and some sheltered housing. The area is mixed demographically, but one of its principal characteristics is a higher than average proportion of residents who are eligible for an old age state pension. In other words, those who are most likely to need accessible postal services, and least likely easily to traverse large distances over Sheffield's renowned hills to access them, are most likely to be hit by the closure. That is especially true in view of the comparatively poor public transport connectivity in the area.

The area, nestling as it does between High Green and Chapeltown, suffers from a lack of retail establishments of its own. For years, however, Burncross has enjoyed the presence of a Costcutter, which has also housed the post office. The supermarket has become an important part of the fabric of the area. It has been there for all the years that I have been the Member of Parliament for Burncross, and it was there for many years before that.

The post office has been well used, with some 1,200 transactions a week. It operated at a profit, and in 2014 it was upgraded in the network transformation programme into a new "main style" branch. I believe that that reflects its importance to the post office network. In July this year, however, it was announced without warning that the post office would close imminently, and not because the Post Office considered it to be a failing outlet, as is often the case. This debate does not represent a criticism of the Post Office, or, one may be surprised to find, the Government.

The reason for the closure was that the freehold owner of the building that housed both the supermarket and the post office decided to redevelop the site and construct a new, larger premises. That, one would imagine, could only be a good thing. Costcutter, however, decided at

that point not to renew its lease arrangements and has opted out of running its business from the new premises. The upshot is that the Co-op has entered into an agreement with the owners of the building to run one of its supermarkets from the location, but its plans for the store do not include a post office.

Like any good constituency MP, I have spoken to both the Co-op and Post Office Counters about the loss of the service. While Post Office Counters is sympathetic and supports the ongoing provision of postal services in the area—it totally understands the distance that local people will have to travel if they can no longer enjoy the service—its view is that there is nowhere large enough or suitable in the area, apart from the premises soon to be taken over by the Co-op. I am afraid that my conversations with the Co-op—I say this as a member of the Co-op movement—have been very disappointing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her campaign to try to retain the post office. I have been involved in many such cases across the water in my own constituency, and we have tried very hard to find alternative premises for post offices. On occasion, the Post Office can give grants to the potential shop owner to increase the size of a property and make it more acceptable. Has she been able to follow that up as a possible solution to her campaign?

Angela Smith: I do not think that that is an option, given that the new premises are already larger than the old one in which the post office was housed. That is not really the issue, as I shall establish in a moment.

As I have said, my conversations with the Co-op have been very disappointing. The company allows many postal concessions in its stores throughout the country, and it has such an arrangement in a store in the town of Stocksbridge in my constituency, but it has flatly ruled out giving a concession to run a post office in the new store, which opens next month.

At this point, we need to remember that the post office in the old store was profitable and would no doubt continue to be so, with 1,200 transactions a week. I suspect the reason for the Co-op's decision is related to a calculation that profit margins for grocery items outweigh those that can be gained from postal services. While I appreciate that the Co-op is a business that has to make a profit in order to be sustainable, it is important to bear in mind the unique selling point of the brand in communities up and down the country. This USP is, of course, its collective roots and its unique position in our social history as a retail business firmly established in the ethics of serving the interests of its customers, who are of course its shareholders, too.

Indeed, given the depth of feeling made so palpable by many of my constituents about the threat to their postal service, I think the Co-op may well succeed in scoring an own goal. Many Burncross residents are saying that they will never forgive the Co-op for, as they see it, taking away their post office. I warn the Co-op now that when Sheffielders decide they are going to dig their heels in, they really dig their heels in. My constituents feel neglected by movements beyond their control: an owner of a property who sees an opportunity to increase profits by redeveloping the premises; a leaseholder in the form of Costcutter not wanting to pay the extra rent that will no doubt be due because of the redevelopment, which is fair enough; and a new leaseholder who intends

[Angela Smith]

to use the extra space for what it sees as more profitable purposes, no doubt in part to service the extra rental charges due on the redeveloped store.

The real tragedy of all this, however, is that the customers of Costcutter and the old post office were satisfied with the store that was there. It provided all the services the local community wanted. Now they have lost perhaps some of their most cherished services—the collection of their hard-earned pensions being one of them—in the pursuit of higher profit margins.

To bring my remarks to a close, I appreciate entirely that the Minister will probably say that these are commercial decisions and there is therefore very little she can do, but I am not sure we should just settle for that. My constituents stand to lose permanently what they know to be a vital service—not for the normal reasons of the service not being sustainable, but because a business does not want to allocate space for it since it sees a better opportunity for the use of that space. In such circumstances, surely there should be a role for Government, national or local, to intervene. Ideally, the Government need to be able to act as brokers, incentivising partnerships between organisations to secure the amenities that communities such as Burncross so desperately need. In this instance, of course, it would be something as simple as a post office counter in a grocery store—the very provision that we have often decided is the most sustainable way to make sure that postal services continue to be delivered in a given area.

Can I ask the Minister, therefore, if she will review how concessions, such as those found in supermarkets, are awarded? Can she examine what help Government can give to make sure postal services are provided in circumstances such as those in Burncross? Given that postal services often and increasingly have to compete for space alongside other uses, how can public authorities, working with the Post Office, make sure the public good element of postal services is taken into account when commercial retail decisions are made? My constituents are losing their postal services and cannot possibly be expected to access alternative post office outlets easily, given the distance involved and the particularly hilly nature of the area—and that is particularly the case for the elderly population. Surely Parliament and the Government should be about giving a voice and a say in society to such people, giving the voiceless a voice. I hope the Minister takes note of that in her responses.

Although the circumstances of Burncross losing its post office are local and not that important to the rest of the world, similar stories are being played out across the country, with profit being put before the public good. It is only when those are added together that they start to look like something more important, and then often it is too late for us politicians to do something. Today it might be a community post office in Burncross that loses out; tomorrow it will be another one in another constituency, until eventually the network starts to look like a pale shadow of its former self. Then it will be too late. I look forward to the Minister's response.

9.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I congratulate the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) on securing this debate on post office

services in Burncross and for the hard work that she has done in trying to secure their continuation. She has clearly set out the importance of post office services to her community and I fully appreciate the concerns that she has raised.

The Government recognise the important social role that post offices play in communities across the country, and that is why we will have provided nearly £2 billion to maintain, modernise and protect a network of at least 11,500 branches across the country, far from all of which are profitable. Today, the 11,600 post office branches in the UK form the most stable network that the Post Office has enjoyed for some time. That is because the Post Office is transforming and modernising its network, thanks to that investment from the taxpayer, which has enabled the modernisation and transformation of more than 7,000 branches.

The network is at its most stable for a generation, and customer satisfaction has remained high. I understand that apart from the critical problem in this particular area, the hon. Lady's constituency has benefited from four out of its 15 branches now opening on a Sunday and almost 1,000 additional opening hours a month—*[Interruption.]* I understand that that is no comfort to the particular constituents she has mentioned, and I will come on to address the points that she made about that locality.

Post offices are crucial to the many millions of customers, including hundreds of thousands of small businesses, who use the service daily to access the Post Office's diverse range of services, including banking services. I completely understand the difficulty and the frustration that communities face if there is a loss of post office services. We of course hope that the loss we are debating tonight is temporary.

The hon. Lady spoke passionately about her concerns for post office services in the Burncross community. I fully understand the points she made about the local area having many older people who would find it difficult to travel to Chapeltown or High Green, particularly given the limited public transport in the local area. I know that the Post Office apologises to its customers and the community for the huge inconvenience caused by what I hope is a temporary closure. Both I and the Post Office recognise the need to restore post office services to her community as soon as possible.

Hon. Members will be aware that the vast majority of post offices in the network are now independent small businesses operating as agents of the Post Office, so while the overall network position is very good, individual small businesses can face problems like any other. These sometimes lead to temporary closures. As the hon. Lady acknowledged, temporary closures are often beyond the direct control of the Post Office. The Post Office has not chosen to close this branch, but local development and the demolition of existing premises has resulted in the current position. The Post Office is working hard to find a solution that will allow it to restore services to the community. I will certainly work with the Post Office and the hon. Lady to redouble efforts to find an alternative site for the post office service her residents deserve. I am aware that the Post Office met the hon. Lady to discuss the matter and that it has also met local councillors.

It is very unfortunate that the Co-op has indicated it no longer wants to take on the post office. I share the hon. Lady's deep disappointment in the decision made

by the Co-op, especially, as she said, considering its founding principles. Unfortunately, the Post Office cannot force a business to take on a post office if, for whatever commercial reasons, it does not wish to do so. However, the Post Office has and will continue to look for willing partners who are keen to take a post office on as a part of their business in her community.

The hon. Lady spoke about the unique public good of the Post Office in communities up and down the country. This is absolutely one of the key points the Post Office makes when it advertises its branches and when it speaks to potential new operators. The strength of its history and social purpose cannot be underestimated, and it can have a very positive impact on a business. It is also taking steps to develop its business offer, with particular reference to banking services, which it is improving all the time. Considering the large numbers of high street bank branches that are closing around the country, this has the potential to sharpen up the offer the Post Office makes not just to its customers and small businesses that patronise its branches, but to the business partners that take on a post office branch or counter. This is also something we must push.

The Association of Convenience Stores recently published the “Local Shop Report 2017”, which ranked post offices first in terms of having a positive impact on their local areas. These are all selling points that we have to make to potential new partners. There are, of course, commercial benefits too. It offers day-to-day banking for 99% of personal account customers, as well as businesses. It is also the UK’s number one for foreign exchange and the leading provider in the mails market. Some 73% of customers say that the post office is their main reason for visiting a partner store and 78% of people using the post office bought something else in the retail outlet that played host to the post office counter.

To keep post offices in our communities or—as in the hon. Lady’s case—to reopen a service, we must ensure that running a post office continues to be an attractive and commercially sustainable proposition. The Government believe that this is the case. More than 90% of branches are now run by independent business operators and retail partners. The success of the network’s transformation programme, which has seen 2,000 new operators taking on and running post office branches, demonstrates that operating a post office continues to be an attractive offer to many independent and retail businesses. I can only assume that she and the Post Office have been unable to get that message across to the Co-op in her constituency.

Angela Smith: The Minister has got to the crucial point: the Co-op has refused to listen to the argument that post office services benefit stores such as the one it will soon be operating in Burncross. Its point-blank refusal to accept that it is good for the community and potentially for the itself is incredibly frustrating.

Margot James: I quite agree with the hon. Lady. Working with a retail partner brings the benefits of shared overheads across the combined post office and retail business, including property and staff costs, while the host retailer also benefits from increased footfall, to which I alluded earlier, and the income from post office products. There is

also the evidence in terms of the number of transactions that customers perform in post offices. I think she said that there were 1,200 transactions in her post office per week before it closed. For all these reasons, it makes not just social but huge commercial sense.

I can only assume that the arguments with the Co-op in her constituency have been exhausted and that there is no chance of changing its mind, but if in her view that changes, she must please contact my office immediately, and I personally will do everything I can to augment the arguments she is making to the Co-op. I know that the Post Office will join us in that endeavour.

The Post Office is still advertising the opportunity, and its field team visited the local area last week to explore possible opportunities and further engage with other local businesses. The Post Office will always consider all possible options for replacing a branch and restoring a service to the community. If it concludes that it is not feasible to restore a main-style branch, such as the one run by Costcutter, it will explore other options, such as the possibility of introducing one of its smaller “local plus” models, which actually offer at least 95% of post offices’ most-used products and services. Those opportunities are also in the frame.

The Post Office welcomes and considers applications from any suitable retailer following its advertising process. Post offices across the UK are run successfully in many varied businesses and locations, including farm shops, local authority offices, fish and chip shops, garages, pubs, libraries and community hubs. We need to think outside the box if we are to benefit the hon. Lady’s constituents.

I assure the hon. Lady that the Post Office is committed to finding a solution to restore the services to her community. It does not give up on communities, even if these issues take time to rectify. I will be attending the reopening of a post office service in my constituency, in Quarry Bank, where the post office has been shut now for seven years. I do not think she will have to wait that long to get her service restored, but it is wonderful when a service is restored. It is perfectly doable.

Our commitment to the network and the support that taxpayers and the Government have given it will help to ensure that post office services remain in our communities. I encourage the local Co-op to reconsider the benefits to itself and the community of running a post office. As I have explained, the Post Office works hard to set out all the benefits to potential partners. It has assured me that it will continue to explore possible solutions to restore a service to the hon. Lady’s constituents in Burncross, and I have asked it to keep her informed of any developments. I know that she will keep abreast of any developments anyway, but I also know that Post Office representatives will be happy to continue to work with her. She is fighting for a service which is of great social value to her constituents, and which can be of commercial value to the prospective partner that I truly hope will be found so that a post office service can return to the Burncross community.

Question put and agreed to.

9.55 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 30 October 2017

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

Proportional Representation

4.30 pm

James Gray (in the Chair): Before I call Mr Double to move the motion, I should say that a glance around the Chamber indicates to us all that this is a popular and important debate. I will, therefore, seek strict adherence to the rules and regulations regarding speaking time, including for interventions, although I am not setting a formal limit. We will try to have an extremely orderly debate, otherwise we will become a rabble. Debates are always orderly, but let us ensure that this one is.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 168657 relating to proportional representation.

It is a pleasure to open today's debate on this important issue and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank those who organised the petition, which has gathered some 103,000 signatures, and their supporters. I wish to make clear from the start that I am opening the debate as a member of the Petitions Committee—the Committee that considers petitions once they have reached the threshold for debate. The fact that I am introducing the debate does not necessarily mean that I support the views expressed in the petition. Given the number of hon. Members here today, I am sure that we are going to have a lively and constructive debate.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is probably just as well that the hon. Gentleman is not speaking in support, as about 70% of voters in Cornwall voted against this proposition, along with the vast majority of the rest of the country outside London and the university towns.

Steve Double: I am grateful for that intervention. The right hon. Gentleman has made a good point, which I will come to later.

The petition calls to “make votes matter” by adopting proportional representation for United Kingdom general elections. Although I may not agree with the views expressed in the petition, it is right that we begin by acknowledging the strong and sincerely held views of those who are frustrated with our democracy and voting system.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Double: I would like to make a little progress, but then I will give way.

There are clearly weaknesses in our democracy as it stands today. Too many people feel disconnected, disenfranchised and like observers, rather than participants in our democratic process. I would venture to suggest, however, that a different voting system is not the silver

bullet that would change that. In fact, there is every chance that proportional representation might actually make those things worse rather than better, by putting more power into the hands of parties—with more decisions taken in back-room deals—than in the hands of the voters.

Catherine McKinnell *rose*—

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD) *rose*—

Steve Double: I will give way first to the hon. Lady.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, as a fellow member of the Petitions Committee. It is right that we are debating this issue in Parliament and that people's views are heard. A constituent of mine has conveyed to me the fact that she feels passionately that unless some kind of system is devised that truly represents voters' opinions, our democracy will be even more broken than it is at the moment—she cited the example of the United States. We must ensure that people feel that their voices are heard here in Parliament.

Steve Double: I am grateful for that intervention and I agree wholeheartedly. I suspect that we might disagree on the answer to that challenge, but I absolutely agree that in our parliamentary democracy we have to understand that we are here to represent voters and make sure that their views and voices are heard.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the strongest arguments against proportional representation and in favour of first past the post is that first past the post guarantees a strong and stable Government—and does he think that argument still stands?

Steve Double: I am grateful for that intervention, one that I was wholeheartedly expecting and that is no surprise at all coming from the right hon. Gentleman. Historically, first past the post has delivered, the vast majority of the time, the strong and stable Government that the country needs to lead it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Double: I will make more progress before taking further interventions.

The things that are wrong with our voting system are, in my view, more down to the manner in which political parties can operate and the way candidates are often selected—especially in what we might call “safe seats”—than the voting system itself. The petition sets out to make the case that proportional representation would make votes count, yet its opening statement says:

“The vast majority wants PR.”

I would like to challenge that view. As recently as 2011, a referendum was held in this country to consider changing the voting system.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) *rose*—

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) *rose*—

Steve Double: I will finish my point before taking any more interventions. In that referendum, 13 million people voted by a majority of two to one to retain the current system.

Paul Blomfield *rose*—

Tommy Sheppard *rose*—

Steve Double: I will not give way just yet. I know that it has become fashionable in this country to play down referendums and call for them to be rerun, but it seems a very odd and conflicted scenario that those who say that they seek a so-called fairer voting system are unable to accept the result of the last referendum on this very issue.

Paul Blomfield *rose*—

Tommy Sheppard *rose*—

Steve Double: I will give way in a minute.

“Ah,” some people will cry, “that was about the alternative vote, AV. This is about proportional representation—a very different thing altogether.” The fact remains, however, that the referendum result was not only a rejection of AV, but a massive endorsement of our current voting system.

Tommy Sheppard: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify whether he thinks that the 2011 alternative vote referendum gave people a choice between first past the post and proportional representation?

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Clearly, it did not, but people argued at the time that it was a step towards proportional representation. It was a clear choice about changing our current system, and there was an overwhelming vote in favour of keeping the system that we have. If we want to make votes count, we surely have to respect the votes that were cast in that referendum.

John Spellar: Would it not be worthwhile to ask those who raise such doubts about the previous referendum whether any of those who supported proportional representation voted against the proposal and voted no?

Steve Double: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point; that would be interesting to know. I am sure the answer would be no, because the argument was made very strongly that voting for AV was a step towards PR and part of that process. The country overwhelmingly rejected that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I support proportional representation but voted against AV, because I thought that single transferable vote was a better system—so I am happy to say that, yes, someone here did.

Steve Double: I am grateful for that clarification.

A slight made against the first-past-the-post system is that votes are wasted. That misconceived notion would surely, if given any credence by the electorate, depress

voter turnout, yet we have seen turnout increase in recent times. The wasted vote argument is a particularly pernicious accusation, used, I would venture, only to bolster the argument for change, and it feeds into an attempt to discredit the current voting system.

First past the post is clear and easy to understand. Everyone—by which I mean people who, I would suggest, are less interested in politics than those of us in the Chamber—can grasp the concept of a winner, announced shortly after the close of the ballot, who then represents all the people in the constituency, however they voted. Votes are counted and there is a winner.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I support PR, but I am a huge defender of the geographical link between an elected Member and their constituent, because of what has happened in local government in Scotland. Scotland has a good system of STV, but it has broken that link, and I think it has broken the democratic link between councils and the people they represent.

Steve Double: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point.

Why is having special rules, including multiple voting, and then using some slide-rule technique hours after the voting has taken place considered a better system? That seems strange to me, as it risks over-complicating what should be a straightforward process of voting. That is before we get into the debate about which form of PR we should adopt if we were to go down that route. There is a veritable plethora of different systems on offer, each with its own complexities. One strength of our current first-past-the-post voting system is that it is simple and gives a quick and decisive result. Churchill liked it, and so did Tony Benn. They did not often agree with one another, but on this they did.

Jonathan Edwards: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that first past the post is inherently an electoral system for a two-party political system? In England, there are at least five competitive parties, and in Wales and Scotland, which have national parties, there are six. How can first past the post possibly reflect that diversity of political parties?

Steve Double: It has served this country well over a number of years in elections in which we have had more than two parties standing, so I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's point.

There is a broad consensus across the political spectrum that first past the post works well and is understood by all, and that its perceived flaws are less grievous than those of any of the alternatives. Another argument for first past the post is that it prevents extremist parties from gaining seats. It is interesting to note the outcome of the recent election in Germany. The media commentary the morning after the vote said:

“Angela Merkel will seek to form a government in the coming weeks.”

Weeks to form a Government! That is what we could get regularly with a proportional system. Angela Merkel will likely form a Government with parties diametrically opposed to one another, which caused another commentator to say:

“This difference shows how incoherent any such new government could be”.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Surely two out of the last three general elections in this country were followed by the words, “The leader of the Conservative party will seek to form a Government.” First past the post is no guarantor of a majority Government.

Steve Double: No one is pretending it is a guarantee, but it is far more likely to lead to a clear, decisive result and a stable Government than any other system. In the vast majority of elections it has delivered a decisive result.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Does he not have any concerns about safe seats and the sense of a local monopoly if there is no competition for power? His party surely understands the concept that if one party has complete control in an area, we get bad government.

Steve Double: I concur. One weakness with first past the post is that perceived safe seats can lead to complacency, but there are a number of examples, even in recent history, of MPs in safe seats being overthrown because of a particular issue or because the voters in the constituency felt let down badly by them. The examples of Neil Hamilton in 1997 and of Dr Taylor in 2001 show that sitting MPs in safe seats can be thrown out by local voters. Although the right hon. Gentleman raises a legitimate concern, the power is in the hands of the voters in the constituency. If they want a change of MP, they are perfectly able to deliver that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Does he agree that, in addition to bad government, first past the post leads to bad political debate? It polarises debate and does not lead to balanced debate among us all.

Steve Double: I do not agree. I think we have healthy debates in this country. The nature of our democracy lends itself far more to the first-past-the-post system, which enables us to exchange our strongly, passionately held views in the House. That is a strength, not a weakness, of our democracy.

First past the post has consistently produced majority Governments who can govern. Although it could be rightly argued that two of the last three elections in this country did not throw up a clear majority Government, they were rare in our history in so doing. First past the post means that political parties become broad churches in which a wide range of views are tolerated and debated. It avoids complex coalition Governments who may achieve little, yet, come election time, all the various parties claim any successes as their own and abandon the failures as someone else’s fault.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): First, on the issue of coalition government, I cannot help but say the words, “Democratic Unionist party”. Majority government does not seem to have done very well under first past the post. Secondly, Churchill was actually pro-PR—let us make sure our facts are right. Thirdly, the Conservatives’ vote share in the north-east increased by 9.1% at the last election, but they made no gains in their number of seats. With 34% of the vote, they got

10% of the seats. Do the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues from the north-east think that is fair? Does he think that is fair?

Steve Double: I think I can confidently speak for my party when I say that we are absolutely committed to first past the post as the best system for this country.

With first past the post, there is a direct link between the MP and their constituency, which brings focus and creates a strong bond between the MP and their constituents. From having the names on the ballot paper—each party has one candidate—through polling day and beyond, a connection is made. The voter knows whom they are voting for and whom to hold to account if they do not deliver what the constituents want.

Most people know who their MP is, but I suggest that far fewer know who their MEP is, because MEPs are voted in under a PR system. There is a clear understanding in voters’ minds of the accepted truth that, whether they voted for the winning candidate or not, they can get the help, assistance and advice they need from their MP—their local representative. There is nowhere for the incumbent to hide, which I believe is a good thing. Come election time, with a simple cross on the ballot paper, the electorate can bring about change if they wish to do so.

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling speech. I agree that it is vital that we MPs are held to account by our electorate, and I share his view that we should maintain the constituency link. Does he agree that there are other ways in which we can change our system to engage more voters—for example, by reducing the voting age to 16 to encourage more young people to get involved?

Steve Double: I admire the hon. Lady for shoehorning that into the debate, although it is not a view I share.

It is often said that one weakness of the first-past-the-post system is that candidates from certain parties often never have a chance of winning particular seats. Voters feel that their vote is wasted if they vote for their preferred party, and are therefore often forced to vote tactically against a party, rather than for a party. That has not prevented parties that promote PR from encouraging voters to vote tactically. Until recently, the Liberal Democrats built their campaign in Cornwall on the message, “Vote for us to keep the Tories out.” It is interesting that those who criticise tactical voting as one of the weaknesses of first past the post are happy to exploit it to their advantage.

First past the post does not prevent voters from being able to remove MPs when the tide has turned against them. Earlier, I cited the examples of Wyre Forest in 2001 and Neil Hamilton in 1997. In those safe Labour and Conservative seats, the voters turned against the MPs and removed them. It can happen.

Possibly the greatest argument for first past the post and against PR is that, more often than not, first past the post produces a clear, decisive result and a stable Government quickly. PR often results in no clear majority and days or weeks of back-room dealing to form a Government.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman explain his definition of democracy? I would have thought that democracy was about ensuring that

[Chris Williamson]

the governing party or parties commanded a majority of support in the country. The truth is that that has not happened for some time.

Steve Double: Historically in our country, we have had the first-past-the-post-system, which has delivered decisive results and decisive Governments over many years, and that has served our country well. We are one of the greatest democracies on the planet, so I do not share the hon. Gentleman's views.

Chris Williamson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Double: No, I am going to make some progress. I am winding up my speech, because I want other Members to have an opportunity to speak.

Rather than a Government elected on a manifesto that they can be judged against, PR puts more power in the hands of party leaders and can allow parties off the hook as they can explain away their ability to deliver on the basis of having to negotiate a coalition. Let us be honest: the current system has its failings—no system is perfect—but first past the post works in Parliament and in the constituencies. It is favoured because it is understood.

There is no doubt we are living in interesting political times. The election result in June made that clear. While I acknowledge the frustration with our voting system that many feel, the answer to improving our democracy does not lie in changing that system. The onus is on politicians and political parties to do more not to take voters for granted, particularly in what are considered safe seats, and to hold on to the principle of the constituency Member of Parliament, where we are here first and foremost to represent our constituents and recognise them as our boss. The key is not in tinkering with our system, but in ensuring we value and treasure our democracy, which is respected across the globe, and in ensuring that we do all we can to make it work for everyone.

4.51 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to be able to follow a member of the Petitions Committee. I thank the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for opening the debate, although I am afraid that I disagree with him on nearly all the points he raised. I have always been a supporter of electoral reform. It has always seemed to me that the obvious starting point for any electoral system is that the number of votes that people cast for parties should be reflected in the composition of Parliament or whatever body is being elected.

Frankly, I find it absurd that on several occasions in British history we have had elections where a party with fewer votes than another has won the election and formed the Government. That happened as recently as 1974, and before that in 1951 and on several other occasions. People will cite other countries and perhaps compare the situation with the last presidential election in America, but America is different—America is a republic, not a democracy. It clearly has a system based on the representation of the electoral college and the states' votes as part of that. It is an absurd comparison with this country.

The number of votes cast should be reflected in the composition of Parliament. That is the start and end of the debate for me, but it is not just about the technicalities of systems. In particular, I remember the deep sense of alienation growing up in the north-east of England in the 1980s, which was a time of huge change. The mines and shipyards were going and the social fabric of the area was being completely transformed. There was this sense of having no purchase, no say and no input into a Government who frankly did not care how the north-east voted. In places such as Sunderland and Durham, where I was from, there was this sense of having no ability to change the country's direction when it was having such a big impact.

We have this argument about strong and weak government, but strong government to me means good government. It does not mean a Government with an artificial majority propelled into that majority by the system when the people have not voted for that majority. Whatever we think of things such as the Iraq war or the poll tax, they are examples of strong government, but I argue strongly that they are not examples of good government.

There is an interesting question—there will be different views about this in the Chamber—of whether our political culture has shaped our electoral system, or whether our electoral system has shaped our political culture, but I worry a lot about the direction of political culture and how we deal with political problems. We are going further and further down a route towards a deep, reductive tribalism that has forgotten the purpose of politics, which is to come together and solve problems. Instead of that, we are seeing a degree of the partisanship that the system is based on, but it is getting more and more absurd.

For instance, a series of interesting Budget proposals have been leaked from the Cabinet. All those proposals would breach the fiscal responsibility charter of the former Chancellor George Osborne, which many Conservatives would have voted for. It was obviously nonsense, but it was trapped in that two-party system that is propelled by the electoral system. We have seen people elected to this House who have expressed strong views that they will not even talk to people on the other side or be friendly with them. That is a completely false direction for this country to go in, and at the heart of it is an electoral system that asks people not to vote positively for things, but to vote against things. That is all that first past the post can do.

We all would find problems with any system—there is no perfect system—but there are clear examples in the rest of the world that have far better democratic systems. Scotland and Wales have better democratic systems than the one we use for general elections in the UK.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and many valid points. He mentioned Wales. The Wales Act 2017 empowered the National Assembly to devise its own electoral system. Will he join me in calling on all political parties in the National Assembly to use Wales as an incubator to bring forward genuine electoral reform for the UK?

Jonathan Reynolds: The devolved nations have led the way on a whole range of policy issues, simply because they have a more representative political culture.

Joanna Cherry: The Scottish Parliament's d'Hondt system involves a first-past-the-post connection and a proportional representation list. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is one of the best examples of a tried-and-tested PR system that keeps the constituency link that the petition advocates? At the last Scottish election, for example, the Scottish National party got 46.5% of the vote and 48.8% of the seats.

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely agree with the hon. and learned Lady. When we look at the alternatives available to us, we see that no system will satisfy everyone, but the best way forward has to be a system that provides a constituency link—that is clearly such an important feature of our political system, and one that I support entirely—but also a representative election. Through that the whole range of political opinions cast in an election are reflected in the result and the system gives a majority, as the SNP had in the Scottish Parliament for some time, when the public have given their consent to that majority, but it does not give a majority based on this false notion that there should be some multiplier effect when the public are unwilling to give one party a majority.

John Spellar: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Reynolds: Yes. My right hon. Friend and I have had this debate for many years, and we will continue to do so.

John Spellar: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He cited with approval Scotland and Wales. Is it not the case that every area in Wales voted to reject change and stick with first past the post in the referendum? In Scotland every area apart from the university seats in Glasgow and Edinburgh voted to keep the current system.

Jonathan Reynolds: We will come to that issue when I go through some of the commonly raised points that my right hon. Friend and I have discussed for some time.

The crucial point I want to make is that the additional member system used in Germany, Scotland and Wales avoids the vast electoral deserts where people in a part of a country, whether a county or a region, get no plurality of representation despite casting votes for a range of political parties. Front Benchers are called to respond to debates in Westminster Hall. I remember responding to a debate on travel in the south-west of England when I was shadow rail Minister. There were 20 Conservative MPs on the Government Benches and just me on the Opposition Benches to respond. Members would get up and say, "Only the Opposition Front Bencher is here," but if we look at the election results, we see that even in the south-west more people voted against the Conservative party than for it. Clearly it was the biggest party, but the system delivered 100% representation for a party that was not even getting a majority of the vote in the region. That cannot be right.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): It is an excellent system.

Jonathan Reynolds: It is excellent if we view this simply as a partisan issue where the only thing that matters is our side winning, but as democrats we have to look at this from the point of view of what the public

put forward, and we have to respond to that public demand. If we are not doing that, we have to ask ourselves what the purpose of elections is to begin with. It cannot just be about maximising individual party advantage and finding a system that gets us to that point. That is not good enough, and it is not what democratic systems are based on.

I will conclude, because we have such a strong turnout in the Chamber. I just want to go through some of the commonly held views, such as those shown in the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) and the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay. It is true that lists are suboptimal—there is no doubt about that—but what I find hypocritical is the fact that many of the people who cite lists as an example of undue party advantage know full well that first past the post is open to manipulation. It has always been the case in every party represented here that favoured sons and daughters have been parachuted into constituencies or selection processes have been manipulated. It is simply not true that that can be transferred to any system that has a list involved.

With regard to minority parties, I think that we should teach better history in schools. As the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay was speaking, I thought, "Well, right now things are dependent on the DUP." We had the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition before that. John Major was dependent on the Ulster Unionists. We had the Callaghan Government's Lib-Lab pact. We had minority Governments and coalitions before the war. We had the situation with the Irish nationalists. The history of this country is not one of first past the post delivering clear results. In fact, we have had a situation quite recently in which a proportional system has delivered a majority Government in Scotland while first past the post has delivered a hung Parliament in the United Kingdom, so we need to look more closely at the evidence.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Our party once stood on a manifesto of proportional representation in the 1920s. We invested a lot of time and effort in the Plant report, which subsequently was taken up by Jenkins. That was never followed through by the Labour party, which is very sad, because Jenkins gave us a way forward. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely agree. Labour could have seized the initiative many times in our history. Many times we have come close, but we have never followed it through. We must change that now. As has already been said in this debate, fundamentally we have an electoral system designed for two-party politics, which is no longer the case in this country. We will not go back to that. We saw a big increase in the vote share for the two big parties at the election, but that was a response to each other. When I talk to people, I do not find that all of a sudden we have stopped having a plurality of political views in this country and that everyone is happy simply voting Conservative or Labour.

With regard to the AV referendum, AV is not proportional representation. I and many people here voted for it simply because we knew that people such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley would cite the result as an endorsement of first past the post. The referendum was really about Nick Clegg and dissatisfaction

[Jonathan Reynolds]

with the decisions that led to the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government, but that cannot be the end of the debate. It would simply cheat people and ignore serious issues if we did not continue the discussion.

I will finish with the point that the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay often makes, which is that the result of the AV referendum shows that people do not want it, they are not asking us for it, and it is simply a political obsession. I ask everyone here today: when they are out in their constituencies or talking to anyone about what they do, how many people say, “You know what? I think British politics is spot on. There is nothing we should change. I am satisfied with British politics. Get back there and continue”? I do not think that is true. I think there is alienation and a huge amount of concern about how we are reducing our political culture so that it is no longer capable of solving the problems this country faces. There is no magic wand that we can wave to change everything, but if we want a better politics we have to start reflecting on how the people vote and what they want in the composition of our Parliament. That is why we must change to a system of fair votes.

5.3 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and to follow the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). I mention in passing to him that when I was knocking on doors on Saturday people might not have said what he has suggested, but they certainly did not say that what we need is a move to proportional representation. They tell me we have very important things to get on with, which needs strong government. I contend that that is what first past the post delivers.

Judging by the number of Opposition Members here, I suspect there is a cosy consensus emerging among them, so I am going to challenge that. I contend that their cosy consensus is not representative of Parliament. Indeed, I know that there are Members on both sides who propose the extension of first past the post to all elections in England, not its abolition. A Bill last year had Government and Opposition Members as sponsors. It is not only within this place that such a view is held; those that we represent across the country also agree.

In the referendum that has already been mentioned, the British people voted two to one to retain the status quo. Further, the Government who were elected only three months ago by almost 14 million voters stated clearly in their manifesto a policy to:

“retain the first past the post system of voting for parliamentary elections and extend this system to police and crime commissioner and mayoral elections.”

Later, perhaps, the Minister might set out his plan to deliver on that commitment, which I thoroughly endorse.

Today, as opposed to the views of 14 million voters, we are debating a petition with just over 100,000 signatures. Do those advocating the upending of the principle on which the British parliamentary system operates really believe that the views of 100,000 signatories somehow trumps 14 million voters? Is that their idea of proportional representation?

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman seems to be repeating the mistakes of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). As the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) has already said, there are people in this room who are in favour of PR but voted against AV because it is simply not a good PR system. Plenty of other options are available. He should not take a vote against AV as a vote against PR.

Mr Jayawardena: I would welcome the hon. Lady’s remarks if she had listened to what I just said: 14 million voters in the general election backed first past the post. Perhaps the desire to overrule people’s votes is why in other systems, such as the alternative vote, the person who actually won the election often ends up losing when second preferences are announced.

I was pleased when Lord Fowler was elected Lord Speaker at the first time of asking under the alternative vote—a system on which, as the hon. Lady mentions, there was a referendum—but that was in effect an election by first past the post, and often that is not the case. We have talked about history and there are many historical examples. Let me provide another. In the 1990 Irish presidential election, the Labour candidate lost the first round by 80,000-plus votes, but then managed to pull ahead in the second ballot. That is not an isolated case. In the 2013 elections for the Australian House of Representatives, preferential voting meant that 15 members were elected despite being placed second on first preferences.

It is also important to look at the domestic situation. In the police and crime commissioner elections in England, we have seen that those with less support still win. Lord Prescott, not someone I would usually champion, was a candidate in the 2012 elections for police and crime commissioner. He won the first round, but he was beaten in the second. It has been suggested that this is a partisan argument in support of the Conservative party and that is why we might be in favour of first past the post, but, although I was delighted that a Conservative candidate was elected, I must argue that that was a day on which John Prescott should have been elected, and a day when democracy was thwarted.

The only purpose of other systems is to give candidates who were not popular enough to win a second chance to steal votes from those who did not want them to win. In all, eight police and crime commissioners were elected without the popular support of the people in the first round in 2012, including in my county of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Only where two candidates stood, such as in Staffordshire and North Yorkshire, did voters have confidence that, through first past the post by default, the candidate who won would definitely hold the elected office.

At the 2012 Scottish local government elections—we heard about Scotland a moment ago—68 candidates were elected under their system, despite in three member wards not even being in the top three by first preference, or in the top four in four member wards, and therefore 68 candidates who won a place in the top three or four then lost. Across the country we should expect the best candidates, elected through the best system, to give us the best representatives, but alternative systems of voting across our country have meant that some areas have been stripped of their right to choose who is best.

Worse, the wishes of local people are being ignored by voting systems that allow candidates who lose to in fact win public office.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jayawardena: I will in a moment, but I am very conscious that many people want to speak and therefore I do not wish to take too many interventions.

That issue will become ever more prevalent as powers are devolved to local authorities and elected Mayors, so the public will grow even more dissatisfied with that political system and will not forgive those who had taken away their power to have the clear, decisive and transparent voting that they have today.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The hon. Gentleman seems to be implying that the public would be deprived of the best candidates, rather than having faith in the public who, through their preferential voting, would give a richer idea of whom they actually want and sometimes, importantly, do not want to represent them. The person who gets a minority of first-preference votes and cannot command wider support through transfers might not be the best representative of the community.

Mr Jayawardena: I will challenge that in passing. We have proportional representation for the European Parliament—soon we will not, as we will not be part of the European Union—and people vote by party, so they do not get a say on whom their elected representative is. In fact, I contend that many people are not aware of who their Members of the European Parliament are. One person whose door I knocked on at the weekend said that one of their reasons for voting to leave the European Union was the fact that it had such a huge democratic deficit.

I will now turn to first past the post and some of its advantages, which have already been outlined but I wish to probe in further detail. First past the post, as former Prime Minister David Cameron said,

“can be summed up in one sentence: the candidate who gets the most votes wins”,

and everyone has one vote. It avoids unnecessary formulae to calculate the Droop or Hare quota threshold of votes needed to be elected, or to calculate the proportion of subsequent-preference votes transferred in each later round of vote stealing, and more. Is it any wonder that voters rejected a move away from such a clear, simple and transparent voting system as first past the post? Is it not also interesting that our international comparators agree with us?

A poll in Australia in 2016, for example, found that less than a third of people knew how to vote correctly in line with their complicated PR rules, and a quarter explicitly acknowledged they did not know how to vote properly in that system. That is hardly equal representation—I thought we were supposed to be encouraging people to vote. First past the post not only makes it easier for people to vote, but is simple and quick to count. It therefore does not unnecessarily burden the taxpayer with equipment or administration costs. Furthermore, the results are declared quickly, providing people with certainty.

It would be remiss of me at this moment not to reflect on certainty. Another way in which first past the post rather than PR provides certainty is in reducing the number of hung Parliaments—[*Laughter.*] Hon. Members may laugh, but they would then not be good students of history. If we look at recent events, we see that first past the post gives us stable majority Governments. We only need to look at some international examples to see the truth of that.

The UK has only had a handful of coalitions since 1852, but in the 67 years after 1945 Italy had 61 Governments because the coalitions were so weak and prone to splits. In fact, the Italian people recognise the disadvantages of the proportional representation system—in 1993 four fifths of voters chose to reject PR as the method of electing three quarters of their Senate. The consequences for Italy get even more farcical: in the 2013 general election, even the two main coalitions were unable to reach an outright majority.

Wera Hobhouse: Why does the hon. Gentleman think that after the second world war British constitutionalists recommended to Germany, for the introduction of the best government and democracy possible, not first past the post but a proportional system based on the additional member system? Will he explain why he thinks that it was not first past the post?

Mr Jayawardena: I am here to talk about first past the post in the United Kingdom and that is what I intend to continue to talk about—[*Laughter.*] I am pleased that Opposition Members are listening so intently to my remarks.

Let me reflect on the Liberal Democrats for a moment. They gained 1.8% of the seats in this year’s general election. In Poland, however, under a PR system, 29 seats were won by the Polish Beer-Lovers Party—3.5% of parliamentary seats. That is what PR can lead to: parties that do not reflect the will of the people win power. The tendency of PR systems to deliver coalitions means that power is taken away from the people and instead given to political parties which, in a back room, barter away manifesto promises made to their voters.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): If preferential voting is such a rubbish system, why does the Conservative party elect its leaders in that way?

Mr Jayawardena: If the hon. Lady paid close attention, she would see that two candidates are put to Conservative party members in a first-past-the-post system.

Moving on, I would hope that the House agreed that it is the right of each free citizen to vote for the person with the best judgment to represent them. We might disagree on the system, but I would hope that we would all agree about that.

Under first past the post, voters know the candidate and that the candidate, once elected, will have to implement promises and face the test of the ballot box again in five years’ time. That brings me on to the constituency connection: the people of the country elect representatives and know who those representatives are up and down the land. The link that binds a Member of Parliament to his or her constituency is one of the most important in politics. Every person up and down the country knows that they have a single, consistent point of contact

[*Mr Jayawardena*]

in this House, someone to champion the issues and challenges of their area. Unlike many things in our constitutional settlement, however, that link is not an accident; it is a product of our voting system. First past the post gives our constituents the certainty of knowing who their representative is.

Many in all parts of the House appreciate that first past the post has benefits, but that appreciation is not replicated throughout our country.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jayawardena: I will let the hon. Lady intervene in a moment, but I first want to make a point about Scotland, which she may wish to reflect on too.

There are those who say that the effect of PR can be mitigated in terms of constituency connection through the additional member system used for the London Assembly, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. But I would argue that that creates two classes of Member: a class of Members who are known by their constituents and a class of Members who have the same powers and the same right to vote in the Assembly or Parliament but without that connection or accountability to their constituents.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman is right that I was going to draw his attention to the d'Hondt system, which has already been mentioned. I think perhaps he misunderstands it, because additional Members also have a link through the region to their constituents. Constituents know who their regional members are and who they can go to, and they can be assured that, if they voted for a party that did not win in the first-past-the-post system, there is still an elected Member who represents their views and the views that they voted for. It is a much fairer system.

Mr Jayawardena: All I will say is that that makes my point exactly—that system is a two-tier system with two classes of politicians, which is not what we should want in our country. We should want each of us to be elected on the same basis and with each of us accountable to our constituents and able to be thrown out by them if they disagree with us. We sit in the mother of all Parliaments, the home of parliamentary democracy, which has been exported around the world. More people use first past the post than any other system. It is an extraordinary system that has been championed across the world.

Jonathan Edwards: Is the hon. Gentleman's argument not undermined somewhat by the introduction of English votes for English laws? Since the introduction of those changes to the Standing Orders, MPs from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland cannot vote in this place on such matters.

Mr Jayawardena: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, with so many matters devolved to the devolved institutions, EVEL allows English Members to vote on English matters.

I will make one further reference to the House of Lords. Lord Norton simplified the issues of PR and the ability of parties to form coalitions by saying that even though

party A might have 40% of a vote and party B might have 20%, that does not mean that their joint manifesto has 60% of the vote. Without a secondary vote in agreement of the manifesto, the Government enjoy 0% support—it is a stitch-up done in a back room between parties. That is in stark contrast to a single-party Government produced by first past the post, who know for certain that they enjoy a large plurality of support and are far more legitimate than a coalition Government.

We sit in the mother of all Parliaments and we all are elected by our constituents. This is a place where the democratically elected representatives of the people come together to govern for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is a place in which the people should be able to have their say without having their vote stolen or bartered away. Some 14 million voted for a manifesto to keep first past the post after 13 million had already voted against scrapping it. Their voice should be heard.

5.21 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I shall keep my remarks very brief, Mr Gray. I do not want to rehearse the arguments for and against electoral reform, because they are always well rehearsed in this place and outside. My position is well known and long standing. I suspect that I will not convince the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), some other hon. Members or indeed many people outside who are against electoral reform, but my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) put the case incredibly well.

I want to give some constructive and friendly advice to the people outside who campaign on this issue, and who have helped ensure that we have today's debate, about the tactics of winning this battle rather than rehearsing the old and sometimes stale arguments of the past. We will only get electoral reform in Britain if a major political party stands in a general election with a manifesto commitment to introduce it, or if a general election throws up a hung Parliament and one of the coalition parties is in favour of electoral reform and can deliver it. Recent experience shows that the auspices for the second option are not good. I do not want to rehearse all the reasons why the AV referendum was such a disaster but, as we have heard, the people who still argue for electoral reform often refer to it.

The best chance we have to achieve electoral reform, which I have fought for my whole political life—before I was in the Labour party and since then—is to elect a Labour Government who have committed to it in their manifesto. To misquote Nick Clegg, just as people who want to stop Brexit need to join the Labour party, people who want to reform our electoral system need to join the Labour party. I have some good news for those people: although there are relatively few Conservative Members of Parliament who support electoral reform—a small but growing number who tend to be shy—there is a growing number of Labour politicians, trade union leaders and others in the Labour movement who recognise the arguments in favour. I am told that even our shadow Chancellor is an electoral reformer, which even surprised me. That is very encouraging.

To all those extremely well meaning and right people out there who share our passion for a fairer and just electoral system, I say, "Come and join the Labour

party in that fight.” It is possible to get that commitment through the grassroots of the Labour party putting pressure on the leadership, through our motions at conference and our policy formation process. Only the Labour party has delivered constitutional and electoral reform in this country, as hon. Friends have said. We did it under the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown Governments, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and for the European elections. We partially reformed the House of Lords. All the meaningful political and constitutional reforms in Britain have happened under a Labour Government. I am confident that we will have a radical manifesto for constitutional reform for the next election, so let us help to ensure that it contains a commitment to electoral reform.

5.24 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for opening this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It is a great privilege to speak but I will be brief, because a large number of Members want to contribute, from a broad spectrum of political parties. It was my constituent Tim Ivorson who precipitated the debate by starting the petition, which garnered more than 103,000 signatures. I am grateful that he did that because it is important to have a discussion about electoral reform and, more broadly, constitutional reform.

I agree with many of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) on elections to the House of Commons, principally the important link between the constituency and the Member of Parliament. We serve in the House of Commons during the week until late at night, but at the end of the week we are in our constituencies. That is where we have the direct link with our constituents, whether in advice bureau, being stopped in the street or out at events, when people tell us their views directly—they are not shy and that is a good thing. During the week, we come here and reflect on those views. There is a clear link between the Member of Parliament and their constituents and there is a defined community. I am very proud to represent my local community of Crawley.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman said that his constituent started the petition, so clearly Tim Ivorson is likely to be in favour of electoral reform. Is the hon. Gentleman not representing him but speaking in opposition to his point? If we had PR, his elected representative would speak in favour of his point. Is that not one of the arguments in favour? If we had multi-member constituencies elected through PR, his constituent would have someone to argue in favour of electoral reform in this debate.

Henry Smith: We are here not as delegates but to exercise our judgment, and we are here only if our local electorate support us at election time. I have no illusions, because my constituent probably did not vote for me at the last election. Nevertheless, it is important that he brought forward this debate and that is why I am speaking.

I am not necessarily against proportional representation in all forms. It is not best for the House of Commons because of that clear link and the many other aspects that have been mentioned. I am also struck by earlier comments that elections to the European Parliament

under the current UK system give political parties a lot of power to decide the candidates in those vast regional constituencies. One of the great things about the constituency link is that in a relatively small constituency of about 100,000 people, the local parties can decide the candidates and increasingly they are local residents, although there are exceptions of people being given preference by the central party. Under a proportional representation system with party lists, the party leaderships decide who goes on the lists and who is at the top, and therefore who gets elected to the assembly in question. That does not make for good representative governance.

I believe in reform, as I said earlier, and constitutional evolution. One of this country’s greatest strengths has been its ability over centuries to evolve its political systems. I favour a House of Lords that is directly elected by proportional representation, because a revising Chamber would do well to reflect the broad proportional position in this country. Individuals would not necessarily represent small constituencies under such a system, but having a constituency link in the House of Commons and a broader political reflection of the way the country voted in the revising Chamber—the House of Lords or, if it were renamed, the second Chamber—would perhaps go some way towards getting the best of both worlds.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman made a good point about the flaws of the party list system, which might create a structure in which there was cronyism or two classes of Member. Would he consider the single transferable vote? That is a multi-Member constituency model that allows for parity of status among all Members in a wider constituency but also plurality, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned. Would that be a more acceptable model for a second Chamber?

Henry Smith: That model could be considered. We certainly have cronyism right now in our second Chamber, which is increasingly anathema in the 21st century. There are many models that one could look at when considering a proportional representation system for a second Chamber, and that is certainly one suggestion.

I was about to mention the opportunities of Brexit. I will not go into the controversies of whether we support the UK leaving the EU, but that is an opportunity for us to look at constitutional reform. That means not just greater devolution to the nations, regions, counties and cities of the country, but looking at the way that Westminster governance works. We will of course no longer have UK elections to the European Parliament, but the cycle for those elections could be adopted for elections to a reformed second Chamber. Either way, I am grateful to Members who have already made contributions and to my constituent for ensuring that the issue is discussed, and I look forward to contributions from the wide spectrum of parties that are represented under our current system.

5.32 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray.

If democracy is about fairly representing the views of the people, we are failing with first past the post. As a country, we pride ourselves on our strong commitment to democracy, yet the vast majority of votes stack up

[*Caroline Lucas*]

and simply do not make an impact on the overall result. No fewer than 68% of votes cast in June's general election were, in effect, wasted—they made no difference at all to the outcome.

Yes, I have a vested interest. Some 1 million people voted Green in 2015. Under a proportional system, those votes would have translated into people being elected to fight for Green politics; it could have given us more than 20 MPs. However, I am also deeply worried about what our outdated, dysfunctional electoral system is doing to the legitimacy of our governance system—a system that not only fails the political parties and fails to deliver effective government, but fails the citizens of this country.

Some 33% of people do not think that voting for their preferred party will make a difference, and 44% do not feel that the UK Parliament is capable of understanding and effectively representing their concerns. That is a tragedy, and it is also a bit of an irony. We may well be on the path to leaving the EU, but all those who were promised that they would be given back control simply will not have it without meaningful electoral reform. PR would not just bring much-needed fairness, but go a considerable way towards tackling some of the reasons that people do not bother voting at all. In these times of voter volatility and diversity, it would be a system worthy of the name democracy.

The current unrepresentative voting system is doing long-term, pervasive damage, which manifests itself in phenomena such as the widespread lack of trust and faith in public servants, and the growth of what some have coined, with Orwellian overtones, “post-truth politics.” Far too many of our constituents are disillusioned, disaffected and disengaged. Continuing to deny them a voice in decisions that affect us all only perpetuates that problem, yet that is exactly what is happening under first past the post—a system in which votes are not all equal. Unless someone lives in one of the small number of heavily targeted marginal seats, their vote simply does not count.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Is the hon. Lady not an example of how that is not the case? In her own constituency her party won less than 3% of the vote 20 years ago, but in the most recent general election it won 50%. Large numbers of votes can be moved in a relatively short time.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not agree that that felt like a relatively short time; it felt like a very long time. As I said, under PR, 1 million votes would have given the Greens more than 20 MPs in 2015. That is the bottom line. Yes, we occasionally find a way of bucking the system, but that does not give confidence to our constituents up and down the country, who simply want to know that their votes count. That does not seem a lot to ask. Interestingly, it has been estimated that between 20% and 30% of people voted tactically at the last election. In other words, people are trying the best they can to fix the system themselves, but they should not have to try to game the system; we should change it.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My constituency was marginal in 2015. I was returned with a larger majority this time, but I went door to door asking Liberal

Democrat voters to lend me their vote, and there was no Green candidate because the Green party recognised that splitting the vote might allow a Conservative in. I was grateful to the local Green party for making that choice, which delivered a more progressive outcome.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. My Green colleagues were incredibly brave to make such selfless decisions for the good of the country rather than tribal political self-interest.

The Electoral Reform Society described the 2015 general election, in which a Government were elected on just 24% of the eligible vote, as “the most disproportionate” in electoral history. It further reported that in the election just gone more than 22 million votes—68%—were essentially wasted because first past the post takes no account of votes for the winning candidate over and above what they needed to win, or indeed of votes for losing candidates. In five constituencies 90% of votes made no difference to the outcome because they were cast for candidates who did not win, or cast for the winning candidate over and above what they needed to win. More than 90% of votes—a huge number.

Chris Williamson: Does the hon. Lady agree that democracy should be about outcomes, and that a fairer and just electoral system, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) talked about, would be more likely to deliver a fairer and just society, in which the forces of progress trump the forces of reaction? In my view, there is a majority in this country for progressive politics, but that is being frustrated by first past the post.

Caroline Lucas: I absolutely agree. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman pre-empts a little of what I am about to say. Exactly as he describes, first past the post does not deliver the best governance. I say that as someone who has been a Member of the European Parliament—elections to the European Parliament obviously take place under a PR system—where collaboration and cross-party working is normal. It is encouraged and welcomed, and people do it, on the basis that no single party has a monopoly on wisdom.

A winner-takes-all approach to elections promotes adversarial politics. It encourages each of the major parties to seek to defeat their opposition unequivocally, negating the need for post-election co-operation, and essentially not to take any real account of what voters wanted when they cast their votes. It also means that policy is likely to change dramatically when Governments change, with greater extremes and a greater impact on economic and environmental policy and on social justice and inclusion. Research has found that countries with PR systems outperform those with first-past-the-post systems when it comes to issues that require a longer term view and policy continuity. Environmental policy is obviously a key candidate for that; countries with proportional systems score significantly higher on Yale University's environmental performance index.

I want to quote the former Labour MP and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. He observed that electoral reform is about not just functional outcomes—we have talked about that a lot—but values. PR is one way in which we can express our commitment to fairness, openness and equality in our society. I want to make the case that,

under PR, we would be more likely to encourage more people to get out there and vote. It is very hard to persuade people to vote when they live in so-called safe seats and know that their vote will not make a significant difference. There is evidence out there that suggests that those countries that have PR see a higher turnout than those with first past the post.

We would also improve the chances of electing a Parliament that better reflects modern Britain. One of the consequences of safe seats is that it is harder for different groups to get themselves into a position to be able to win those seats. We know that still only 32% of MPs are women. There are 208, compared with 191 in 2015, but that is still shockingly bad. Women MPs are still outnumbered two to one by male MPs, and the UK is now just about 40th in the world when it comes to women's parliamentary representation.

People of colour, disabled people, carers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are still under-represented in Parliament. PR would make a difference to that, because under PR MPs cannot rely on just the votes of their tribe. To win the support of the majority of voters, they are forced to reach out across the party divide to the wider electorate—women, black and minority ethnic communities and so on—which hopefully means that those traditionally excluded groups would end up standing for election, and with a better chance of being elected.

Finally, I want to say a few things about tactics. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) rightly said that getting PR into the Labour party manifesto is vital. He will not be surprised that I do not necessarily agree with his tactic for achieving that, but I certainly agree that we need to put pressure on the Labour party leadership. I am disappointed that we have not yet had a greater commitment to PR and voting reform from the Labour party leadership—perhaps this evening we will hear a change of mind—because we know that more than 200 Labour parliamentary candidates at the election backed PR, as well as a huge 76% of Labour voters, and indeed many Labour MPs in the Chamber have made incredibly powerful speeches.

What I want to say to the Labour leadership is this: it is selfish for them to continue championing a voting system just because it has traditionally handed them power. It is immoral when millions of people are disenfranchised as a result. No party can honestly claim to be for the many when it denies the many a meaningful vote. Robin Cook understood all of that when back in 2005 he said:

“Our objective, our slogan, should be to achieve an electoral system which puts our democracy in the hands of the many voters, not the few voters who happen to be key in marginal seats.”

5.43 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am a relatively new Member and I come from a safe seat—it just happens to be a seat perceived to have been a safe Labour seat until I managed to gain it with the help of everyone who supported me in June. I accept that there are heartfelt and clear examples of why electoral systems are not perfect, and some of those have been outlined already. I recognise that many on the Opposition Benches have clear views about this.

I think we can all agree on the first point: no process is perfect. We will never find an electoral system that both reflects an absolute representation of those who have voted, and that ensures—to use the eponymous phrase—strong and stable government to the greatest extent possible. If we therefore start from the perspective that no system is perfect, we are then into a discussion about the least worst option, or a system that is not as bad as it possibly could be.

My problem with PR is that it prioritises purity over practicality. It prioritises absolute representation over, in many cases, the general ability of a Government to function. If we extend the logical notion of purity, where does that end? If within a Parliament of 650 Members we had to represent the absolute number of votes cast, we would get ourselves into some difficult places with minor parties. If we were being pure about representation, those minor parties would have as much right to be in that Parliament as we would, as Members of parties represented here today.

We can extend that further into slightly more esoteric views. Should we represent those who choose not to vote? Should we represent those who are too young to vote? If there was to be a true reflection and representation of not just the electorate but society as a whole, a much wider group of people would need to be represented. That is where we get into a difficult place and illogical contortions about the arguments of those who propose PR.

I will quickly expand on the arguments against PR. We would end up with more or less permanent coalitions. We would end up with a licence to horse-trade between parties rather than with voters, and there would be the potential for greater instability. Members including the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) have highlighted clear examples over the past 50 years where the British electoral system has not thrown up a strong Government, but there are more examples in the past 70 years of where it has. In 15 or so of the 20 elections we have had since 1945, we have had a majoritarian Government; in the other five we have not, but PR would pretty much guarantee that we never got a majoritarian single-party Government. It is likely that we would have larger constituencies, even if we retained the constituency link, and that would tend to mean Members starting to talk more to their own supporters in that larger constituency rather than to everybody, and then starting to appeal to narrow party bases, which I think most people in the Chamber would not support.

I will give a final example of where PR is working at the moment. Only last month, on 23 September, New Zealand held its eighth general election under a proportional representation system. To those who are pure about wanting to ensure that the representation in a Parliament is absolute, I worry about where we would head when I see the example of New Zealand.

Our friends in New Zealand made some clear choices. They supported the National party with 44% of the vote—the highest number of votes it has ever received in a general election—yet it lost power to a party that took 10 fewer seats and received 200,000 fewer votes, and that does not have a formal coalition but only a confidence and supply deal. The gentleman who made that decision, Mr Winston Peters of New Zealand First, lost his seat on the constituency side of the election.

[Lee Rowley]

His party commanded only 7% of the vote, and for 20 days he refused to tell anybody who in his party was making a decision about which party he was to go into coalition with. Therefore, I hope that all those people who stand on the other side of the and argument that PR is necessarily more transparent, necessarily more representative and necessarily an improvement on first past the post say reflect on the New Zealand example. It demonstrates that no system is perfect and that PR has huge problems.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): My brother and his family live in New Zealand and have done so for many years. They are happy with the PR system, instead of first past the post, which has given the country hope and a future. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is giving a little bit of something different?

Lee Rowley: I certainly know that what it has given differently to New Zealand is eight consecutive elections with no clear winner, whereas before the 1996 election there were clear winners in seven out of eight elections.

I accept the arguments made by many people so far—and those I am sure will come—with regard to PR. I understand why PR has some merit and some benefits, but on balance I am simply not convinced that changing our electoral system from first past the post to PR would be supported by the majority of people out there in the country or be good for our Parliament. Before I sit down, I ask this question: numerous Members have stood up and talked about how PR is more democratic and fair. More democratic to whom, and more fair to whom? I have seen no examples and nothing in the debate that convinces me—I certainly see nothing in the New Zealand example—that it is either fair or more democratic than the first-past-the-post-system.

5.50 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and to follow the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who, though he did not persuade me, made a powerful speech.

I thank everyone who signed the petition for enabling us to have the debate, and I pay tribute to the range of organisations working in the field, many of which have done so for decades, including the Electoral Reform Society, Make Votes Matter—a younger organisation—and Unlock Democracy. In particular, I thank the members of Merseyside Unlock Democracy, with whom I have had the pleasure of working regularly, on this and other issues.

I agree with the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire that there is no such thing as an ideal electoral system. We all seek to balance competing criteria, to try to fashion the best system for the circumstances of our country. Having debated the issue over the years I am familiar with the fact that Italy is often cited as an example of a country using PR that has not been very successful. Those on our side of the argument counter with Germany as a great example, and one in which proportional voting has been part of the reason for the country's success over the past 70 years. However, we should agree among ourselves that we are debating different criteria, one of which is fairness.

My answer to the very fair challenge with which the hon. Gentleman finished his speech—fairness and democracy for whom?—is that it is for the people. It is for the voters. The reason I favour a broadly proportional system—I am not a purist and do not want to adopt the Israeli system, which is near to being precisely proportional representation—is that in our political situation now the system does not work any more.

We have long heard during debates on the issue that one of the main arguments in support of first past the post is that it delivers a clear majority for the party that comes first, which enables it to govern. My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) reminded us of the anomalous elections when that was not the case—1951 and February 1974. However, there is a more powerful point: the fundamentals of voting in this country have changed. From 1945 to 1970 well over 90% of those who voted in every general election voted either Conservative or Labour. It really was a two-party system, but since 1974 the system has essentially been more diverse, pluralistic and fragmented, and it is therefore more volatile. It is relevant to say that two of the past three general elections have resulted in hung Parliaments. That might be an anomaly. It might turn out that, in future, we shall elect five majority Labour Governments in a row, which would be great by me, but I suspect that the pluralism and volatility of the previous few decades might well be with us to stay. Therefore, a system that might have been okay for the '50s and '60s, when a vast majority of people voted Labour or Conservative, is not right for the world we live in now.

I want briefly to respond to some points made in the debate. As to tactical voting and the reason that parties, despite decrying it, use it, I think that is just the reality of working in the system we have. I am delighted that a good friend—my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous)—is seated next to me. He and I campaigned together 20 years ago in Enfield, Southgate to win the seat for Labour for the first time. We said clearly to Liberal Democrat and Green voters, and others, “If you want to defeat Michael Portillo, only a Labour vote will count”—and it worked, but we should not have a system in which it is necessary actively to encourage that, and to support that negative style of campaigning. I want a system in which Liberal Democrats in Enfield, Southgate can vote Liberal Democrat and Green supporters can vote Green, and in which Labour supporters in areas that are Liberal Democrat versus Conservative can vote Labour. That, for me, is one of the most powerful arguments for electoral reform—ensuring that voters, wherever they live, can cast a vote by conviction rather than tactically.

All parties target a relatively small number of seats and, within them, a relatively small number of voters, and all Members present will, in the recent general election, have spent time not only in their constituencies, but campaigning elsewhere—because a relatively small number of seats determine the outcome of an election. That is unhealthy for the voters in the non-target constituencies.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made an important point, which is that proportional representation is not a silver bullet. Those of us who favour voting reform must be careful, sometimes, not to present it as a panacea for all the ills of our democracy, or even of society more widely. It is important

to see the issue in the context of a broader set of social, economic and political challenges. It is important to have a package of democratic reforms that will address the democratic deficit we still have. I was delighted that the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) spoke about the need to elect the second Chamber, and mentioned that proportional representation could be used. I am also delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) has introduced a private Member's Bill to reduce the voting age to 16; the Representation of the People (Young People's Enfranchisement and Education) Bill is due to be debated on Second Reading on Friday. We need to go back to the question of citizenship education in schools, and what can be done to equip the voters of the future. The devolution settlement in England needs serious attention, because it is hugely variable around the country.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): On the point about devolution, we have proportional representation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in London. It works very well. People understand it, and it delivers good government in all those regions.

Stephen Twigg: I agree; I concur with those who have said in the debate that we can really learn lessons from the experience of those broadly proportional voting systems in Scotland, Wales and Greater London. There has been a suggestion that the system should be abandoned in England and that we should move to first past the post, but it is hugely helpful that there is a range of parties in the Greater London Assembly. Minority parties in London such as the Conservatives can have a voice in the Assembly. [*Laughter.*] I said that expecting to elicit a laugh, but there is a serious point: I think I am right to say that at the previous elections, if first past the post had been used—I think the Conservative manifesto position is that it should be—there would be a clear Labour majority in the London Assembly. Particularly when the Mayor is Labour, it is right that the other voices of London citizens and parties—the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Greens and others—are there to hold him to account.

There is a risk that we are today engaged in a Westminster bubble debate, in which Members of Parliament rehearse arguments that we have had over many years. We need to take the debate out into the country. I still think that the idea of some kind of democratic or citizens' convention to consider the issues would be welcome. It played a productive role more than two decades ago in Scotland, as the devolution settlement was framed in the 1990s. Citizens need to have their say, which comes back to the question of the system. Rather than having a system that politicians dream up, let us engage citizens and see how they want to balance proportionality versus strong government, voter choice and all the different factors. I am confident that if we allowed citizens to do that, through a convention, they would come to a different system from the one we have now. They would not necessarily want to import one from another country; they would devise one suited to the history and traditions of democracy in this country.

I finish where I started, by thanking the more than 100,000 people who petitioned us and enabled this important issue to be discussed.

5.59 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am grateful to the Electoral Reform Society for the information that it provided to all Members in advance of the debate, and particularly pleased to have received so many representations from my constituents. However, I do not think that Members should forget that we had a full test of public opinion on first past the post just six years ago. That was a national poll—[*Interruption.*] Let me continue. That national poll was held in 2011, on the same day as many local elections.

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

The turnout was just 42%, but in terms of local elections that was fairly respectable. Many would say, "Ah, but of course that was about AV, not about some system that is infinitely more complicated. If we presented that, we might have found the silver bullet. People would have voted for it." We can rake over the coals of referendums and say, "What does this mean and what does that mean?", but I think a two-to-one result said something very clearly: that no matter what our thoughts may be on the different forms of PR, first past the post was still the favoured means of electing Members to constituencies in this country.

Tommy Sheppard: I am keen to clarify something. The hon. Gentleman said that first past the post was the victor over the various forms of PR. Does he really believe that the 2011 referendum offered people a choice between first past the post and proportional representation? Does he actually believe that?

Craig Mackinlay: The choice, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, was between first past the post and an AV system. My point is that there was a choice to change what we have, which was rejected by two to one. I would take a lot of persuading to say that had some other, infinitely more academic, proper PR system been offered the result would have been much different. I will not say that first past the post is a system without flaws. Under various academic analyses, one can come up with a different alternative that might be better. However, I am minded of what Churchill once said about democracy: that it is the worst form of government, but it is better than all the others. That is probably true of first past the post as well. It has the benefit of being understandable and easily completed. It has a defined geographical area, which to me is the most powerful point: we maintain a clear link between those who elect and the elected representative.

Caroline Lucas: First, several of us have pointed out that there are proportional systems that keep the constituency link. I wish we could get rid of that argument, because it is not relevant. Secondly, as the hon. Gentleman is talking about Churchill again, I will use this occasion to let him know that Churchill said that if we are to choose between AV, second ballot and PR,

"I have no doubt whatever that the last is incomparably the fairest ...and...best in the public interest."—[*Official Report*, 2 June 1931; Vol. 253, c. 102.]

The hon. Gentleman quotes Churchill with great alacrity; perhaps he would like to quote that too.

Craig Mackinlay: I am always grateful to the hon. Lady for her contributions. This is a wide-ranging debate, and I will come on to other forms of PR.

On the question of decisiveness, we generally have decisive outcomes from first-past-the-post systems. In my South Thanet constituency I was very fortunate to receive 50.8% of the vote, so under first past the post, AV or supplementary vote I would still have won. That is true of many Members. AV, the system that was wholly rejected, has a “one, two, three” system, as hon. Members will be aware. Supplementary vote is seen in police and crime commissioner and mayoral elections. I stood for police and crime commissioner in 2012. Even after educating the public about what the two columns meant—“Vote for one, vote for two, or don’t use the second column and just use the first”—the number of spoilt ballot papers was truly exceptional. That is still true today in London elections. I do not know hon. Members’ experiences in their own constituencies, but the number of spoilt ballot papers in first past the post is vanishingly small, and I was alarmed to see the number of spoilt papers in mayoral elections.

Dr Drew: Why was there no attempt in the last Conservative manifesto, or the manifesto before that, to remove that form of election for police and crime commissioners? Why has the Conservative party never tried to remove the list system for European elections?

Craig Mackinlay: As the hon. Gentleman will be absolutely clear, the list system for European parliamentary elections has been foisted on us, and is not one that we would have chosen for ourselves.

I was just going through the various systems. With the single transferable vote system, we can have a transferable vote down from the winning candidate or a transferable vote up from the eliminated candidate. We can have the additional member system, with a constituency member and a party vote top-up. Last year, I was fortunate to go on a visit with an all-party parliamentary group to Hungary, which operates that system. We were warmly entertained by one of the Hungarian list MPs. I asked her about that experience. There are others in this room who are more familiar with these systems, particularly in Scotland. I asked, “Are you busy as a constituency MP?” She said, “No, I don’t get any post at all. I have nothing to do, because nobody knows I exist, because there is no link to my constituency.”

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not think it ironic that a number of his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament were elected on the regional list system, and therefore many of the comments he is making about list MPs now apply to him? Does he consider them to be second-class MPs?

Craig Mackinlay: I am talking about the system for this place, one that has served us well. I have a lot to say about what is wrong with any type of PR system, and I am no more in favour of the Scottish system now than I ever was. In Northern Ireland there is a slightly different system of a single transferable vote.

Moving on to the European parliamentary elections, which were mentioned by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), I am not against the d’Hondt formula just because it was created by a Belgian mathematician from 1878. How many hon. Members

have knocked on doors and dared to ask the elector: “Do you know who your MEPs are?” I am within this bubble in the south-east region, and I can only name four MEPs for the region. What chance do others have of getting a reply they want, when they send out their letters to that faceless 10?

Jonathan Reynolds: Is it the hon. Gentleman’s assertion that when Members of the European Parliament were elected by first past the post, the country knew who they were?

Craig Mackinlay: That is a point well made, and that leads us to the state that we are in today. My point is that the constituency link is lost, but how can we have a region? When we have a pure system, a little like Israel or the regional system for European parliamentary elections, how on earth can we have a constituency link from Milton Keynes to the Isle of Wight and through to east Kent? How can people feel any familiarity with or knowledge of the people who represent them? To have a proper system in which those elected completely reflect the votes cast, the area has to get bigger and bigger, and that link is lost.

Even under the d’Hondt system we have closed and open lists. The worry with the closed list system is that hon. Members cannot say with any sincerity that it is the right system and that it puts the power in the hands of the electors. It puts the power in the hands of the party machines, electing people who are in favour with the party leadership of the time to be top or bottom of the list, or wherever in between.

Wes Streeting: It would be down to parties to choose how to decide the order of the lists. In the Labour party, members of the party have always decided on their candidates at a general election. There is no reason to think that, under a proportional or list system, members of the Labour party would not be involved in deciding both the candidates and the order of the list.

Craig Mackinlay: Again, it puts the power in the hands of the party rather than those of the elector. That is the key point. I see many constituencies where the person is elected because their views are more in tune with their public rather than with the party that people normally support. I certainly put the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion in that category. She has that appeal because it is her, and that is very important.

It is unfair to say that any of us, no matter how we were elected, treats any of our electors any differently. We do not say to them, “Did you vote for me? Then I will not help you. Oh, you did vote for me? Then I will.” That completely disappears once we are elected Members; so it should be and so it should stay. It comes down to a question of what is fair. My view of fairness will probably be different from other people’s, and that is the problem with the varieties of PR or alternative systems out there. I worry that perceptions of fairness change depending on the vote share and the outcome of the protagonist’s favoured party at the last outing. That is another argument against PR.

One final unfairness is last month’s vote in Germany. Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union party received just 33% of the vote. There is no clear Government even today.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Craig Mackinlay: I am making a powerful point, and then I will give way. Angela Merkel received 33% of the vote and is unable to form a Government. How will that Government be formed? It will be formed in back rooms, not anywhere near the ballot box or the people who elected on that day. That has to be one of the most unfair systems for creating a Government.

Wera Hobhouse: I am very grateful that the hon. Gentleman has given way. I always love it when people talk with such conviction about areas that they do not necessarily know so much about. I challenge him that I know more about Germany than he does. A coalition Government is not an unfair Government—it is a coalition, in which two or several parties come together to form a Government, bringing several views together, rather than just the view of one party. That does not mean it is an unfair Government, or that people do not know what the result of that Government will be. It is a coming together of views that creates a better democracy and better governance.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank the hon. Lady for that view and perception, but she must realise that, in these back-room coalition deals, it can be the most small party, which has been rejected virtually nationally, that holds the balance of power. [HON. MEMBERS: “Like the DUP?”] We do not need DUP Members to that extent, although we are grateful to have them. [Interruption.] May I just finish this point? In Germany, it is often the Greens that hold the balance. In this country, deals are generally done with parties of a similar persuasion, exactly as in our maintenance agreement with the DUP.

Wera Hobhouse: What is wrong with smaller parties having a say in government? It is sometimes very healthy and is a great sign of democracy.

Craig Mackinlay: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady’s point, but when parties completely different from the main parties hold the balance of power, that is a danger.

I will close my remarks; I am glad they have caused some excitement. If we had a 33% result in this country, we would have another general election. That does not happen in Germany and other places that have PR in prevalence. I want strong Government, and first past the post, despite its flaws, tends to give that result most of the time. Frankly, I think we should reject any other system.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): My miserable maths suggest that, if a self-denying ordinance is imposed and Members confine themselves to five minutes’ speaking each, most if not all Members will get in. If Members are greedy, not everybody will get in.

6.12 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Roger; I will try to keep to time. In preparing for the debate, I texted my modern studies teacher from high school to ask quite how long I have been thinking about this particular issue. She reckons it is probably since the start of third year at

high school. The organisations supporting the debate should have produced a bingo card for all the arguments raised; we would probably have had a full house about an hour ago.

There is a package of measures other than the electoral system—votes at 16, House of Lords reform and, most of all, our engagement with our constituents—that we need to have a better democracy. However, a good voting system that is fair, representative and allows a wide range of views to be heard and represented in Parliament is very much the most important. It seems that our system is increasingly discredited and increasingly does not represent a wide range of views.

We have experience of proportional representation in Scotland—not only in the Scottish Parliament, which has been talked about quite a lot, but in Scottish local government. I was lucky enough to be elected twice to Glasgow City Council under the single transferrable vote system. That system removed, at a stroke, the one-party state that Glasgow City Council had been for many years and brought a range of new voices on to the council, including Greens, Lib Dems and a Tory. That brought a huge range of views to the council, to the point where research by the Electoral Reform Society found a council officer saying, “It gave us our council back.” There was actually debate and discussion, which is something we should very much value. That was a positive experience.

Constituency size has been mentioned. I think Glasgow had three and four-member wards, which achieved all three or four members being a strong voice for the area and campaigning together in that area on local issues, such as the closure of the local sorting office. That amplified the issue. On the negative side, a constituent could be represented by a councillor who for years had done *hee haw* for them, but they then had somebody else they could go to who could help and be there for them. That was a positive for many of my constituents. While mine was a larger council ward, I certainly found that I had that link with people, and I still have that link with a lot of those constituents because it is in the same area as my parliamentary constituency. That has been a good and positive experience for those people. They had known nothing but Labour councillors until that point, but they now have the opportunity to be more widely represented, which is absolutely a positive and is more reflective of their views. Having politicians competing in an area for interest and votes can only be a good thing, because they will try to get their work done that bit better and faster.

The European Parliament list, which is a closed system, has its limitations, as has been raised. However, in the Scottish National party, as in the Labour party, the list is decided by party members. We have the second largest party membership in the UK, so that is quite a big pool to draw from when selecting representatives for that list. That is a good thing and should be encouraged.

One disadvantage of our current system is that it has so many things that are negative and skew it. As was mentioned, marginal seats are targeted, with parties throwing all kinds of money at them to try to win them back, whereas voters who do not live in a marginal seat are lucky to get a couple of leaflets through the door. That is not a good and representative system, and we need to think a bit better about how we get around and change those things. PR, under which all votes count a

[Alison Thewliss]

good deal more, would certainly be one way to change that, particularly when asking for second or third preferences from constituents, as happens in Ireland, which has a far more competitive system where people fight for those votes. Electors in that system want people fighting for their votes.

It is also important that we talk about how we set politics up. Constituency size is an issue, and the European Parliament constituencies are perhaps too large. That is a factor in people not knowing who their representative is, but some of it comes down to the representative and their ability to communicate and connect. It is a burden on those people to try to represent such huge constituencies. However, where there is a balance, as in Scotland with regional lists, it is a good and fair balance, and people can make those links, make that change and actually connect with their constituents. We need to do a lot more connecting, but we also need to look at the fundamental structures of the system, because it is not working at the moment.

6.17 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and also to follow such excellent speeches by Members from all parts of the House. I also thank my constituents who have written to me on this very important subject.

First past the post neither reflects voters' wishes nor is any more likely to provide strong government than proportional representation. I will also quote the late Robin Cook, who said in 2005:

"Democracy is not just a means to an end. Democracy is a value in itself. And if we treasure that value, we need to provide a more democratic system for the centrepiece of our own political structure."

I agree with the Electoral Reform Society that, under first past the post, people feel more like observers than participants in the democratic process. I have never been particularly wedded to first past the post, although I have been elected, first to Hounslow Council and then to the House, in more than nine elections through that system. I can beat the number of years the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has been involved with PR. Some 35 years ago, I was elected to the National Union of Students national executive—so I share a political history with at least four Members here—for which the PR elections to that body were felt to be representative and fair.

Since the last Labour Government created the London Assembly, I have been involved in campaigning for elections in which the geographical link is maintained, contrary to the points repeatedly made by Members here who oppose a change. Furthermore, the London Assembly reflects the voting intentions of Londoners, as do all the new elected legislative bodies created by the last Labour Government in the years after 1997.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who is no longer in the Chamber mentioned the recent New Zealand general election, of which I have personal experience. When I visited my son in New Zealand in September, I played a small part on election day. They have multi-Member PR there. Notwithstanding the unorthodox way in which the leader of New Zealand First announced his choice of partners in the Green

and Labour parties, in order to form a Labour-led Government, there is no groundswell of opinion in New Zealand to move away from the multi-Member system. I spent the day reminding voters in a strongly Labour voting area in South Auckland to go out to vote. Because of the PR system, those people were more likely to come out to vote than they might have been under first past the post, which would have made it a safe seat. No doubt because of those conversations they had on their doorstep with a middle-aged English MP, they now have a Labour-led Government. In New Zealand, the voter has two votes: one for the electoral district and one for the national list, thereby representing their geographical concerns and their national political perspective.

In the UK, because of first past the post, too many people in safe seats say on the doorstep, "What's the point of voting?" In highly marginal seats such as my own—it was highly marginal until June 2017, but seems to be a safe seat for the time being—people often vote not for their first party of choice, but for the candidate most likely to defeat the candidate they least want. One person in five votes tactically, according to the Electoral Reform Society. The lack of representation in Parliament of small parties is abysmal, but as the co-leader of the Green party, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), said, those parties often represent millions of votes.

Going into the election in June this year, I had a majority of 465 in my seat of Brentford and Isleworth. The Green party—some of its members are here today—withdrawed its candidate because it felt that I was more likely to further its priorities in Parliament than my Conservative opponent. I met many people on the doorstep who normally vote Green and said they would vote for me, but would have liked an influence on getting a Green MP elected to Parliament. I met many Liberal Democrats who were voting for me, but would have preferred the chance to vote Lib Dem. That is not democracy—it is not good democracy.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. We come to Westminster because we want to advance the politics that we care passionately about. Is it not right that our constituents also have the opportunity to advance the politics they are most passionate about by voting from the choices before them to have a more representative voice in this place?

Ruth Cadbury: In my view, PR is a way to have a more representative voice.

While no system is perfect, all systems have elements of complexity. All can bring instability, hung Parliaments and coalitions. PR brings proportionality, as people know that their vote will help towards the weighting of the party they want to see sitting in that legislature, and reflects the complex diversity of the UK now.

6.23 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. As an abstract principle, tactical voting is nonsense, but there is one exception to that great rule, which is when people happen to vote in Clwyd South as they did in this year's general election. It was quite magnificent, because as well as talking to those who were unsure how

to vote, much of my time was spent talking to people who desperately did not want a Tory MP or one of those sheep who would come here to vote for a hard Brexit. I hope I have managed to provide them with good representation on that count.

Really and truly, most people—excluding certain Government Members—know that there is much wrong with our voting system. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) must be one of the most popular, decent and nice Members in this place. He is a great person and a thoroughly thoughtful parliamentarian, and I am delighted he is back here, but I am not sure he needed his majority of 39,883, which is 70.4% of all the voters in that seat.

Several Members have quoted the late great Robin Cook. I remember something he said; I will remember the version where he did not insult Lord Mandelson. [*Laughter.*] Other Members have heard it too. He said that under first past the post, if a floating voter was found in the Amazon, people would go over there and bring them back to make sure they could vote in a marginal seat. That raises the question, if we believe in democracy and claim to be pluralists—I appreciate that not everybody does—should we not have the guts to back a fairer system? The 1997 Labour Government did that for the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Parliament, the London Mayor and the Greater London Authority. As a Welsh MP, I do not think it has been unbridled joy in Wales. In fact, sometimes it has been a right pain in the neck, but I do not believe that our National Assembly, of which I am passionately in favour, would have seriously developed the breadth of reach across society and the inclusivity had we not gone for that proportional system.

Many Members have said that under first past the post at least we get stable Governments. We have one now, do we not? I do not think many of us would say that that is true any more. The Government are weak and wobbly, to coin a phrase. I know that no voting system is perfect and that we need sensible thresholds. I also know that, across this country, most people are not that bothered about constitutional issues. Having been fairly interested in them when I came here several years ago, I am probably allergic to them now, but that is not the point in the debate about voting reform. We can be as concerned about bread-and-butter issues as we like, but if our vote does not actually matter because of where we live, what on earth is the point? Our voice is either likely to go totally unheard or, at best, be of marginal importance. Rather a lot of things have happened since the 2011 referendum, but that was not really about a proportional system. To say that is to decry what it was about. So much has changed.

It is high time that we had an honest, open debate. I have every confidence in my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on the shadow Front Bench. She is a fair-minded person and a good pluralist, and I look forward to hearing what she has to say. There are members of the Minister's party in Wales, such as Jonathan Evans, who advocate passionately for electoral reform. We have to look at this issue for the sake of not just my tactical voters in Clwyd South, some of whom said they like voting for me and would like to do so again, but people right around the country. If democracy matters, it has to matter for here.

6.27 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the Petitions Committee for enabling this debate. I rise to argue that the central purpose of the campaign for proportional representation must be to shine a light on the clear, strong and manifold causal links between the state of our broken politics and the state of our discredited voting system.

The simple fact is that the British people deserve an electoral system in which every vote counts. Why do the vast majority of developed nations use proportional representation, while our electorate are forced to accept second best? Why should our people be forced to accept the fundamentally flawed logic of a system whereby seats in Parliament do not reflect vote share? Why should we have to tolerate tactical voting? Polling found that on 8 June 20% to 30% of the electorate voted tactically. Why should we have to put up with a system whereby almost 7 million people felt that they had to hold their nose while voting?

What does it say about our democracy when millions of people are going to the ballot box to vote for the “least worst option,” as opposed to voting for the party or individual they feel will best represent their values, beliefs and interests in this place? Can we really sit here today, in the building that is sometimes referred to as the cradle of modern democracy, and defend a system that fails to pass the most basic principle of democracy—namely, the right of voters to vote for the party or candidate that they actually support? Perhaps most importantly of all, why should the British people have to accept a system that delivers the winner-takes-all political culture that is the root cause of the deeply divided, polarised and fragmented country that we have become?

Decades of research from around the world shows that proportional representation correlates with positive societal outcomes: greater income equality, less corporate control, better long-term planning and political stability, fairer representation of women and minorities, higher voter turnout, better environmental laws and a significantly lower likelihood of going to war. This is the real prize of electoral reform: building a better politics. It is the means of shaping a more inclusive society in which resources are allocated on the basis of real needs and opportunities rather than cynical swing-seat electoral calculations. It should therefore come as no surprise that polls consistently show that a majority of the public want PR. The latest poll shows that 67% want to make seats match votes, and those people are joined by a growing alliance of parties, MPs and public figures who want real democracy.

There are those who argue that the great advantage of first past the post is that it delivers “strong and stable” government—I think the less said about that, the better. We are also told that the great danger of PR is that it will mean back-room stitch-ups. What, like the £1 billion bung for the DUP?

Wes Streeting: On the point about back-room stitch-ups, does my hon. Friend also recognise that, under the present system, political parties are themselves coalitions? In the Conservative party we see the libertarian tradition and the patrician tradition. In the Liberal Democrats we see the social democrats and the “Orange Book” liberals.

[*Wes Streeting*]

Of course, in the Labour party we agree on everything all the time. [*Laughter.*] Let us let the people in to some of those compromises, choices and trade-offs.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right; the transparency of a more coalition-based system whereby parties are able to self-identify clearly as parties in their own right is a far more healthy way of running a democracy.

The truth is that it is first past the post that increasingly leads to smoke-filled rooms, backstairs deals and pork barrel politics. I prefer the open politics of transparent coalition building, in which parties are clear about the trade-offs that they would make in a coalition, and the public clearly do too. They like to see their politicians putting the national interest ahead of narrow party political gain, because they can see that our entire political culture, underpinned and compounded by our winner-takes-all electoral system, is not geared to building broad-based political support right across the country. No, it is geared to focus on approximately 100 constituencies—the so-called battleground seats.

Mr Jayawardena: The hon. Gentleman talks about constituencies, but if he is talking about open politics and fairer politics, will he make it his policy—indeed, is it Labour party policy—to allow the redrawing of boundaries so that they are fairer in themselves?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I think that the equalisation of constituencies is, in principle, right, but it should be on the basis of 650 MPs, particularly in the light of Brexit and so many more responsibilities. As I am sure he will agree, we are taking back control in this Parliament.

Mr Jayawardena: Welcome aboard!

Stephen Kinnock: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely delighted by that development, but still, arguing for 600 seats does not really make sense.

The system is geared to focus on approximately 100 constituencies that always tip the balance when it comes to polling day, 100 constituencies that hold the future of our country in their hands, 100 constituencies that drive and define our politics, 100 constituencies that can give a party with 40% of the vote the powers of an elective dictatorship.

A proportional system, however, is genuinely representative. It forces parties to come together and build consensus around policies that advance our long-term national interest. What a refreshing change that would make, following the short-term, tactical party management that has driven so much decision making in Westminster for so long. That is why I am so keen to point out that the campaign for electoral reform is not, and must never be, about partisan interests. I favour electoral reform not because I think it will particularly benefit the Labour party, but because it is right for our country, our economy, our society, our people and our democracy; because the campaign for electoral reform is about showing people that this is their society, they have a voice and they can shape their future.

I shall finish in that spirit by calling on political parties to commit to including two things in their manifestos: first, an undertaking in principle to replace first past the post with a more proportional system; and secondly, a commitment to organising a constitutional convention, shortly after the next general election, to identify the best possible proportional system that we can implement for our country. True radicalism is about going to the root cause of a problem, identifying the solution and building consensus for change, so let us for once be truly radical. Let us accept that our politics is broken and that our utterly discredited first-past-the-post system is preventing us from building the new political culture that our country so urgently needs.

6.35 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Sir Roger, I apologise for coming to the debate a little late—I had left my notes in the ladies' toilet. I hope you see that as a sign of how excited I am to be in the debate. I thank everyone who has made it possible. I am also grateful for the good-natured debate that we have had so far.

I have been campaigning on electoral reform for many years. I am a council member of the Electoral Reform Society—that membership will run out in a few months' time, because my parliamentary duties no longer allow me to fulfil that role properly—so I am very much involved with the issue. Electoral reform is not about electoral advantage for any particular party; it is simply the right thing to do. Many hon. Members have made it clear why first past the post is a rubbish voting system: it disenfranchises a large number of voters in so-called safe seats, encourages apathy and disinterest, drives the politics of division and polarisation and simply does not encourage a culture of grown-up political debate.

Electoral reform and a proportional voting system are about better democracy. That is really the headline for the Electoral Reform Society's campaigning. I am sometimes very alarmed when I follow the Brexit debates that we are having currently, because our political culture simply does not understand what it means to be a participatory democracy, in which all people can participate and have a meaningful say, rather than two sides just shouting at each other. That is why it is so important that we find a political culture that can deal with the complex issues of the day, and changing our voting system would definitely be a step in the right direction.

The defenders of first past the post are clutching at straws. That people vote tactically in large numbers demonstrates not that this is a great system, but that we have to make do with something that is very inferior. I love this argument that we have already had a referendum. A referendum does not set an argument in stone once and for all. According to that argument, we had a referendum in 1975 to join the EU—and look where we are today. Certain issues do not go away, and electoral reform is one of them. Democracy is about healthy debating and continuous challenge. It is about fair representation of all people.

I have listened with great interest to what Labour Members have said about their manifesto. I know from being a council member of the Electoral Reform Society that we have been engaging over many months with the Labour party to see whether we can get a manifesto commitment from it. I am looking forward to that manifesto commitment, not least because it would mean that I would not have to join the Labour party.

6.38 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I start by congratulating all those who have worked so hard to secure the signatures on the petition. I am sorry that it was so casually dismissed by at least one Government Member. I am proud that my constituents contributed, I think, the fourth highest number of signatures, and I think that it reflects a growing mood for change in the way we elect our Members of Parliament, and indeed in other parts of the system. At the moment we face huge challenges in our politics, and at these times it is so important that our politics commands the support of the people; that our democracy is held in high regard. It is here that our electoral system lets us down.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made a fair attempt at defending first past the post, but as a system that might have worked in the past, rather than one that meets the challenges of today. Looking at some of the flaws of first past the post, there is a Member of this House—I do not want to name names—who was elected with 29% of the votes cast. In the last Parliament, a Member was elected with less than 25% of the votes cast, with more than three quarters of voters not wanting that person to be their representative. There has to be something wrong with a system that produces those sorts of results.

Reflecting on this debate, I am struck by the extraordinary absence of irony in the way Government Members have described PR as flawed because it leads to an election result in which there is no clear winner, and therefore a Government determined by backroom deals, giving disproportionate influence to small parties. I think irony is quite important in politics.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay also casually disregarded the argument about wasted votes, which I think is important. There is no more powerful indictment of our system than the way people feel disempowered by their votes being wasted. Not only do the votes going to losing candidates have no impact on the outcome of the election, but neither do the surplus votes for the winner over the finishing line. I say that as someone who, in sharp contrast with my result in 2010, has a majority just short of 28,000. That combination of wasted votes meant that between 68% and 74% of votes have been wasted in the last three general elections.

The hon. Gentleman also suggested that people are obviously happy with the system when he asked why they continued to participate in it, but they have found their own way of navigating this flawed system. Thankfully they did not walk away, as he suggested they might. Instead they tried to find their own ways of making votes count, increasingly turning to tactical voting and to vote trading websites. As many hon. Members have pointed out, political parties know how to navigate it too. It leads to that focus on key marginal seats and key voter segments within them, which is no way to run a democracy.

PR is not a silver bullet and those of us who are strong advocates for it do not pretend that it is. There are many other ways in which our democracy needs to be improved, but we should learn something from the fact that an increasing number of countries have turned away from first past the post and towards more proportional systems. Of the 35 nations in the OECD, more than 80% use some form of PR. Contrary to the lack of imagination that some Government Members have shown,

it is possible to have systems in which there is a constituency link—most of those countries do—which retains that vital relationship that so many of us believe in, while also allowing for proper proportionality.

The impact of moving to PR goes beyond voting systems. As a number of hon. Members have alluded, it contributes to changing our political culture. My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) spoke of his concerns about the increasingly damaging way in which tribalism and a binary approach to politics is undermining what is a much more nuanced political debate in our country. PR would move us from a majoritarian culture to a more consensual approach to politics, which we should welcome. It is therefore no surprise that, as all the evidence demonstrates, societies with PR systems generally have lower income inequality, developed welfare systems, higher social expenditure, fairer distribution of public goods, better environmental controls, more effective action on climate change, less likelihood of armed conflict and, as one hon. Member pointed out, better long-term decision making. Given many of the big issues we face as a country, we should aspire to that.

The petition is timely, given that confidence in our democracy is not at its strongest. In this House we need to be open to change. Making votes count would make an enormous difference. I again thank those who have brought the petition to the House. They should recognise—as should we—that it has stimulated a large number of Members to get involved in the issue. Let us see this as a springboard from which we can build.

6.45 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful to all the people who signed this petition. This is a hugely important matter, and one frequently raised with me on the doorstep and in public meetings. This petition and the question around it are indicative of a changing relationship between elected Members, the voting public and power. It would be helpful to look at one aspect that lies behind the petition and to share some of the experiences from Scotland, where we have PR for elections to the Scottish Parliament and councils, and also where 16-year-olds can vote and express their democratic views.

Does a voter in my constituency of East Lothian want a specific person to fulfil a role as their representative in Westminster? Do they see that role as lawmaking, or solving constituency problems? Do they want to know who I am, ask questions of me and demand representation on all issues? It is interesting that the evidence suggests that parliamentarians think the constituent wants them to be a lawmaker, but constituents rank solving constituents' problems as the most important job. If we add to that a shared desire to promote the interests and improve the economy of the constituency, I would suggest that voters see a dual role in their parliamentarian.

At the time of a national election, with its national campaign, febrile press coverage, and umpteen polls and opinions, what is important to voters is who will form the next Government and control their future. After the election that view changes and a constituent wants a voice for the constituency: to sort out their problems, and to help build and develop the area they live in. That may suggest why by-elections are different beasts to general elections. East Lothian has always had

[*Martin Whitfield*]

a strong history of constituency MP Back Benchers who have contributed to the politic, but always put their constituency first. I believe this characteristic is shared in a lot of constituencies.

This petition refers to PR systems that keep the constituency link. In Scotland we have the additional member system—AMS—in which the first-past-the-post vote identifies a constituency MSP and then additional Members are added from a list. The list is party-based and adds Members for a particular party to one of eight area lists. We also have the single transferable vote—STV—in which constituents have multiple Members and rank as many candidates as they wish. STV improves the proportionality and retains a constituency link, and that is used in our council elections. I would, however, counsel from experience that voters sometimes find that system difficult, with people frequently voting for just one person, or sequencing their votes down the ballot paper, resulting in an alphabetic list of councillors, rather than the choice of a party or individual. Education is the key to solving this, as well as, possibly, randomised ranking on the ballot paper. However, with Westminster, are people up to having more MPs, or would we require larger constituencies, removing and eroding the historic link of an MP to an area? I am aware of other systems, such as party lists, regional or national, which again point to a party political choice, rather than an individual choice.

The question of electoral reform is loud and it is a massively important debate. Just because something is complex does not mean we should not address the question. We must listen to what is being said, but a question we need to ask ourselves before that is: what do we want from our MP? If we can answer that question, the system we use to vote for that MP might become clearer to everyone.

6.49 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Ipswich borough consists of 16 wards, of which 13 comprise the parliamentary constituency of Ipswich and three are part of the Central Suffolk and North Ipswich constituency. That does what it says on the tin, consisting of a huge swathe of some of the most rural and prosperous parts of Suffolk, plus two council estates and some other dense housing in north-west Ipswich. Every time a resident of Ipswich contacts my office, my staff have to ask for their address to determine whether they are one of my constituents or a constituent of the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). Many residents of north-west Ipswich assume that they are represented by the MP for Ipswich, and can become irritated when they discover that they have to approach someone else, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman is becoming a little weary of my constant messages to his office informing him of my intention to attend events that involve Ipswich-wide groups or campaigns but that happen to be taking place in his constituency—although we do try to work together for the good of Ipswich wherever appropriate.

Of course, if the boundary commission changes go through before the next election, one ward's worth of his constituents will not be allowed to vote on whether he has done a good job for them, because they will be transferred into my constituency. At the same time, it

would be wrong for me to attempt to show the residents of that ward whether I am an effective MP until after the general election at which they can vote for me, or not.

I am lucky in that I have only one borough council with which I have to deal, and that borough council has only two MPs with which it has to deal. Just down the road in Essex, there are constituencies with boundaries that bear virtually no relationship to any recognisable geographical entities. Colchester, for instance, has suburbs such as Wivenhoe in the Harwich constituency and Stanway in the Witham constituency. Across the country MPs have to deal with one council for one part of their constituency and another council for another part. That has a seriously damaging effect on the level of democratic engagement.

We have a supposedly geographic system of representation—MPs are elected to represent geographic constituencies—but how can we use the importance of the geographic link between the MP and their residents as an argument for keeping the first-past-the-post system when half the residents of this country do not know which constituency they live in? If and when they do learn which constituency they live in, find out who their MP is and develop some sort of relationship with them, the Boundary Commission is likely to come along and ship them over into some other constituency, so they cannot vote for that MP anyway.

We are not here to propose a specific alternative electoral system, but rather to debate whether there might be any merit in looking at any alternatives. It is entirely possible to devise a system of geographic representation that enables meaningful and fixed constituencies of varying sizes coupled with a proportional top-up to ensure that the overall result is fair. It is not necessary that that top-up should be done with a list system. I was never a great fan of the system proposed at the last referendum on the voting system, and I do not propose that we revisit it. My perception of the AV referendum was that it was a referendum on the popularity of Nick Clegg. The vast majority of people had no idea how the system they were voting for or against was supposed to work, and I have to say that any hon. Members in this place who believed that it was a proportional system were among them.

Surely this debate is about whether the current system is fit for purpose, and I suggest that given we elect people to represent geographic entities that mean nothing to the voters, and change their boundaries on a regular basis, it is about time we looked at something more meaningful, which would actually accord with the expectations of our voters.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Thank you for your courtesy and your restraint. We have accommodated all the Back Benchers who wished to speak. Well done.

6.54 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): May I begin, as others have, by congratulating those who organised this petition—Make Votes Matter and other organisations? It is no mean feat to get 100,000 signatures on a petition to this place, and I very much hope that this is the start of the next phase of a push for reform of our voting system in this country. As the events of the

next few years unravel and we go through Brexit, we will see constitutional upheaval anyway. In the midst of that, we can seize the opportunity to try to improve our democratic system.

The Scottish National party supports the petitioners. Indeed, we have long argued for proportional representation. We have tried to give it effect in our own national Parliament, and for as long as we are represented in a Union Parliament we will press the case for reform here as well. Ironically, we do that even though we are probably the greatest beneficiaries of the current system's distortion. We had what now looks like a freak result in 2015 when we achieved 95% of the seats on 50% of the vote. That is not a good system; I know that, and we know it as a party. If the price of having a fair voting system in this country is that I and some of my colleagues do not get to return to this place, to my mind that is a price worth paying. I think that all of us should discuss this from the point of view of political principle rather than of what is good for our individual party.

The simple proposition we are debating is whether the parties in Westminster should be represented in proportion to the votes they receive at an election. That is such an overwhelmingly reasonable and correct proposition, it is difficult to argue against it. No wonder, therefore, that in opinion polling a vast majority of people say that they agree with that proposition. That is also why those who disagree with the proposition do not argue its opposite. I have not heard anyone say, "We think that political parties in Westminster should not have representation in line with the votes that were cast for them in the election." Instead of that we get treated to, "Well, nothing's really perfect. We know you mean well, but here is a whole series of technical obfuscations that takes us away from the debate in principle and get into a situation that confuses the electorate." We need to return to principle and try to ensure that we focus on that debate.

I want to deal briefly with three of the arguments that have been put against this idea. The first is the proposition that proportional representation somehow does not lead to stable government, and that first past the post does. I do not want to repeat the arguments that have been made about the experience of recent elections, but I do want to say that there is a confusion between the majority Government of one party and majority Government. A coalition Government are a majority Government in that they have to have a majority of Members of Parliament supporting them in order to get anything through. In fact, despite many of the criticisms I would have of them, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government from 2010 to 2015 were remarkably stable and were able to put their programme through. People are confused, and to argue that the important thing about the system is that it should deliver a majority for one party, rather than a Government that have the majority of the electorate behind them, seems a misguided and indefensible position.

There has also been a suggestion that PR will lead to a system where electors actually lose power because it will be handed to political managers in the parties and deals will be done in smoke-filled rooms, or whatever their 21st-century equivalent is. That is not really the case either, is it? The truth is that if there is a proportional system people will be obliged to form Governments and will only be able to do so only if they have the support of the majority of people who took part in the election.

That seems absolutely fundamentally democratic, rather than the current system where the Conservative party and its junior coalition partner formed a Government with just 43% of the vote.

The third and final point I want to address is this idea that proportional representation somehow weakens the constituency link. That is nonsense. Government Members have said, "We all, as MPs, try to represent people without fear or favour. It doesn't matter whether they voted for us or not." Of course that is true and I genuinely believe we all do that, but I do not think that the electors who come to our door believe that that is the case. In many ways, I think they would rather have someone who they believed would be more empathetic to their case because that person might agree with the difficulty that they are in. For example, if someone has an immigration problem, are they likely to seek support from an elected representative who has made public statements about the need for tighter immigration controls and crackdowns? Perhaps that would put them off. However, if, say, in Edinburgh, we had an STV system in which five MPs were elected but where each represented the whole city on an STV basis, an elector would have the opportunity to go to any one of them with a particular case. That would enhance and widen the constituency link, because people would be more likely to seek help from their Member of Parliament.

Fourteen million people did not vote on 8 June this year, and we all need to be aware of that and more concerned about it than we appear to be. I believe that one reason why people did not vote was our electoral system; let me illustrate that with an example. Suspend disbelief and imagine that I am Conservative supporter in Newcastle upon Tyne. I am 58 years old—which I am—and all my life, I have argued in support of the Conservative party, and I have gone out and voted Conservative. I have participated in 10 general elections and have never once been able to vote for someone who would be elected to represent my views. What is worse, the party that I support has said that they are not at all concerned and has offered compensation by saying, "Well, at the other end of the country it happens in reverse, so don't worry." But I am not sure that a barrister or a banker in the home counties will have the Conservative approach to the north-east that I am arguing for. An activist might put up with that level of frustration, but many of our fellow citizens have just given up on the process.

Mr Jayawardena: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I will not because I am very short of time. People simply do not see the point of voting in elections and decline to do so, so we have to see changing the electoral system as part of a process of democratic renewal in the governance of these islands that will address people being alienated from the system. If we do not do that, I really fear for the future of these institutions in which we all participate.

For a final minute, let me address the issue of the 2011 referendum. Twice I asked those who talked about it today to confirm whether they thought it was a referendum on PR and at least they had the good grace to concede that it was not. We have never had a referendum on proportional representation in this country. I do not know what went on in the coalition talks or why the Liberal Democrats got themselves into the position of

[Tommy Sheppard]

agreeing to the referendum on AV. It was a policy that they did not agree with and it blocked the debate for the rest of that Parliament, and probably until now, but that is history. It is certainly not the case that the 2011 referendum should be taken as an endorsement of anything. I make the observation that many of the biggest changes in our franchise and in our democratic voting system have not been because of referendums. We did not have a referendum on giving women the vote or on lowering the age of majority to 21 and then to 18. Parliament decided that it was the right thing to do, so there is not even any need for a referendum.

The experience of operating PR in Scotland is very positive, not just for local government, but for our national Parliament. There is wide support among people in Scotland for the Scottish Parliament's existence—even the Conservative party has come around to being an advocate for it. There is much more support for the Scottish Parliament now than there was when it was set up. That is partly because of some things it has done and partly because people feel that the body genuinely represents the plurality of opinion in Scotland. That gives it a safety net and the credibility that it needs to get on and act on their behalf, and we could do with that safety net and that big dose of credibility in this Parliament as well.

7.4 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I congratulate the more than 100,000 members of the public who supported the e-petition to secure today's debate. This truly is their debate on proportional representation. Given that the petition reached the required number of signatures by March, I also thank them for their patience. The debate was slightly delayed by the June general election, and despite the shared disappointment on both sides of the House that, even with our first-past-the-post system, neither party was able to secure a majority at the general election, I am sure that we all welcome the huge increase we saw in political participation, particularly among young people. Two million young people registered to vote after the election was called and we witnessed the highest youth turnout since 1992. We must continue to build on that high level of engagement, and the petition process plays a powerful role in doing just that.

The debate focuses on the important subject of our voting system and, in particular, proportional representation. I stress that we in the Opposition are committed to taking radical steps to ensure that all eligible voters are registered and can use their vote, and we therefore welcome the opportunity to have a much needed discussion on the wider issue of electoral reform.

As has been said, all voting systems have strengths and weaknesses. On first past the post, although the 2017 general election did not produce a strong majority Government, some have argued that first past the post has a history of returning single-party Governments and of retaining the constituency link, both of which I agree are important benefits to any electoral system. The constituency link is a vital part of British political life. As the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, I represent the people of my local area and am directly accountable to them. However, as has been said, moving to a proportional system does not necessarily rule that out.

I am also aware of the argument in favour of proportional representation. The recent election resulted in a minority Government. The Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party received just 43% of the votes between them but hold a majority of seats in this House. In Scotland, the Labour and Conservative parties received a similar vote share, on 27% and 28% respectively, but the Tories won twice as many seats as Labour. Supporters of PR argue that seats in Parliament should reflect the vote and that a system of PR will give voters the opportunity to vote for what they believe in, rather than having to vote tactically.

The question that must be answered—and the answer is somewhat unclear—is this: what do the British public want? Much has been said about the 2011 AV referendum. The former Labour leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), supported the yes campaign because he believed that it was good for democracy and accountability, and fairer than the current situation. However, the UK voted overwhelmingly to reject changing the system, with just 32% of voters supporting AV. Indeed, public opinion may have changed since 2011. Supporters of PR highlight recent polling by ICM that found that 67% of people believe that seats should match votes, while 61% say that they would support replacing first past the post with PR. It is therefore important to continue to look at different voting systems, which is why today's debate is so important. However, changing the voting system alone will not fix the disconnect that some voters feel regarding our political process. We need wide-ranging transformation of all the political structures that are in place to help build a vibrant and active democracy in which vested interests and big money do not have all the power.

Labour's 2017 manifesto committed to establishing a constitutional convention to examine and advise on reforming how Britain works at a fundamental level. As well as having the option to look at different voting systems, the convention would look at extending democracy locally, regionally and nationally, starting by ending the hereditary principle and reducing the size of the other place. That should be part of a wider package of constitutional reform to address the growing democratic deficit across Britain. This is about where power and sovereignty lie—in politics, the economy, the justice system and our communities.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Cat Smith: I will not, because most of the people who have taken part in the debate want to hear from the Minister and I want to maximise the time that he has.

A recent study by Demos found that only 37% of young adults in the UK feel that British politics today reflects the issues that matter to them. If we are to build a democracy that works for everyone, what are the Government doing to increase democratic engagement and ensure that voters have their say on decision making, both during and outside election time? As we approach 100 years since the start of women's suffrage, it is important to reflect on the ways in which more people can participate in our democracy. Many Members mentioned this in their contributions, but extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds, as is the case in Scotland for local elections, would make our constitution clearer across the whole United Kingdom. At the moment,

there is a discrepancy, because 16 and 17-year-olds can vote in local elections in some parts of the United Kingdom but they are not entitled to vote in a general election.

Mr Lord: May I ask one important question? In its manifesto, the Labour party talked about a convention. Can we establish that if any reforms were to be made under a Labour Government, they would be subject to a referendum? That is important for our constitution, and for public good will.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady courteously gave way, so the hon. Gentleman has the right to the floor, but I make the point from the Chair that it is customary for Members to come and listen to the debate before intervening.

Cat Smith: If the hon. Gentleman had been here for the debate, he might have found that that question was answered earlier.

What is the Government's position on votes at 16? The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office said in a recent report that

"it is important for Conservatives to demonstrate to young people... that we take their opinions seriously. Supporting a reduction in the voting age would be a dramatic way of doing that".

Is it the Government's position to support votes at 16 or not? There is support for it across the House, and I hope that Members in favour of it will support the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), which will be debated this Friday.

When it comes to electoral reform, it is important that people are entitled and registered to vote. We have a particular problem with fair registration for people who move house often because they rent privately. Students and young people are also less likely to vote. What are the Government doing to ensure that mobile and transient groups, such as students and those in private rented accommodation, do not fall off the electoral register every year? It is hard for people to check whether they are on the electoral roll. I highlight the work done in the London borough of Hackney, the first council in which people can check online to see whether they are registered to vote in the borough. Would the Government consider rolling that out nationally?

Finally, there is no point making radical changes to our electoral system if we do not have the staff to manage them. Many people assume that there is a big machine behind the delivery of elections. In fact, the delivery of electoral services is generally administered by small, often relatively junior teams. The Association of Electoral Administrators describes the industry as "pushed to the absolute limit"

by this Government's funding cuts and the rushed move to individual electoral registration. Staff are stressed, there are very few experienced electoral administrators left and the number of people leaving the profession has almost doubled since 2015. What are the Government doing to ensure that our elections are properly staffed, and what will they do to protect the mental health and wellbeing of electoral administrators?

It is important that we look at different voting systems as part of a wider package of constitutional and electoral reform to address the growing democratic deficit across Britain. We must see some action on the issue.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. The Government welcome this debate on the merits and drawbacks of adopting proportional representation and the opportunity to address the important issues raised by hon. Members. It is fantastic to see such a strong turnout in Westminster Hall for this three-hour debate.

Members have made their arguments eloquently, and we have had a good-natured and high-quality debate that has shown us at our best. Clearly, how we select our representatives in Parliament is of fundamental importance, and Members rightly have strong views on the merits and disadvantages of various voting systems that have sometimes, as we have seen, gone beyond the traditional confines of party politics. The choice of voting system is central to our democracy, which is why such debates are important. I thank the 103,000 petitioners who triggered the debate, as well as the Petitions Committee and its representative, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for giving us the opportunity to have it.

The Government are committed above all to ensuring that the laws governing our elections are clear and generate the greatest degree of confidence. Under the first-past-the-post system, electors select their preferred candidate for their constituency. The candidate with the largest number of votes wins, and the party with the largest number of elected candidates may form a Government. The electorate understand well how their representatives in Parliament are selected under the first-past-the-post system, and it makes it easier for electoral administrators to deliver an election accurately and quickly. The Government therefore do not support proportional representation, as we consider it to be more complicated without delivering the same benefits as first past the post.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister might not be aware that using the single transferable vote system for local government in Scotland allows us to use electronic counting. Has he attended any electronic counts in Scotland to see how simple and well-operated they are?

Chris Skidmore: Devolved legislatures have the ability to choose various voting systems; the Government provided those freedoms in the past. I have not attended an electronic count, but I understand that there have been a number of difficulties running them in Scotland. I also understand that we have given Wales the freedom to consider electronic voting in future, and I look forward to seeing what comes from the pilots there.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) mentioned, we committed in our manifesto not only to retain first past the post for parliamentary elections but to extend it to elections for police and crime commissioners and Mayors. In line with that, the Government have no plans to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons. We will seek to legislate on that matter—

Wera Hobhouse: The Conservative party did not win a majority, so one could turn the argument round and say that therefore, the majority do not support continuing with first past the post and what the Conservatives propose in their manifesto.

Chris Skidmore: We have a system of representative democracy. The largest party that forms a Government can then implement its manifesto. That is clearly in line with historical precedent. We will seek to legislate on the matter and meet our manifesto commitments when legislative time allows.

I turn to the specifics of why the Government believe that retaining first past the post is the best system for the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) mentioned the administration of elections and the burdens on staff. Electoral systems used to achieve proportional representation are often more complex than a first-past-the-post system. Systems such as the single transferable vote require ballots to be counted multiple times in order to allocate seats, which lengthens the duration of the count and therefore the time and effort taken to determine a result.

Conversely, first past the post entails a relatively simple count that, hopefully, need only be conducted once, except where the margin between candidates is slim, which minimises the pressure on the administrative process and the possibility of error. Furthermore, the simplicity of the count means that a result is produced much more quickly, normally during the night following the poll, with an overall result early the next day; long may the election night count and the declaration of results continue. A timely result is in the interests of all parties and the country as a whole.

The first-past-the-post system is well established in the United Kingdom and easy for the electorate to understand. Consequently, elections using first past the post produce fewer rejected ballot papers than other systems, including proportional representation systems such as STV. According to the Electoral Commission, the use of the single transferable vote in the Scottish council elections led to 37,492 ballots being rejected, or 1.95%, a proportion of total ballots cast nearly six times higher than under first past the post in the 2015 general election, in which only 0.33% of ballots were rejected. In the 2016 election of the police and crime commissioner for England and Wales, a remarkable 311,000 ballots were rejected, out of a turnout of 8.8 million. That is 3.4%. In the same year, there were just 25,000 spoiled ballot papers in the EU referendum.

Martin Whitfield: Is that not an argument for more funding for education, rather than for changing the system?

Chris Skidmore: No. I believe that the simplest system—putting a cross in a box and having one Member and one vote—is the first-past-the-post system. That is why the Government want to legislate to return to that system, so that we have a simple system that is well understood across all elections. The Government have serious concerns that proportional representation voting systems are less likely to be understood and followed correctly by members of the public, increasing the likelihood that ballot papers will be completed incorrectly.

Caroline Lucas: Does the Minister really think that the population of Britain is significantly less intelligent than the population of Germany, France, Denmark and Finland—all the countries that use proportional representation? Is he saying that, with education, people could not work out how to use that system? That is a pretty big indictment.

Chris Skidmore: I am not saying that at all. If there is any indictment, it is on a system that leads to a large number of rejected ballot papers. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood mentioned the issue of voter engagement and ensuring that people vote. There is a massive discrepancy between the systems when it comes to turnout and people filling out a correct ballot. The first-past-the-post system works, so why do we need to change it? Proportional representation disenfranchises people who participate and then find out that their ballots were rejected—or they do not even find out. The system works against them and their democratic right.

Cat Smith: The Minister makes the point that the elections for the police and crime commissioners had a higher proportion of spoiled ballot papers than a general election. If that is the case, perhaps the public are sending a message that they do not want to elect police and crime commissioners in the first place?

Chris Skidmore: That may be the hon. Lady's view, but the Government's view is that 311,000 spoiled ballot papers are a problem—we are looking at how the transfer of votes took place and a misnumbering in that system. The Electoral Commission also recognises that problem.

High numbers of incorrectly completed ballot papers put pressure on the administrative process at the count. If a voter's preference is unclear, administrators must adjudicate on whether the ballot paper can be assigned to a candidate or rejected. That increases the burden on administrators by prolonging the count and requiring some ballots to be counted twice, or multiple times. For those reasons, the Government support the continued use of the first-past-the-post system because it retains the confidence of the electorate, results in the lowest level of errors in ballot paper completion and reduces pressure on the administrative process of adjudicating unclear ballots.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) mentioned the crucial constituency link, which my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) also reflected on, along with other hon. Members with varying views. I personally believe that that link with individual Members of Parliament who represent electors in a defined constituency is a core feature of our parliamentary democracy with the first-past-the-post system. Constituents have a distinct parliamentary representative who is directly accountable to them. The manner of that representation may be less obvious when someone is elected under a proportional representation system or a list system that uses larger multi-Member constituencies. Although hon. Members have different views, that was brought up countless times on the doorstep at the AV referendum.

In the United Kingdom, the Government conducted a referendum on whether the voting system to elect Members of Parliament should be changed from first past the post.

Stephen Twigg: I am bemused by the Minister's argument. The AV system would retain single Member constituencies represented by a single Member of Parliament. What is the relevance of the argument about the constituency link?

Chris Skidmore: In contrast to AV or other proportional forms, the constituency link with first past the post is

that a clearly defined person in that constituency has won with the plurality of votes—actually, the same number of votes.

I well remember a cross-party debate on this subject with the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), as he is now, and Billy Bragg in Bristol City Council's Council House. The result of the AV referendum was that 13 million people—more than two-thirds of people who voted—voted in favour of retaining first past the post. The Government believe it would be hard to justify ignoring that democratic verdict in the referendum or to make the case for a further referendum on more ambitious reform such as PR when the more modest alternative vote proposal was defeated so resoundingly.

The referendum was an overwhelming vote for the status quo of first past the post. The Government are committed to first past the post and the clear, overriding principle of one person, one vote. When it comes to the vote, why should one person's vote be worth three, four, five or six times more than another person's? Every vote is equal, so every vote should be counted equally. That is why we believe in the first-past-the-post system as the fairest and clearest mechanism by which to elect this democratically elected Chamber.

7.24 pm

Steve Double: I thank all those who initiated and signed the petition that has enabled us to have this debate. I am sure we all agree that it has been very lively and that some passionately held views have been expressed. Clearly the debate is ongoing; I do not think for a minute that this is the end of the matter.

Good points have been made on both sides. The one thing we can agree on, across the House, is that no system is perfect; every system for holding elections has its strengths and weaknesses.

Caroline Lucas: Some are better than others.

Steve Double: Indeed they are, and we probably disagree about which, but we all understand that there is no silver bullet. Simply changing our system of voting will not change the concerns that we all share about engaging voters and ensuring that they feel a valued part of the system.

I am still of the opinion that the strengths of first past the post outweigh its weaknesses, and I am not convinced that changing to a PR system would address those weaknesses. However, I am sure that we will go on having this debate. The one thing we can all agree on is that we value our democracy—the freedom we have in this nation to vote to elect our representatives. Whatever debates we have about how we vote, we will continue to value that freedom very highly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 168657 relating to proportional representation.

7.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 30 October 2017

HEALTH

Law Commission Report: Mental Capacity

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I am today announcing the publication of the Government's interim response to the Law Commission's report on Mental Capacity and Deprivation of Liberty, a copy of which is attached.

In England, around two million people with conditions such as dementia, learning disability or an acquired brain injury may be unable to always make decisions about their care or treatment, including where they live, because they lack mental capacity. In 2007, the Government amended the Mental Capacity Act to introduce the deprivation of liberty safeguards (DoLS), which provide a legal framework for such decisions. However, the framework has been subsequently criticised in both Houses, as well as by charities, local authorities and families. The current regime is inflexible and complex and the system is bureaucratic and unwieldy, meaning that it is unnecessarily cumbersome to ensure that vulnerable people are afforded the rights and protections to which they are entitled. The current system does not always empower people or place them at the heart of decision making about their care as set out by the Care Act 2016.

The Commission were asked to conduct a fundamental review of the deprivation of liberty safeguards provisions which are rooted in the Mental Capacity Act and integrated into healthcare practices for joined-up person-centred care. Our expressed priority at the time was that any new scheme delivers real tangible benefits for individuals and their families, and this remains the case. Any new scheme must improve the quality of care for people, improve access to safeguards and be cost-effective.

I welcome the publication of the Law Commission's report, which we are carefully considering and thank them for their careful and considered work. We will now engage with a range of stakeholders to understand in greater detail how these changes can be implemented. We will also consider what enabling actions need to be taken to support the Mental Capacity Act ethos of greater empowerment and care centred around people, their wishes and aspirations.

This Government are committed to take action to reform mental health and to transforming care for people with conditions such as dementia, learning difficulties and autism. Action to reform the current deprivation of liberty safeguards regime is an important contribution towards achieving these aims including effectively protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

The Government will provide their final response on the Law Commission report to the House in spring 2018.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-10-30/HCWS202/>.

[HCWS202]

HOME DEPARTMENT

National DNA Database Ethics Group

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): My noble Friend Baroness Williams of Trafford has today made the following written ministerial statement:

I am pleased to announce the publication today of the 9th annual report of the National DNA Database Ethics Group. The Group was established on 25 July 2007 to provide Ministers with independent ethical advice on the operation and practice of the National DNA Database.

I am grateful to the Ethics Group for their strategic advice concerning the use of biometric identifiers and for their continued oversight of the work of the Forensic Information Database Strategy Board, which contributes to ensuring that robust procedures are in place to minimise DNA contamination and remove systematic errors in the forensic use of DNA.

The Ethics Group's annual report can be viewed on the website of the National DNA Database Ethics Group and I am arranging for a copy to be placed in the Library of both Houses.

I am grateful to the Ethics Group for their strategic advice concerning the use of biometric identifiers and for their continued oversight of the work of the Forensic Information Database Strategy Board, which contributes to ensuring that robust procedures are in place to minimise DNA contamination and remove systematic errors in the forensic use of DNA.

The Ethics Group's annual report can be viewed on the website of the National DNA Database Ethics Group and I am arranging for a copy to be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS203]

JUSTICE

Justice Update

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): I have today laid before Parliament, and shared with the Chair of the Justice Select Committee, the Government's post-legislative memorandum for the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) 2012, introduced by the coalition Government. This fulfils the commitment made by former Justice Minister Sir Oliver Heald before this House earlier this year.

My predecessors also committed to publish a post-implementation review of the legal aid changes made by the Act during its passage through Parliament. I have asked my officials to commence this review.

Our legal aid system is a fundamental pillar of access to justice, accounting for more than a fifth of the Ministry of Justice's budget. The reforms within the Act were founded on delivering better value for money for taxpayers by reducing the cost of the scheme and discouraging unnecessary and adversarial litigation, while ensuring that legal aid continues to be available for the highest priority cases, for example where life or liberty is at stake, where someone faces the loss of their home, in domestic violence cases, or where their children may be taken into care.

The Government have previously committed to review a number of areas, including:

the changes made to the scope of legal aid for family, civil and criminal cases, and the introduction of the Exceptional Case Funding scheme;

the changes made to fees for various types of legal aid work;

the procedural changes the Act made, including the introduction of the mandatory telephone gateway and the introduction of evidence requirements for victims of domestic violence and child abuse;

changes to the rules on financial eligibility, including the application of the capital eligibility test to all legal aid applicants, increasing income contributions for those eligible to contribute, and capping the subject matter of dispute disregard;
 changes to the application of the merits test;
 the abolition of the Legal Services Commission and its replacement with the Legal Aid Agency.

This review of part 1 of the Act will be led by officials in my Department. I am keen that we listen to views on these changes from all interested parties, and I will shortly be inviting individuals and organisations to join consultative panels and contribute to this review work.

The review will conclude before the start of the summer recess 2018.

My predecessors also committed to a post-implementation review of the civil litigation funding and costs reforms in part 2 of the Act. We are considering how to carry out that review, but we hope to conclude it to the same timetable.

[HCWS204]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 23 October 2017 in Luxembourg. Margot James, Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Corporate Responsibility at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, represented the UK.

The Council agreed the draft interinstitutional proclamation on the European pillar of social rights and gave permission for the presidency to sign on Council's behalf. It is expected that this will now be officially signed at the Gothenburg social summit on 17 November.

The Council agreed a general approach on the posting of workers directive. Discussion during Council focused on the duration of postings and application to the transport sector. The UK argued for a balanced text which protected workers without disproportionate burdens on business but ultimately, along with Ireland and Croatia, abstained from the vote.

The Council also agreed a partial general approach on two chapters (equal treatment and applicable legislation) revising EU Social Security Co-ordination Regulation 883/2004. The UK voted in support.

Ministers discussed "improving co-operation in cross-border labour mobility to fight fraud and abuse" over lunch.

The Council endorsed the key employment and social challenges, based on the key messages from the Employment and Social Protection Committees, without comment.

Under any other business, the presidency and Commission provided information on the tripartite social summit. The presidency provided information on the Tallinn digital summit and the Commission provided information on the new skills agenda for Europe. The European Institute for Gender Equality gave a presentation on the 2017 gender equality index.

[HCWS201]

Petition

Monday 30 October 2017

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Parking around Linton Avenue

The petition of residents of Solihull,

Declares that there is a problem with parking around Linton Avenue and that it is necessary for parking restrictions to be put in place.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council provide restricted parking between 09:00-11:00 to 14:00-15:00 on Monday to Friday around Linton Avenue.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented on 25 October 2017, by Julian Knight.]

[P002069]

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 30 October 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ..	555	COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—	
Affordable Homes	567	<i>continued</i>	
Assessment of Housing Need	565	Landlords and Letting Agents	556
Children in Temporary Accommodation	559	Mayors: Economic Growth	561
Coastal Communities: Economic Growth	555	Midlands Engine	566
Council Tax: Non-payment	563	Residential Tower Block Safety	557
Family Hubs	564	Topical Questions	570
Homes: Construction	568	Women on Local Councils	570

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 30 October 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH	13WS	JUSTICE	14WS
Law Commission Report: Mental Capacity	13WS	Justice Update	14WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	14WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	15WS
National DNA Database Ethics Group	14WS	Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council	15WS

PETITION

Monday 30 October 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>
PRESENTED PETITION	3P
Parking around Linton Avenue	3P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Monday 6 November 2017**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Monday 30 October 2017

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 555] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Sexual Harassment in Parliament [Col. 579]
Answer to urgent question—(Andrea Leadsom)

Independent Review: Deaths in Police Custody [Col. 599]
Statement—(Mr Hurd)

Balfour Declaration [Col. 608]
Statement—(Boris Johnson)

Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill [Lords] [Col. 623]
*Motion for Second Reading—(Sir Michael Fallon)—agreed to
Read a Second time*

Post Office Services: Burncross [Col. 675]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Proportional Representation [Col. 237WH]
General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 13WS]

Petition [Col. 3P]
Presented Petition

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
