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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 1 November 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

HILLSBOROUGH

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Report, entitled 'The patronising disposition of unaccountable power'—A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated, dated 1 November 2017.—(*Guto Bebb.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Swansea Main Line: Electrification

1. **Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the Welsh economy of the Government's decision not to electrify the main line to Swansea. [901487]

4. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the Welsh economy of the Government's decision not to electrify the main line to Swansea. [901490]

15. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the Welsh economy of the Government's decision not to electrify the main line to Swansea. [901501]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Before I respond to questions, I would like to convey the thoughts and prayers of the whole House to the families and community in Llangammarch Wells following the tragic fire earlier this week.

The Government are delivering the biggest rail investment programme for more than a century. The Great Western modernisation programme includes £5.7 billion of investment in new trains. It will cut journey times from south Wales to London by 15 minutes, which will make south Wales more attractive to investors, and bring significant benefits to our economy and passengers alike.

Laura Smith: May I associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments? I offer my deepest condolences.

The Government's decision not to go ahead with electrifying the main line to Swansea has been a bitter blow to south Wales. My constituency is less than 20 miles from north Wales, and many of my constituents have written to ask me what steps the Government are taking to electrify the north Wales coast line. Can the Secretary of State provide any clarification today?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady will be well aware that advances in bimodal technology mean that electrification between Cardiff and Swansea would not save passengers any significant journey time. She makes an interesting point about north Wales, and I hope that she is aware of the £43 million of signalling improvement that has taken place in north Wales to improve speed and reliability along the line. In addition, the Crewe hub offers great potential for bringing the benefits of HS2, a major UK rail investment programme, to north Wales as well as to the north of England.

Liz Twist: What will the Secretary of State be doing to create a more competitive and cost-effective environment for rail infrastructure in Wales?

Alun Cairns: A major multibillion investment programme is benefiting rail passengers in Wales. Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee asked us to reassess the electrification programme on a stage-by-stage basis, and that was what we did. We are therefore using the latest advances in modern technology to ensure that passengers in Swansea and west Wales get the benefits of the most modern trains on the network immediately, rather than perhaps waiting for the traditional technology of electric-only trains.

Alex Norris: On 16 May, the Transport Secretary said that electrification was definitely happening and that he wanted to see an end to "smelly diesel trains", so there was widespread disappointment on 20 July when electrification was cancelled between Cardiff and Swansea, and also for the midland main line, with Ministers citing the fact that new technology made electrification unnecessary. Can the Secretary of State satisfy the House that this is not another cynical broken election promise by outlining what technological breakthrough was made after the ballot boxes closed?

Alun Cairns: One of the strong advocates for electrification was Professor Mark Barry, but he said that the bimodal fleet neutralised the case. The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about diesel trains because these bimodal trains will use the latest and most environmentally friendly diesel generators. The latest trains can even exceed the maximum speed that could be achieved between Cardiff and Swansea. Of course they will stick to the maximum speed along that route, but that demonstrates their flexibility.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The benefits of the Crewe hub station rely on a business case of five trains an hour to deliver improvements to not only to my constituents in Eddisbury, but north Wales. What is the Secretary of State doing to support that case?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and I meet regularly to discuss the whole range of rail infrastructure programmes in Wales. The integrated way in which the network works via the Crewe hub offers potential not only to my hon. Friend's constituency, but to north Wales, because bringing the benefits of high-speed rail to Crewe will benefit north Wales as well.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee when it came up with its cross-party recommendations in February, so I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State cite them. Does he agree

that any future electrification needs to be based on a robust assessment? It is worth bearing in mind that the bimodal trains that he proposes for Swansea are exactly what most other parts of the Great Western network, including Plymouth and Torbay, will be getting anyway.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes a logical, reasonable and helpful point in recognising that by using the latest technology we are offering more capacity and much faster trains, which is a major benefit to Swansea and to west Wales. Criticising the decision to use the latest technology on the line to Swansea does nothing more than undermine investment in the city.

12. [901498] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Rail electrification from London to Cardiff will save 15 minutes of journey time, but the new Swansea metro proposal would save half an hour between Cardiff and Swansea. What is more, the city deal will create 10,000 jobs and more passenger demand. Will the Secretary of State look again at the business case for an electrified metro between Swansea and Cardiff that will provide an environmentally friendly and stronger future, and offset the negative impacts of HS2 on investment in south Wales?

Alun Cairns: Clearly the Swansea metro is a different proposal, but I am keen to meet Professor Mark Barry to discuss its potential. It is an interesting addition to a wide-ranging debate in which there are also proposals to improve the frequency of trains to Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. At the moment, passengers from west Wales often drive to Port Talbot to get on the train, but I think that we can come up with much more imaginative solutions. The metro is an additional solution to consider as part of that debate.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that in addition to deep concerns about the failure to electrify beyond Cardiff, there is a worry that Great Western Railway will apparently not offer a bilingual service on main line trains operating into Wales. Has he had a discussion with GWR about that? Other rail companies, such as Arriva, have been offering a bilingual service even on trains that go between Wales and England.

Alun Cairns: I have noted the public statements that have been made by the Welsh Government and the comments that the hon. Gentleman has made, and I suggest that he raises the matter with First Great Western. Arriva is also making a change. Clearly this is a matter for the operators, but I think that the proposal is positive.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I associate myself and the Opposition with the condolences paid by the Secretary of State to those affected by the fire—our thoughts are with them.

Does the Secretary of State for Wales agree with Andrew R. T. Davies, the leader of the Welsh Conservative party, who said this week that electrification of the line to Swansea would be beneficial to Wales and should still take place? He said that he had not “given up the ghost of fighting that campaign”, and I assure the Secretary of State that neither have Labour Members.

Alun Cairns: I hope that the hon. Lady recognises that we are using the latest technology so that we have more capacity and faster trains going to Swansea. She needs to consider the fact that the original plans involved 15-minute savings between Swansea and Paddington, but the bimodal trains will still bring about 15-minute savings. We are bringing in the most modern technology and the most modern bimodal trains on the network now, rather than waiting another couple of years and causing Swansea additional disruption.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): With reports that HS2 will cost more than £100 billion, alongside £15 billion for HS3 and another £30 billion for Crossrail 2, it is an absolute scandal that the British Government have broken their promise to electrify the main line to Swansea, despite the fact that that would cost only £400 million. Given the priorities of the British Government, is it not the case that the only way to ensure that Wales gets its fair share of rail investment is to devolve full responsibility for rail infrastructure?

Alun Cairns: I am surprised by the hon. Gentleman's tone because the bimodal trains will improve connectivity to his constituency and west Wales. His constituents would not have benefited from the previous proposal for electric-only trains to Swansea. Of course, the network in Wales is part of the UK network, and when he compares spending, he needs to think logically. For example, he has been supportive of the Halton curve, which is in England but will bring major benefits to the network between north Wales and Liverpool.

Heathrow Expansion

2. **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential benefits for Wales of the proposed expansion of Heathrow airport. [901488]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of different UK investment projects, including the proposed expansion of Heathrow airport. Estimates suggest that Heathrow's proposed expansion would require 370,000 tonnes of UK steel, securing 700 British steel jobs, which would be welcome news for communities such as Port Talbot.

Paul Masterton: In addition to the benefits to Wales from construction related to the expansion of Heathrow, does my hon. Friend agree that there are opportunities for Welsh industry to support the ongoing operation of Heathrow when the expansion is complete, as many of my constituents in East Ren do for nearby Glasgow airport?

Guto Bebb: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The development of Heathrow offers significant opportunities for Wales and for the supply chain in Wales. That is why the Wales Office, working with the Welsh Government, have been involved in ensuring that we have roundtable discussions and “meet the buyer” events with Heathrow in Wales—south Wales and north Wales—so that Welsh companies will be in a position to benefit from investment in Heathrow.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Hub airports are more important than ever, so will the Minister join me in congratulating the Welsh Government on purchasing Cardiff airport, which has led to a great increase in passenger numbers? Should not the Tory party back that as well?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. The Wales Office is very proud of its involvement in the Qatar decision to have direct flights from Cardiff airport. The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of hub airports, and a recent meeting I had with Heathrow highlighted the possibility of direct flights from Liverpool to Heathrow, which would be a significant advantage for businesses in north Wales.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I am delighted that my hon. Friend agrees about the importance of hub airports to the regions. Will he keep up pressure on his colleagues to give slots to the distant regions in the north and in Wales?

Guto Bebb: Again, I agree with my hon. Friend. The importance of hub airports is understood by businesses across the United Kingdom. It is therefore imperative to have regular flights into Heathrow, which is one of the reasons why we need the expansion of Heathrow. That expansion will be good not only for the United Kingdom, but for regional economies, as connectivity into a major hub airport such as Heathrow will be beneficial to our local economies.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Trade unions, the CBI and local authorities all support the potential £6.2 billion of investment that Heathrow expansion will bring, but that depends on two things: the extension of HS2 to the Crewe hub; and a final decision on Heathrow. When are they both going to happen?

Guto Bebb: The right hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. I hope that the decision on Heathrow will be forthcoming very soon. I agree entirely with him about the Crewe hub. A development in Crewe that links HS2 services into the north Wales main line represents a real opportunity for north Wales. We in the Wales Office have been involved in that with our colleagues in the Department for Transport.

Infrastructure Investment

3. **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on infrastructure investment in Wales. [901489]

6. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on infrastructure investment in Wales. [901492]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): I hold regular discussions with Government Departments and the Welsh Government about infrastructure investment in Wales. We have invested £212 million in the new HMP Berwyn and committed more than £600 million to city deals in Cardiff and Swansea. Just last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was in Swansea

to announce our £800,000 investment in important innovative infrastructure—the UK's first energy-positive office, which is capable of generating more energy than it uses.

Emma Hardy: Lasting economic success will come only from a long-term approach to major economic decisions, which is why it is so great that the Welsh Labour Government are supporting strategic investment in infrastructure. A Labour Government will ensure that they work with rather than against the devolved Governments. Is that the same for the Conservatives and, if so, will the Minister assure the House that Wales will get its full Barnett consequential funding from HS2?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point, but I regret to say that it probably shows that she does not really understand the relationship between the Wales Office and the Welsh Government. It is fair to say that infrastructure investment in Wales does depend on a partnership approach, which is why the growth deals secured for Swansea and Cardiff have been crucial examples of co-operation, and why I am working so closely with the Economy Minister to develop a north Wales growth deal.

Gerald Jones: Like many constituencies across Wales, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney has seen huge benefits from European structural funds, but there is great uncertainty about the future. Will the Minister assure the House that the level of financial benefits that we currently enjoy from structural funds will be replicated when we leave the European Union?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about structural funds, but the reality is that structural funds in Wales did not make the difference that we anticipated. This Government are committed to a shared prosperity fund for the entire United Kingdom. Communities such as Merthyr Tydfil want good long-term jobs—the type of jobs I saw when I visited General Dynamics, which is recruiting apprentices and creating quality jobs in Merthyr Tydfil. That is exactly what the south Wales economy needs.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The excellent History of Parliament website yesterday tweeted a link to a 1606 Bill to build a new bridge at Chepstow. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a pity that those involved did not add an amendment calling for a M4 relief road, because by now the Welsh Assembly Government might have got their act together and actually built one?

Guto Bebb: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. It is indeed disappointing that we are still waiting for a relief road for Newport. I understand that the Welsh Government are going for another consultation, but it is imperative for the sake of the economy of south Wales and the south Wales valleys that we see action on a relief road for Newport sooner rather than later.

11. [901497] **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): I was pleased that the Minister mentioned the north Wales growth bid. It is now 10 years since the step change in services between Chester and Shrewsbury that was caused by the introduction of an hourly service. Does he agree with everyone else in north Wales that it is high time that that step change was repeated through the reintroduction of the north Wales growth bid and better transport services across the border?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is a key supporter of better transport links in north Wales, and his work on Growth Track 360 is appreciated by the Department. The north Wales growth deal is a key priority for the Wales Office. Cross-border connectivity is crucial to that growth deal, and I agree that we need to improve transport links, whether road or rail, as part of the development of the north Wales growth deal.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I would like to add my condolences, and those of Labour Members, to all those affected by the heartbreaking tragedy at Llangammarch.

Wales is one of many areas in Europe that have received EU structural funds to help to improve their infrastructure. After 2020, will Wales receive the same funding as those comparator regions of Europe or will there be a reduction in funding to Wales by this Conservative Government?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman raises the question of EU structural funds as if they were a success story in the Welsh context. They were actually a failure: £4 billion of investment, yet our comparative economic performance fell. This Government are committed to the UK shared prosperity fund, which will work for the benefit of the Welsh economy, rather than being wasted in the way in which the Welsh Government wasted our structural funds over the past 18 years.

Chris Ruane: I am afraid that the Minister did not answer my question, so I will come back to it. There is a lack of clarity about what will happen in Wales after 2020. I thank the Secretary of State for meeting me to discuss these issues, but will he and the Minister convene a meeting of the Wales team, the shadow Wales team and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to sort these issues out so that there is absolute clarity for the people of Wales?

Guto Bebb: The offer of a meeting is something I would always be happy to accept, but it has to be at the right time. In the context of structural funding, the key thing is that, for example, a strategic approach across north Wales was not possible because four counties were receiving European structural funds and two were not. We now have an opportunity for a strategic approach across north Wales, which will be supported by a UK shared prosperity fund in due course.

Leaving the EU: Inward Investment

5. **Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on inward investment in Wales. [901491]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Wales remains a great place to invest. As we leave the EU, we will continue to support existing investment relationships and work to attract new projects. I am working closely with the Department for International Trade to deliver this.

Chris Evans: The Secretary of State will know that the Welsh Labour Government have been very successful in attracting businesses such as TVR, Aston Martin and General Dynamics. All that foreign investment

could be at risk if there is a no-deal Brexit. What is he specifically doing to reassure the business community that Wales is still open for business?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that Wales is a great place to invest. Last year, 85 foreign direct investment projects came to Wales, 95% of which were supported and facilitated by the Department for International Trade. I have been to Qatar and Japan to talk to investors, and I am encouraged by their optimism and the flexibility that the Welsh economy can bring.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will happily take the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) on this Question.

7. [901493] **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reassure us that the two important markets that he visited recently—Japan and Qatar—are committed to their current international business links with Wales? What plans do they have to expand that involvement?

Alun Cairns: As I mentioned to the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), I am encouraged by their interest and commitment. Japanese companies, by tradition, make long-term investments. The first was in Bridgend—Sony was one of the first—in 1973, and they have similarly committed that they want to remain with us for the long term to come. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are very many private conversations taking place, but I think it is fair to the Secretary of State if we are able to enjoy the product of his lucubrations. He spent a lot of time preparing for this session; it seems a very great sadness if his observations cannot be properly heard. Liz Saville Roberts.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): *Diolch yn fawr.* A report earlier this year found that foreign direct investment to Wales declined by 44% during the EU referendum year, with what are described as “geographically peripheral” regions lagging even further behind. What will it take for the Secretary of State to admit that the only way to protect jobs and wages is to maintain economic links with the EU by staying in the single market and customs union permanently?

Alun Cairns: As I mentioned, last year was another successful year: 85 projects came to Wales, creating 2,500 new jobs. I would also point to the latest export data: exports to the EU were increased by 15%, but exports outside the European Union increased by 20%. That demonstrates the great flexibility of businesses in Wales, keen to explore the new opportunities that exiting the European Union brings.

Liz Saville Roberts: For a meaningful vote on the final deal to be exactly that—meaningful—we must not allow Parliament to be threatened with the prospect of condemning the UK to a no-deal scenario, should that final deal prove unsatisfactory. Would it not be more prudently conservative and economically wise of the Government to explore any legal flexibilities surrounding article 50, to appease businesses across Wales and avoid a damaging cliff edge?

Alun Cairns: I hope the hon. Lady will take great reassurance from the fact that we are doing everything we can to get a good deal for the whole United Kingdom as we leave the European Union. Of course, it is also prudent—that is the word that she used—to prepare for all outcomes, and we have to prepare for every potential eventuality because we need to preserve the integrity of the UK market, a relationship with Europe and the new opportunities, as we leave the EU, with markets around the world.

10. [901496] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State encourage the Department for International Trade to give a high priority to Wales as part of the Government's efforts to bring prosperity to every corner of the kingdom?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question. I think the Department for International Trade is already doing that, but there is always more that we can do. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade and I met the First Minister on Friday to consider the trade White Paper, as well as the new opportunities, and the establishment of the UK Board of Trade, which includes strong representation from Wales, is an important part of that work.

Leaving the EU

8. **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Welsh business groups, universities and the Farmers Union of Wales on the effect of the UK leaving the EU. [901494]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): Since the referendum, the Secretary of State and I have discussed the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union in meetings with stakeholders across Wales. We have met businesses, universities and farming unions, among others, and the next meeting, the Secretary of State's expert panel on EU exit, will take place on Monday.

Chris Davies: I thank the Minister for his answer, but does my hon. Friend agree that this needs to go even further as negotiations with the EU continue? Will he encourage other Cabinet Ministers to come to Wales to hear the views of Welsh business, Welsh farmers and Welsh universities first hand?

Guto Bebb: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a champion for the agricultural industry, which is no surprise in view of the constituency he represents. I can assure him that the discussions with the farming unions will intensify, and I am very pleased to announce that the Secretary of State for International Trade will be in Wales this week.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab) *rose—[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman discovers anew his popularity on a daily basis.

Albert Owen: I am very pleased that the Prime Minister is here to listen to my question, because on a number of occasions I have asked her about the importance of the port of Holyhead in my constituency to Irish trade. Last week, a company from Ireland suggested a new route to Holland and Belgium, circumnavigating Britain.

Stakeholders in my constituency are concerned about that. The Irish Government are concerned about that; so are the Welsh Government. When will the UK Government wake up?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the port of Holyhead and the concern is shared by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, who visited the port with him. These concerns have been heard in the Wales Office; we have met stakeholders and Irish businesses. I can assure him that our intention is to ensure a frictionless border in Holyhead, in the same way as in Ireland.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): EU students contribute upwards of £130 million to the Welsh economy, and thousands of academic staff from across Europe have been vital to the success of Welsh institutions. Given that we already know of an 8% decline in applications from EU students to Welsh universities, what discussions has the Minister had with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that visa arrangements do not further harm our higher education sector?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the universities sector in Wales. I recently visited Bangor University and Aberystwyth University and discussed these matters. I can assure him that the Wales Office is in constant discussions with other Departments on the issues raised by the sector, including EU visas.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I welcome the fact that the UK and devolved Administrations have agreed the principles on which the common frameworks will be constructed, which will be of particular interest to business groups, universities and the National Farmers Union of Wales. I encourage the Minister to continue these exchanges with the devolved Administrations, so that we can reach agreement on how the common frameworks should be established.

Mr Speaker: There is no obligation for the Minister's reply to exceed a sentence.

Guto Bebb: I agree with my right hon. Friend on how important it is to continue having deep engagements with farming unions and the universities sector in Wales.

Leaving the EU: Balance of Powers

9. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If he will hold discussions with the National Assembly of Wales on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the balance of powers held between the UK Government and the Welsh Government. [901495]

13. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): If he will hold discussions with the National Assembly of Wales on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the balance of powers held between the UK Government and the Welsh Government. [901499]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I hold regular discussions with the First Minister and Assembly Members, as well as with local authorities, industry representatives and third sector organisations, on matters relating to the UK leaving the EU.

Martyn Day: Following the last Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations meeting of Welsh, Scottish and UK Governments, an agreed set of principles on areas where EU law currently intersects with that of devolved competence was published. Will the Secretary of State please update the House on what tangible actions the UK Government have taken to institute those principles?

Alun Cairns: There are 64 areas of law that intersect with the Welsh Government, and I think that there are 111 that relate to Scotland. There is an awful lot of technical work going on between officials in the Scottish and Welsh Governments and the UK Administration. There are many functions beneath that, but we are working positively to establish which of them can be devolved as quickly as possible when powers are returned from the European Union to the UK.

Patrick Grady: Will the right hon. Gentleman, like the Secretary of State for Scotland, promise the Welsh Assembly a powers bonanza following Brexit, and if so, unlike the Secretary of State for Scotland, can he name one power that will actually be devolved?

Alun Cairns: I have mentioned that officials are working on 64 areas, and we want to move forward so that the powers of the Scottish and Welsh Governments will be extended, but we also need to maintain the integrity of the UK market. We need to remember that everything we are doing needs to suit business, because we want business in Scotland to continue to export and work throughout the UK, but we also want business in Wales to have the opportunity perhaps to take some of the Scottish market.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901537] **Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 1 November.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I know that Members across the House will have been appalled by last night's cowardly terrorist attack in New York. Our thoughts are with all those affected, and we stand united with the people of New York.

Members on both sides of the House have been deeply concerned about allegations of harassment and mistreatment here in Westminster. This demands a response, which is why my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has been meeting with her counterparts, and we are hopeful that all sides can work together quickly to resolve this. I have written to all party leaders to invite them to a meeting early next week so that we can discuss a common, transparent and independent grievance procedure for all those working in Parliament. We have a duty to ensure that everyone coming here to contribute to public life is treated with respect.

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

Mr Skinner: Is the Prime Minister aware that some very powerful research has been done on the question of High Speed 2? It shows that for the first 140 miles, in the leafy suburbs of the south, nearly 30% of the line

will be in tunnels to avoid knocking down houses, yet now we are told that the figure is only 2% for the whole of the north. Why? It is because HS2 says, "It is too costly; knock the houses down." Will she arrange for a meeting with people from my area, to avoid another 30 houses being knocked down in Newton, which is part of Bolsover? Is it not high time that this Government stopped treating our people like second-class citizens?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the Department for Transport will be happy to look into the question the hon. Gentleman has raised, but of course the reason why we are doing HS2 is that it is important to increase the capacity of the railway lines going through to the north. This will be a very important contribution to the United Kingdom economy, and I assure him that if he looks at everything this Government have done, with the northern powerhouse, the midlands engine and the significant investment in infrastructure across all parts of the country, he will see that this is a Government who want to ensure that this is a country that works for everyone.

Q2. [901538] **Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in adding that my thoughts, along with Wealden's, are with New Yorkers. The shocking scenes in New York will have brought back awful memories of terrorist attacks here, and, as we degrade and destroy Daesh at its base, it will export its death cult ideology. Will my right hon. Friend urge our international partners to join with us in delivering the recent United Nations resolution to investigate and prosecute Daesh terrorists, so that we can hold them to account for their vile crimes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and it is important that we ensure that we have a complete response to this issue of the threat of terrorism. That involves dealing with the problem at source, and it also involves dealing with terrorism wherever it occurs. But our message is very clear: our values will prevail and the terrorists will not win. However, as we do this, we need to ensure that, as my hon. Friend has said, we work with international partners. We want to develop safe spaces in Syria and Iraq as they re-emerge from this terrorist threat that has been on their streets, but that has also, obviously, affected us here and others elsewhere across the world. Crucially, we have done a lot of work in helping those in situ to gain evidence that can be used to ensure that anybody who is involved in the horrors of the attacks that we see can be properly brought to justice.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I put on record that I am happy to meet with the Prime Minister and all party leaders to discuss the sex harassment allegations that the right hon. Lady rightly referred to. We need better protections for all in this House, and the House must involve workplace trade unions in that, but it is also incumbent on all parties to have robust procedures in place to protect and support victims of sexual abuse and harassment.

I also join the Prime Minister in sending our solidarity to the people of New York and their mayor Bill de Blasio following yesterday's appalling terrorist attack.

I hope the whole House will join me in paying tribute to two former Labour colleagues who, sadly, passed away this week: Candy Atherton, the former Member

for Falmouth and Camborne, and Frank Doran, former Member for Aberdeen North. Both did enormous good work, at opposite ends of the UK, to diligently represent their communities and constituencies. They will be sadly missed by us all, particularly in the Labour party, which they served so well for their entire lives.

In 2010, the Labour Government intervened through Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to shut down an Isle of Man scheme used to import yachts into the European Union and thus avoid tax. A similar scheme has recently been exposed relating to the import of business jets into the Isle of Man, so can the Prime Minister assure the House that HMRC will investigate these new allegations diligently?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman referred to a number of points in his question, and I will address them all.

On the first point, the right hon. Gentleman is right that it is absolutely essential that political parties have processes to deal with allegations of misconduct. We also have the ministerial code, and proper investigations must take place against it where that is appropriate. But I believe that it is also crucial for everybody working in this Parliament—be they working for a Member of Parliament or the House authorities, or a journalist working in this Parliament—that there are proper processes in this Parliament for people to be able to report misconduct and for that to be dealt with. That is very important and I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for saying he will meet with me, and I hope with other party leaders, to look at this issue; I see that the leader of the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), is nodding.

I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Frank Doran and Candy Atherton. Frank Doran was first elected in 1987 and served two separate terms as the MP for Aberdeen. He chaired the Administration Committee for five years and was a tireless campaigner for safety in the oil and gas industry. I am sure that everybody will recall the commitment with which he served in this House, and join me in offering condolences to his family and friends. Candy Atherton was first elected in 1997, when I was first elected. She served for eight years as a Member of Parliament and was a strong campaigner for women's rights and disability issues. She continued to champion those causes on Cornwall Council after she had left this House. Once again, I am sure that Members across the House will join me in offering condolences to her family and friends.

The right hon. Gentleman also talked about tax avoidance. I can assure him that, when cases are referred to HMRC in relation to tax avoidance, it takes them seriously and looks into them seriously. We have taken action collectively as a Government over the last few years since 2010, when we first came in, and we have secured almost £160 billion in additional compliance revenues since 2010 through a number of measures that we have taken to ensure that we clamp down on tax evasion and avoidance.

Jeremy Corbyn: There are 957 business jets in the Isle of Man, and that seems a bit excessive for any island, anywhere. I hope that that will be investigated and that due tax is collected from those people who are trying to avoid it. Estimates of the scale of tax dodging range from £34 billion, which is around the size of our schools

budget, to £119 billion, which is the size of the NHS budget. The Isle of Man VAT avoidance allegations are part of a wider leak from a Bermuda-based law firm said to be on a similar scale to the Panama papers. Will the Prime Minister commit HMRC to fully investigate all evidence of UK tax avoidance and evasion from this leak, and prosecute where feasible?

The Prime Minister: I have given the right hon. Gentleman an assurance in my first answer that HMRC does take these issues very seriously, does investigate and does take action, and that, where appropriate, tax loopholes are closed. What is important is to look at the record, and I have mentioned the additional £160 billion of compliance revenues since 2010. We have announced or implemented more than 75 measures since 2010 to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. The right hon. Gentleman referred to one that had been done by the Labour Government, and we have continued to act on this issue. We will be raising billions of pounds more as a result of that. I want to reassure him: I think most people would recognise that HMRC actually wants to collect tax. That is its job, and it looks to make sure that it can do so as much as possible.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, it is rather strange then that Britain has reportedly blocked a French-led proposal that would have placed Bermuda on the European Union tax haven blacklist. Perhaps the Prime Minister could explain why that would be the case. The Panama papers exposed many wealthy individuals and big businesses who avoided tax through offshore trusts. Labour backs any necessary changes to toughen our laws against aggressive tax avoidance. Just yesterday, we tried to strengthen legislation on the beneficial ownership of trusts, through amendments that we tabled to the Finance Bill. Why did the Government vote against them?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the British overseas territories. In fact, this Government have taken action in relation to those territories—action that was not taken by the previous Labour Government. If he is saying to me that the whole question of tax evasion needs constantly to be looked at and that the Government need to be prepared to act, my answer is, yes, we are and we will.

Jeremy Corbyn: There is a strange pattern here. In 2015 alone, Conservative Members of the European Parliament voted against five reports that would introduce methods of fighting tax avoidance and evasion, and HMRC admitted last week that multinational companies avoided paying £5.8 billion in taxes in 2016. Despite that, HMRC is currently cutting another 8,000 staff. So will the Prime Minister assure the House that, instead of more cuts, HMRC will get more resources in the upcoming Budget to tackle the scourge of aggressive tax avoidance and evasion?

The Prime Minister: I have reassured the right hon. Gentleman that HMRC is acting, has been acting since this Conservative party came into government in 2010, and will continue to act. In asking these questions, the right hon. Gentleman might want to reflect on why, before the Dissolution of Parliament earlier this year,

the Labour party refused to support anti-tax avoidance and evasion measures brought forward by this Government. His party stopped them.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about why Conservative MPs opposed what Labour was proposing yesterday. Last month's European Parliament committee of inquiry, set up in the wake of the Panama papers scandal, claimed that the UK is obstructing the fight against tax dodging and money laundering. Just last week, the EU's Competition Commissioner announced an inquiry into UK taxation rules that may have institutionalised tax avoidance by multinational corporations. Is the Prime Minister not concerned that vital revenue to fund schools and hospitals is being lost? Will she change the rules in the Budget?

The Prime Minister: We have taken an extra £160 billion in compliance revenue since 2010. The right hon. Gentleman comments on measures that were proposed this week but, as I said in my previous answer, we would have had more anti-tax evasion measures in place if the Labour party had not blocked them before the last election. This party in government has not just been acting in the UK; we have been working with the Crown dependencies and with the British overseas territories, and we have been leading the world. It was a Conservative Prime Minister who put this on the agenda at the G7 and the G20 for international action against tax avoidance and evasion.

Jeremy Corbyn: If we are leading the world, perhaps the Prime Minister could explain how the amount of income tax paid by the super-rich has fallen from £4.4 billion to £3.5 billion since 2009. Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee said that HMRC's record of getting multi-millionaires to pay their taxes was "dismal" and that the super-rich were getting "help with their tax affairs that is not available to other taxpayers." Our schools' budgets are being cut, more people are waiting longer for treatment—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. We tend to have large doses of this over-excitement every week, but I just give notice that, as usual, I would like to get to the end of the questions on the Order Paper and to facilitate Back-Bench inquiries as well. Members are eating only into their own time; I have all the time in the world.

Jeremy Corbyn: Since Conservative Members get so excited, I must say it again: our schools' budgets are being cut, more people are waiting longer for treatment on the NHS, and more elderly and disabled people are not getting the social care they need. When it comes to paying taxes, does the Prime Minister think it is acceptable that there is one rule for the super-rich and another for the rest of us?

The Prime Minister: The top 1% of earners in this country are paying 28% of the tax burden. That is the highest percentage ever, under any Government. Once again, the right hon. Gentleman is wrong. Over the next two years, £2.5 billion extra is being put into our schools as a result of decisions taken by this Conservative Government.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about spending on schools and hospitals, and I will tell him where the real problem lies. Today we spend nearly £50 billion in

payments on interest to those we have borrowed from as a result of the legacy of the Labour party. That is more than we spend on the NHS pay bill, and it is more than we spend on our core—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister's answer will be heard, as I indicated that the question from the Leader of the Opposition would be heard. Mr Gapes, you are a senior and cerebral denizen of the House. This excessive gesticulation is not good for you, man. Calm yourself.

The Prime Minister: We spend £50 billion every year on debt interest payments to people we have borrowed from. That is more than the NHS pay bill, it is more than our core schools budget and it is more than we spend on defence. That is the result of the economy we were left by the Labour party in government. And what does the Leader of the Opposition want to do? He wants to borrow £500 billion more, which would make the situation worse and would mean even less money for schools and hospitals.

Q3. [901539] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On 22 August 2015, 11 men in my constituency tragically lost their lives in the Shoreham airshow disaster. More than 26 months later, no decision has been taken on criminal charges and the coroner's inquest has been delayed again until November 2018. The families of the victims have just had their application for exceptional case funding rejected by the Legal Aid Agency, and they will likely be the only people at the inquest not to be legally represented. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look at the case again and to meet the families to ensure that they have proper access to justice? This exceptionally tragic case has a much wider public interest for safety at all airshows.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, and I fully understand the concerns of the families. He talks about the timetable for decisions, and the Department for Transport has accepted the air accidents investigation branch's recommendation to commission an independent review. The Department is working with the air accidents investigation branch to determine the exact scope of the review. The Civil Aviation Authority has accepted all the recommendations. Considerable work is going on to learn the lessons from this disaster, and obviously we are also committed to ensuring that, where there is a public disaster, people are able to have proper representation. I will ask the Lord Chancellor to look at the questions raised by my hon. Friend.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the zero tolerance there has to be for bad sexual practices and behaviour? I certainly commit my Members to working with the Government to make sure that we have a system that we can be proud of and that will protect all members of the Houses of Parliament.

I also pass on my condolences to the family and friends of Frank Doran on his untimely and sad death this week.

Can the Prime Minister tell the House how much a working single parent can expect to lose because of the roll-out of universal credit?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for agreeing to work across the House on this important issue. He refers to sexual misconduct, but it is important that any processes that are put in place not only look at sexual misconduct but look at issues such as bullying—that is also important.

The right hon. Gentleman has raised the roll-out of universal credit with me before. As he knows, the reason why we have introduced universal credit is to ensure that people are encouraged into the workplace and that when they are in the workplace they are able to keep more of the money they earn. I believe that that is an important principle. It underpins what we are doing and will continue to do so.

Ian Blackford: The reality is that new research shows that working single parents could lose an average of £1,350 a year because of the cuts to work allowances. Universal credit is fast becoming Theresa May's poll tax. The Prime Minister has a habit of U-turning, so will she U-turn one more time and fix the problems with universal credit?

The Prime Minister: I have underlined the principle that lies behind universal credit, which I believe is a very important one. That is why when we look at the support that is given to people it is not just about the support they receive in financial terms on universal credit; it is also about the support they receive to help them to get into the workplace to ensure that they can actually meet the requirements of getting into the workplace and that when they are in the workplace they can keep more of the money they earn. That is an important principle. We will continue to roll out universal credit, looking carefully at its implementation as we do so, because we are doing this in a careful way, over a period of time. But the important principle is that universal credit is a simpler system that ensures people keep more as they earn more.

Q6. [901542] **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): In Chesham and Amersham, we are acutely aware that infrastructure is vital for economic success, particularly that of other parts of the country. However, we still have areas that do not have access to high-speed broadband, and with the advent of electric vehicles we are going to need to install an extensive charging network. What further action can the Government take to ensure the timely completion of our broadband infrastructure and what they can do to guarantee the rapid roll-out of electric vehicle charging points, so that Buckinghamshire residents and businesses do not just bear the brunt of infrastructure development, but can take advantage of the opportunities offered by modern technology?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we want to ensure that we take the advantages offered by modern technology. That is why these issues have been addressed in our industrial strategy and will continue to be addressed. We recognise that when we talk about infrastructure in this country, increasingly the IT infrastructure—the broadband infrastructure—is part of that; this is not only about the physical road and rail infrastructure. So we are investing £790 million in improving broadband, taking our public

investment to £1.7 billion. We are also, as she says, leading the world in the development of electric cars, and we need to ensure that we have those vehicle charging points. So we have put in place, and are putting in place, grants and policy measures to ensure that we see those charging points so that people can take advantage of those new vehicles.

Q4. [901540] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): If the Prime Minister is serious about building a country that works for everyone, can she tell the House why under-25s are not included in the national living wage and will she address the scandal that is the national minimum wage for apprentices of £3.50 per hour?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we have the national living wage. It was our party, in government, that introduced the national living wage. It has had an important impact on people and, obviously, the national living wage continues to increase.

Q7. [901543] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join in the positive comments this week from the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) who welcomed the development of some family hubs? Will she encourage our excellent Conservative mayors and councils to be champions of these hubs, which can so improve the lives of children, including the most vulnerable children, by strengthening their families?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point. We all recognise the value of stable and strong families, and this is a cause she has championed, not only through her time in this House, but outside it. I am happy to join her in welcoming the development of family hubs, and I will certainly encourage Conservative mayors and councils across the country to be champions of them.

Q5. [901541] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): As the Prime Minister will be fully aware, my great city of Dundee has been repeatedly in the news over the last week: Dundee has launched its European capital of culture bid; it is now the world centre for pharmaceutical innovation; and *The Wall Street Journal*, no less, listed Dundee as one of the top 10 places to visit on earth, making it “Scotland's coolest city”. So wouldn't it be great if the Prime Minister today could finally tell the innovative, creative and cool people of Dundee and the surrounding area what precisely is the UK Government's date for delivering their full and fair share of the Tay cities deal?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid I did not hear the end of the question. The hon. Gentleman stands up and waxes lyrically about his city of Dundee. He will recall that I was asked about Dundee's city of culture bid last week, and I made the point that a number of places throughout the UK might put in bids. On the creative industries, I am pleased to see the development of the V&A in Dundee. The Tay cities deal will be important for Dundee and the whole Tay area, as other city deals in Scotland have been for the areas in which they have been agreed.

Q9. [901545] **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Cheltenham general hospital's A&E is hugely valued

by me and my constituents, and we want to see it preserved and enhanced. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the local NHS managers who are currently formulating the draft sustainability and transformation plan must listen carefully to the voices of my constituents and others in Gloucestershire, and ensure that any proposals truly command local support?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. We are clear that proposals should be developed at a local level by local clinicians, while taking account of and listening to the views of local residents and local constituents on the relevant matters. It is important that local people are heard and know that decisions have been taken in the light of any concerns they have raised. I understand that any proposals for urgent care that are developed by the Gloucestershire STP will be subject to full public consultation in due course.

Q8. [901544] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Today, the Government will publish their first report detailing progress towards the ratification of the Istanbul convention on violence against women, as required by Eilidh Whiteford's private Member's Bill, which was enacted earlier this year. After five years, I hope that today's report signals that we will not have to wait much longer for ratification. Nevertheless, women fleeing from domestic violence do not have the luxury of time, so just as the Prime Minister has vowed to root out the sexual harassment and misogyny in this place, will she commit to long-term, sustainable funding to ensure that all women have somewhere safe to go when fleeing violence?

The Prime Minister: Over the past few years, both when I was Home Secretary and under my right hon. Friend the current Home Secretary, we have taken steps to ring-fence certain domestic violence funding over a period of time so that there can be greater certainty for organisations that work in this area. There is much for us to do, because sadly we still see domestic violence and abuse. One of the other steps we are taking is of course to bring in new legislation on domestic violence, which I hope will clarify the situation. Nevertheless, we need to address this through a wide variety of action.

Q11. [901547] **Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): How we treat our farmed animals is an indication of our civility as a nation. In this country, we have a record of which we can be rightly proud. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about reports that there might be a relaxation of our standards as a result of our leaving the European Union? Will she take this opportunity to reassure me that that is not the case and that, in fact, we will seize the opportunity to improve standards and thereby enhance the reputation of British produce?

The Prime Minister: First, I agree with my hon. Friend that we are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. We want to continue to have a reputation as a country with those high standards, so leaving the European Union is not going to change that. We remain committed to high animal welfare standards. Indeed, as he says, we may have the opportunity to enhance those standards so that we can further demonstrate to people this country's

reputation as a place where they can be safe and secure in the knowledge of the conditions in which their food has been prepared.

Q10. [901546] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware that 4 million children in our country are growing up in poverty, and that that number has risen. Two thirds of those children are from working families. Does she still seriously believe that the introduction of universal credit will bring that number down?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to see that the number of children in absolute poverty has actually come down under this Government, but of course we need to be aware of the impact of decisions that have been made. We are looking carefully at the implementation of universal credit. Let me repeat what I said in response to the question asked by the leader of the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, which is that the point of universal credit is that it is a more straightforward and simpler system, but also it helps people to get into the workplace and ensures that they keep more of the money that they earn. I think that that is important.

Q13. [901550] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): This Government's industrial strategy makes the historic commitment to have a fairer distribution of infrastructure spending across the regions—that is our roads, railways and digital networks. In advance of the White Paper, will my right hon. Friend confirm that commitment and the commitment to a rebalancing of our economy by investing more in the regions, not least in Yorkshire?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend stands up well for his county and constituency on this matter. I am very happy to confirm that we will maintain that commitment in our forthcoming industrial strategy White Paper. We do want to see a fairer distribution of infrastructure spending across the country because we know that infrastructure investment is important to unlocking economic opportunities, economic growth and productivity in our towns, villages and cities. We have backed that with ambitious commitments to increase our spending on infrastructure by 50% over the next four years, but I can assure him that we will be looking at that infrastructure spending across the whole country.

Q12. [901548] **Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her opening words on the horrific revelations this week, but can I say to her that, three years ago, I brought evidence to her in this House that Whips had used information about sexual abuse to demand loyalty from MPs. I brought that information to her in this House and I warned her at the time that, unless real action was taken, we risked repeating those injustices again today. On three occasions, I asked her to act and on three occasions she did not, so can I ask her: in this of all weeks, for the fourth time, will she finally take concrete action to tackle this?

The Prime Minister: I will, of course, look back at the questions that the hon. Lady said that she raised with me in this House. I assume that she raised those with me when I was Home Secretary. I am very clear that the

Whips Office—I hope that this goes for all Whips Offices across the House—should make it clear to people that, where there are any sexual abuse allegations that could be of a criminal nature, people should go to the police. It is not appropriate for those to be dealt with by Whips Offices; they should go to the police. That continues to be the case.

As I say, I will look at the questions that the hon. Lady raised with me, but I am very clear that we will take action against those where there are allegations that we see and the evidence is there that there has been misconduct. I say to her that I hope that we will all send a message from this House today that we want people in this place to be able to feel confident to bring forward cases, and we need to ensure that those cases are dealt with in a way that people can have confidence on both sides that they will be properly investigated. That means I want to see a good process in this Parliament, so that people do not feel that they have to go through a party political process to have their allegations considered.

Q14. [901551] **Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): My constituency of Aldershot is the home of the British Army and of many thousands of servicemen and women who are loyal, resolute and steadfast in their service to the Crown. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree, when her very busy schedule allows, to visit the Aldershot garrison to meet servicemen and women and to thank them for their service?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that we recognise that the men and women of our armed services serve with great distinction and loyalty, and we are all grateful to them for the service that they give to this country. That is why we are committed to maintaining 2% of our GDP being spent on defence. He very kindly invites me to visit his constituency, and I will be very happy to do so if my diary allows.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): A few days ago, the Chancellor told the House that the Government could not afford to borrow £50 billion to invest in housing because of the burden on the next generation. The Communities Secretary says that the Government must borrow £50 billion because of the burden of unaffordable housing on the next generation. Will the Prime Minister adjudicate?

The Prime Minister: There is no need to adjudicate. The Government absolutely agree that it is necessary for us to ensure that we are building more homes across the country. We have already announced policies to enable that to happen. A number of proposals were set out in the housing White Paper. I was very pleased to announce the extra £2 billion for affordable housing at our party conference, and the extra £10 billion for the Help to Buy scheme, which genuinely helps people to get their first foot on the housing ladder. We are seeing, and will continue to see, more houses being built under this Government.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Earlier this week in Llangammarch Wells in my constituency, a horrific farmhouse fire claimed the lives of a father and five young children. This has had a devastating effect not just on the family, but on the tight-knit community

that surrounds them. Will my right hon. Friend join me and this House in sending our sympathies to the bereaved family and to everyone in Llangammarch? Will she also praise the outstanding work of our emergency services, who dealt with this appalling tragedy with true dedication and professionalism?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a very tragic case. I am sure that everybody across the whole House will want to join him in sending condolences to the family and friends of those affected by the fire. This was, indeed, a terrible tragedy. As he said, it is not only the family, but the local community who have been affected. The emergency services did sterling work. I am pleased to commend their bravery and professionalism in dealing with the issue. The Secretary of State for Wales has spoken to the police and they will remain in touch over the coming days. Once again, our emergency services do an amazing job protecting us, as we see in so many instances. They never know when they are going to be called out to such a tragic incident.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given today's news that the Electoral Commission is investigating Arron Banks, the main financial backer of Brexit, and given the significant British connections being uncovered by the American Department of Justice's special counsel Robert Mueller in investigating Russian interference in the US presidential election, will the Prime Minister assure me that the UK Government and all their agencies are co-operating fully with the Mueller investigation or will do so if asked?

The Prime Minister: We take very seriously issues of Russian intervention, or Russian attempts to intervene in electoral processes or the democratic processes of any country, as we would with any other states involved in trying to intervene in elections. We do, of course, work closely with our United States partners. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that, as part of that relationship, we co-operate with them when required.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Last month I was in the Kurdistan region of Iraq—I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—where I saw people's enthusiasm for independence and a fresh dialogue with Baghdad. The subsequent military actions against the peshmerga by Iranian-backed militia and the Iraqi army are wholly unjust and completely unacceptable. Will the Prime Minister accept that the peshmerga and the Kurdistan region, to whom we owe so much both for resisting Daesh when the Iraqi army dumped their weapons and ran and for helping to keep our own streets safe, remain vital to our security? Will she do all she can to encourage a resolution based on full respect for the Iraqi constitution and the democratic will of the Kurdish people?

The Prime Minister: It is right that we are working with our international partners in the region to defeat Daesh together with the global coalition. Daesh is losing territory. The action being taken is having an impact on it; its finances have been hit, its leadership is being killed and its fighters are demoralised. But we do want to see political reconciliation in Iraq and a political settlement to the Syria conflict to deny Daesh safe space and prevent its re-emergence. My hon. Friend

raises a particular point about Iraq and the Kurdistan region. The Government have always been clear that any political process towards independence should be agreed with the Government of Iraq. We want political reconciliation in Iraq and we have been urging all parties to promote calm, to pursue dialogue and to take this issue forward through dialogue.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): An hour ago, the Government published a report by the Right Reverend James Jones, “The Patronising Disposition of Unaccountable Power”, which the Prime Minister commissioned to ensure that the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated. Given what we have heard in this session and given the events surrounding the Grenfell Tower disaster, I worry that the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is already being repeated. Will the Prime Minister commit her Government to supporting both a duty of candour for all public officials and, as the report requires, an end to public bodies spending limitless sums to provide themselves with representation which surpasses that available to families?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the House will appreciate that I have to be careful about what I say in relation to Hillsborough because of ongoing criminal proceedings, but I want to pay tribute to the work of Bishop James Jones throughout: in chairing the independent panel, as my adviser on this issue and with the family forums. He has done an excellent job once again. His report into the experiences of the Hillsborough families, which has been published today, as the hon. Lady says, is important. The Government will need to look very carefully at the, I think, 25 points of learning that come out of it and we will want to do so. I have always been very clear that the experience of the Hillsborough families should not be repeated. That is why we have looked at and are committed to the concept of the public advocate. We want to ensure that people have the support they need and it is important that we learn the lessons of Hillsborough. As she knows, I was involved in making the decision that enabled the Hillsborough families to have legal support on a basis that I felt was fair in relation to the other parties involved in that inquest. I assure her that we will not forget the Hillsborough families, who have been dignified throughout the many years they have been waiting for justice. We will not forget them, we will not forget their experience and we will ensure that we learn from it to improve the experience of others in the future.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I cheekily make a diary suggestion to the Prime Minister? If she could remain in the Chamber for just a few moments after questions, she will hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) introduce the Armed Forces (Statute of Limitations) Bill, which would provide protection to those brave service personnel who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles. Like her, and I am sure the whole House, I want to see the setting up of the Northern Ireland Executive, but does she agree that we cannot do that at the price of pandering to Sinn Féin and allowing a witch hunt for those people who served so bravely for so many years to uphold the rule of law?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure I am going to be able to satisfy my right hon. Friend on the first point he raises, but I can assure him that I am aware of the proposed legislation my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) is bringing forward. We all want to see the Northern Ireland Executive restored. We recognise that the question of legacy issues has been there throughout the discussions in Northern Ireland and continues to be. What I want to ensure is that any investigations that take place in the future take place in a fair and proportionate way. Our soldiers did serve bravely, as my right hon. Friend says, in upholding the rule of law. It is important that we never forget all the people who lost their lives at the hands of the terrorists in Northern Ireland and it is important that any investigations are conducted fairly and proportionately.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Members are exercising their knee muscles and there is no harm in that.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): As the Prime Minister will be aware, self-employed people are not eligible for shared parental leave. This places the burden of childcare on the mum, and denies fathers financial support and bonding time with the child. Has the Prime Minister seen the demands of the March of the Mummies, and can she give us assurances that she is prioritising this very urgent issue?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important issue and I am happy to look at the point that has been made, but I remind her that the reason we have shared parental leave for anybody is because when I was Minister for Women and Equalities I ensured it was introduced.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): In my constituency, one of the big challenges as we leave the European Union is the uncertainty about the seasonal migrant workforce. Angus produces 30% of Scotland’s soft fruit and welcomes over 4,000 seasonal workers every year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need clarity on the new migration framework— for the benefit of these loyal workers, for the prosperity of our British soft fruit industry and to support the overall rural economy of our United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the importance of supporting the rural economy across the whole of the United Kingdom. In relation to the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which she has referred to, obviously we will, as we leave the European Union, be bringing forward new immigration rules, which will enable us to have that control that we have not had in the past for those coming from the European Union. We recognise that we need to do that in the national interest. We need to look at the needs of the labour market, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has commissioned the independent Migration Advisory Committee to look at the needs of the UK labour market and to further inform our work as we bring those new immigration rules in. The issue my hon. Friend has raised is one they will look at.

Armed Forces (Statute of Limitations)

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

12.52 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to create statutory limitations on court proceedings against current and former members of the armed forces for certain alleged offences committed during military operations or similar circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Everyone in this House, and particularly those of us who have served in the armed forces, wants our armed forces always to be seen as the most professional in the world. This means we want them to abide by the strict codes of behaviour we impose on them and, in addition, to abide by the international rules of war.

In the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland and elsewhere, we have asked our armed forces to operate in highly complex war-fighting scenarios. Almost to a man and a woman, they have acquitted themselves in the finest traditions of the three services. The reputation of this country and our armed forces has been enhanced by their professionalism, restraint, compassion and courage.

There is a problem, however. First, there has emerged out of the Iraq conflict an industry in which lawyers—sadly, often dishonest lawyers—have used vast amounts of public money to attempt to bring cases against current and former members of the armed forces. If there was any truth in these cases, that would be one thing, but the abject failure of the allegations to stick shows how vile and corrupted the process became.

The Government were right to close down the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. The organisation was processing over 3,000 cases, which gives an indication of the absurdity of some of those claims. My understanding is that just 20 cases were running at the time of IHAT's demise, and none of those is believed to be viable by prosecutors.

My Bill would bring an end to what has become known as “lawfare”. Never again would dreadful individuals such as Phil Shiner be able to line their pockets, or the pockets of their legal firms, with vast amounts of public funds while pursuing our veterans into old age.

My Bill would set a statute of limitations beyond which it would be impossible to bring a case against any individual about whom an allegation was made regarding actions he or she took while serving on operations. I would argue that 10 years is the right period for which to legislate. I fully accept that there would have to be caveats and exceptions, and my Bill would define what we mean by operations. A decade gives plenty of time to bring forward legitimate cases in which real wrongdoing has occurred, and it is about the timescale after which evidential trails start to run cold. The House should be indebted to the Defence Committee, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and the Sub-Committee that met under the leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), because their work on this issue has informed the Bill.

Later this month in Belfast, a 78-year-old man will face charges including attempted murder. Dennis Hutchings was an exemplary soldier who ended his career as a senior warrant officer. He has a severe heart condition

and only 11% kidney function. The allegations against him relate to an incident in 1974 when a patrol he was leading in Northern Ireland—this was a time of intense terrorist activity—fired on an individual, who was killed. In 1975, he was told that no action would be taken against him or any member of his patrol, and that was confirmed many years later with a similar message from the Director of Public Prosecutions.

So what has changed? No new evidence is being laid before the courts—in fact there is less evidence, as two of the three witnesses are dead—and the firearms, casings and original file have been lost, but the Northern Ireland Director of Public Prosecutions claimed in January that new evidence had come to light. Many fear that we are seeing a form of retributive politics. Extreme nationalist-leaning individuals in the Northern Ireland justice system have decided to reignite such investigations.

The Government have rightly said that there should be no bias in how such investigations are carried out but, unfortunately, there already is a bias. Of the 3,600 deaths in the troubles, 90% were at the hands of terrorists. These were people who went out with the express intention of killing and maiming. The security forces went out with the express intention of saving lives. I spent most of my time in the fields and streets of Northern Ireland—most of my early 20s were spent there—protecting prison officers, reservists and police officers from being assassinated in or near their homes. So please can we end this argument that there is some kind of equivalence between terrorists and the security forces? There is a limit of two years for any former terrorist found guilty after the Good Friday agreement was signed. Many feel that the on-the-run letters, which were part of the Good Friday agreement, effectively give terrorists a statute of limitations.

More than 300,000 people served in Op Banner in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 2007. Those of us who are still alive will testify to the complexity of that operation. Many of us, myself included, witnessed acts of extraordinary restraint and professionalism by young soldiers in the face of extraordinary provocation.

Like most Op Banner veterans, I have been moved by the ability of community leaders and politicians to bury the enmities of the past, and to enter government with those who killed, or ordered the killings of, people they knew. Of course there are ongoing tensions in Northern Ireland, and we all hope these can be ironed out in the coming weeks and months. However, in the main, what Northern Ireland has done in the last few years is so impressive—it is moving on. It is moving on from the horrors of killing and maiming.

Terrorists who would otherwise be in prison walk free under the terms of the Good Friday agreement. The person who slaughtered seven members of my battalion's band while they were playing to tourists in Regent's Park is known to the authorities but is not pursued. So why is Dennis Hutchings being pursued? Why are we now facing the possibility of many more veterans receiving the knock on the door? My Bill would end this nonsense. Op Banner ended 10 years ago, and so would all pursuits of veterans into old age by a flawed and, some would argue, deeply prejudicial judicial system.

If we discuss this with any audience, we get a clear message that unites left and right, old and young, and people who have a detailed knowledge of military matters

[Richard Benyon]

and those who have none. They want to draw a line under the troubles. For them, hounding Dennis Hutchings and others to the ends of their lives is abhorrent.

Those who agree that these prosecutions and investigations are wrong, but disagree that this is the way forward, have to answer some clear and resounding questions. What would they do to end this grotesque charade? Do we just put up with it and hope that no one notices? Can we imagine any other country in the world doing this to its veterans? Do we really want to see people who should be appreciated—even revered—for what they did being taken from their homes, questioned, and prosecuted for actions they took on our behalf many decades ago in one of the most impossible campaigns of modern times? It is time for this House to reflect the mood of the vast majority of people in society.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Richard Benyon, Richard Drax, Emma Little Pengelly, Dr Julian Lewis, Johnny Mercer, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Jim Shannon, Bob Stewart, Leo Docherty, Mr Kevan Jones, Sir Nicholas Soames and James Gray present the Bill.

Richard Benyon accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June 2018 and to be printed (Bill 120).

Opposition Day

[4TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Armed Forces Pay

1.2 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that the pay of Armed Forces personnel has been capped at 1 per cent in 2017-18 and that this represents another below inflation pay settlement; further notes that the size of the Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy and Royal Marines is below stated targets; notes that dissatisfaction with pay has been identified by service personnel as a reason for leaving their respective force; and calls on the Government to end the public sector pay cap for the Armed Forces and give Armed Forces personnel a fair pay rise.

Our armed forces represent the very best of what this country stands for. Across the House, we recognise their dedication and their professionalism and, especially at this time of year, we honour the sacrifices that they make on our behalf. Yet when it comes to their pay, our armed forces personnel have not been treated with the fairness and decency that their service deserves. In every year since 2010, the Conservative party in government has made a conscious decision to give our brave men and women a real-terms pay cut. As a result, regardless of rising rents in service accommodation and cuts to tax credits, the pay that service personnel receive has lagged way behind inflation in each of the past seven years. This sorry state of affairs means that the starting salary of an Army private has been cut by over £1,000 in real terms since Labour left office. Is it any wonder that the Government are presiding over a crisis in recruitment and retention?

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Of course, pay is very important. However, does the hon. Lady accept that in a survey conducted among 12,000 members of the armed forces this year, pay did not feature in any of the top five categories, and that in fact the Government are doing a huge amount to ensure that terms of employment are right and that the armed forces have a good service model?

Nia Griffith: I am not quite sure where the hon. and learned Lady has been, because that is not evident in the materials that I have been reading. For example, AFCAS—the armed forces continuous attitude survey—clearly states that two thirds of personnel do not find levels of pay satisfactory. That is one of the main reasons why people consider leaving the armed forces.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I do not want to drone on about it, but I was in the Army for 14 years, and not once has someone spoken to me about their pay. Looking incrementally at how we are paid compared with our NATO allies or those in the US, the British armed forces have a respectable pay deal that goes up each year in pay bands with the X factor. It is simply disingenuous to say that there is a military out there that is deeply disaffected by how much it is paid.

Nia Griffith: It surprises me to hear the hon. Gentleman say that, because not only do we have the evidence in the AFCAS report, but the pay review body itself has talked about frustration with levels of pay and identified that as a real source of concern within the armed forces. I think we must be living on different planets.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Perhaps it depends on where you come from, because certainly in Wales plenty of people are complaining to me about pay issues in the armed forces, and people are struggling to cope with their bills. People have rung me this morning concerned about press reports on the cutting of the £29-a-day allowance for service in Iraq, which they see as a further cut to their capacity to cope while remaining in the armed forces. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate forward today. It is an issue and I am glad we are here to discuss it.

Nia Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend. She very much lives in the real world and is very aware of the cuts that have affected our armed forces, particularly the cuts to pay.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Nia Griffith: I will take one more intervention and then make some progress.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I represent Chetwynd barracks and am very proud of the great service of the Royal Engineers there, and I am a former Minister in the Ministry of Defence, with responsibility for welfare. I have to say that pay was not, and is not, on the list of concerns of those constituents who serve so well in our armed forces. Accommodation is another matter, but it is not about pay. With great respect to the hon. Lady, perhaps those listening to this are not being done a great service. There are other issues about our armed forces that we should be debating, but not this one.

Nia Griffith: I agree that pay is not the only factor that makes it difficult to recruit and retain staff, but it is certainly a significant one when both AFCAS and the pay review body list it as such.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I find the comments of Conservative Members quite astonishing, because I remember as a Defence Minister being harangued by Conservative Members in opposition arguing that we did a bad deal for the armed forces, even though we accepted the pay review body's recommendation. With regard to the X factor, in 2013 the pay review body chairman was sacked because the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, did not want to recommend an increase in the X factor.

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend refers to an absolutely shocking situation. It is very disappointing that Conservative Members are starting this debate on such a negative note.

More and more personnel are choosing to leave the armed forces, and every one of the services is shrinking in size. A recent Government-commissioned report by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) found that recruitment to the services was “running to stand still”, leading to the “hollowing out” of our armed forces. Yet rather than getting to grips with this problem, the Conservatives' record is a litany of missed targets and broken promises. Their 2015 manifesto pledged to keep the size of the Army above 82,000. That was hardly an ambitious target, considering it was well over 100,000 when Labour left government, but miss the target they did, and the trade-trained strength of the Army is now just 77,600.

The figure of 82,000 had mysteriously disappeared by the time of the Conservatives' 2017 manifesto. That fateful document simply promised to

“maintain the overall size of the armed forces”.

We can add that pledge to the rubbish pile along with the rest of the Tory manifesto, because since June's election we have seen a reduction in the size of the Army, a reduction in the size of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, and a reduction in the size of the Royal Air Force. Now we are in the shameful position where the Defence Secretary cannot rule out cuts to our Royal Marines, or even promise that the Army will not shrink further.

The Government may be complacent about the diminishing size of our armed forces, but we are not. At a time of immense global uncertainty—

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I was for 15 years chair of the defence unions and responsible for our membership of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in north-west Europe, where 80% of our war dead are buried. I saw at first hand their heroism and their history. Does my hon. Friend agree that at a time when our country faces an ever more serious threat to our national security, it is absolutely wrong to cut tens of thousands from the armed forces and to say that those who remain will suffer a pay cut?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes the point very eloquently. We live in a world of immense insecurity.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does that mean that the hon. Lady is prepared to commit to having more than 82,000 personnel in our Army if Labour ever gets into power? I would totally support that.

Nia Griffith: The hon. Gentleman needs to take cognisance of the fact that in every year we were in office, we spent considerably more on defence than the 2% of GDP commitment. In fact, in our last year in office, we spent 2.5% of GDP on defence—a figure that this Government have never matched.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am a former soldier and not a mathematician, but I suggest that the hon. Lady studies the figures that the Ministry of Defence has released, which show that in 2015 its annual budget was £34.3 billion, and that in 2020-21 it will be £39.7 billion. That number is clearly going up, so overall the budget is increasing. To characterise the situation as a landscape of cuts is, frankly, erroneous.

Nia Griffith: Indeed, the number needs to go up, because costs are escalating. We have said clearly that we would match that increase, but I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that costs are escalating far higher than that figure will accommodate.

At this time of immense global uncertainty, we cannot allow numbers to continue to slide, month after month, while all we get from the Government is warm words and crippling complacency. The Government's chosen recruitment partner, Capita, is completely unfit for the job at hand. We have had warning after warning that Capita has not fulfilled its basic obligations, but as the number of personnel recruited continues to fall, the amount paid to Capita has grown and grown.

[Nia Griffith]

We propose to take real action to begin to address that state of affairs, by lifting the public sector pay cap and giving our forces a fair pay rise. I recognise that that alone would not be a silver bullet for the crisis in recruitment and retention, but we know from personnel that pay is one of the main reasons why they choose to leave our armed forces. Satisfaction with basic rates of pay and pension benefits is at the lowest level ever recorded. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has found that there is an

“over-riding sense of uncertainty and an increasing view that the offer will only get worse”.

Barely a third of service personnel are satisfied with their basic pay, and 42% have said that pay was a push factor for them in choosing to leave the forces. Is that any wonder, when our servicemen and women have had to shoulder real-terms pay cuts that have left them badly worse off? Between 2010 and 2016, the starting salary of a corporal fell by nearly £2,000 in real terms, whereas for a flight lieutenant that figure was £2,800.

At the same time as they have been hit by real-terms pay cuts, our servicemen and women have faced rising costs in forces housing because changes to charges for service family accommodation mean rent increases for nearly three quarters of occupants. The Government's future accommodation model risks adding to that pressure because it fractures forces communities by forcing service families into the private rented sector, with all the additional costs that that brings to them and the taxpayer. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has warned of a “perfect storm” for personnel who face increases in rent and national insurance contributions, at the same time as their pay is cut in real terms.

Let us be in no doubt that the responsibility for the below-inflation rises lies firmly with the Government. Since the Government lost their majority at the general election, Ministers have made great play of the supposed independence of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. They would have us believe that the pay review body sets the rates and Ministers merely implement them, as if it were some coincidence that the body had not recommended an above-inflation rise since 2010. But that is little more than a cynical attempt by Ministers to shirk responsibility, because of course they instruct the pay review body to work within the context of the cap. Despite all the warm words from the Secretary of State and Ministers, the Treasury has said that it will not fund increases above and beyond the 1% cap; that is a fact.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that the situation is worse than that? The idea is that the pay review body should be independent and able to make recommendations for Ministers and the Government to look at, but in 2013 the then Prime Minister sacked Alasdair Smith, the chair of the pay review body, because he made recommendations that the Treasury and the Government did not like. Does she agree that that is outrageous?

Nia Griffith: As my hon. Friend says, that is absolutely outrageous, and it betrays an appalling attitude on the part of the Government.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am listening carefully to the points that the hon. Lady makes, and as a current reservist I have every sympathy

with the idea that pay should rise. However, does she appreciate that within ranks in the armed forces there is pay progression? It is right to talk about starting salaries, but one also has to appreciate that pay will progress within particular ranks.

Has the hon. Lady taken into account the non-contributory pension that applies to the armed forces? Despite the fact that the 2015 changes represented a deterioration in terms and conditions, the pension still represents a wonderful gold standard that is the envy of both the public and private sectors.

Nia Griffith: In any career, one would hope to have career progression. The hon. Gentleman also refers to the fact that the pension offer is not as generous as it once was. The problem is that people still face a perfect storm of rising costs and pay that is not keeping up with those costs.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that our Conservative colleagues seem to be confused about the difference between a pay rise and a pay increment? Those are two very different things; one of them is an entitlement and the other is in the gift of the Government.

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend expresses that perfectly.

Of course, the pay review body can recommend a higher award for a specific group of personnel, but if it did so, it would have to reduce increases for others. In other words, it would be robbing Petra to pay Paula. Even when increased pressure on recruitment and retention has been raised with the pay review body, it has been unable to recommend a pay rise to deal with the problem, given the Treasury's insistence that it will not provide the funds.

Rather than passing the buck, is it not time for the Government to do the right thing and lift the public sector pay cap across the board so that our armed forces and, indeed, all public sector workers—firefighters, nurses and ambulance workers—get the pay award that they deserve? That is a popular policy that commands support across the country. More than three quarters of voters, including 68% of Conservative voters, want to give public sector workers a pay rise. I hope that that straightforward proposal will command support in the House this afternoon.

Let us remember that while other public sector workers have unions to work on their behalf, our armed forces do not, so it is all the more important that we in this House speak up on their behalf. I say to Conservative Members that there is no point in saying that they back our forces personnel if they refuse to stand up for them when it counts. There is no point Conservative Members pretending that they want forces' pay to improve if they are not prepared to vote for it. Members should listen to what our service personnel are telling us. The pay review body has found:

“Service personnel are becoming increasingly frustrated with public sector pay policy. They feel their pay is being unfairly constrained in a period when costs are rising, private sector earnings are starting to recover, and the high tempo demands on the Armed Forces have not diminished.”

Those men and women work tirelessly to keep us safe. Surely the very least they deserve is fair pay for their service.

The fact is that we cannot do security on the cheap. Whether we are talking about moving the goalposts so that we barely scrape over the line to meet NATO's 2% spending target, cutting corners with short-sighted defence cuts that have weakened our defence capabilities or imposing a public sector pay cap on our brave armed forces personnel, the Government simply will not stump up the cash to invest in our national security. I make this challenge to Conservative Members: they have talked the talk, but are they prepared to walk the walk into the Lobby with us this afternoon and show the courage of their convictions in their vote?

1.19 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I am grateful to the Opposition for giving me the opportunity to discuss armed forces pay. The motion reflects a shared sense on both sides of House of the value our armed forces bring to the nation. It reflects an appreciation of their unparalleled bravery and enormous efforts all around the globe—whether fighting Daesh in the middle east, providing vital reassurance to our Estonian allies against Russia aggression, or bringing essential humanitarian aid to those whose lives have been devastated by hurricanes in the Caribbean. Lastly, it reflects a desire that those who put their lives on the line should receive the reward that is their due. At the same time, the motion presents but a partial picture of a complex issue, so I welcome this opportunity to correct some of the misconceptions and provide some of the missing context.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Defence spend as a percentage of GDP in the final year of the previous Labour Government was 2.5%. Will the Minister tell me what it is now?

Mark Lancaster: Off the top of my head, I would say that it is just over 2%.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): It is 2.16%.

Mark Lancaster: I was going to say 2.14%, but it is 2.16%.

First, there is the broader fiscal context. We should not forget why pay restraint was imposed in the first place back in 2010. It was a consequence of a large inherited economic deficit. The whole public sector, not just our armed forces, was subject to the same conditions. Given that a huge chunk of the defence budget is spent on personnel—currently, just under £9 billion, which is more than we spend on equipment support—the MOD had an important part to play in supporting the Government's efforts to restore the UK's economic credibility. After all, a stronger economy means stronger defence. Having taken those tough decisions, we have since seen the deficit reduce by three quarters and the economy grow, while taxes are low and employment is high, which benefits us all.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Most of us in the Chamber sat through the proceedings on the ten-minute rule Bill, and no one spoke against it. Tribute was paid to the courage, the service and the sacrifice of our armed forces—not only in Northern Ireland, but in Iraq—and the Minister put his tribute on the record at the beginning of his response. There is a moral obligation,

so I do not want to hear about fiscal reasons. I want this Government to recognise their moral obligation and duty to our armed forces and to lift the 1% pay cap in recognition of the armed forces' courage and sacrifice for the country and the Queen.

Mark Lancaster: I will move on in a moment to that very question. I would add that many of us also sat through Prime Minister's questions, and I would simply refer the hon. Lady to the very powerful argument that the Prime Minister made in response to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) on the very subject she has raised.

The second point this motion ignores is the impact of pay progression. Officers and other ranks are tied to incremental pay scales, and they routinely and regularly move up the bands. The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) talked about privates. The average private soldier starts on a salary of £18,673. After one year, through incremental pay alone—not including the 1% pay increase—that rises to £20,029, which is an increase of 7.26% in one year. After three years, the salary rises to £21,614, which is an increase of 15.8%, not including the 3% increase that would have been given. That is an increase in pay of almost 20% over the three years.

Mr Kevan Jones: I think that the hon. Gentleman is being completely disingenuous—

Mr Speaker: Order. No, the hon. Gentleman must not use that word. He is a person of felicitous phrase and extensive vocabulary, and he must find some other way to express his irascibility with or disapproval of the Minister.

Mr Jones: The Minister is wrong. The point is that, in any job, people get a pay increase because they are being trained and their ability to serve increases as that goes on. The fact is that the yearly increases my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) mentioned affect a private's pay because they affect the levels of the bands and the percentages. He cannot argue that, just because somebody gets pay progression, not giving them an increase in their basic pay every year will not affect their ultimate pay. Of course it will.

Mark Lancaster: I am slightly worried about the hon. Gentleman's approach. We have actually been great friends in this House for many years, so I am somewhat surprised that he called me disingenuous. I am sure that I will get my revenge at some point. As somebody who continues, after 29 years, to serve in the armed forces, I would like to think that accusing me of all people of being disingenuous when it comes to the armed forces is slightly unfair. I like to think that I have done my bit.

At the end of the day, I do not think that a private soldier receiving £18,673 in their pocket on day one—admittedly before tax—and then receiving £21,614 after three years will care too much whether that is due to pay progression or annual increases; it is money in their pockets.

Sir Michael Fallon: More money.

Mark Lancaster: More money, as my right hon. Friend says.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Kevan Jones: It's less.

Mark Lancaster: Here we go: the hon. Gentleman says—perhaps this is testimony to Labour mathematics—that £21,614 is less than £18,673. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) should not keep hollering from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of the stance taken by the Minister. Apart from anything else—he is chuckling about it—it is marginally discourteous to his hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who had requested an intervention and had it granted, before it was ripped away from him by the hon. Gentleman's unseemly behaviour.

Conor McGinn: Talking about the figures, I was very concerned to read in the *London Times* this morning that the Government are considering scrapping the £29 deployment allowance that applies to soldiers on the frontline in Iraq. The Minister is an agreeable chap, and I would like to give him an opportunity to deny that categorically at the Dispatch Box.

Mark Lancaster: I am a very agreeable chap, but this is yet more speculation from *The Times*. No decision at all has been made to scrap the operational allowance. Every year since the operational allowance was introduced 12 years ago, there has been a review of where it should and should not apply. Soldiers have not been told that they will not receive it when they go to Iraq. I am deeply proud that this Government have doubled the operational allowance from £14 to £29. Finally—to get the last word, for the time being at least, with the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—none of those figures takes into account the substantial rise in the personal tax allowance introduced while this Government have been in power.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: I will not give way at the moment—I am taking my revenge—but I am sure he will get another chance.

Despite fiscal constraint, salaries in the armed forces throughout this period have not stagnated. Indeed, they have actually risen on average by 1.5%. What is more, the MOD has the option of introducing targeted payments where there are particular recruiting and retention issues. These payments can range from time-limited financial incentives through to longer-term recruitment and retention payments that recognise the particular challenges we face in retaining certain specialisms, such as military pilots or submariners.

That brings me to the third aspect of the pay story, which has been conveniently glossed over. Joining our forces comes with a range of often unacknowledged additional benefits: a non-contributory pension scheme, subsidised accommodation and food, access to free medical and dental care, and allowances packages—I have just mentioned one of them—towards additional costs. It is therefore unsurprising that pay is neither the primary reason why people enter the service, nor the primary reason why they leave.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise the frustration felt by the armed forces when they see rising costs in accommodation, but no real pay rise?

Mark Lancaster: Let us be absolutely clear: the subsidised accommodation costs that our service personnel are charged are approximately two thirds—I repeat, two thirds—of what they would pay in the private sector. There has been a readjustment across the range, because some of the bands were completely out of date. For example, accommodation was graded according to how far it was from a public telephone box. What relevance does that have in 2017 compared with access to broadband? So there was a readjustment, but let us not forget that members of the armed forces pay considerably less than they would if they worked in the private sector.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I am glad to hear my hon. Friend talk about non-pay benefits. My constituents at Catterick garrison and at RAF Leeming most often talk to me about the day-to-day hassle and unfairness they face as a result of their service. To that end, will he confirm the Government's commitment to the armed forces covenant and perhaps develop further what they are doing to ensure that nobody is penalised by their service in our armed forces?

Mark Lancaster: I am delighted that perhaps we have a moment of consensus across the House when we talk about the military covenant. It is indeed one of the success stories of recent years. When I was in my previous role, which is now filled by the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), we managed to convince the nation of the value of service, and to see so many companies signing up to the armed forces covenant—well over 1,400—is a testament to its success. Indeed, every local authority in England, Scotland and Wales—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mark Lancaster: I shall give way one more time and then I must make progress.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way. May I take him back to his comment about military salaries rising in real terms? Can he explain to the House why the Ministry of Defence publication of 1 September 2017 states:

“Fig. 11 highlights that growth in military salaries fell below inflation from financial year 2010/11 to 2014/15.”?

Will he source where his evidence is coming from, as opposed to the evidence that the rest of us are having to rely on, which is taken from the MOD's own website?

Mark Lancaster: We are going back—are we not?—to the debate about the annual salary increase and incremental pay. I have always used the example of the private soldier, where we see almost a 20% salary increase over three years.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: I have been generous, but I am going to make progress. I will give way again before I finish my speech.

In other words, when it comes to armed forces pay, context is all, and the decision to award a 1% pay increase in 2017 did not happen in isolation. It followed

a recommendation by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body and the Senior Salaries Review Body. They were clear that their decision

“broadly maintained pay comparability with the civilian sector”.

Critically, the AFPRB and SSRB are independent organisations that make annual recommendations. Their reports are detailed, comprehensive and take time to compile. For 2016-17, they gathered written and oral evidence from everyone from the Defence Secretary down, including more than 2,300 service personnel and 154 spouses. They held 186 discussion groups before arriving at a decision. Such a thorough, evidence-based approach is precisely why it would be wholly wrong to start introducing ad-hoc in-year reviews, as some people have suggested.

Focusing solely on the pay award also excludes the other reforms we have made to pay—reforms supported by the AFPRB itself. For example, in 2016 we introduced a new pay scheme, more effectively to reward personnel for their skills and simplify an individual’s pay journey. Consequently, people are better able to predict their future career earnings and make better-informed decisions.

At the same time, we recognise that, in an increasingly competitive world, we need to do more to plug skills gaps in parts of the public sector, such as engineering, if we are to continue delivering world-class public services. That is why the Government’s recent announcement that greater flexibility will be available in public sector pay remains key. It means the independent pay review bodies can now make their own judgements on future pay awards to mitigate any potential future impact. So, for 2018-19, the AFPRB will no longer have an across-the-board requirement to keep its recommendations within a total 1% maximum award. But let us not jump the gun. The 2018-19 armed forces pay review is still to come. It will be agreed as part of the budget process and we expect its recommendations early next year.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister is extensively quoting the AFPRB, but it is also clear that it says that

“if inflation continues its upward trajectory, we could foresee recruitment becoming more challenging and morale being adversely impacted... we would need to consider very carefully whether a one per cent average limit on base pay was compatible with continued operational effectiveness”.

He knows my concerns about the recruitment figures and that I accept that pay is not the only issue affecting recruitment and retention, but will we see those recruitment figures going up, and will he listen to what the AFPRB is clearly saying?

Mark Lancaster: Over the past year, we have seen 8,000 applications to the Army, which is an increase of some 20% on the previous year, but I am interested in the hon. Gentleman’s view. I was deeply surprised to discover while reading a national newspaper that part of Labour’s plan is to use the money for marketing—some £10 million a year—as one source of income to give soldiers a pay increase. We have approximately 150,000 armed forces personnel, so that would be an increase of about £5.50 a month per member of the armed forces, but it would involve scrapping the one thing that delivers recruiting. So, no marketing budget for a bottom-fed organisation? Does he agree with that? Does he agree with the plan of his Front Benchers to scrap the marketing budget?

Stephen Doughty: Marketing is obviously a crucial part of the recruitment process, but the Minister needs to be clear. He has given me an answer that makes it clear that every single course—including those at Catterick in the constituency of the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), who has just left—is under-recruited. Every single course at Sandhurst since 2015 has been under-recruited. It is his Government who are leading us to this recruitment crisis. Pay is one part of that, and a crucial part, but he is the Minister and he is in charge.

Mark Lancaster: So we have a crucial marketing budget. Would that be scrapped? I am going to Catterick in two weeks to be the passing-off officer for the latest group of Gurkhas to pass off. That is a fully recruited course; not all courses are, but I am delighted to say that the last Sandhurst course was also fully recruited.

Nia Griffith *rose*—

Mark Lancaster: I will give way to the hon. Lady, but then I must make progress.

Nia Griffith: As the Minister knows well, newspapers do not always report things the right way round. The point we are making about the marketing costs is that they have rocketed. The question is, what value for money are those costs providing? What value for money is the contract with Capita providing? What evaluation have the Government done of whether the money spent on Capita—spent on marketing—is providing value for money in view of the returns they are getting? That is what we want to see.

Mark Lancaster: I am not sure whether we have seen a U-turn in Labour party policy—[*Interruption.*] So we have not seen a U-turn. Would Labour still scrap the marketing budget? Can we have some clarity? Is Labour proposing to scrap the marketing budget or not?

Nia Griffith: The point that I was making is that there has been a massive increase in the marketing budget for zero returns in additional recruitment. That is the point—is it value for money? The Government are running the contract. They are employing Capita. They need to answer as to exactly what value they think they are getting out of Capita.

Mark Lancaster: I am going to do the House a favour and move on.

As alluded to earlier, for those joining our armed forces, pay is not the be all and end all. People sign up to challenge themselves, experience adventure and learn new skills. The most frequently cited reason for leaving, according to the 2017 armed forces continuous attitude survey, is the impact of service on family and personal life. That is why we are keen to do all we can to improve life for our personnel. Some 70% of our people told a recent MOD survey that they wanted more flexible working opportunities, so we are introducing a flexible working Bill. It will enable regular service personnel temporarily to change the nature of their service, enabling part-time working or protection from deployment to support an individual’s personal circumstances “where business need allows”.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: I will in a minute, but only once more because others want to speak in this short debate.

At present, a woman considering starting a family, or an individual with caring commitments, faces a difficult choice over leaving when their circumstances change. We do not want to lose good people with knowledge, skills and experience from a more diverse workforce, and we should not have to.

By providing a more modern and flexible employment framework for our people, we will help to improve morale, retain and recruit the very best, and increase the overall effectiveness of the armed forces. More than that, we will also help to attract recruits from a wider cross-section of society—those who might otherwise not have considered a military career.

Pay and flexible working, in and of themselves, do not offer a silver bullet to address the issues of recruitment and retention, as highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford in his excellent report “Filling the Ranks”, but taken together with our broader people programme, we believe that it will have a significant impact.

Gareth Thomas *rose*—

Mark Lancaster: I will give way for the last time, to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who asked first.

Ruth Smeeth: I thank the Minister. Many colleagues have mentioned the overall package, but may we go back to service family accommodation? I shall be talking about pay later, but the reality is that SFA and the CarillionAmey contract are the No. 1 issue, in addition to pay, that is raised with us every day. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, I think that SFA is becoming a headache for everybody and needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency.

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Lady makes a very valid point. In my previous role, I spent a lot of time with CarillionAmey. I took the chief executive on a walk around Woolwich to see the standard of some of the accommodation. I think that there is acknowledgment across the House that the situation has improved, but there is still an awful lot more work to do. We recognise that and are determined, as were the previous Government, to address this issue. Of course the better defence estate strategy is part of the key to that. As we begin to consolidate our barracks, we will have less mobility of our armed forces; we will be able to dispose of some sites and all that money will be reinvested.

Johnny Mercer *rose*—

Gareth Thomas *rose*—

Mark Lancaster: I will give way one more time, to my hon. Friend, and then I will conclude.

Johnny Mercer: I really welcome the contribution by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), my colleague on the Defence Committee, because this whole debate comes down to credibility. Yes, we would always want more money; people will always want to be paid, but that is not the No. 1 issue. Generally, we have a good offer for our servicemen and women. We have deep challenges with accommodation, veterans' care

and mental health, but this has to be a credible debate, and it is simply not the case that our men and women have a raw deal on pay and experience.

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point.

It is worth being clear about what this programme entails. It will see us offering greater help to personnel, so that they can live in private accommodation and meet their aspirations for home ownership. It will see us develop a new employment offer for new joiners to the service from 2020, better meeting the expectations of future recruits and targeting resources on the people we need most.

Gareth Thomas: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: No: I have been very generous.

The programme will also make it easier for people to move between the public and private sectors during their careers—retaining and making the most of their skills in areas where they are most needed.

Of course, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford outlined, there is still more to do, whether recruiting more people from ethnic minority communities, improving accommodation or making sure that all our people are fit mentally as well as physically; but we are now hard at work developing an action plan to take forward his recommendations, including a planned medical symposium.

Our people will always be our greatest asset. As a Minister and a reservist, I have nothing but respect and admiration for achievements of our armed forces personnel. Of course I appreciate the impact that pay restraint has had, but I also believe we are taking a balanced approach. On the one hand, we are ensuring pay discipline, which is critical to the future affordability of public services and the sustainability of public sector employment. On the other hand, we are doing our utmost to make sure that our overall package not only reflects the value that our people bring to our country but retains the flexibility that is so vital in attracting the best and the brightest.

Armed forces pay structures and levels are regularly reviewed, and I look forward to hearing the AFPRB's latest recommendations. In the meantime, I am personally committed to doing everything I can to make sure that our exceptionally talented and hard-working men and women continue to receive the recognition that is their due.

1.43 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for bringing the motion before the House.

In the short time that I have been the Defence spokesperson for my party, it has become abundantly clear that the Secretary of State—who, unfortunately, is leaving us at this moment—is not so much running a Department as presiding over a shambles with, I believe, the fourth-biggest spend in Whitehall. You have to hand it to Ministers, Madam Deputy Speaker, because it takes some brass neck to come to this House time and time again and seek to portray this team as in command of its ship, when the reality is that when you lift that thin veil, the chaos and the haemorrhaging of money is

there for all to see, and it is like nothing I have seen in the two and a half years that I have been a Member of this House.

On the issue of pay and the broader issue of terms and conditions, I wish to bring the House's attention to a piece of work that will be led by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan)—a commission set up by my party to review what offer we think should be made to members of the armed forces. That will look in detail at the issues of pay, pensions, a trade union or representative body—which was mentioned today and in a previous debate this week—and, of course, housing and homes for veterans and their families.

On the pay cap, it should be noted that the Scottish Government were the first Government anywhere in the UK to commit to lifting the 1% pay cap right across the public sector. We believe that it is the very least that workers in uniform—be they nurses, police officers or those who protect us in the armed services—truly deserve. The pay freeze—which, as has been mentioned, is in reality a cut to their wages—is one of the many, many components making up the crisis in recruitment and retention. Inflation has pushed the cost of living up for everyone, meaning that their take-home salary is being stretched like never before. For too many, there is too much month at the end of their money.

Let me just adumbrate for Ministers, with inflation sitting at 3%, what that means. If your base pay is £21,000 you receive £21,210 after your 1% rise. When you account for inflation, Madam Deputy Speaker, it leads to a real wage loss of £420. So how Ministers and Government Back Benchers can come to this House and participate in the inevitable crescendo of backslapping and chest thumping, claiming to be the party that backs the armed forces—no doubt we have a couple of hours of that to go—is beyond me. I would be embarrassed to defend this Government's record on armed forces pay.

Having outlined—[*Interruption.*] I shall come to the nuclear deterrent; I am glad that the Whip, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), mentions it from a sedentary position. Having outlined, as many speakers no doubt will, the bravery and sacrifice that those in our armed forces display, and what they are asked to live with, it would take some nerve to do anything other than support the Opposition motion and offer my party's support for it. But there is a deeper, more fundamental issue that we cannot ignore, and that is how this Government and previous Governments have chosen to spend money defending the nation, which brings me to the Government Whip's point.

There are certainly many arguments against Trident, and I have had very honest disagreement with those who support Trident. The cost is certainly one argument against it. The drain that the cost puts on our ability to defend ourselves is, I believe, unsustainable, and more and more people in the defence community are realising that.

Let us put that cost in context. The Government's own figure for Trident is £31 billion, so if we take a starter Army officer's salary of £26,000, it equates to over 1.1 million new staff officers. Clearly we do not need that many, but when the picture is laid out in those terms, against a backdrop of a recruitment crisis, broken manifesto pledges on the size of the army, and forces numbers at their lowest since King George III was on the throne—since Arthur Onslow was the Speaker of the House of Commons—it puts the draining cost of

Trident on our conventional capabilities into some perspective. And that is before we even get to the £100 million of efficiency savings that commanders have been asked to make in addition to cuts to already threadbare budgets for training, for maintenance, for accommodation and for travel.

I want to return to those numbers: 82,000 was the commitment made by the Conservatives in their manifesto. It was their pledge, not mine, and it was not one number—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Before the hon. Gentleman completely leaves Trident behind, is he aware that the Defence Committee recently took evidence from a group of senior academics who told us that it would be wrong to assume now that North Korea is incapable of reaching the United Kingdom with a thermonuclear warhead? In other words, they think that the North Koreans are already there, or extremely close to it. Given the unstable nature of the North Korean regime, is not that a very strong argument for retaining our own independent nuclear deterrent to deter whatever those in Pyongyang might think?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, because it is obviously not deterring anyone, given what the right hon. Gentleman has just said.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Perhaps I can offer some information about deterrence. Some of the real, tangible threats that we face, for example in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been faced by people such as my brother, who is a reservist, so not even a regular member of the armed forces—some Members of the House know him. Investing in the people at the frontline is more important than Trident, which is sitting in Faslane and doing nothing but gathering dust.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am trying to resist having a debate on Trident and to stick to the issue at hand. Of course the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) can quote academics who are in favour of Trident, just as Members on my side of the debate can quote academics who are against it. We would be more than happy to debate another motion on that.

The Conservative party's manifesto set out a commitment to 82,000 for the size of the Army, and not one number below that. We know that the Government have failed to meet that commitment, as the number has fallen to 78,010, which is a shortfall of 3,990 fully trained troops. As if that was not bad enough, just five months ago, when pressed on the numbers at the Royal United Services Institute's land warfare conference, the Secretary of State had nothing to offer in response but obfuscation, which is deeply concerning when we consider how that prejudices our ability to field a short-notice, war-fighting division of 40,000 troops, which is seen as absolutely critical by our allies.

On recruitment, the Government clearly do not see the issue with their reputation as an employer. They have increased spending on advertising by 50%, yet the numbers keep sinking.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman, and I praise the work that his hon. Friend's brother does in the

[Sir Mike Penning]

Army Reserve. We are one Army and all the same, whether reservists or full-time regulars. That is how it was when I served and how it always should be. One area where we are desperately short and struggling to recruit is the Scottish infantry regiments, which is unusual. Has he any idea why people in Scotland do not want to join the infantry? Might it be that they are frightened they would be dragged out of the British Army and into an independent Scottish Army?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am up for a debate on Trident or independence. I do have some respect for the right hon. Gentleman, and I pay tribute to him for his service. I recall him appearing before the Transport Committee when he was a Minister, so I know that he is a thoughtful Member of the House. To answer his question bluntly, no, the threat of independence is not what is putting off potential recruits. If he stays for the rest of the debate and listens to what other Members have to say, he will realise that there are serious things that are putting people off. I say that not because I want to have a bun fight across the Chamber, but because we want to see that sorted. Even if Scotland became independent tomorrow, it would still be in our interests for England to have a strong Army. I am not interested in having a constitutional bun fight, but I will allow him to intervene again.

Sir Mike Penning: That is not my intention either. I was the Armed Forces Minister before my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) took over the role—he is doing a fantastic job, because he has much more experience in the Army than I ever had. The point I was trying to make is that the English regiments have always been augmented by Scottish troops, particularly in the infantry—the corps are full of Scots and Welsh, but particularly Scots—but now the Scottish infantry regiments will be augmented by English recruits. I have no problem with that, but it is interesting, and it is not just about pay; it is very often about the package. I will stay for the debate and I will speak, probably for about seven minutes.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, and I look forward, as always, to hearing his contribution. To be fair to Members on the Opposition Benches, I do not think that anyone has said that this is just about pay. In fact, we had a very thorough debate earlier this week on flexible working, when many other issues were also addressed. I see that his colleague, the hon. Member for Burton, is nodding in agreement. [Interruption.] I understand what the motion is about. He is shouting from a sedentary position, but if he allows me to make a little more progress, perhaps he will hear what else I have to say on what might be stopping Scottish people joining the armed forces.

Colonel Kemp, who took command of UK forces in Afghanistan in 2003, has criticised the Government's reliance on outsourcing with Capita, which in 2012 took over regular and reservist Army recruitment in a contract valued at around £44 million over 10 years. That seemed to cause a bit of a bun fight across the two Front Benches. I ask Government Members, and the Government Whip, the hon. Member for Burton, who seems determined to shout me down at every turn,

why will they not heed the advice of a report part-authored by one of their own colleagues, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, which recommended in July this year that the Government should accelerate work on an alternative to the Capita contract? That thoughtful recommendation, which we support, was set out in a report part-authored by a Government Member.

I want briefly to mention pensions, because that is another area. I note that the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) has now left the Chamber, having asked me to talk about other areas, which is a shame. It is well known that the Ministry of Defence is working on a new joiners offer, which I would like to hear more about. On pensions, I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that the Ministry is working on new joiners' offer arrangements. If so, how does that square with the promise, given a few years ago, that pension arrangements were safe for 25 years? Will any new scheme apply only to those joining after a particular date, or will the cut be retrospectively applied to those currently serving?

Mark Lancaster: The clue is in the title. It is called a new joiners' offer.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am glad that the Minister has cleared that up for me.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: There is clearly a lack of consensus across the House, at least between the Government Benches and these Benches. Would the armed forces of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland not be better served by consensus, as we see in countries such as Denmark, where there is trade union representation for members of the armed forces, and where pay, housing and health are part of a consensual approach, and not just by Government but by those serving, through their trade union membership?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a thoughtful point, and I noted Government Members shaking their heads in disagreement. In the Netherlands they have not just one trade union, but four. I do not see what the Government would have to fear from a trade union, or certainly from a body similar to the Police Federation, which could stand up for members of the armed forces when discussing these matters.

In conclusion, when all these issues are considered in the round, added to the huge number of issues faced by armed forces and veterans families, I hope that the chest thumping and backslapping that we normally see in such debates will give way to something of a *lento* and a *decrescendo*, so that a sober reflection is what drives Members in their contributions and voting this afternoon. The Ministry of Defence must urgently bring back some decency and honour to the way it treats our armed forces and veterans communities.

Defence—proper defence—cannot be bought on the cheap. That is as true of equipment and platforms as it is of the people we ask to defend us every single day. A career in the forces should be something not only that people are proud to pursue, but that the Government can offer with pride, but they cannot do so seriously if they continue to preside over wage cuts for those who protect us every day.

1.59 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): This morning, along with 20 other MPs and peers, I attended a brief act of remembrance at the Guard's Chapel in Wellington barracks, where we paid our respects to the fallen. I think that it is an underappreciated fact that over 30 Members of this House have themselves served in the armed forces, in either the regulars or the reserves, including myself, the Minister for the Armed Forces and the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). Another of those people is my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, who served in the Royal Naval Reserve and who was present this morning. However, he has asked me to offer his apologies to the House because he had two unbreakable commitments this afternoon and therefore could not, as he usually would do, contribute to this debate.

Our armed forces 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, and the shortages are far worse in specialised trades. In the year to April 2017, over 2,000 more people left the regular armed forces than joined.

As I argued in the House recently, a combination of lower retention than expected and failure to achieve recruiting targets means the under-manning in the armed forces is worsening. The Royal Navy and Royal Air Force are now running at around 10% below their annual recruiting target, while for the Army the shortfall is, unfortunately, over 30%.

This continuing process of "hollowing out" in the ranks also threatens to compound the problem by increasing the pressure on those personnel who remain. In order to address these problems, the Ministry of Defence needs to improve its recruiting performance, particularly among black, Asian and minority ethnic personnel and female personnel. The MOD has a target, set by the Minister for the Armed Forces, for 15% of all recruits to be female by 2020. In the year to 31 March 2017, female personnel represented 10.2% of the regular armed forces, while the proportion for the reserves was somewhat higher, at 14%.

The RAF, which for some time has had a programme devoted to nurturing female talent, has three female officers of two-star rank, and there is one female officer of two-star rank in the Army, but, unfortunately, there is none in the Royal Navy.

Ruth Smeeth: As the right hon. Gentleman had to correct me on Monday to inform me of the position, may I ask whether he agrees that we hope that, at some point, the senior service, the Royal Navy, will catch up with everybody else and ensure that we have a female leading officer sooner rather than later?

Mr Francois: Yes, I would like one day to see our new aircraft carrier, Queen Elizabeth, which is named after our wonderful Queen, captained by a woman.

The MOD has been able to make much of female representation in media terms in order to show the career progression that is possible for female officers, but clearly it would be desirable to see female candidates reaching three-star rank or above in the relatively near future. The independent service complaints ombudsman

has three-star rank, but she is independent of the armed forces. In addition, as a ministerial example, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) was, I believe, the first female Minister of State for the Armed Forces in history; she held the post from 2015 to 2016.

The MOD is now also introducing women in ground close combat, meaning that in future women will be allowed to serve in the Royal Marines, the infantry and the RAF Regiment. Places will be made available to female candidates who can pass the requisite physical standards, which will be maintained as the same as for their male counterparts; that is important in maintaining confidence in the process. In addition, women will be allowed to apply for posts in the special forces, again entirely on merit, thus clearly demonstrating there are no longer any areas of the armed forces that are off-limits to female personnel.

The RAF Regiment was opened up to suitably qualified female candidates this September, and women will be able to take places in the Royal Armoured Corps and the infantry in 2018. It will take some time for the absolute number of women in ground close combat to build, but the opportunity should be used at an early stage, with exemplars, to demonstrate unequivocally that there are no longer any restrictions of opportunity for women serving in the armed forces.

The flexible engagement system, which we debated in the House on Monday evening and to which several Members have already referred, will positively affect the ability to attract and retain a diverse workforce. FES is designed to allow individuals to decide on their level of commitment, including opportunities for work in full-time and part-time capacities, with the current barriers between regular and reserve being reduced. That flexibility should be particularly helpful in assisting women to enjoy full careers in the armed forces over a period of time, while reducing concerns female recruits may have about the longevity and potential progression of their careers.

Overall, female recruitment—including representation at senior level—is starting to show real success, and this is one area where the Ministry of Defence can afford to be more ambitious. The 15% recruitment target by 2020 seems likely to be met and the Royal Air Force is already intending to raise its target to 20% by 2020. If the Department wants to continue the momentum that is currently being developed in this area across the three services, I believe it should set a new stretch goal of 20% of recruits being female by 2025. In addition, maximum publicity should be given to the introduction of women in ground close combat, to highlight that all areas of the armed forces are now open to female talent.

Gareth Thomas: Two years ago, the Government set up an armed forces credit union to help armed forces personnel on low pay who might be vulnerable to payday loan companies charging very high rates of interest. Two years on, the three armed forces credit unions are well-established, but could do with the MOD taking steps to advertise their services more widely. Given that 15 years ago the right hon. Gentleman showed a brief interest in co-operatives, may I encourage him to join me in encouraging the Minister to think through what else the MOD might do now to encourage awareness of that armed forces credit union among military personnel?

Mr Francois: The hon. Gentleman's researcher has clearly been on the ball. I know that in the United States service credit unions are far more advanced than here; there is a big movement in America. I for one would ask Ministers to look munificently on the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mark Lancaster *rose*—

Mr Francois: Indeed, I think the Minister wants to intervene.

Mark Lancaster: I am now feeling guilty for not giving way to the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). He makes a very reasonable point. I am very pleased with the progress we have made with the credit unions, but there is always more we can do. I will look into this point, and write to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Francois: We appear to have got some consensus there.

In July 2013 the Government published a White Paper entitled "The Reserves in the Future Force 2020: valuable and valued", which envisaged an ambitious revival and expansion of Britain's reserve forces, under the heading of Future Reserves 2020, or FR2020. The roll-out of that programme was initially complicated by a combination of excessive bureaucracy, delays to medicals for recruits and IT problems.

In response, the three services—in particular the Army, where the greatest problem lay—committed additional resources to reinforce the recruiting effort, and now, several years on, that has borne fruit. As of May 2017, the trained strength of the Army reserve is 26,730 as against a target of 26,700; the maritime reserves, including the Royal Marine Reserve, stood at 2,590 against a target of 2,320; and the figures for the RAF reserves, including the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, were 2,140 against a target of 1,860.

Reserve recruiting now enjoys support from across British industry, including the Business Services Association, the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Institute of Directors, and is an important part of the armed forces covenant. In addition, considerable success has been achieved by offering "recruitment bonuses" to ex-regulars who have left the services but have then joined their reserve counterparts.

There is no room for complacency. That has only been achieved with considerable investment, of both money and effort, by the regular as well as the reserve forces. If the targets in FR2020 are to be met, it is vital that this earmarked funding is continued and not sacrificed to in-year savings, which would run the risk of seriously compromising the momentum achieved to date. Overall, however, the reserves story is now becoming a successful one, and is far healthier than it was only a few years ago.

An important aspect of the overall quality of life in the services is represented by service accommodation, and this is where the Ministry of Defence must do better if it wishes to retain the support of service personnel and, particularly, of their families. Remember the saying: "Recruit the serviceman, retain the family." The UK tri-service families continuous attitudes survey, published in July 2017, shows that the level of satisfaction with the maintenance of service families' accommodation remains low following a large decrease in 2016. In particular—this follows on from the point made by the

hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth)—there are issues surrounding the delays in the MOD's housing contractor, CarillionAmey, responding to requests for maintenance and also with the quality of the maintenance and repair work subsequently undertaken. Only 34% of those surveyed said that they were satisfied with the responsiveness of the contractor and only 29% were satisfied with the quality of maintenance or repair work that it undertook.

Ruth Smeeth: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the problems with that contract is the existing key performance indicators? The contractor gets a big tick for turning up within 24 hours, but that does not mean that the boiler has been fixed. That could take another eight days. The letter of the contract might be being fulfilled, but it is definitely not being fulfilled in spirit.

Mr Francois: The hon. Lady anticipates what I am about to say. I will come on to boilers in just a minute. Her point about acting to the spirit of the contract is well made, and I agree with her.

The FCAS report states:

"Satisfaction with most aspects of SFA fell markedly in 2016 due in part to underperformance by the National Housing prime contractor and changes to the SFA charging method in April 2016."

Similarly, the Army Families Federation—sometimes affectionately referred to as the Army freedom fighters—reports that housing continues to be the biggest concern for Army families. There is overwhelming anecdotal evidence about the poor performance of CarillionAmey and, put simply, we are not honouring our people by providing them with this shoddy service. We send a serviceman halfway around the world to fight for their country and we call them a hero, as that is what they are, but back at home their wife spends weeks trying to get their boiler fixed because of the startling ineptitude of the people we have hired to keep their home warm. And then we wonder why people leave.

This has gone on for too long, and it is simply unacceptable. Either CarillionAmey should materially raise its game on behalf of our service personnel or it should be unceremoniously sacked and we should find someone competent to do the work instead. Housing associations and registered social landlords around the country have been carrying out basic maintenance and repairs as bread-and-butter work for years, so why cannot CarillionAmey do the same?

There are a variety of reasons why people are leaving the armed forces at present, and pay is one factor but—as has already been pointed out—not the predominant one. As the Minister rightly said, the armed forces continuous attitude survey published in May 2017 points out that the primary reason for people wanting to leave the services is the effect of separation or long hours on their family life. That is the greatest challenge that Ministers have to grapple with. The Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which we debated in this House on Monday, should help in this regard, as it will allow service personnel to vary their commitment, rather than face an acid test of only being able to leave the services in order to reduce the pressure on their family. In other words, it might persuade some personnel to stick rather than twist when their family are under pressure because of their commitment to their country.

The issue of pay itself has now become something of a challenge, particularly in relation to retention. The AFCAS notes that only 33% of personnel are satisfied with their basic rate of pay, and that only 27% are satisfied with their pension benefits, although it should be pointed out that the armed forces have one of the few remaining pension schemes anywhere in the public sector where employees do not have to pay a contribution of their own—something that I know MOD Ministers have fought valiantly to defend.

Recommendations on pay are made by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body and its recommendation in January 2017 was essentially for a 1% pay increase, although certain personnel would qualify for additional increments and also for specialist recruitment and retention pay, particularly if they serve in areas where the armed forces are struggling to retain specialists. Any further pay increase for the armed forces will be subject to the next recommendation of the AFPRB early next year, so we will have to wait and see what it recommends. It is likely that any increase above 1% would need to come out of the defence budget, which could have implications for some elements of the equipment programme, for instance. However, given that the police have now had an above 1% pay increase, if the AFPRB were to recommend something similar next year, I think that Ministers would have to take it seriously.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Does he agree that it would be quite wrong if the MOD implemented more cuts to equipment to finance a pay increase?

Mr Francois: I cannot say what the AFPRB is going to recommend. In fairness, we will have to allow it to go through its deliberations and see what it concludes. However, given that the police have been given an increase above 1%, I am sure that there will be strong views in the armed forces about what should happen to them. But let us await the recommendation of the AFPRB.

In conclusion, our armed forces, on whom we rely so much, continue to be under pressure in the fields of recruitment and retention. Although the principal reason for people leaving the armed forces is pressure on family life, pay also appears to be entering into the equation, and I think that Ministers in the Department are cognisant of that. We must also do something about the poor quality of repairs and maintenance of service accommodation. I urge the Ministers sitting on the Treasury Bench this afternoon to formally review the performance of CarillionAmey and to be prepared, if necessary, to re-let the contract unless the company succeeds in materially raising its game. We have to continue to attract the brightest and the best to serve us in uniform, and we must continue to provide the resources to make that prospect a reality. We also need to ensure that those people have homes that are fit to live in.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people want to take part in this important debate and that there is limited time. I am therefore putting on a formal time limit of seven minutes, which is likely to be reduced later if there are a great many interventions in everyone's speeches. To speak without hesitation now is Kevan Jones.

2.17 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Government are nothing if not consistent, as Conservative Governments have been throughout history, in that in opposition they call for more expenditure on the armed forces and argue that they are proud supporters of the armed forces, but when they get into power the first thing they do is cut the defence budget and show no respect for the men and women of the armed forces in terms of their pay and conditions. We have heard some remarkable things today. Conservative Back Benchers—including the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who must have quite a few members of the armed forces in his constituency—have been suggesting that pay is not important. Well, I am sure that will be news to those members of the armed forces, when they get that message.

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that what I was trying to say—and what I did say—was that pay was not the No. 1 issue for service. It would be disingenuous to suggest that it was. There are a number of reasons why people serve, and a great experience is on offer to the people of this country who serve. Pay is important, but it is not as important as this debate suggests.

Mr Jones: I find that remarkable. The hon. Gentleman is letting down his constituents by not supporting what we are arguing for, which is a fair deal on pay for members of our armed forces. If I were in his shoes, I would be making sure that I did.

The last Labour Government, during which I served in the Ministry of Defence, had a proud record of accepting the recommendations of the pay review body every single year. For example, the increase was 3.7% in 2001 and 2002 and 3.2% in 2003, and that goes right up to 2010, when the increase was 2%. However, this Government have put in an artificial cap, completely ignoring the pay review body, and it was remarkable to hear the Minister say that that does not matter because people are receiving increments. I am sorry—this may be the trade union official in me coming out here—but where someone starts affects where they end up. A 2% incremental increase may mean an increase in pay, but a 2% increase on the basic level of pay is a damn sight bigger, and we need to recognise that.

Something else that cannot be forgotten is this idea that armed forces pensions are, as I think someone said, gold plated and generous. However, people do not recognise that that is taken into account by the pay review body. I also want to remind the Conservatives that if I had sacked armed forces personnel or made them compulsorily redundant weeks away from their retirement date when I was in charge, I would have been rightly condemned. That is just another example of a Conservative Government saying one thing, but doing another. Making people compulsorily redundant is astounding.

As for the independence of the pay review body, it is clear that the Government have completely ignored its recommendation, but things are even worse than that. The previous Prime Minister David Cameron sacked the head of independent pay review body in 2013 because he did not like what it said about the X factor and pay increases. The Government have not just ignored the

[Mr Kevan Jones]

pay review body; they have interfered in the independent process. Conservative Members may say that pay is not important, but I am yet to meet anyone in life who does not think that getting a decent reward for their efforts is important to them.

Alongside that, we have seen declining morale. One of the Conservative Government's betrayals is that they say, "We stand up for the armed forces." Well, the armed forces stood at 191,710 personnel in 2010, but that is now down to 149,366. The situation is worse than that, however, because there are artificial caps on numbers in the individual services, including the Navy, which is leading to real deployability problems. Ships are not sailing because they do not have the crews. As I said, the Conservatives say that they stand up for the armed forces, but if they genuinely want to do that, they should pay people accordingly and recognise the efforts and sacrifices that individuals make on our behalf. Empty words are fine, but actions in government are different. I am proud that the Labour party—not just in the last Labour Government, but throughout its history—has always stood up for our armed forces by supporting personnel and by ensuring that our country is defended.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): That last Labour Government, for which the hon. Gentleman presumably has some responsibility, left a £38 billion black hole in the defence budget. By contrast, this Government are increasing defence spending. Does he accept that he has some responsibility for that and that the Conservatives stand up for the armed forces?

Mr Jones: I thought the Cameron Kool-Aid had been dispensed with. That figure was plucked out of thin air. I recommend that the hon. Gentleman look at the 2010 National Audit Office report that says that there would be a £6 billion so-called black hole over the next 10 years. The Conservatives dishonestly tried to give the impression that there was a £38 billion black hole to be met in 2010. Both the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) and the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), his successor as Defence Secretary and now Chancellor, miraculously got rid of that black hole within 18 months and said that it had been plugged—do not ask me how they did it. If they could get rid of a £38 billion black hole in less than 18 months, they are in the wrong job. That was complete nonsense. The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) should stop repeating things that are just not true. I give the Conservatives credit for their great job of changing the narrative at the time, but the actual facts are different.

Robert Courts: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jones: No, because I am about to finish. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman looks at the black hole that exists in the current Government's procurement plan. I am not suggesting that it is an in-year black hole; this is about the 10-year equipment plan. The hon. Gentleman may want to look at that, the NAO report and the excellent report out today on how the Government are cannibalising equipment. Please look at the details.

I will finish with a non-partisan point. Everyone across the House recognises the dedication and service of the members of our armed forces, and they deserve

that recognition. In just over a week's time, we will remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and there is a consensus across the House of support for our armed forces, but if we are to support and recognise the sacrifices they make, they need to be paid and resourced at an acceptable level.

2.26 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): In about two weeks' time, millions of people around this country and around the Commonwealth will pause for various public, private, simple and not-so-simple acts of remembrance to remember those who, in the words of the Kohima epitaph, gave their today for our tomorrow. For example, my great-uncle Samuel Coyle fell aged 19 at Gallipoli in 1915 and now lies alongside 600 other British and Commonwealth soldiers at the Pink Farm cemetery in Turkey.

Over the past 12 years or so, I have been lucky enough to have attended many moving remembrance services. In 2008, I was just along the road at the Cenotaph as part of the team that organised the 90th anniversary commemoration of the end of the great war. As a young sub-lieutenant fresh out of Dartmouth, it was incredibly humbling to meet Harry Patch, Henry Allingham and Bill Stone—the three remaining veterans from that incredible generation who endured so much. In 2015, I stood, with colleagues from the European Parliament, in Loos in northern France, taking part in a simple but solemn act of remembrance with local mayor and townspeople as a grey dawn broke across the row upon row of gleaming white headstones, illuminating some 20,000 names of officers and men who fell in that one battle—600 of whom were from the Gordon Highlanders from the north-east of Scotland.

However, the place I think of more than any other at this time is the San Carlos cemetery in the Falkland Islands. I was there in 2007 as young midshipman on my first deployment. It was 17 June and we were commemorating the 25th anniversary of the conflict. Standing there in near sub-zero temperatures, with freezing rain swirling around—I remember it well—I was surrounded by veterans of that war, including Paras, Marines and Welsh Guardsmen, who less than a quarter of a century before had been storming through the freezing waves and upwards on to the rough terrain. Along with islanders who had lived through the terrifying invasion, we stood shoulder to shoulder with the sailors of HMS Sheffield, HMS Ardent and HMS Antelope. Standing there, thousands of miles from the UK, brought home for the first time how much we truly owe to those who were and still are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice to defend us, our country and our way of life.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): This debate is about pay and retention, but Government funding and the duty of care towards armed forces veterans is another issue. The planned cessation of residential services at the Audley Court combat stress facility means that many Welsh veterans suffering from conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder will no longer have access to residential care. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me in pressing the Government to ensure that veterans have access to the sort of care that they may need in the future.

Andrew Bowie: I would be happy to join the hon. Lady in demanding that veterans are given the due care and attention they deserve, having given so much for this country.

To enable people to do their job effectively in our name, it is essential that our armed forces are properly funded and resourced and that they have the tools to do the job. I am sure that the old adage that the three enemies of the Royal Navy are, in reverse order, the enemy of the day, the French and Whitehall is one that still finds sympathy in many mess decks and wardrooms around the fleet, but the fact is that the Government remain steadfast in their support for the armed services.

That support has been shown not just in words but in action. In that regard, the Government cannot be accused of being found wanting. The defence budget will increase by £1 billion a year until at least 2021, ensuring that we remain the country with the second highest defence budget in NATO, the largest defence budget in the EU and the fifth largest defence budget in the world. Seven ships and submarines are in build right now in UK yards. Some £178 billion is being spent on equipment for all three armed services, including the new aircraft carriers, 50 upgraded Apache helicopters and nine Boeing P-8 maritime patrol aircraft. The Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill will, of course, bring our armed forces into line with modern working practices and will make them more adaptable to the demands of 21st-century life.

Those are the actions of a Government committed to our national security and to the serving members of our armed forces. But, of course, it is right that we debate the pay of personnel currently serving on land, at sea and in the air. When this Government came into office, tough decisions had to be taken to attempt to strike a balance between

“the need to recruit, retain and motivate suitably able and qualified people”

and maintaining comparable pay to the civilian sector. That was why the Government took the tough decision to budget for a 1% pay rise across the public sector, including the armed forces. This year, the Armed Forces Pay Review Body recommended a 1% pay increase.

However, it is right that in this place we hear the concerns of those who think that the 1% pay cap could be a factor in recruitment and retention, and I am persuaded that greater flexibility on pay rates could be required in order to ensure that our armed forces have the personnel to continue operating at such a high level. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), I do not recognise such flexibility as a priority on the long list of things that my friends who still serve complain about daily.

Robert Courts: Does my hon. Friend agree that the approach to this debate carries the danger that it becomes very simplistic? Evidence tends to suggest that other issues, such as accommodation—the RAF housing at Carterton in my constituency very much needs attention—and the effect on family life, are more important than pay alone.

Andrew Bowie: I could not agree any more with my hon. Friend. Accommodation is at the top of the very long list that friends of mine remind me of on a daily basis.

I welcome the Treasury’s announcement in September of greater flexibility on pay across the public sector next year, and I look forward to seeing the next recommendations of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body.

The Government value our armed forces personnel. As I have said, we owe our armed forces personnel and all who served before them an immense debt. The Government’s actions in investing record amounts in equipment, in raising our defence budget in real terms, in introducing the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill and in signalling their desire for more flexibility on public sector pay across the board are the actions of a Government committed to the defence of this country.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about how the Government support the armed forces so wholeheartedly. How would he respond to the very recent surveys showing a consistent drop in morale, consistent anxieties about the level of pay and consistent concerns about the direction of travel?

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Gentleman raises some pertinent points but, as has already been said, there are various reasons for people leaving or not joining the armed forces, and pay, which is what we are debating this afternoon, is not the sole reason for the drop in morale.

The actions of this Government are those of a Government who are committed to the defence of this country and to those men and women who join our armed forces to do just that.

2.34 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions to this debate. They have spoken with insight and conviction about the importance of ensuring fair pay for our armed forces personnel, not just as a point of principle but as an essential guarantee for our future recruitment and retention across all three services, which in turn ensures that we will have the right people in the right place and in the right numbers to keep us safe.

We speak here today because our armed forces and their families make daily sacrifices to protect us, so it is only right and proper that we do our duty and look after them. I am therefore delighted that today’s motion, tabled by the Leader of the Opposition and my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), directly mirrors an early-day motion I tabled earlier this year on the need for enhanced salary levels for our armed forces personnel.

I am privileged to chair the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, and it is because of that role that I wish to contribute today. At a time when we and our allies face renewed threats from a resurgent Russian Federation, when the global order is facing unprecedented realignment and when we see global terror attacks on the news bulletins on a weekly basis, not least the horrendous scenes in Manhattan last night, we find ourselves with a Government who seem to be missing the point. It is our service personnel who keep us safe, and we need to ensure that their overall terms and conditions are good enough to recruit and retain in post.

[Ruth Smeeth]

Let us be clear about the current challenge. As other hon. Members have said, we find ourselves facing a personnel deficit of 5%, with stories of declining morale and faltering recruitment targets, and with no fewer than 38 operational pinch points across the three services—gaps that threaten to have a detrimental impact on our planned and contingent operations. We need to ask ourselves, why?

We expect our armed forces personnel to do the extraordinary every day. It is challenging and, all too often, life-threatening work. We ask them to make incredible sacrifices and to cope with intense physical, mental and emotional challenges in the line of duty. From engineers to infantry soldiers, bomb disposal experts to intelligence officers, logisticians to caterers, and pilots to submariners, all our armed forces personnel, at whatever grade and in whatever role, are exceptionally skilled and dedicated men and women.

Our armed forces personnel do not do the job for the money, and we should be in no doubt that people of their calibre may well be able to earn more in other fields, but they do need to pay their bills, as we all do. They deserve recognition, including financial recognition, for their service. It is unacceptable that anyone who makes sacrifices to keep us all safe should struggle to support their family. As chair of the all-party group, servicemen and women and, as importantly, their families tell me that they are struggling. The House needs to recognise that we have a problem when they are earning less in real terms than they were seven years ago.

The pay cap has meant real hardship for many in service, and it is undoubtedly one obstacle to recruitment and, more so, to retention. Not only that, the pay cap is symbolic of how much—or should I say how little?—the men and women of our armed forces mean to the country they serve. The cap's removal would be symbolic, too.

I welcome that the Government are now back-peddalling on the continuation of the 1% pay cap for armed forces personnel. Their recognition that the men and women of our armed forces deserve better than they have been subjected to for these past seven years can only be welcomed by Members on both sides of the House, but I am sure I speak for many when I ask the Minister, what took so long?

My fear, however, is not just the pay cap, which many others have raised today. We need to look at the terms and conditions of our service personnel in the round. Too many servicemen and women have contacted me with concerns about potential cuts to their tour allowances and bonuses for me not to be worried that the Government are planning to rob Peter to pay Paul to fund pay rises. This may all prove to be smoke and mirrors, and our proud servicemen and women might end up no better off next year because they lose the X factor, the tour bonuses from Iraq or other things.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that the pay cut over the past seven years will have an ongoing effect throughout these individuals' lives, as it will affect their final pension?

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Let us be clear about realities: where someone's

base salary is not increased, their pension, which is based on that salary, is also affected. So this affects everybody.

That brings me on to my next point. No trade union can advocate for our armed forces and no staff association can stand up to the Government for them. It is therefore down to us in this House to ensure that they are well paid and to fight their corner, because no one else is going to do it for them. They follow orders—that is what we pay them to do and train them to do. Therefore, they are never going to challenge us. So while they do their duty protecting our national security, at home and abroad, we must do our duty and look after them and their families. Next week, we have Remembrance Sunday and although our servicemen and women do not consider themselves heroes, we should. Heroes do not want handouts—they just want a fair deal. It is the very least they deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Given the number of speakers, I am going to have reduce the time limit to five minutes. I just remind hon. Members that interventions do take away from the time available to others.

2.40 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Let me say from the outset, as a former young soldier who joined the Army in 1974, that pay is important—it is what sometimes makes the job worth while—but it was not the reason I joined, and it is not the reason why most people stay in the armed forces. They stay in for myriad reasons and we must be conscious of the fact that, even though pay is not the most important thing, we must not take them for granted. I think that across the House we would agree with that today. There would be no argument that pay is important, but I can honestly say that pay was not in the top 10 in the leavers surveys that used to sit on my desk when I was Minister for the Armed Forces.

If Her Majesty's Opposition do not get copies, I ask the Minister to allow them to see those surveys. These people are leaving, so they have no reason to lie or to try to get some favour from their units. Lots of other things aside from pay were in these surveys—it was not right up there. Where they were going to go during their career was one such thing—people always had aspirations. Even young guardsmen like me, who knew they would not get past acting corporal, had aspirations. As the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, you start at the bottom and you want to work up. I became the Minister for the Armed Forces, the first one ever from the ranks—from a junior rank—and that to me was exactly what our armed forces should be aspiring to do.

Many of them face many other challenges, and that came out in the surveys I saw. On my first day in the Department, I had all the chiefs in and said, "Is pay the biggest issue? Why am I losing so many servicemen?" As well as recruitment, retention is massively important. It is almost more important, because those people who are in are by far our best recruiters. They go home on leave—they go home to their families and loved ones—and they talk about their experiences in the armed forces.

We train them and we spend huge amounts of money on them. They have dedicated themselves to us, so we want to keep them in.

One thing that I tried to do was to deal with the situation where someone is upset with the unit they are in and they start that process to leave. I wanted us to try to pause them for a fraction and get someone to talk to them, so that they might stay. Perhaps this would be someone in a different unit—in a different part of the armed forces. As the Minister will know, at the moment someone from their own unit usually talks to them to try to convince them to stay, but that person could well be the problem they have had in the first place. So trying to keep these people in the armed forces is massively important. No young soldier, no young matelot, no young Air Force man is ever going to turn around and say, “Don’t give me any more money.” Of course they are not going to do that.

I went around Catterick recently and I went to the Mons part of the barracks, and I would not have put my dog into some of the accommodation the people there were having to live in. I came back and went absolutely berserk, and I understand that those repairs have now been done. But it should not be for the Minister to turn up and see that; these things should be done. Comments were made about CarillionAmey earlier, but I had the pleasure of sacking Atos when I was at the Department for Work and Pensions and, should I be the Minister responsible, it would be my great pleasure to do something similar to other companies when they let us down.

The motion is narrow. Her Majesty’s Opposition, in good faith, missed an opportunity for us to have an open debate about the package that our armed forces need—what we should be offering them.

Johnny Mercer: Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we were to broaden this debate, the Opposition would find wide support for challenging a lot of the pertinent issues. Their narrow focus on this one issue makes it impossible for us to focus on the constructive argument around it.

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. and gallant Friend has hit the nail on the head for me. Nobody in this House does not have respect for our armed forces. Nobody would not want to pay them more. But where does the money come from? What part of—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North Durham is chuntering from a sedentary position. When he was the Minister he should have been paid, because he did it for free and I respect him for that. *[Interruption.]* Well, he should have been paid a lot more for what he was doing. We have bandied this around for many years. The situation for me is: where would the money come from?

I am one of the Conservative Members who wrote to the Chancellor months ago saying that we need to phase the cap out. I passionately believe that if we are in the position now, we have to do it. I was the Policing Minister and I cannot be disingenuous and pretend that I did not push to have it removed for the police; I was also the Fire Minister. The nurses also need it removed. But where is that money going to come from? As the Opposition Front Bencher said, it should not come from expenditure on equipment—I could not agree more.

People cannot just make promises that they are not going to be able to deliver, because that is the worst thing for morale in the armed forces: making promises that we cannot fulfil. If I went through the Lobby to support the motion not knowing where that money was going to come from, I would be ashamed of myself. I cannot actually do that. Do I want the armed forces to get more pay in the long run? Of course I do. I also want this in the short term, but I want them to have the right equipment and the right accommodation. I want them to have the right package, and then we can say that we respect them properly.

2.47 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Let me start by joining other right hon. and hon. Members in acknowledging the work our armed forces do in protecting Britain, both at home and overseas, in difficult circumstances. I wish to specify two people in the armed forces in particular. The first is the erstwhile Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland or, as he is known after passing out at the weekend, Private Tom Blenkinsop of 243 Provost Company, Norton Detachment, 1st Regiment, Royal Military Police. Tom may no longer be an hon. Member in the parlance of this place, but we can all agree that he is certainly an honourable man and still a good friend to many of us.

The second person I wish to mention is Corporal Andy Reid, from Rainford in my constituency. Andy lost both legs and his right arm to an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan, yet this year he and Warrant Officer Glen Hughes cycled 400 miles, kayaked 175 miles and ascended 17,500 feet to raise funds for veterans. I was very honoured, along with the Veterans Minister, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), to host a reception here for Andy.

I use those two cases to illustrate that, as hon. Members have said, money is not the motivation for people to join the armed forces—no one is suggesting it is for a minute—but we do have a duty not to exploit that sense of duty or service, and to treat people and pay people properly. I am sorry to say that I do not think the Government are doing that, and this is causing difficulties for serving personnel and a crisis in recruitment. The Government must address and get to terms with the chronic under-recruitment affecting the Army, but they have been in denial for the past seven years about this. In 2013, when I was the adviser to the then shadow Defence Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), and to the then shadow Defence Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), we opposed the Government plan to cut the Regular Army and expressed deep concerns about a lack of reserve recruitment. The then Defence Secretary, now the Chancellor, said: “to halt that or to seek to reverse it at this stage would simply create confusion in the ranks.”

If the Government continue on their current path, there will not be any ranks left to confuse.

Lady Hermon: Earlier, the Minister gave the impression that the armed forces covenant was working well throughout the country. I am absolutely clear that I am a huge supporter of the implementation of the armed forces covenant, but if it is going swimmingly everywhere, why on earth did it have to be specifically written into the deal between the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party?

Conor McGinn: The hon. Lady makes an important and interesting point. We have certainly tried hard in my constituency and the Metropolitan Borough of St Helens more widely to implement the armed forces covenant, but there have been issues with its implementation in Northern Ireland. I am sure we would all wish to see those issues resolved and its full implementation in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK.

Despite the Government's target in the strategic defence and security review to have 82,000 full-time fully trained troops, as of April this year there were just 78,000 soldiers in the Army. By any measure, that is an abject failure on the Government's watch, and it was rightly identified as a key problem by the former commander of Joint Forces Command, General Sir Richard Barrons. The recent report by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) confirmed that the Regular Army needs to recruit 10,000 people a year to maintain its strength, but managed to attract only 7,000 entrants last year.

Worryingly, alongside all that, the figures show that the numbers leaving the part-time Army Reserve, which we were told would be increased to meet the decline in numbers in the Regular Army, increased by 20% between 1 June 2016 and 1 June 2017. At about the same time, in the most recent financial year the reserve intake fell by 18%. The Government do not seem to have a strategy to turn these falling numbers around. In fact, their only solution so far has been to sack another 120 members of the armed forces personnel who serve as recruiters and replace them with civilians from Capita. I say gently to the Minister—as I said earlier, he is an agreeable chap—that he has a bit of a cheek on him to criticise our plans for recruitment and what we would do with the budget when he is taking money out of the pockets of armed forces personnel and giving it to a private company.

Mark Lancaster *rose*—

Conor McGinn: I suppose I had better give way.

Mark Lancaster: Of course people join the armed forces and people leave—that is the nature of any job and the nature of the armed forces—but to be absolutely clear, over the past three years the numbers in the reserves has increased, not decreased.

Conor McGinn: I do not wish to contravene the rules of the House by getting into a debate with the Minister, but I am not sure that he can express particular confidence that the target of 30,000 reserve recruits will be met. The Government started to publish the figures only after pressure from the Opposition several years ago. We will continue to monitor progress on that in particular, because although, like the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) said earlier, I am not a mathematician, I know that if we need to recruit 10,000 and we are attracting only 7,000 to the Regular Army, and we have not met the quota that we defined to meet national security needs through recruitment to the reserves, it is not going to add up. It is not going to add up for the armed forces, and it is not going to add for the British public.

Mr Francois: In my speech, I gave figures about recruiting targets for the reserves and explained where we currently stand, and I pointed out that we are ahead of target.

Conor McGinn: There is a huge issue with respect to the figures, but there is also a problem in thinking that we can replace regular soldiers with reserves. The truth is that this Government have cut the Army, and they have cut it to below their own target, which was 20,000 below how things stood when Labour left office. There is worry about recruitment and there is worry about capability. With the proposed further cuts, there is a real danger that, in a very dangerous and uncertain global context, Britain's defence and security could be undermined and, indeed, compromised.

On this Government's watch, the armed forces have been cut, their pay is down, key capabilities are being hollowed out and our world-leading defence industry is being left behind—the latter is perhaps something we can debate on another occasion. The armed forces and the British public deserve far, far better.

2.54 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate. First and foremost, it is important that the discussion is based in fact. On that note, we must recognise that a 1% increase to armed forces pay was recommended in January this year—

Mr Kevan Jones: This year, not last year.

Leo Docherty: In 2017. The Government accepted that recommendation. They declared that they were moving away from a blanket 1% cap on public sector pay, and we anticipate that the Armed Forces Pay Review Body will make suggestions that the Government will accept. We must bear in mind that good news when we discuss this issue.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am sorry, but what the hon. Gentleman is saying is just wrong. Over the past six years, the Government have completely ignored the pay review body. I do not know where he gets the idea—I must have missed this—that the Government are going to accept its future recommendations, because I am not aware of such an announcement.

Leo Docherty: If the hon. Gentleman had been paying attention back in September, he would have noticed that the Government indicated that there will be a move away from a blanket 1% public sector pay cap. If the pay review board makes a recommendation to the Government about increasing pay, it is likely that the Government will accept it, so it is entirely erroneous to paint a picture of armed forces pay being cut.

We must recognise that, broadly, the offer to the armed forces is good. In addition to increases in basic salary, armed forces personnel enjoy subsidised housing and non-contributory pensions. That is important and we must recognise it. There are of course concerns, and we must be vigilant in safeguarding and improving the experiences of our armed forces personnel, but the offer is good. I hear from people in my constituency concerns that are more related to kit and equipment, and to opportunities for training and deployment.

The issue of pay should not be a political football to be kicked around by Opposition Members. There is a good story to tell and we should be positive about the broad offer that the armed forces present to people.

Sadly, the Opposition are talking it down; to demonstrate how, I shall quote the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

Mrs Moon *rose*—

Leo Docherty: I shall make some progress before I give way.

A few years ago, the Leader of the Opposition said:

“I would like us to live in a world where we spend a lot less on defence.”

In 2015, he said:

“Why do we have to be able to have planes, transport aircraft, aircraft carriers and everything else to get anywhere in the world?” Shortly after that, he said:

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if every politician around the world, instead of taking pride in the size of their armed forces, did what the people of Costa Rica have done and abolished their army”.

What a disgraceful indictment of the Leader of the Opposition’s attitude.

Nia Griffith: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to do what the Leader of the Opposition is going to do today and vote for the motion to show his unequivocal support for our armed forces.

Leo Docherty: I look forward to every single opportunity in this place to demonstrate my commitment to the armed forces, but playing the games of the Opposition will not be included in my repertoire.

I was pleased during Prime Minister’s questions to extend a warm invitation to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to visit my constituency, Aldershot, the home of the British Army, and the Aldershot garrison. In the spirit of public service and the national interest, I extend that invitation to the Leader of the Opposition. If he made time in his diary to spend time with some of the regiments we have in the garrison—including the 1st Battalion the Grenadier Guards, the 1st Battalion the Scots Guards, the 4 Rifles and the Queen’s Own Gurkha Logistic Regiment—that would not only improve his turnout, but generate a greater degree of sympathy for the armed forces that he would do well to express in future.

On a slightly more serious note, the message that we send to our young men and women who are considering a career in the armed forces must be positive and upbeat. We live in a time of unparalleled global instability: the middle east is in flames; NATO is being challenged by Russia; and there is a potential nuclear conflagration in North Korea. We have huge global threats and challenges. I am very pleased that the British armed forces will be able to deliver on a global scale both hard and soft power over the coming years. We should make it very clear to the young men and women who are considering serving in the armed forces that the future is very bright. If there are any young people who are watching this debate, they should know that there are tremendous careers available in the armed forces. If they do join up, they will be doing their country proud.

3 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate today—and of course a great pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), not least because it means that his speech has come to an end.

On a more serious note, as the hon. Gentleman would say, in 11 days’ time all of us will be standing around our local cenotaphs. One thing that moves me greatly is meeting the families of military personnel—both former and present—and hearing the issues that they raise. One such issue is below-inflation pay settlements, but there are other problems relating to accommodation and how rises in costs are not met by those pay settlements, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan).

Mention was also made earlier about the credit unions, which were an excellent initiative. Let us not forget that those unions were set up because research showed that 20,000 military personnel—and former military personnel—were relying on payday loans. That is the reality of the situation. I pay tribute to the Government, as they listened to the Royal British Legion on its campaign. I wish to use this debate in the hope that they will listen to the Royal British Legion on another campaign—the “count them in” campaign. In that campaign, the Royal British Legion is asking for a designated question or questions in the census so that more information can be provided on who our military and former military personnel are, so that they can be better served in our communities.

I hope that Ministers will welcome the fact that the Office for National Statistics made a very positive report on this subject. It said:

“Our understanding of the user need for information on those who have served, and now left, the UK armed forces has grown.”

The ONS has noted that linked data only partially meets the users’ needs. We now know also that 88% of people surveyed by the ONS think that it is acceptable to ask these designated questions. The ONS further comments:

“Based on the testing so far, the ONS have concluded that it will be possible to finalise a question that works and is broadly acceptable.”

I really hope that, at this time of year and before the next census is prepared, our Government honour the campaign of the Royal British Legion; honour what is being requested by many military families around our country; listen to the very thoughtful words of the ONS; and fully support the “count them in” campaign so that we as a country can better serve those people who have served and are serving us.

3.4 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words in this debate. I must admit that I was a little surprised when I read that this was the topic that had been chosen by the Opposition, given that the Leader of the Opposition, when faced with the option on Armed Forces Day to honour the British armed forces, chose instead to go and stand in a field in Glastonbury to talk about dismantling Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent.

It is important to place all this in context. The allegation being made is that the UK Government are not supporting the armed forces. Well, let us take a look at that. The British Government have the second largest budget in NATO and the largest in the EU. We are meeting the 2% target, which, by the way, Germany, Italy and Spain are not. Furthermore, spending is forecast to increase. Seven ships and submarines have started to

[Alex Chalk]

be built. There is a kit projection of £178 billion between 2016 and 2026. What does that translate into? It translates into jobs in my constituency. For example, the excellent CDS Defence Support will be supporting that investment.

Something that has not been mentioned thus far is the fact that £1.9 billion will be invested in intelligence spending, so that GCHQ in my constituency will be able to expand and to keep us safe. It is concerning that that £1.9 billion seems to have been forgotten. To put it in context, that is about half of the total amount that we spend on prisons. That is something that the UK Government are supporting. Let me add this: spending supports not just the valiant and skilful men and women of our armed forces and intelligence services, but the local economy. A cyber-innovation centre has been set up in Cheltenham and is doing great work. The finest minds are going in and out of places such as GCHQ to nurture small businesses.

Of course the issue of pay is important, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) has said, it is part of a basket of issues. It is not for me to advise the Loyal Opposition on what to talk about, but it might have been more judicious to broaden the scope and the basket of issues. Some issues, such as accommodation, are clearly very important. To focus the whole debate purely on pay is, I say respectfully, ill advised.

Bob Stewart: In 28 years, I cannot recall a soldier complaining about pay. However, they often complained about allowances, particularly when changing from one theatre to another on operations and losing their local overseas allowance. That is correct. They do complain about that, and it is something that we should look at, because service personnel, particularly those in the junior ranks, find it very difficult.

Alex Chalk: That is exactly the kind of sophistication that should be brought to this debate. We should be looking at specific issues, that can improve the lives of serving soldiers, sailors and airmen and women.

The principles that we should apply are tolerably simple. First, we should listen to independent experts—the pay review bodies—and, secondly, we should build in flexibility where there is a skills shortage. I will return to that briefly in a moment. It is right, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister indicated in Prime Minister's questions today, to look at the context of the public finances. She said that we are spending £50 billion a year on debt interest alone. That raises a really important moral argument. When we talk about the future of our armed forces, we do not just want armed forces for today, tomorrow or next week; we want our children to be able to enjoy the protection of the armed forces as well.

What is Labour's suggested solution to this? Notwithstanding the fact that we have public borrowing of about £58 billion each year and a national debt of £1.7 trillion, its remedy is more borrowing, more debt and more tax. Where does that leave us as a country? If we were to borrow an additional £500 billion, as has been suggested, our national debt would go from £1.7 trillion to £2.2 trillion. What happens to that £50 billion that we are spending each year? It goes to

about £65 billion. Basically, before we pay for a single soldier, a single police officer, or a single nurse, we will be spending £62 billion a year when the entire defence budget is £36 billion. There will be people born today in our country who in 30 years' time, through no fault of their own, will either knock on the door of the welfare state because, as an entirely deserving case, they need assistance, or they will want the protection of our armed forces, but the cupboard risks being bare if the Opposition are able to achieve what they want to achieve.

Mr Kevan Jones: I thought that the Tory party's script had changed; obviously the hon. Gentleman does not have the new one. Will he explain, therefore—

Alex Chalk *rose*—

Mr Kevan Jones: He needs to sit down.

Alex Chalk: I was chomping at the bit.

Mr Kevan Jones: The Government were able to find £1 billion out of fresh air to pass over in their agreement with the Democratic Unionist party in Northern Ireland so that they could stay in power, so why can they not fund the pay of our armed forces?

Alex Chalk: With respect, that argument has been made with tedious regularity. It betrays a complete lack of understanding of the public finances. This country borrows £58 billion every single year. The nation spends £803 billion a year. Yet, Labour wants to borrow £500 billion, which in turn would increase our annual payment by something in the order of £12 billion. That would be monstrous and disastrous for the UK economy and future generations. There is an issue of generational justice, and that is a message that Labour has not learned.

Nia Griffith: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us whether he thinks it is better to get this country's deficit down by asking the wealthy and the big corporations to pay a little bit more, or does he want it to come off the backs of our hard-working armed forces?

Alex Chalk: With respect, that is complete financial illiteracy. The top 1% in this country are paying 28% of total spending. That is a higher figure than ever. The hon. Lady fails to mention that people started to pay tax at earnings of a little more than £6,000 under the last Labour Government. We do not require the lowest paid to pay tax after £6,000 now; the threshold is up at £11,500. That means more money in the pockets of low-paid people. We have increased the national living wage, which also puts more money in the pockets of ordinary people. It is the complete inability to engage with the figures that, with respect, undermines Labour's position.

It is important, of course, that we do everything that we possibly can to support our brave men and women. It is also important that we increase flexibility where there are shortages, which is why it is important to observe that there may be extenuating circumstances—for example, in GCHQ, where there is sometimes difficulty getting and retaining the brightest and the best. We want brilliant armed forces today, tomorrow and in the years to come, and that is why I will not support the Labour motion.

3.12 pm

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

I reflect on the values and standards that I was taught in the service. A fundamental one was the notion that credible leadership is derived from serving others and serving the interests particularly of those we lead. This House could demonstrate its leadership and its credibility in the leadership of our armed forces by ensuring that our service personnel have the adequate remuneration that reflects the nature of their service and dedication to our country. Only 33% of service personnel are satisfied with the basic rate of pay, so it is clear that there is dissatisfaction. It is a rather ill-observed point that, just because pay is not the primary driver of someone's behaviour and career development, it is not important and not worthy of discussion in this House. It is, in fact, very worthy of discussion in this House, and I repudiate those sentiments utterly.

It has been mentioned that the X factor of incremental pay reflects the antisocial nature of the career of regular forces and that it makes up for the fall-off and restraint on pay. But it does not; only a quarter of the personnel surveyed think that it is sufficient compensation for the disruption it causes in their lives. A key thing to bear in mind is that the X factor is not much of an X factor at all.

An interesting observation about service pay that has been made across the House is that service in the armed forces provides a great opportunity for career development, particularly for young people. One of the great advantages of joining the armed forces is that the lower increment for minimum wage does not apply. It would be great if the Scottish National party could reflect that sentiment in ensuring that we continue to extend the opportunity to serve in our armed forces to 16 and 17-year-olds.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to a recent debate on policy change at my party's conference. I am sure he will note when he gets to his feet that I argued against that change in policy.

Mr Sweeney: It is reassuring indeed that the SNP spokesperson on defence matters continues to uphold the principle that young people should be allowed to join the armed forces and develop their careers in the service. That is most welcome.

Consider a servicemember on the lowest basic rate of pay. When on 24-hour deployments—on exercise or operations—their basic pay could actually go down to a notional value of £2 an hour. Is that really the value of our armed forces when they are dedicated to that extent? Any plans to remove the increments associated with overseas service are totally unacceptable. We should bear that in mind when we consider appropriate rates of pay for our armed forces. We talk about the great opportunity that a career in the service provides, particularly for skills development, apprenticeships and trade opportunities.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point about career prospects and the package. Why was that not in Labour's motion? Many of us would have agreed with exactly what he is talking about.

Mr Sweeney: We are making the point that, by virtue of that great opportunity for development, these people are very attractive to the private sector. When inflation picks up and private sector salaries respond, we will see increasing pressure on retention in the services, especially if pay continues to lag behind that in the private sector. We need to address the situation urgently if we are to continue making our armed forces capable.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): In Plymouth, the private sector is already poaching some of the engineering grades in particular, and pay is one of the reasons why people are leaving the armed services to work in the private sector. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the case?

Mr Sweeney: Yes, I absolutely agree. Engineering and air crews in particular have urgent issues of undermanning in the service.

It is alarming that the entire Regular Army can be comfortably seated in Wembley stadium now that its numbers have fallen below 82,000 and it is 6% undermanned. In contrast, the Regular Army numbered 103,000 when I joined in 2006 and it could not fit into Wembley stadium.

The defence budget has fallen from 2.5% of GDP to under 2% over the term of this Tory Government. There is a chaotic equipment programme. Whether it is Nimrod or the cats and traps on the carriers, fiasco after fiasco has bled resources out of the armed forces through a lack of efficient management of equipment programmes. It is shocking that armed forces pay should suffer as a result.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I just want to give the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to correct what he just said. It was the Labour Government who chose to abandon cats and traps, and who slowed down the building of the aircraft carrier, which cost over £1 billion on top of the original bill. That is what happened to the aircraft carrier under a Labour Government.¹

Mr Sweeney: I have to correct the Minister. That is factually incorrect. I worked at BAE Systems at the time. The project was commissioned as a result of the 2010 strategic defence and security review, and £1 billion was utterly wasted before the project was cancelled.

I will quickly draw my comments to a conclusion. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has highlighted that the 2016-17 pay review was not an increase in real terms at all because of the impact of national insurance increases and the changes to housing cost allowances. From 2010 to present, it actually represents a 5.3% cut in real-terms pay for our armed forces. The reality is borne out by the evidence presented today, and it is comprehensive. We have seen a litany of failure, falling expenditure and stagnating incomes. That leads to a fall in morale. As a result, outflow has exceeded recruitment since 2011. Let us come together in this House today to recognise that there is a vicious cycle of downsizing. We must move towards a virtuous cycle of investment that will stop the continued degradation of our armed forces and ensure that the operational effectiveness of our armed forces is secure for the future in a very dangerous world.

1. [Official Report, 20 November 2017, Vol. 631, c. 3-4MC.]

3.18 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you for squeezing me in, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not going to speak today but I felt compelled to come to the Chamber and give my two pence-worth. I very much enjoyed the contribution of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), but it would be remiss of me not to point out how narrowly he danced on the line between delusion and fiction. He was veterans Minister in 2008-09, when I was fighting those campaigns. This is not about me or about anybody's personal service; this is about truth and fact, and the fact is that the equipment with which we fought those campaigns and the care for veterans were simply appalling. I cannot stand here and allow Opposition Members to say that Labour's record on defence is so—

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Johnny Mercer: No, I will not give way at this moment.

I cannot say that the Labour party's record on defence is so superior to the Conservative party's.

Mr Kevan Jones: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for one Member to accuse another Member of something that is not true and then not allow that Member to respond to it?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) will feel that if he has referred to another hon. Member in that way, he might like to take an intervention.

Johnny Mercer: Am I alleged to have said something that is not true? What have I said that is not true?

Mr Kevan Jones: I am not going to get into a discussion. What is not true is what the hon. Gentleman just said about cutting support for veterans.

Johnny Mercer: I didn't say that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Can we not have conversation across the Chamber? This is an intervention and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View will then respond to it.

Mr Jones: I was proud to introduce the Army Recovery Capability, which made sure we supported the armed forces coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq with severe injuries. I was proud to be a part of a Labour Government who introduced the Armed Forces (Pensions and Compensation) Act 2004, which for the first time brought in lump sum payments for those severely injured. The track record of our Administration on support for veterans will stand up to any scrutiny in comparison with what the Conservative Government have done since.

Johnny Mercer: It may be worth the hon. Gentleman putting that debate on our offer to our veterans and service personnel to the court of public opinion. The time between 2003 and 2015 saw the biggest explosion of military charities this country has ever seen because of the lack of provision that he presided over. It would be a good thing to put that into the public domain and to see whether his argument bears out the facts.

It is important that this debate is grounded in fact. This should not be a partisan issue. We should not be talking about what Labour did or what the Conservative Government did. There are areas—*[Interruption.]* I have to talk about it, because of the fiction coming from the Opposition. We need to work harder on some serious elements of defence—mental health, veterans' care, what we want our armed forces to stand for, and, crucially, what we do not want from our armed forces as we move forward to the period post-Brexit—but we must ground this debate in credibility and reality.

Yes, when it comes to pay everybody would like to be paid more. I could not find a single serviceman or woman in the UK armed forces today who would not like more money, but it would be disingenuous in the extreme if I were to stand here and say that that is the single blanket issue that drives down recruitment and reduces our ability to retain skilled men and women, or to say that a career in the armed forces is not worth it or completely constrained by appalling terms and conditions. That is not the case.

I want to address what is one of the most frustrating things about this place. We have a world-class military. Of all the things I can be accused of, of which there are many, being a Government lackey on defence is not one of them. If Members look at my record on the Iraq Historic Allegations Team and defence spending, or have a brief conversation with the Minister for the Armed Forces, who recoils at the very mention of my name, they will know that I am not a defence lackey. On our capability, yes, we had more ships in the Falklands and more tanks and so on, but in the Falklands a lot of the guns and the ships did not work. The Type 26 frigate is one of the world's most capable combat ships. Members can shake their heads and say, "Well, it doesn't employ millions of people and the steel did not come from exactly where I wanted it to," but we have a world-class military. It is therefore extremely disingenuous to the people of this country to constantly use this as a political football between the Labour party and the Conservative party over who is doing better on defence. We have deep challenges, but I gently suggest that pay is not one of them.

Anna Soubry: Does my hon. Friend agree that the reasons why some fall out of our armed forces are hugely complex? There are all sorts of different reasons. It could be accommodation. It could be that they often find it difficult with their spouses, who want employment and some sort of family life. In an increasingly modern world, that is often thought not to be compatible with military service. There is a rich and important mixture of different things; it is not just one thing and it is not just pay.

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. That is why the Government are trying hard. I come back to the fact that I am not going to stand here and say it is all rosy when it comes to defence. On Monday, the Government had the Second Reading of the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which will fundamentally change the offer we give. We have to constantly challenge the offer we give to our armed forces personnel, but to pretend that pay is the limiting factor as to why so many people are leaving and why we have so many challenges on recruitment is not fair on the Government and not fair on the people who serve. We are making them think it is an issue when it is not.

We have a lot of work to do on defence, but pay is not a part of that. Let us put the debate into the realms of reality, so we can get somewhere and deliver something for those who I know will be watching this debate and scanning it for credibility. They will not, I am afraid, have seen much of that today.

3.26 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): No one believes that our armed forces are anything but among the best in the world. There is no division about that. Everybody knows as well that it is not just pay, but I think there are some real challenges facing our armed forces today both in terms of retention and recruitment.

I would like to use the Government's own statistics, published on 12 October straight from the MOD. I think pay is relevant and is one of those challenges. I agree about accommodation and all the other comments that have been made, but pay is a factor. It is really important for the Minister to understand the scale of the challenge we are facing as a country in the recruitment and retention of our armed forces. The key points and trends from the Government's own figures show that the strength of UK armed forces personnel is down. Full-time trained strength—down. I say to the Minister that that is with the new way to judge what are full-time personnel, where people do just phase 1 training, not phases 1 and 2. Deficit against the planned number of personnel needed—up. People joining the UK regular armed forces—down. People joining the future reserves—down.

Bob Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Vernon Coaker: No. I am sorry, but other Members would not be able to speak.

People who have left the future reserves—an increase.

I am not saying to the Minister or the House that we are all doomed, but we would be neglecting our responsibilities if we did not look at what is happening. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), in an excellent speech, pointed out the difficulties in relation to hollowing out. There is good news, but there are also real problems. It is the same with pay. The Minister said that pay had gone up, yet his own documentation shows, in figure 11, that armed forces pay has actually gone down. Either the Minister is publishing wrong information on the internet, or his speech is wrong. We also learn that the real growth of military salaries is negative, at minus 0.1% during 2015-16.

I just wanted to put those facts on the table, because there is a real challenge for us as a country and a Parliament in terms of what we do about this issue. We have been debating recruitment to the armed forces for years. We have been debating the retention of armed forces personnel for years. We can argue about who is right and who is wrong, but this country faces a very real difficulty with this issue. I think pay is one aspect of it, and accommodation is another.

However, I want to point out another thing to the Minister—members of other bodies to do with defence have heard me say this before. The policy briefing—this is part of the issue—talks about the main factors affecting decisions about the size of the armed forces required by the Ministry of Defence to achieve success in its military tasks. It lists a number of things, but the crucial one is

an assessment of current and future threats to UK national security. We need to explain to the public what we want our armed forces for, what we expect them to do and, therefore, why we wish people to join them. Some of that is about having a grown-up conversation with people. Yes, we should talk about recruiting, but we should have a clear vision of why we are proud of our armed forces and the job they do, and why we need them to pursue the objectives we as a country have, whether abroad or defending our citizens at home against the threats we face.

There are real challenges, and they are set out in the Government's own documents. The Minister needs to say how things will be different, so that we can see success, rather than these perennial debates about what we will do about the fact that we are not recruiting enough people and not retaining enough people for long enough.

3.30 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank the Opposition Front-Bench team for calling this important debate, and I will be supporting the motion.

This is an opportunity to debunk some of the myths and misrepresentations we have heard during the debate about the Labour party's defence policy. In the Labour party manifesto "For the many not the few" it is written with complete clarity that Labour supports a

"strong, viable and sustainable defence and security policy"

and that that

"must be strategic and evidence led",

and not the financially driven defence agenda of the Conservative party.

The manifesto also says:

"We will ensure that our armed forces are properly equipped and resourced to respond to wide-ranging security challenges."

There is a suggestion that the Conservative party is somehow the guardian of probity and competence, but there are many examples—the Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft, the 18-month delay with the RFA Tidespring and the disbanding of the Harrier force—where the Government's procurement decisions have impacted on the defence budget. Labour is also committed to spending at least 2% of GDP on defence, and we

"will guarantee that our Armed Forces have the necessary capabilities to fulfil the full range of obligations"

that are set for them.

We have a duty to properly reward and remunerate our armed forces. It is clear that, under the Conservatives, they have been hit by rent rises, pay restraint, and changes to tax and benefits, which has put real pressure on service personnel and their families. Labour will ensure that servicemen and women get the pay and living conditions their service merits.

I do not have a military base or establishment in my constituency, but I am fortunate to have a strong and active forces community, and it has a noble tradition of high levels of recruitment to all three armed services. This Sunday—5 November—there will be a unique act of remembrance in my constituency. Last year, the Remember Them Fund constructed a huge poppy, using thousands of painted beach pebbles—I live by the coast next to Seaham harbour—to create a stunning tribute

[Grahame Morris]

to the servicemen and women of our armed forces. This Sunday, at the foot of “Tommy”, a renowned piece of local artwork commemorating the last moments of world war one, another unique tribute is to be unveiled. It is to be called “Fruits of the Sea”, and it will use natural materials collected from the award-winning east Durham coast, such as seashells, scallops and shingle, to form a huge poppy.

I am delighted to have been invited to unveil this year’s poppy artwork. In a spirit of solidarity and generosity, I would be very happy to invite the Minister to accompany me. He would be more than welcome to visit Seaham this weekend to help to highlight this year’s poppy appeal. I hope that in his closing statement he will commend the work of all the volunteers who have spent many months planning this tribute in support of our service personnel. It is one of many examples of how communities honour the armed forces covenant, which is a really important aspect of how we treat our veterans.

I am sorry that because of the shortage of time I am not able to develop these arguments. Marvellous work is done by terrific charities such as the Royal British Legion, SSAFA and, in my area, the Remember Them Fund. We have a moral obligation to the men and women who risk their lives to protect us. The nation owes them a debt of honour and we should ensure that we fulfil that debt. The modest armed forces pension is another issue that many veterans identify to me as causing them significant problems. I urge the House to support the Opposition motion.

3.36 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank Opposition Front Benchers for calling this debate.

I was recently approached by the wife of a serving member of the armed forces who described to me the daily struggle that her family face in the light of the fact that her husband, a private in the Army, has not had a real-terms pay increase under this Government. In fact, figures from the Armed Forces Pay Review Body show that they have had a 5.3% real-terms reduction in pay since 2010. As with many families of service personnel, they rely on this income due to the fact that a life in the military often stations families away from their support networks, with real financial and childcare implications. She recently received a letter from the Combined Accommodation Assessment System, or CAAS, which outlines a year-on-year increase in the charges for their quarters. How does the Minister suggest that this family make ends meet as they face greater charges on the one hand and a real-terms pay cut on the other?

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con) *rose*—

Alex Sobel: I am sorry, but I must make progress.

On top of this, as a family of five, they have been hit hard by the Government’s two-child cap on child benefit. The personal experience of the woman I spoke to is reflected in the findings of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, whose latest report says:

“A common theme from our visits was that the one per cent basic pay award for 2016-17 was not perceived as an increase as it coincided with increases in National Insurance, changes in tax

credits and CAAS increases...that left a number of Service personnel seeing a reduction in take home pay”.

It is no wonder, given these circumstances, that servicemen and women are leaving the profession and that the armed forces are now facing a recruitment and retention crisis.

Like most Members on both sides of the House, I am wearing a poppy to commemorate and honour those who have sacrificed their lives in the service of our country. The best way to honour those who put themselves at risk is to make sure that their families are not living hand to mouth. As my former constituent said to me—she is no longer my constituent as the family have been stationed away from her home county of Yorkshire for some time—she is one more ill-advised Government reform away from not being able to afford to feed her family. This is again reflected in the report of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, which says:

“On levels of pay generally, our visit programme made clear that Service personnel are becoming increasingly frustrated with public sector pay policy.”

Last week, we saw a BBC “Panorama” programme that showed a mental health nurse brought to tears, a firefighter forced to take a second job, and a homeless police officer. If we add to that the family of an Army private struggling to cope, we get a full picture of the destruction that is caused by this Government’s systemic squeeze on living standards and public sector pay. I would like Ministers to consider this: we once built a land fit for heroes—what has happened?

3.38 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): We have had a very good debate today. Members of the House have made excellent contributions, but I do not have time to refer to them—I apologise.

It is true to say that our armed forces face enormous problems. They have a huge problem with recruitment and retention and face the scandalous inadequacy of the levels of remuneration for the men and women who are prepared to put their lives on the line to defend this country. Those problems are linked. In a report commissioned by the Prime Minister and published in July this year, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talked about a perfect storm against which military recruiters have had to battle. As he said, the regular strength of the UK’s armed forces is some 5% below what was planned. There is also the problem of retention, with more personnel leaving the services than joining them.

Although there are several reasons why the armed forces are in such a predicament, a large part of the blame must rest with how the Army recruits its personnel, for which Capita bears a large measure of responsibility. The “hollowing out” in the ranks, which the right hon. Gentleman referred to in his report, is caused by several factors. Without doubt, the privatisation of Army recruitment and the outsourcing of aspects of recruitment for the other services has played a major role. The poor quality of living accommodation for servicemen and women and their families is another important factor.

Mark Lancaster: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Wayne David: I am sorry, but time is short. Another huge problem is the levels of pay in the armed forces. As the most recent pay review body report indicates, members of the armed forces

“feel their pay is being unfairly constrained in a period when costs are rising, private sector earnings are starting to recover, and the high tempo demands on the Armed Forces have not diminished.”

Mark Lancaster: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Wayne David: Time is limited, as the Minister knows. I respectfully ask him to sit down.

The Government say that they are introducing flexibility in the future pay regime, but let us be clear. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body stated in its 2017 report that the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury sent it a letter to say that the Government’s policy of pay restraint remained in place. The letter states:

“We will fund public sector workforces for pay awards of an average of 1 per cent a year, up to 2019/20.”

The pay review body report makes it clear that that is the context in which the body was obliged to work, and that point has been well made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones).

Mark Lancaster *rose*—

Wayne David: If there is to be greater flexibility, as the Secretary of State has hinted, where will the extra money come from? The MOD is already undertaking a mini defence review and significant cuts are already being considered, with 1,000 Marines, HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion ready for the chop. It would be totally unacceptable for any pay increase to be funded by further cuts to the defence budget. Will the Minister indicate when he responds that the Department has the courage to stand up to the Treasury and demand that extra money be forthcoming for our brave men and women in the armed forces?

Mark Lancaster *rose*—

Wayne David: Where will the money come from? We will call for extra contributions of up to 5% from large corporations and we will demand that the super-rich pay a little bit more, instead of enjoying the largesse that the Government have given them. I am not hopeful that that will happen, however, not least because I understand that rather than fighting for more resources, the Secretary of State and his friends—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It is up to the shadow Minister to give way, or not. My understanding is that there was no giving way earlier, so if there is tit for tat, that is up to each individual; it is not for the Chair. What I do not want is this continuous barracking across the Chamber, with Members saying, “He is not giving way” and, “Will he give way?”. *[Interruption.]* Order. There are no more contributions, are there? Wayne David, please.

Wayne David: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that the chuntering and the interruptions are indicative of the crass behaviour of the Ministry of Defence, which we are debating this afternoon.

I am not hopeful that Ministers will stand up for the armed forces, which they claim to support, not least because I understand that rather than fighting for more resources, the Secretary of State for Defence is considering scrapping the special allowance given to soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Will the Minister, in his response—I will give him time to respond—make a commitment not to cut the special service allowance?

As we approach Remembrance Sunday—several Members mentioned it, including my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones)—it is surely imperative that the House unites in support of our armed forces. This afternoon, many contributions have strongly supported lifting the pay cap. I very much hope that all of us will support the motion, and call for a fair pay rise for our armed forces. Especially at this time of the year, our armed forces deserve nothing less. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Ellwood *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister should sit down for a second.

Mr Lancaster, I do not know whether you are deliberately trying to frustrate the Chair—I am sure that is not your intention—but you are going a good way towards doing so. Let me help you. It is up to the Opposition spokesman when he sits down. The Minister has asked for extra time to respond, so you should be thanking Mr David for sitting down to give him that extra time. Let us have less chuntering, and let us hear from Minister Ellwood.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to what has been a passionate and mostly constructive debate. It is a real pleasure to add my support, as expressed on both sides of the House, for our noble, gallant and brave armed forces.

Before I respond to the debate, may I join the Prime Minister and I am sure the whole House in sending our best wishes, thoughts and prayers to those affected by yet another terrorist attack in Manhattan in New York? That place is close to my heart: I was born there, and I have worked there as well. The attack reflects the type of security challenges we continue to face not just in this country, but across the world.

As the Minister for the Armed Forces said, we need to see this debate in the wider context of fiscal responsibility, and that must be the backdrop to any discussion on pay. It is only with a growing economy that we can responsibly make any changes to funding for Departments. Let us not forget that we inherited a deficit of almost £150 billion. That is now down by three quarters, but the annual interest on the nation’s debt continues to be more than £50 billion every year, and we cannot simply take money if it does not exist. Under this Government, the economy is growing, employment is up and it is now possible to lift the 1% pay freeze imposed by the Treasury, which is good news.

This debate has focused primarily on armed forces pay, but that cannot be directly compared with other types of public sector pay, such as in the NHS and so forth—we must look at the other aspects that make wearing the uniform very different. We have to recognise the subsidised accommodation and food; the X factor pay, which many hon. Members mentioned; the pensions package; the free medical and dental care; the allowances, including operational pay; and of course the automatic pay progression, which has also been mentioned. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body considers all those factors before any changes are made.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Specifically on pensions, the MOD's continuous attitude survey shows that dissatisfaction with the package was at 38% in 2013, but is now at 52%. Why?

Mr Ellwood: I take from the continuous attitude survey that, yes, we have to recognise the concerns about pay and indeed about pensions—such concerns are felt on both sides of the House—but the biggest concerns are the long periods of separation and the pressures on family life. That is exactly why we are introducing the armed forces people programme, which will alleviate the pressure on families caused by separation. We are providing a new joiners' offer and a new accommodation offer, and we are also looking at a new enterprise approach, which will allow highly capable people in the private sector to slide across into the armed forces. There is also the flexible engagement model that we debated in the Chamber on Monday.

As the Minister for the Armed Forces said, and this has been reiterated by Members on both sides of the House, we must recognise how different it is to wear the uniform in today's context. It is becoming tougher to recruit because we have full employment, and it is becoming difficult to retain because of the challenges and competition we have in public life. Unlike the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David)—who perhaps teased my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces in denying him the ability to intervene—we recognise those different circumstances, and we are trying to get people to step forward.

The conduct of war itself has changed. What we expect to ask of our brave service personnel is also different. That is the context of the debate, and that is reflected perhaps in the recruitment and retention challenges that have been echoed across the House.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for giving way, particularly as I did not get a chance to ask this question when the debate finished half an hour early the other day. Earlier, the Minister for the Armed Forces said that the current commissioning course at Sandhurst was at full capacity, but I looked at the figures for the most recent course: only 210 places were taken up when the capacity was 270. Can the Minister clarify what is going on? Is the course at capacity or not?

Mr Ellwood: If I may, I will ask my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces to write to the hon. Gentleman with the details, but I do not shy away from the challenges that we face. I have just made that clear. It is difficult to recruit and retain in the manner that we would wish because of a number of circumstances, which have been highlighted by the report produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). I shall come to that shortly.

Conor McGinn *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: This will be the last time I give way, if I may.

Conor McGinn: The Minister for the Armed Forces was quick to his feet earlier to dispute figures that I gave that show that numbers leaving the Army Reserve increased by 20% between June last year and this year. Furthermore,

the intake decreased by 18%. Those are not my figures; they are the Government's figures. Would the Minister care to acknowledge that?

Mr Ellwood: I think that, overall, reserve numbers are up, but, again, I will ask my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces to write to the hon. Gentleman with more detail.

To move on—

Wayne David: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. He tests the patience of the House in rising to his feet after denying my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces I do not know how many times the opportunity to intervene.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), talked about the importance of Remembrance Day, which was also highlighted by other hon. Members, and about the importance of pay itself. She also talked about the role of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, whose recommendations will, I understand, come through in March.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) used the debate as an opportunity mostly to promote his views on Trident, which are not shared across the House. Indeed, this nation would become a lot weaker if we were to get rid of Trident. That would not be in anybody's interest.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford produced a report highlighting some of the challenges we face, and I fully agree with him that we need to work on improving diversity. It is important that we attract the brightest and the best, and that includes recruitment moving up to 15% by 2020 for women, and up to 10% for BAME—black, Asian and minority ethnic. I am grateful to him for the work he did on that important report.

The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) talked about the black hole in defence finances. We came into government recognising that £38 billion was seemingly missing, because it had been stolen from future budgets, but let us take a step back.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: In a second. When we came into government, we found a black hole in the nation's finances, with £150 billion missing. Although the Labour Government managed to balance the books back in 2000, in every single year thereafter they spent more and more money that they did not have, but which belonged to the taxpayer. That is why we ended up with the deficit and the recession—they were taking money that did not exist.

Mr Jones: I am sorry that the Cameron Kool-Aid is now being handed round again in the Conservative party. I ask the Minister to look at the facts—

Mr Ellwood *rose*—

Mr Jones: Look at the National Audit Office report of 2010. What it said on the equipment budget, not the overall budget, was that on its current basis the figure would be £6 billion. If there was no increase in line with

inflation over a 10-year period, the figure would be £36 billion, not £38 billion—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. First, if the Minister takes the intervention both Members cannot be on their feet and he cannot suddenly say, “I don’t want to hear any more of it.” In fairness, if he gives way he needs to let the intervention get to the end. If I think the intervention is too long, let me take that decision. Let us not have both Members on their feet.

Mr Ellwood: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I make it clear that the facts are very clear. Look at any—

Mr Jones: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Look what you’ve done now. You’ve got a point of order: Kevan Jones.

Mr Jones: I am sorry—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Hang on. The Minister has been here long enough; you know you have got to sit down. Please, let us follow the rules of engagement. As ex-Army personnel, you are very good at that. Kevan Jones.

Mr Jones: It is a serious point of order. The right hon. Gentleman gave way to me, and then he stood up when I had not finished. But the serious point is that what he is saying is not true—not the facts—and as a Minister, he should not be actually saying that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Whoa! Nobody would mislead the House with an untruth.

Sir Mike Penning: Withdraw!

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sir Mike Penning, thank you. Your knighthood goes before us. [*Interruption.*] Order. Now, we know that that is not the parliamentary way. I am sure the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) does not mean it in the sense in which it was given.

Mr Jones: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. All I am saying is that accurate information must be given. If the Minister looks at the NAO report from 2010, he will see the actual figure, instead of the bluster which he keeps—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Okay. I will accept “accuracy” but not “truth”. Minister.

Mr Ellwood: I am not sure whether I should sit down or stand up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, I tell you what: you’ll sit down. If we are going to play the game, we will start playing it. Now then, Minister: on your feet.

Mr Ellwood: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have a huge amount of respect for the work that the hon. Gentleman did, and continues to do, in supporting our armed forces, but the numbers are clear. The growth of the deficit since 2000, moving forward, increased, increased and increased; and that is the black hole that I was actually referring to.

I think we have milked this subject enough for the moment, so I will move on. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) spoke about the importance of the covenant. She is in her place. I thank her for the work that she does on this important matter and I would like to meet the Committee at the earliest opportunity.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) spoke of the package of financial support, which is very important. I have touched on that. The hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) said that the reserve numbers are increasing. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) spoke with passion about his constituency. It was a pleasure to visit the event to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Falklands campaign. The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) spoke about the importance of the Royal British Legion. I am really pleased that the Office for National Statistics has agreed to include a tick—a requirement—for veterans and I am pleased that everyone has worked towards that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) spoke about the importance of the equipment that we have—£178 billion is being spent on that. He also said that the total cost of the promises that Labour has made so far under this Government is £500 billion. I do not know where that money will come from.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) spoke about cats and traps. I want to make it clear that the electromagnetic aircraft launch system—EMALS—was being promoted. That simply had not matured in time. There was no way that we were going to buy F-35Cs for the aircraft carrier; they could not have been launched off it because there is no steam.

Mr Sweeney *rose*—

Wayne David *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way. There is no steam on board the aircraft carriers. They are diesel; they are not powered by atomic energy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) denied being a Government lackey. I can confirm he is certainly not—

Wayne David: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Now you will have to sit down again, Minister, but don’t worry: I will bring you back up. Wayne David.

Wayne David: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister is being economical with the truth. But what is absolutely outrageous is that the subject under consideration is pay rises for the armed forces, but Ministers have hardly referred to it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think people will deliver figures in different ways, and the interpretation of those will always be in dispute. Minister.

Mr Ellwood: I was just going to mention the animation—the passion—of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View, who has done a service to the House with his work to promote the needs and requirements of veterans. I hope that continues.

[Mr Ellwood]

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made an interesting and measured contribution. He was the first to point out that what we need to do is to ask the question, “What do we want our armed forces to do?” Only by asking that question will we determine the size and the equipment we need, and that is why we are undertaking our capability review.

The hon. Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) spoke with passion about Remembrance Sunday and the poppy appeal. It was a real honour to visit the Poppy Factory a few months ago to see the work that it is doing with veterans, and the work for Remembrance Sunday itself.

In conclusion, like all Members of the House, the Government want to ensure that our brave armed forces, those exemplary men and women who give their all for our country, continue to get what they deserve. Our forces are currently serving in 25¹ operations around the world. They are keeping us safe and enhancing our reputation around the world. They are the best of British, and they have the right to expect the best in return. Therefore, although the need for pay discipline will remain a constant in the coming years, we remain committed to ensuring that their overall package of pay, progression and benefits continues to reflect the enormous value that we place on their work. We await the next review’s findings with interest. Members can rest assured that, as a Defence Minister, a former officer and a reservist, I am determined to do everything in my power to ensure that our people get what they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that the pay of Armed Forces personnel has been capped at 1 per cent in 2017-18 and that this represents another below inflation pay settlement; further notes that the size of the Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy and Royal Marines is below stated targets; notes that dissatisfaction with pay has been identified by service personnel as a reason for leaving their respective force; and calls on the Government to end the public sector pay cap for the Armed Forces and give Armed Forces personnel a fair pay rise.

Exiting the EU: Sectoral Impact Assessments

4.1 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the list of sectors analysed under the instruction of Her Majesty’s Ministers, and referred to in the Answer of 26 June 2017 to Question 239, be laid before this House and that the impact assessments arising from those analyses be provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union.

The motion is about transparency, accountability and ensuring that Parliament can do its job of scrutinising the Government properly. It is a shame that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union is not here, but, assuming that he is on negotiating duties, I will not make a cheap point about that. [*Interruption.*] In a private conversation with him, I said that I would make that point clear at the beginning of my speech if he was not here, so it was not a cheap point.

It goes without saying that there is huge anxiety and uncertainty in the country about the impact of the Government’s Brexit approach. That is felt by businesses across the country, communities large and small, and all sectors of the economy. That is perhaps inevitable, given the size of the task ahead. The Government say that they are planning for all eventualities, but if relevant information and evidence is not published in a responsible fashion, businesses and people up and down the country will be unable to do so.

On 14 December last year, the Secretary of State revealed to the Brexit Committee that the Government were working on sectoral impact analyses in 57 areas—one was added later, making it 58. Thus began this battle about transparency and accountability. First the Government said that they could not even publish the list of the sectors being analysed. When my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) sought that under freedom of information legislation on 30 August this year, she was rebuffed in a response on 29 September. Then, on Monday this week, the list was published.

Looking at the list, a copy of which I have here, two things are obvious. First, in many ways it is unremarkable, and so it could and should have been published months ago. Secondly, the wide range of sectors analysed demonstrates why it is so important for Members to see the impact assessments.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the right hon. and learned Gentleman explain why the Labour party, in the many months of Brexit discussions, has found not a single way to strengthen the UK’s bargaining position or expedite the Brexit that their voters voted for?

Keir Starmer: Over the summer, I set out the Opposition’s position in relation to Brexit with great clarity, and Government Members, if they are talking to businesses, will know how warmly that has been received. That has been documented in what businesses have said and done.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): In the interests of clarity and transparency, what exactly is the Labour party’s policy now on remaining in the customs union after March 2019?

1. [*Official Report, 20 November 2017, Vol. 631, c. 4MC.*]

Keir Starmer: This has been absolutely clear from the summer. It was set out by me, and it was repeated by me in this House and in my conference speech and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) in his conference speech. It is that we should seek transitional measures, because we are not going to have reached the final deal by March 2019, and that those transitional measures should be on the same basic terms as now. That means being in the single market, in a customs union, abiding by the rules and accepting the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, exactly as I have set out many times, and there has been unity on this side about that transitional position.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the comments from Government Members are absurd given that the Prime Minister says one thing about no deal, the Brexit Secretary says no deal is a threat and the Home Secretary says no deal is unthinkable? The issue of transparency is crucial because we are talking about 29 million workers here—88% of the economy—and we do not know what those studies say; they should be published.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I was going to highlight just three sectors on the list: construction and engineering, where 2.9 million jobs are involved; medical services and social care, where 3 million jobs are involved; and pharmaceuticals, where 50,000 jobs are involved. So even taking just three of the 58 sectors, it is obvious why this is of such importance.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman and the Opposition that these impact assessments should be disclosed—they can be redacted—but we definitely disagree about the Labour party's position. We must be very clear: it started off with the Leader of the Opposition saying article 50 should be triggered on the day after the referendum, and it has flip-flopped around since. I am delighted that the Labour party has now come across to my way of thinking: we should have a transition period, retaining our membership of the single market and the customs union. I hope that Labour will go further and say we need a final deal that includes the single market and customs union.

Keir Starmer: I hope to see the right hon. Lady in the Lobby with us later if that is how she feels about this motion.

I must say that there were at least five different versions of the Government position over the summer, and it is almost impossible to reconcile the Foreign Secretary's approach with that of others in the Cabinet. Everybody knows it and is commenting on it. To claim there is unity in the Cabinet is a pretence.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the transparency the right hon. and learned Gentleman has provided on the transition period, but what is Labour's policy for after that period?

Keir Starmer: I have been very clear about that as well, and about what the priorities are—jobs and the economy—and that we should retain the benefits of the single market and customs union.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: The last debate got fractious just before 4 o'clock because interventions might or might not have been taken; I have taken pretty well all of them so far, but none of them has yet been about the motion. [*Interruption.*] I apologise to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for saying that.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In response to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point, may I formally request that these documents be released not only to the Exiting the European Union Committee, but to all relevant Select Committees, as requested by the Select Committee on Health yesterday?

Keir Starmer: I will come to that, because we gave some thought to the process, and if the principle of disclosure is agreed, we are open to a discussion about exactly how that works. The Brexit Committee seemed the obvious Committee, but there is clearly interest in other Select Committees in the subject matter, not least medical services and social care, which I know will be of great interest to the hon. Lady.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am going to press on, because I have barely got a sentence in. I will give way later but I am really not making much progress at all.

The list of sectors was initially not disclosed, but it was then disclosed on Monday. In her freedom of information request of 30 August this year, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston also asked for the scope and the terms of reference of each sectoral analysis. This request too has been rebuffed, in a letter of 29 September. This time, the Secretary of State's Department relied on two grounds: first, that to disclose the terms of reference would prejudice relations between the UK and another state; and, secondly, that it would prejudice the formulation and development of Government policy. The first of those grounds seems a bit far-fetched, to say the least. The scope and the terms of reference are not even being disclosed.

The second of those grounds is surprising, coming from the current Secretary of State. Back in December 1999, he was Chair of the Public Accounts Committee when the freedom of information legislation was before Parliament. Then, when he was on the Back Benches, he intervened strongly in the debates. He said:

"I do not approach the issue from the perspective of a freedom of information enthusiast...my test is whether it makes democracy and government work better."

He then said:

"The class exemption applying to all information relating to formulation and development of Government policy, including factual information, is a ludicrous blanket exemption."—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 774.]

Today, from the Front Bench, he relies on that ludicrous blanket exemption that he rallied against from the Back Benches.

I shall now turn to the analyses and reports themselves. In a joint letter dated 11 October this year and supported

[Keir Starmer]

by 120 Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) sought the disclosure of all the sectoral analyses. I salute their work in pressing the Government time and again on this issue. The Government have responded by saying that the impact assessments could not be disclosed because to do so would undermine the UK's negotiating position. That is an important consideration, and I have accepted all along that the Government should not put into the public domain any information that would undermine our negotiating position. However, this requires some probing and testing.

The House will recall that when we, the Opposition, were calling for the Government to publish a Brexit plan this time last year, our request was initially refused. It was claimed that—guess what?—to do so would undermine our negotiating position. Thus, in an exchange on 7 November last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pressed the Secretary of State to reveal the Government's plan. The Secretary of State said:

“It is no good creating a public negotiating position, which has the simple effect of destroying our ability to negotiate—full stop.”—[*Official Report*, 7 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 1264.]

The Prime Minister then coined the phrase “no running commentary” and stuck to it like glue. And so it went on until 7 December last year, when we won an Opposition day motion calling on the Government to publish a plan. The publication of that plan has not undermined our negotiating position, although its contents might well have done so.

On the claim that any disclosure will undermine our negotiating position, I also bear in mind what the Secretary of State said to the House of Lords EU External Affairs Sub-Committee last night when he was pressed on this. He said:

“I don't think you should overestimate what's in them. They're not economic models of each sector, they are looking at how much of it depends on European Union markets versus other markets, what other opportunities may be, what the regulatory structures are, all those sorts of things that inform the negotiation, but they are not predictions. So I wouldn't overestimate what they are.”

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that we might ask how the Ministers even know whether the reports would undermine our negotiating position given that last week they told the Exiting the European Union Committee that they had not even read them? One does wonder why on earth they are now going to such lengths to protect them.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and will come to that very point. Playing down the significance of the reports last night, while playing up the need to keep them absolutely secret, is an interesting strategy that needs to be tested. The Government's claim about not disclosing the reports or any part of them also raises some pretty fundamental questions. First, who has actually read the 58 reports? On 25 October, the Secretary of State, under questioning from the Brexit Committee, indicated that the Prime Minister will know the summary outcomes, but she will “not necessarily”

have read them. Later in the same sitting, he indicated that the Cabinet had not seen the analyses, saying:

“They will have seen summary outcomes. That is all.”

The impact assessments that we are debating this afternoon have not been read in full by the Cabinet.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend may also be interested to know that when the Health Committee asked the Health Secretary yesterday whether he had read the four reports of great relevance to the NHS and public health, he seemed rather unsure. Given the huge negative impact that Brexit will have, particularly on our NHS workforce, is it not extraordinary that the Health Secretary cannot remember if he has even read the reports?

Keir Starmer: If the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was right in his evidence to the Brexit Committee, it appears that the Health Secretary has not read the reports because he has not had them.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was asked by the Brexit Committee whether the reports had been passed to the Scottish Government. In reply to a question from the SNP spokesperson, the Secretary of State said that he did not know whether they had been shared with the Scottish Government. These reports, which are in lockdown and cannot be seen and not a word of which can be disclosed, have not been read by the Cabinet, and nobody knows whether they have been disclosed to the Scottish Government, yet nothing can be made available to this House.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that there is a hint of almost religious fervour with the idea that if we keep our eyes closed and our ears blocked, perhaps everything will be okay as we leap off the cliff into the unknown.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): For clarification, it was me who asked the Secretary of State whether he would share the impact assessment on the Scottish economy with the Scottish Government. After I corrected him that it has in fact not been shared, he went on to give an undertaking that it will be shared with the Scottish Government. If that particular assessment will be shared, should not the other assessments be shared with the other relevant sectors?

Keir Starmer: The hon. and learned Lady makes a good point. If some of these reports can be or have been shared with some Governments or Administrations, there is simply no basis for arguing that they cannot be shared with this Parliament, through the Select Committees.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I recently asked the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport what sector assessments her Department was involved in, and she answered, “None.” However, I count at least 10 areas in which her Department is involved—or perhaps it is not involved. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that that prompts questions about how the Government are co-ordinating the production of the reports?

Keir Starmer: I can see that if I keep giving way, I will get answers that relate to every Department and find out that in fact none of them has seen, analysed, read or considered the impact assessments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am going to try to make some progress.

The Secretary of State made it clear that the Cabinet had only seen the summary outcomes. If that position has changed, I am sure that the Minister will intervene to clarify the position. If the assessments are so important, the relevant Cabinet members ought to read about the sectors that concern them. It is extraordinary that that has not happened. It is also extraordinary because it raises the question of who is making the decision that these reports cannot be disclosed. Who is making that decision? It cannot be the relevant Cabinet members, because they have not read the reports. When he appeared before the Brexit Committee, the Secretary of State was pretty hazy about that:

“The Government do. To a very large extent it comes to me, but it would depend on which department it is”.

That is interesting, given that the other Departments have not read the reports. He continued:

“Some of the stuff is also held in other departments.”

Who is the decision maker on the non-disclosure of these reports? Is it the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union? If not, who is it? [*Interruption.*] I see that instructions may be being taken.

Is there a record of the decision being made? It is a significant decision to withhold information from Parliament. Is a record made of the decision for each report? Where is that record? What criteria are actually applied?

A number of Members, including me, have experience of handling sensitive information—in my case, very sensitive information about very serious criminal offences—and everyone who has been in that position knows that a blanket ban can be justified only if no lesser form of publication is possible. Blanket bans are very rare. Even in the field of counter-terrorism, where there is highly sensitive material, blanket bans are very rare and the Government will normally find a way of publishing some of the material in an acceptable form. The current situation is extremely unusual, even for sensitive material.

Has consideration been given to redacting some of the sensitive material? Has consideration been given to providing a summary to Parliament? That is not uncommon in sensitive criminal cases. Can the gist not be given, or are we seriously expected to believe that not one paragraph, not one sentence, not one word can be disclosed to anyone in this House?

Mr Jenkin: I am listening carefully to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but I can only conclude that it is foolish and irresponsible to have called this debate. He knows there is a blanket ban on disclosing advice to Ministers—that is in the ministerial code and the civil service code, and it is absolutely standard. It is normal for Select Committees to request information themselves, rather than getting the official Opposition to do it on their behalf. This is game playing.

Keir Starmer: I am surprised by that intervention, given the concerns expressed by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe, the right hon. and learned Member for

Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). The concern is shared on both sides of the House.

The intervention of the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) is typical of what has been going on for 16 or 17 months. Every time somebody raises a legitimate question, it is suggested that they are somehow frustrating or undermining the process. It is not unlike the interventions I took a year ago when I suggested that the plan should be published. The interventions were exactly the same.

This is lockdown, a blanket ban. If the exemption for ministerial advice is being relied on, it is curious that it is not mentioned as the ground being relied on in the letter in response to the freedom of information request. That is why we have brought this motion to the House—

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I am going to press on.

You will have seen today's Order Paper, Mr Deputy Speaker. Coming from someone who thinks that we should catapult Parliament into 21st century, the wording of our motion is a little odd. The motion borrows widely from parliamentary procedure used to require Ministers to lay before the House or a Committee a specific document. “Erskine May” says the following:

“Each House has the power to call for the production of papers by means of a motion...the power to send for papers by means of a motion for unopposed return extends to papers which are in the possession of Ministers or which Ministers have the authority to obtain.”

That procedure has widely been used for many decades—the Opposition Whips tell me it has been used for many centuries. If anyone doubts the procedure, they should see on page 3 of today's Order Paper that the Home Secretary has used the same procedure in relation to a different report.

What is important about this procedure is that we believe this is a binding motion, and that makes it—we hope—impossible for the Government to pull their usual Wednesday afternoon trick of not voting on Opposition day motions or not taking any notice of them. That is why we have chosen the procedure that we have. But let me be clear: our motion does not require blanket publication without further consideration. Instead, it would require that the documents covered in the list should be provided to the Brexit Committee—or other Select Committees if the Government's concern is that that is too limited and these things ought to go to all the Select Committees. We are very open to that discussion, but these documents should go to the Brexit Committee. Then it would be for that Committee—or any other Select Committee—to decide which documents should and should not be published. It would also fall to that Committee to decide in what form publication should occur.

Members may ask why we have chosen the Brexit Committee. We have done so because it is a cross-party Committee; it has a lot of expertise and support staff; and it has a Government majority, so the Opposition cannot be accused of being party political here. It is a trusted and responsible Committee.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way in a minute. As I have said, we are open to hearing from the Government if they have alternative mechanisms or procedures to allow publication in an appropriate fashion. We are not wedded to the form we have put forward. We are wedded to challenging the blanket approach that the Government have taken.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am one Member of this House who welcomes the use of a 19th century procedure to hold the Government to account. I have one question for the right hon. and learned Gentleman: why is he asking for this information for the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union without a formal motion having been passed by that Committee to request these papers?

Keir Starmer: Because that is not necessary and this is an important motion, and because in recent weeks we have seen contempt for motions in this House—week after week on Opposition day motions—from a Government who are too weak to turn up or too weak to accept the outcome. Therefore we have chosen a procedure that is binding on this Government.

Only a weak Government push Parliament away and ignore the facts. It should not require an arcane parliamentary procedure to force the Government to release these documents, but after 10 months of trying that is what Parliament now has to do. The current impasse prevents Parliament doing its job, undermines accountability and is inconsistent with transparency. The Government should support the motion before the House today.

4.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): This is an important issue, and we have always taken incredibly seriously our commitment to transparency in the negotiations, but we also take incredibly seriously our commitment to the national interest and to the vote in this House last December which concluded that we should not publish anything that undermines it.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: In a moment.

We have always tried to strike the right balance between those two commitments, and we intend to continue to do that in our response to the motion before us. I shall start by taking each part of the motion in turn.

Seema Malhotra *rose*—

Mr Walker: Let me at least respond to the motion; I will then give way to the hon. Lady.

The first part of the motion calls for Ministers to publish the list of sectors that have been analysed. As the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), acknowledged, that has already been done—it was done before the motion was tabled.

Keir Starmer: I do acknowledge that. To explain, we were advised by the parliamentary authorities that that

needed to be included in the motion in order for the second part to be triggered. I acknowledge, though, that that list was published on Monday.

Mr Walker: I am grateful for the right hon. and learned Gentleman's acknowledgement. As he says, that list was published in response to the Lords EU External Affairs Sub-Committee report on Brexit and the trade in goods. A copy was placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available for all to see.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: In a moment.

As set out in the document we published, we estimate that the 58 sectors covered account for around 88% of the UK economy, so they provide a comprehensive framework from which to analyse the entire economy. We believe that that approach to structuring our analysis has helped us to cover all relevant parts of the economy. Given that that list has been published, we feel that the first part of the motion has been addressed. The second part of the motion calls for the impact assessments arising from the sectoral analyses to be provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee.

Seema Malhotra *rose*—

Mr Walker: I am happy to give way to the hon. Lady, who serves on the Committee, on that point.

Seema Malhotra: Will the Minister confirm that the list of sectors was not published directly to the House in a ministerial statement, despite more than 120 MPs calling for its publication? Will he also confirm that Parliament's votes in October and December last year, to which he referred, were on Opposition day motions?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before I bring the Minister back in, I just want to let those Members who wish to speak know that there will be a five-minute limit after the Front-Bench speakers.

Mr Walker: I am happy to confirm to the hon. Lady what I have already said about the form of the document's publication. Yes, it was an Opposition day motion, but interestingly it was a Government amendment on an Opposition day which the Opposition accepted and which was supported by both sides of the House. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras has repeated his acknowledgement of that principle today.

I wish to take a moment to highlight several conflicting responsibilities for Ministers with respect to the request that impact assessments be published.

Ian Paisley: Is it the Minister's understanding from what the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said from the Front Bench that not only did he not bother to consult the Select Committee members before he made his proposal, but that he does not appear to have consulted the Chairman of that Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), yet he has drawn up this wheeze as a way of trying to get these documents out anyway?

Mr Walker: I am not going to speak for the Opposition Front-Bench team, but I take the hon. Gentleman's concerns seriously, because what is being proposed needs to be checked against a number of significant issues relating to the national interest and, indeed, the responsibilities of Ministers of the Crown in respect of the information that we hold.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: If I may, I will give way to my hon. Friend in a moment.

The Government recognise that Parliament does have rights relating to the publication of documents, which is one of the reasons why we have always been as open as possible with Parliament. In this case, though, the Opposition have taken an approach based on an obscure parliamentary rule that has not been in general use for these purposes since the 19th century. When it has been used, it has been mostly to ensure the publication of information that is now provided to Parliament by the Government regularly and as a matter of course.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and persuasive argument. I notice a flurry of activity on the Labour Benches while the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), is asked to confirm his interest in this matter. Does my hon. Friend agree that the right process has not been followed? The right process would be for the Select Committee to discuss this, make the request and then come to this House to ask for the information. The Opposition should not try to short-circuit it. What they are doing is a misuse of the House's processes.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes his point powerfully. I am sure we will hear from the Chairman of the Select Committee in due course.

As the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras knows, Ministers have a clear obligation not to disclose information when to do so would not be in the public interest. In this case, the public interest is also the national interest. The key national interest here is to ensure the best possible outcome from our negotiations with the European Union. As he accepted earlier, putting all the information in the public domain could undermine our negotiating position. Furthermore, we must consider the importance of Ministers receiving unvarnished advice without the risks of it being published. That is particularly relevant in this case given that much of the development of this analysis has helped to inform advice to Ministers regarding our exit from the European Union. If the motion were to pass, we would need to reflect on these various constraints and conflicting responsibilities when it comes to passing information to the Exiting the European Union Committee.

I take note of the points that the right hon. and learned Gentleman made about looking at redaction or summary as an approach. Given the generosity of his approach in that regard, we will not be opposing the motion today. However, I do say that we need to look at the content of the analysis. As he quoted the Secretary of State's comments before the Lords EU Committee yesterday, I point out that there has been some misunderstanding about what this sectoral analysis actually is. It is not a series of 58 economic impact assessments.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not think that he and his Government have a responsibility to tell the people of this country who voted either leave or remain what the real impact will be? If he does not, will they not turn on the people who hid the information from them? Will he stop governing in secret, and make sure that the people who are running this country and the people who voted have all of the information and the truth?

Mr Walker: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have always been clear that we have a responsibility to people on all sides of the referendum debate to deliver a successful outcome to our negotiations. However, delivering a successful outcome to our negotiations for the whole country does require keeping some information confidential for the purposes of negotiation.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, while the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) is self-evidently an expert lawyer, he is quite clearly a very lacking negotiator? Putting this level of information potentially into the hands of the people with whom we are negotiating could very seriously undermine our ability to do the right thing for the British people.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes a key point. It is very important that, as we approach these negotiations, we do so with a firm view of the national interest in mind.

Anna Soubry: I am very grateful to the Minister for his excellent speech. He has told us that the Government will not seek to vote against the motion. On that basis, the motion will be passed. In that event, what will the Government then do?

Mr Walker: The Government always pay careful attention to the views of this House. As I have already pointed out, we have done so in the past and we will respond appropriately. To return to the analysis—*[Interruption.]* This is an important point. We have been looking at 58 sectors, as well as cross-cutting regulatory, economic and social issues to inform our negotiating position.

Keir Starmer: Will the Minister express his view on whether this is a binding motion according to the procedures of this House?

Mr Walker: It is not my job to interpret the procedures of the House; that is a matter for the House itself. As I have said, we will take note of whatever the House decides on this matter.

Mr Bradshaw: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given the exchange that we have just heard, would it be possible to have a ruling from the Chair about the enforceability and binding nature of this motion?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The immediate answer is, no, it would not be possible at this moment to have a ruling from the Chair. The fact is that the Minister has answered the question. I appreciate that he does not like the Minister's answer. The right

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) asked a straight question, and the Minister gave a straight answer. It is not for the Chair to decide how the Minister should answer the question.

Mr Walker: Let me clarify for the right hon. Gentleman that we are, first and foremost—

Anna Soubry: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There was nothing further to that point of order, because I have answered the point of order. If the right hon. Lady has a different point of order, I will hear it.

Anna Soubry: Madam Deputy Speaker, forgive me. The point of order, which was raised and which I raise again, is whether or not this motion, in the view of the Chair, is a binding motion. That is the question.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Lady knows that the Chair will not become involved in an argument between one Front Bench and the other, or one side of the House and the other. The Minister has—[*Interruption.*] Order! Do not shout when I am speaking from the Chair. The Minister has the floor and he has heard the points that are being made. It is for the Minister to answer those points.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. What advice might you be able to get from the Clerk of the House, perhaps during the course of this debate, on whether the motion is binding? It is important for the House to know that information. I appreciate that you might not be able to rule on it at this moment, but I would also appreciate it if we could get that advice in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's advice; thank you.

Mr Walker: The House was quite keen to hear about some of this analysis, so I thought it would be helpful if I set out some of the details of what it is and what it is not. I have explained that the analysis is not a series of 58 economic impact assessments. It is a cross-sectoral analysis. It is not just work undertaken by our Department, as it draws on analysis and expertise from across the whole of Government. But it is not the case—and I do not believe that this Department or any of its Ministers has ever said that it is—that there are 58 economic impact assessments that neatly summarise what all the eventualities could mean for each sector.

Seema Malhotra: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I have given way once to the hon. Lady; I will not do so again.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We can discuss all sorts of processes and whether they will undermine negotiations, but will the Minister agree that withholding this information is now becoming counterproductive? It looks like the Government are hiding bad news.

Mr Walker: The Government will always take a careful view, and I will come to that later. We have disclosed plenty of information during this process. Where we see that it is in the national interest to do so, of course we will.

The analysis ranges from high-level, overarching analysis to much more granular-level analysis of certain product lines in specific sectors. It examines how trade is currently conducted with the EU in those sectors, and in many cases considers alternatives after we leave, as well as looking at existing precedents. The analysis is constantly evolving—as we discussed in the Select Committee just the other day—and being updated based on our discussions with industry and our negotiations with the European Union.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. Is it still his contention that businesses will have exactly the same benefits outside the single market and the EU as we have inside?

Mr Walker: I do not think that I have personally ever made that contention. We need to ensure that businesses have the best outcome from this whole process. With that in mind, it is important to note that this analysis is closely tied to our negotiating position. There is therefore a significant chance that it would be detrimental to our interests in negotiation to publish all the analysis in full, as the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras acknowledged.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I notice that a right hon. Gentleman is reading all your documents over your shoulder. Is it in order for somebody to read the advice that you are getting? He is doing it right now. I think that is rather out of order.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am extremely grateful for the protection of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). It is quite in order and normal for a Member to approach the Chair. It is not normal for anyone to read my papers while I am on my feet.

Mr Walker: It has been a lively session so far.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: In a moment.

To continue informing our approach, we are conducting a comprehensive programme of engagement with businesses and third-party organisations. We are working proactively with industry and other Departments to have the best information available to negotiate from the best possible position.

We held events at Chevening House in July and September. A cross-Government business advisory group consisting of the five main business representative organisations has been established to ensure business is not only heard, but is influential throughout the process. I was with the group earlier this week. The Prime Minister chairs a quarterly business advisory council to hear directly from senior business leaders on key issues across EU exit and the wider economy. Department for

Exiting the European Union Ministers alone have undertaken a wide-ranging programme of stakeholder engagement.

Mr Bradshaw: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just wondered, in the intervening period since the previous points of order, whether you had managed to seek advice from the Clerks on the enforceability and binding nature of this motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The House will be aware that the motion before us is a Humble Address to be presented to Her Majesty. That is the motion before the House. We are currently debating that motion and it is absolutely correct that there should be differences of opinion about the effect of the motion, the way in which it should be debated and what should happen to it. At this stage, I would say only that a motion of this kind has in the past been seen as effective or binding. That does not mean that I am making a ruling at this point about the nature of the motion before us today.

I will reiterate what I said before. While it is correct for the Chair to make a ruling on what happens here in the Chamber, it is for the Government to decide how they will proceed, having considered the opinions of the House. It would, of course, be quite wrong for the Government not to pay any attention to a decision taken by the House, but the way in which the Minister interprets what he and his colleagues should do after the House has expressed an opinion is a matter not for the Chair but for the Minister.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wondered if it might be helpful to refer hon. Members to page 819 of “Erskine May”, which points out that in a recent case the Canadian House of Commons, in not entirely dissimilar circumstances, viewed it as a breach of privilege for the Government to fail to provide information when asked for it by the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for directing me to page 819 of “Erskine May”, which I will look at as soon as I have an opportunity so to do, but he will be aware of the rules on privilege, as I am, and the way in which those rules can be interpreted. Like him, not long ago I served for many weeks on a Committee considering the way in which privilege can be applied. If I were to say that it is a grey area, that would not be an exaggeration. There is no black and white in the way in which privilege is applied. But I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing to my attention to that particular point in “Erskine May”.

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. “Erskine May” is written in black and white. It makes it absolutely clear, as the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) mentioned—I am partially giving you time to read page 819 in case you need to, Madam Deputy Speaker—that if the House chose to, it could refer each and every individual Minister who chose to ignore the decision of the House to the Committee on Privileges, and they could then be suspended from membership of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me time. I must say it would not matter whether “Erskine May” was written in black and

white, or green and yellow, or purple and orange. The fact is that the rules on privilege are not a matter that can be decided immediately without consideration of all of the circumstances. I am not going to make a ruling here and now about the way in which the Minister and his colleagues should interpret what is happening in the House today.

Mr Duncan Smith: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. “Erskine May” is quite clear. The reference to the Canadian position was in the event that the Government chose to ignore what the House had said and called for. The Government have made it clear already, in the Minister’s opening remarks, that they have not chosen to ignore this particular outcome, whatever that outcome is. That is clear. The word “ignore” is very clear. It means to disregard and to refuse to reflect on. The Government have made it clear that they will not ignore it and therefore this tautological debate should now end.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his point of order. The difference of opinion between him, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), whom I can hear making further points on my right, simply proves the point that I have made to the House, which is that privilege is not a black and white matter. Privilege and the way in which it is interpreted is a matter that takes some consideration, and I reiterate that I will not make any ruling from the Chair which has an effect right now on this Minister in this Chamber. But I am now making a ruling that this is a short debate, that there are many matters to be discussed, and that I have a long list of names of people who wish to participate in this debate, and I will take no further tautological points of order. I want to hear what the Minister has to say, and I suspect that everyone else wants to hear what the Minister has to say.

Mr Walker: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is good to know that someone wants to hear what the Minister has to say.

DEXEU Ministers have been engaging with businesses up and down the country. That includes attendance at 50 roundtables and over 250 bilateral meetings, as well as many more meetings with other Departments. Those interactions help to inform and supplement our analysis.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Walker: I will give way to the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), who I promised to give way to, and then to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). I am afraid that that will then be it.

Jonathan Edwards: The Minister has confirmed in the debate that a report has been prepared on the impact on the Scottish economy. Has a similar report been prepared on the impact on the Welsh economy? If so, has it been shared with Welsh Ministers? If a report has not been prepared, why is there not such a Welsh report?

Mr Walker: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments I made earlier about the nature of those reports. I did not say that there were reports on the Scottish or Welsh economies; I said that there were cross-cutting reports,

[Mr Robin Walker]

based on sectors across the whole of the UK. But, of course, there is, within the Joint Ministerial Committee process, the opportunity to discuss with the Government the analysis we are conducting, and we want to make sure that that can move forward.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: If the hon. Lady will allow me to finish the point on business engagement, I will be happy to give way, as I promised to do.

These interactions with business in every part of the country help to inform and supplement our analysis. It is an important point, which should not be glossed over lightly, that much of the information that businesses share with the Government on these issues is highly commercially sensitive. They have a right and an expectation that that information will be treated in the utmost confidence, and in none of our meetings and engagements was it suggested that the information provided by businesses could be published as part of a Government analysis.

Catherine McKinnell: The Minister must accept that the impact of Brexit will not be uniform across the country, which is why the Chancellor acknowledged that the Government have not only carried out sectoral impact assessments but looked at regions. Will the Minister explain what information the Government will release about the impact on different regions of the UK, so that we can not only understand the impact of Brexit but prepare for it?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. In addition to not having lots of tautological points of order, we will also not have any more extremely long interventions. Short interventions are—[*Interruption.*] Order. We will not have any more extremely long interventions, because it is simply not fair to the people who want to speak later in the debate.

Mr Walker: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I would say to the hon. Lady that I have spoken about the nature of our analysis. This motion refers to sectoral analysis, and that is what we are focusing on today. However, I do want to come to the issue here, and the motion also speaks about the Exiting the European Union Committee.

Chris Bryant: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: If the hon. Gentleman will give me one moment, I should say that I look forward to hearing from the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and perhaps from the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras, what discussions the latter had with the Select Committee before this motion was tabled. Perhaps the Chair of the Committee, in his comments later on, could provide some suggestions to the House as to how the Committee could safeguard the confidentiality of information that might be sensitive or prejudicial.

Chris Bryant *rose*—

Mr Walker: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman on that point, but this is the final intervention I will accept.

Chris Bryant: Will the Minister make it absolutely clear to the House, whether, when this motion is carried today, the Government will provide the analyses to the Committee, as demanded by the House, or not?

Mr Walker: The motion has not yet been carried. I will absolutely take note of the decisions of this House, as Ministers always do, and we will respond in due course.

Ian Paisley *rose*—

Hannah Bardell *rose*—

Mr Walker: I will not give way again, I am afraid.

The Government have consistently published information where we believe it is in the national interest to do so. We have already published 14 papers to address the current issues in the talks and to set out building blocks for the relationship that we would like to see with the EU both as we leave and in future. Those papers represent some of the hard work and detailed thinking that has been going on across Whitehall over the past 12 months. In addition, we have published technical notes shared with the European Union and may agree further joint publications with the EU as part of the ongoing negotiations.

But we must not forget that the House has voted repeatedly not to disclose material that could damage the United Kingdom's position in negotiations with the European Union. Not only is that the approach taken by the UK; it is also the approach taken by the EU in its negotiations. The EU's document, "Transparency in EU trade negotiations", says:

"A certain level of confidentiality is necessary to protect EU interests and to keep chances for a satisfactory outcome high. When entering into a game, no-one starts by revealing his entire strategy to his counterpart from the outset: this is also the case for the EU."

That once again drives home the need for a balance between transparency and securing the best outcome in the negotiations.

As the House will understand, many thousands of documents are being prepared across Government with regard to our exit from the European Union.

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Walker: I will not give way to my right hon. Friend again.

The release of some of those documents would not undermine our negotiating position, although others might have more of an impact. The House will appreciate that the more information that is shared more widely, the less secure our negotiating position and the harder it becomes to secure the right deal for the British people. The House has the right to require the release of documents. However, I sincerely hope that in what is requested, and how much is requested, by the Opposition spokesman, the Select Committee and the House, they will guarantee the necessary confidentiality and be mindful of the job that Ministers need to do. That job is to secure the vital national interests of the United Kingdom as we negotiate our departure from the European Union.

4.56 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I welcome the chance to contribute to this debate. I hope that we can concentrate on the fundamentally important matter at hand. This debate is not about which party's position on Brexit has been more chaotic; it is about the importance of making sure that Parliament and the public have information to which they are entitled to hold us all to account. A few minutes ago, I was reminded of what a pity it is that these analyses were not available before 23 June 2016.

Hannah Bardell: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government and those in the leave campaign had a moral and an ethical duty to do this work and to give a proper timescale, as we called for at the time of the Brexit debate? Does he think that the assessments were not published because the Government are scared of the truth or because they would not fit on the side of a bus?

Peter Grant: I suspect that it may have been all the above and more reasons besides.

Is it not ironic that yet again, in response to a decision that was supposed to restore sovereignty to Parliament, for those who believe in such an idea, it now appears that even the Parliament that exercises sovereignty on behalf of Her Majesty does not have the right to instruct the Government to make representations to Her Majesty on our behalf? We can ask, and the Government can simply ignore—well, they cannot ignore, but they can say, “No, we’re no’ doing it,” which apparently is not the same as ignoring. What an utter shambles of a way to run a sweetie shop, never mind a country.

I have been a very long-standing supporter of open government and freedom of information. I remember as an opposition SNP councillor being in the strange position of enthusiastically supporting legislation proposed by the then Labour-Lib Dem coalition in the Scottish Parliament against complaints from Labour councillors that it would somehow undermine the working of the council. I believe that improved public availability of information always leads to better government. Occasions when information needs to be restricted, or some information needs to be redacted, should be seen very much as the exception rather than the rule.

Caroline Lucas: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware that there is a legal case pending, which my colleague in the European Parliament, Molly Scott Cato, is leading. Does he agree that rather than going through all the extra work, time and taxpayers’ money involved in fighting a legal case, the Government should just show us what it is in the public interest to show us now?

Peter Grant: I was going to say that, not having seen the information, I am at a disadvantage compared with the Cabinet, but I am not convinced that I am, because I do not think most of them have seen it either. I am perfectly prepared to accept that some of it—perhaps quite a lot of it—cannot be made public, but I do not think a document exists that cannot be made public in some form. If the Government really want to give the public information, there are always ways in which details can be removed.

The comment has been made that we are talking about public information, paid for by the public and produced by a public organisation, which exists only for the benefit of the public. I always take the view that information should be disclosed where possible and withheld only where necessary. My view of freedom of information was eloquently expressed 250 years ago, and I am pleased that Madam Deputy Speaker is still here to hear this, although she is no longer in the Chair:

“Here’s freedom to them that wad read,

Here’s freedom to them that wad write,

There’s nane ever fear’d that the truth should be heard,

But they whom the truth would indite.”

I appreciate that for some Members, that might be a difficult thing to think about just now.

I have always been convinced that far too many public bodies have hidden behind statutory exemptions in freedom of information legislation, not to protect the interests of the public but to protect the interests of those who withhold the information. That seems to have played a significant part in the Government’s thought processes in this instance. A member of the Government originally claimed that even to confirm that the analyses existed would somehow fatally undermine the UK’s negotiating position with the European Union. It is hard to see how anybody could make the UK’s negotiating position any more untenable than it already is, but let us look at how making any of the information available might weaken the UK’s position.

It seems to me that there are three possible scenarios. In scenario 1, the secret information shows that the UK’s position is a lot stronger than any of us suspected—I do not know; that might be possible—so instead of negotiating from a position of weakness, the UK is negotiating from a position of considerable strength. How does it weaken our negotiating position if those on the other side of the table think that we are strong, rather than weak? It does not, so in scenario 1, it is in the UK’s interests for the European Union to have the information.

In scenario 2, the analysis simply confirms what everybody knows and what analysis from everybody else under the sun has already indicated, which is that leaving the European Union is seriously bad for the UK economy, that it is seriously bad for us socially and culturally, and that it will weaken our reputation worldwide, emboldening other potential trade partners to push for ever more difficult and damaging trade deals and ensuring that we have to go cap in hand to look for them.

John Redwood: Does the hon. Gentleman think it is at all possible to have a worse fishing policy and to do more damage to the Scottish fishing industry outside the EU than in it? Why does he not speak up for Brexit, because it has lots of great features?

Peter Grant: I do not think that it is possible for any Government to sell out Scotland’s fishing industry in the way the UK Government did 50 years ago. That is a matter of public record, but it could not be made known to the fishing communities or anyone else for 30 years, because it was covered by the Official Secrets Act at the time. That is the reason why Governments withhold information for as long as possible—not in the interests of open government, but to protect themselves from proper public scrutiny.

[Peter Grant]

I return to scenario 2. If it shows exactly what everybody already knows, how can producing more evidence to confirm what we already know possibly damage the UK's position? It cannot, so scenario 2 cannot cause any damage.

Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you are able to rule on this matter before any more confusion is added to the debate. Is it your understanding that the motion as presented, if carried, leaves open to Her Majesty's Government the timing of when they choose to lay these matters before Parliament and that, if that is the case, the Government could lay these matters before Parliament after the negotiations?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The answer is that it is for the Government, not for me, to respond on that point. There has been a question about whether this is binding. What is binding is the need to carry forward the debate. Let us have no more ado.

Peter Grant: The third scenario—many of us are increasingly convinced that this is what has happened—is that the detailed analysis indicates that the damage caused by Brexit will be even worse than any of us previously feared. Yes, that would weaken and fatally undermine the UK's negotiating position. It may well be that the analysis shows that Brexit is such a catastrophic decision that we should not do it at all. What kind of Government in possession of that information would choose to hide it, rather than to act on it? It seems to me that the only scenario in which releasing any of the information can possibly undermine the UK's position is if that information shows that the damage caused by Brexit is worse than any previous analysis has indicated.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Is there not an unattributed briefing from a Minister who has said, "We either destroy the Conservative party, or we destroy the country"—that was their choice of words—and in this case are they not choosing, by hiding these documents, to destroy the country rather than to destroy the Conservative party?

Peter Grant: I could not comment on that quote, but throughout the Brexit shambles there have been plenty of instances when it has been very clear that the Government are acting in the interests of the unity of the Conservative party, rather than in the interests of the United Kingdom—not that the attempt to retain unity in the Conservative party has been too successful.

Last week, the Secretary of State for Brexit got into a real muddle when he was asked whether the Government intended to make any of this information available to the devolved Governments and in particular, under questioning by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), whether the assessment of the impact on Scotland would be shared with the Scottish Government. At first, he seemed to cast doubt on whether such an assessment existed at all, and then he admitted that it probably existed, but he was not sure it would ever be shared with anybody. Then he assumed it had already been shared with the Scottish Government—it still has not been shared, by the way—and, finally, he acknowledged that it had not been shared yet but eventually would be.

By a process of elimination—or, perhaps, by accident—the Secretary of State therefore managed to say the same as his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland said to the Scottish Affairs Committee 24 hours earlier. It is concerning, but not surprising, that the Minister appears to have departed from that today. It seems that as soon as two Ministers agree on something, a third has got to disagree with it almost on principle. The fact is that, even a week later, the information has still not been shared—none of it. The relevant Minister in the Scottish Government, Mike Russell, has had to write to the Secretary of State to remind him of the undertaking that was given and to ask for that information to be shared so that, for example, discussions in the JMC can be more meaningful than they have been until now.

Another possible reason for the Secretary of State's reluctance to share any of the information comes from an answer he gave later in the same evidence session last week:

"I am not a great fan of mathematical models. They are almost always wrong."

He referred to a revelation from Norman Lamont who, when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer, was told by the Treasury that he would become the most unpopular man in Britain and that that was the only thing Treasury staff ever told him that turned out to be correct. The Secretary of State went on to say that, sadly, the Norman Lamont story was true:

"I am afraid it is the truth. These models are never right."

The models produced by the Government at the public expense are never right. That will make for an interesting Budget in a couple of weeks' time. What kind of a defence is it to tell a parliamentary Committee, "The reason why we will not give you access to information that has been produced at great public cost is that we do not believe it any more than you do"?

The Government have previously refused a formal freedom of information request, as was mentioned by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). They refused even to confirm whether some of these analyses existed, because they were concerned that even to confirm that such documents existed or that such analysis had taken place might lead some to take precipitate action as a result. This comes from a Government who were excessively precipitate in holding a referendum before people really knew what they were voting on. They were precipitate in triggering article 50 before they knew what it would mean, and they were precipitate in calling a general election, which did not turn out particularly well. It is therefore a bit rich for them to be concerned about anyone else acting in a precipitate manner.

I am not a scholar of Latin, but I remember as a student teacher, over 30 years ago, hearing a very experienced chemistry teacher asking a class of pupils doing experiments involving chemical elements being precipitated in a test tube whether any of them knew about precipitates in the Bible. He explained to them, because he was of a generation that could recite the Bible in English and Latin, and probably in Greek as well, that the word "precipitate" came from the Latin word "praecipitare", and "se praecipitare" was a verb used in the Bible to describe the actions of the Gadarene swine as they launched themselves off a cliff edge.

I will never cease to be amazed at just how many prophecies in the good book come true sooner or later. The Government have been precipitate throughout this

entire sorry affair. They have artificially, unilaterally and quite arbitrarily put immense time pressure on themselves, this Parliament and the overworked staff at the Department for Exiting the European Union and elsewhere.

It is no defence against that chaos or against the repeated display of incompetence we have had from the Government for them now to say that we cannot trust the public with information that exposes the full damage that the Government's incompetence will cause. The electorate were sophisticated enough to understand after the vote in the referendum that when the Government said we could still be in the single market if we were out of the EU, they did not mean it. The electors in east London were sophisticated enough to know that when a Minister told them, "If we leave the EU, we will stop immigration from the EU and those of you who have family in Bangladesh, India or Pakistan will be able to bring them over to replace those people," that was rubbish. The electorate were sophisticated enough to know that when someone who is now a Minister promised £357 million more for the health service, that was Boris being Boris. They were sophisticated enough to know that we never believe anything the Foreign Secretary says. Well, we do not need to be too sophisticated to realise that, I suppose.

So the electorate are sophisticated enough to know that all the promises that were made before the referendum really did not mean anything, yet they are not sophisticated enough, or educated or intelligent enough, to look at an impact assessment, or a summary of an impact assessment, and make their own decisions about the competence and the re-electability of a Government who got us into this mess in the first place.

Without even having seen this information, I believe it is not being made widely available because it demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt that leaving the EU is the wrong way to go. Leaving the single market would be catastrophic for these islands and the Government should change course before they follow the Gadarene swine over that cliff edge.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. To help the Chair, can we have fewer interventions? Those Members who are on the list of speakers who have intervened I will put lower down to try to make sure we get fairness.

5.12 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I rise to support the Government. I am delighted that they do not want me to vote against the motion. I am happy to accept their guidance on that. I am someone who usually favours full disclosure and publication of interesting information, but I urge Ministers not to reveal anything that could damage our negotiating position in any way. It is cavalier to the point of irresponsibility that the Opposition wish to have everything published in the hope that they will find something damaging to the UK position, because all they ever do is run the UK down. All they ever do is say we are wrong to want Brexit. All they ever do is say to their voters, "You made the wrong decision. We are going to block it, dilute it, slow it down. We are going to try to prevent it." I for one am heartily sick of the complete lack of sensible co-operation with the wishes of their voters.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): In the spirit of taking back control, if this Parliament insists that it wants to see documents, should it not be allowed to see them?

John Redwood: Of course it should see documents, as long as they do not harm the national interest, and it is Ministers who are charged with the duty of ensuring that the national interest is upheld. It is quite obvious that Labour Members have absolutely no wish to uphold the national interest, and whenever I debate with them they tell me that the EU is right, the EU is in a strong position and the EU will grind us down. They should be speaking up for their electors and the jobs in their constituencies, because Brexit is teeming with opportunity.

We are asked to talk about sectoral impact assessments, so let us hear it for the fishing industry. It is going to be a much stronger, better British industry when we can have our own territorial waters and our own policy. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am struggling to hear the right hon. Gentleman, and I am sure that everybody wants to listen to every word he has to tell the Chamber.

John Redwood: They do not like good news, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Let us consider the agricultural industry. Is it not a great tragedy that we have lost so much of our capacity to make our own food and to grow our own food where our temperate climate allows? Will not being outside the EU enable us to have an agricultural policy that allows us to be more self-sufficient, so that there are fewer food miles travelled and more jobs for British farmers? Would not that be great? Why do the Opposition not spend a bit of time thinking about how that policy might work, and what a big opportunity it will be for that sector if we develop in such a way?

Would not it be great for quite a number of the sectors in our country if we got that £12 billion a year back as soon as possible and started spending it in the UK? I thought the Opposition understood that if you spend more money in a country, you create more jobs and more economic activity. When it comes to the money we send to Brussels, all we ever hear from them is, "Let's keep sending them the money. Let's do it next year, the year after, the year after that. Can we find a way to send the money for another three years after we've left?" It is outrageous that they want to give our money away in this way.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is a former Secretary of State for Wales, and I think that he sent £120 million back from Cardiff to London. Will he now support calls from the Opposition to ensure that Wales does not lose out on the money it is currently receiving from Brussels?

John Redwood: Wales did not lose out, because I wanted tax cuts for Welsh voters as well as for English voters, and that was the whole point of what we were doing; and we had more than adequately funded the health service, where I increased the amount of money, which the Labour Government in Wales do not do. I think my record is rather better than theirs when it comes to providing proper provision for the health service in Wales.

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

Chris Bryant *rose—*

John Redwood: What we need to do is to have a proper debate on the sectoral impacts and look at the many positives, so that Opposition Members can debate in the way I am and talk about the opportunities for our country and the way our economy can be better, rather than continue in the depressingly negative way they always do, where they are desperate to find some bad information. They have come up with two things at the moment, which are clearly misleading, but they are constantly repeating them. First, they say that planes will not fly in April 2019, after we have left, without a special agreement and sending lots of money to the EU. I was very pleased the other day to see that Willie Walsh of British Airways made it very clear, in his professional view, that the planes will fly—and of course they will. There is no way Britain is going to stop German, French and Spanish planes coming into UK airports the day after we have left the EU, even without an agreement, and in turn they will not want to stop our planes going there, with our tourists and with the people who want to go and spend money in their country.

Hannah Bardell *rose—*

Chris Bryant *rose—*

John Redwood: Then there is another one that the Opposition are constantly telling us about, which is that there will be lorries queuing all the way back from Dover. I am not quite sure how that would work because it would mean that they were queuing in the sea. But of course, given modern, electronic frontiers, there is absolutely no reason why there should be huge queues.

Wera Hobhouse *rose—*

Angus Brendan MacNeil *rose—*

John Redwood: We can have a system of authorised economic operators, developing the existing system, and it will be quite easy to speed the lorries through, and if we still have to impose tariffs because there is no agreement, we will be able to do that electronically, without there being a lorry jam.

Charlie Elphicke: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the other side talk about queues at the port because they actually hope that Brexit will be a disaster for this country? They want to stop Brexit and they want the worst for this country. They should put Britain first.

John Redwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is always doom and gloom. It is always about what can go wrong.

Wera Hobhouse *rose—*

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab) *rose—*

John Redwood: One of my worries about these sectoral studies that Ministers are agonising about—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it disingenuous or misleading Parliament to suggest that the £120 million you did not spend in Wales was the same as £120 million of tax cuts for the people of Wales when they did not get tax cuts in that year?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is not a point of order. I call John Redwood.

John Redwood: I think that is a silly point, because there were tax cuts from the Government and it was very important that we had a sensible Budget after we had made full provision.

The Opposition are always running things down. My worry about these sectoral studies is that there is a tendency amongst some Government advisers and consultants to want to highlight every conceivable thing that could go wrong and lots of inconceivable things that could not conceivably go wrong, because that is how they make their money or that is what they think they are there to do. They do not risk-assess; there are very few genuine risks that need to be managed properly, and we still have 15 months to manage them. If necessary, we can manage them for ourselves without even needing the agreement of the EU.

I look forward to Ministers making a judicious response to this debate. I do not want them to share any information that undermines our position. I just live in hope that one day the Opposition will wake up to all those voters who wanted Brexit, and understand that they need to be positive and sympathetic to the British Government view, not to the EU view.

5.19 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Passions are running rather high, but this is a deadly serious business. This is about transparency and the need for Parliament to have the information and facts it requires in order to do its job. I raised this question with the Secretary of State when I was first elected as Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee. I asked him how he proposed to handle the sharing of information. In a letter to me in October last year, he stated:

“There is an important balance to strike between transparency and confidentiality and information sharing will need to be considered in close detail.”

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) spoke to me about this issue yesterday, and I pointed out to him that our Committee’s first report, published on 11 January this year, referred to the economic assessments that the Government were undoubtedly undertaking. It stated:

“In the interests of transparency, these should be published alongside the government’s plan in so far as it does not compromise the government’s negotiating hand.”

I make that point because the Committee accepted—indeed, my right hon. and learned Friend has accepted this from the Dispatch Box—that there might be certain information that the Government do not wish to put in the public domain and that it would not be right to do so, but that is not to say that nothing should be published, or that there is no method for sharing information with Select Committees in confidence.

Let me give an example. We are told that there is a Treasury analysis of the economic benefits to the UK of future free trade agreements with non-EU member

states. The existence of that paper was revealed by Charles Grant of the Centre for European Reform back in June. According to the *Financial Times* of 15 September, “it is said to show that the value of new free trade agreements would be significantly less than the economic cost of leaving the customs union.”

None of us knows whether that is the case or not, because the Government have chosen thus far not to disclose that information to us. Yet that is information that we really ought to know, given that the Government have taken an absolutely major policy decision—that we should leave the customs union—without any analysis being shared with this House about the consequences or costs, or indeed the benefits, of that decision.

First, like all those who have been Ministers, I looked at—I will not pretend to have read them in their entirety—all the impact assessments that passed before my eyes during my time as a Minister. On all other matters, including relatively minor ones, the Government produce an impact assessment that is shared with Parliament and the public, so it really is extraordinary that for the single most important decision that this country, as a result of the referendum, has taken since the end of the second world war, the Government have published nothing by way of an impact assessment.

Secondly, there is the question—raised very effectively, I thought, by my right hon. and learned Friend—who decides whether they can be published. I understand why Ministers told the Select Committee in evidence that they have not been able to read them all, and I have confessed that I did not read every single word of them when I was a Minister. Indeed, the Secretary of State told us that the analyses contain “excruciating detail”. He also confirmed that the Cabinet has not seen them. It could not be right for civil servants to make the decision about what should or should not be released; it clearly must be Ministers. The Select Committee has been told that certain analysis will now be shared with the Scottish Government—the point made a moment ago—so I presume that that decision was taken by Ministers.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend, in his capacity as Chair of the Select Committee, asked what safeguards could be put in place to ensure that information that would be detrimental to the UK’s negotiating position is not released, and I wonder whether he could comment on that.

Hilary Benn: I shall come on to that point at the end of my remarks.

Thirdly, it is hard to believe that all the material has the potential to undermine our negotiating position. I would be intrigued to know how reports on museums, galleries and libraries, and crafts or real estate, could contain information of such sensitivity that it would create difficulties for the Secretary of State when he next meets Mr Barnier.

John Redwood: On property, if there was an entirely bogus forecast of big job losses and a collapse in commercial property, it would be silly to publish that, as, first, it would be wrong and, secondly, it would be negative for our position.

Hilary Benn: It is not for me to argue the Government’s case, but if it were a bogus forecast I would be very surprised if the Government would have put it in an assessment they had drawn up—*[Interruption]* Please do not tempt me on this subject. This point raises the question of why, thus far, the Government have had a blanket policy of non-publication.

Having said all that, I welcome the spirit of what the Minister said today, even if I and—I venture to suggest—the House are not absolutely clear what was being offered when he helpfully said that the Government will not be opposing the motion. In that same spirit, I say to him, in conclusion, that if the Government comply with the motion, as they should if it is carried, and pass the information to us, I am sure the Select Committee—I hope the members who are here do not mind my saying this—would be very happy to discuss with Ministers how the material should be handled. We would be happy to discuss what can be published—to come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander)—and where the Committee might share the Government’s view that there might be some difficulties if it were put into the public domain. I hope that that offer to the Minister is helpful as the Government give effect to the motion, if, indeed, it is carried by the House this evening.

5.26 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I rise to support the motion. I hope that the motion is put to the vote and I shall be walking through the Lobby in favour of it. If the Minister and the Government are not prepared to be bound by the terms of the motion, I gently say to them that we are not messing about here any more. This is grown-up, serious stuff. This is no longer a debate on the fringes of politics, where people can follow long-held ideological dreams they have had for decades. The country has voted—52% of those who voted voted to leave the EU—and people like me accept that we are going to leave the EU. But I am not going to stand by and see the future of my children’s generation and the grandchildren I hope will follow being trashed and ruined without any form of debate and disclosure as to the consequences and, arguably, the options that might be available as disclosed in all these documents that cover so many sectors in so many ways.

So this is grown-up, serious stuff. I say to Members on this side that the days of carping from the sidelines have gone. I say to them: “You’ve won; you’re in charge of this; now you have to face up to the responsibility of delivering a Brexit that works for everybody in this country and for generations to come.” So what’s the problem? If the Government are not going to be bound by this motion, vote against it. If they abstain, they agree to it and they will abide by it. As I have said, these are serious matters.

Hannah Bardell: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry: I will take the extra minute.

Hannah Bardell: I find myself in the strange position of agreeing with everything the right hon. Lady is saying. She is making a very sensible and rational speech. Does she agree that the irony is that some of our colleagues who so seek to have a sovereign, more powerful,

[Hannah Bardell]

more transparent Parliament are, by not agreeing to the result of this motion, damaging democracy and the ability of Parliament and those who sit in it to do their jobs?

Anna Soubry: I agree. Let us be clear: this debate has always crossed the political divide. Many in the Labour party supported leave and many Conservatives supported remain. This transcends the normal political divide. I agree very much with the hon. Lady.

Let me explain why it is so important that we know what is in these documents. I am getting a bit of a feeling here. I rather take the view that there might be stuff in these huge impact assessments that perhaps hon. Members on this side do not want to put out into the public domain. They can and should redact every piece of commercially sensitive material in the documents, and anything that could undermine the security of our country should also be redacted. However, I am getting a rather strong feeling that, if the Government were to say that, whatever the options might be for the final deal, everything in this wonderful new post-Brexit world that awaits us was going to be brilliant and rosy, those Members who favour no deal would be the first to stand up and say to the Government, “Disclose these impact documents! Let the people see what wonders await them in this wonderful new post-Brexit world.” So what’s the problem?

I must say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), as he represents all those fishing men and women who live in his constituency: how on earth can he say that we should not disclose all these documents because that would undermine the negotiations if he has not seen them—or even some form of summary of them—in the first place? The implication is quite clear: there is something in them that is not to be disclosed because it might actually prick this golden bubble, this balloon, that is the promised land of Brexit. My constituents are entitled to know the consequences of the options that are available to this Government as they negotiate the transition and then, most importantly, the final deal. My constituents are concerned about their jobs, and so are the businesses in my constituency.

Stephen Doughty: Does the right hon. Lady agree that her constituents and mine have the right to know the costs of a no-deal Brexit option? The Government are refusing to answer my parliamentary questions asking how much each Department is putting aside for Brexit contingency planning and planning for a no deal. Does she agree that that information should be in the public domain?

Anna Soubry: I absolutely agree. Other hon. Members have talked about the impact that they fear this will have on their constituents and on the part of our great country, and they are right to do so. How can local authorities, businesses and chambers of commerce—and all the other people who create our country’s great economy and the jobs and prosperity that we have now and will need in the future—plan for those things and make important decisions without the necessary information? How can we as a country come together, as people say we should, to heal the divide between the

52% and the 48%? We have failed to do that so far. How can we do all those things unless we are open and frank with people and bring them into the discussion about what Brexit is going to look like and what final deal can be secured for our country?

Whatever the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) might say about Government policy, it is now clear what we want from the transition deal, thanks to the Prime Minister’s excellent Florence speech, which was widely welcomed. But let us be honest, what happened then? We heard the usual “noises off” trying to undermine her and destabilise her position. Thankfully, however, the Prime Minister has stood firm, and full credit to her for doing so. But even now, at this moment, my Government have still not worked out what their policy is for that final deal, and the usual voices continue to make their irresponsible argument for no deal and for falling off the cliff edge. That is the most dangerous thing that could possibly happen to our economy and to the generations to come.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why has my right hon. Friend put her name to an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that would give Parliament the power to prevent a deal?

Anna Soubry: That is absolute nonsense, if I may say so to my right hon. Friend. I hope that he might support that amendment, because at its heart is what he has told the British people he believes in. It is about taking back control in this Parliament, not relying on arguments from the right hon. Gentleman for the 19th century, who actually suggested that this Parliament might be bound by a decision in—heaven forbid—a foreign Parliament. The Canadians! I thought we had voted to take back control, and that is absolutely right. This is one of the most important decisions this country has ever made, and what Brexit will look like should be put before this House. It is a crying shame that we have had no debates, binding motions or votes on the future of our country. Future generations will judge us on that. I stood and warned people about the consequences to my party unless it stood up for everybody in this country and abandoned a hard Brexit. I was ignored, and we lost our majority. Millions of people feel that they are unrepresented by any political party, but I hope that my party will now change that by embracing the 48%.

5.34 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Each of us has a responsibility as a parliamentarian—it is the basic reason why we are here—to represent those who have put us here. It is our duty as parliamentarians to ask questions and gain information in order to make correct judgments on how we vote. That is why we want to see the impact assessments for the various sectors. Speaking for my constituency, the three sectors that I am most concerned about are construction, production and the creative industries, and medical services and social care. I simply want to be able to explain to my constituents the way that I will be voting over the coming months.

Chris Ruane: Would my hon. Friend add the British aerospace industry to that list? In north Wales, 7,000 jobs in one factory in Broughton depend on it. With 100,000 jobs in total, would aerospace be up there on her list of sectors that we need information on?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Knowing the facts and figures behind the Government's thinking in various sectors is even more important in the regions, where there can be an over-dependence on one industry.

Parliament should be hugged, not pushed away. The Government should be hugging us, because they need us. In some ways, the Government's Front-Bench team needs us more than we need them. I would welcome another election; let us have one tomorrow. We have to work together on this, but we can work together only if Members do not feel frustrated and left in the dark.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the impact on industries in our local areas. Does she agree that the medical services and social care sector is incredibly important in all our constituencies? A leaked Department of Health report from earlier this year suggested that there could be a shortfall of 40,000 nurses if there is a hard Brexit—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) answers that intervention, Mr Deputy Speaker has just made it clear, and I reiterate it, that if people make long interventions at this point in the debate, they are depriving someone else who has been sitting here all afternoon of the opportunity to speak at all.

Catherine West: I agree with my hon. Friend and thank her for all her excellent forensic questioning in this area. It is sad, however, that she has had to spend hours and hours asking those questions when it is really our basic right as parliamentarians to have the information we need for this important treaty making. It is probably the most important constitutional question that we in this Parliament will have to grapple with. My worry is that we could be heading for a crash course, which relates to my intervention on the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) about there being an element of people not wanting to know the facts and figures. Those who have already made up their mind want to be positive, but perhaps they also want to ignore the facts. That is the opposite extreme, and opposites are unnecessary and probably bad in this regard.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Hon. Members: Just carry on.

Catherine West: Go on.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Lady tell the House what she has done in the past 16 months to strengthen the British hand and to be positive about things?

Catherine West: I have redoubled the number of meetings that I am having, and I am polishing up my Mandarin Chinese so that I can improve our standing with one of our big trading partners. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] It is important that this does not end up like a Pentecostalist meeting where we close our ears and eyes and just sing for the positivity of Brexit. We should engage our minds as well our emotions when dealing with the taxing and difficult question of what the future will hold for our children and their children.

I want to make a quick point about the cliff-edge scenario. I am unsure whether we have really explored it. None of us wants it. The Prime Minister said in her Florence speech that she wants a transition deal just as much as those of us who are sensible and also want it. Let us imagine, in the worst of all possible worlds, that we are on a crash course leading towards the cliff edge. I am deeply concerned about inflation, flat wages, the more than £200 billion of household debt and the fact that interest rates are going up this week. These are deeply concerning and worrying times for our economy, with or without Brexit. I am worried about the combination of factors, which is why we need a proper analysis from the Treasury of the broad overall picture of non-Brexit-related issues.

There are other people whose opinions we must trust. For example, the former chief mandarin of the Foreign Office, Sir Simon Fraser, has said that the differences between us in our debates on Brexit mean that the UK has been "absent" from the formal negotiations, perhaps leading to this terrible cliff-edge scenario.

Crashing out could lead to real questions about the safety of our nuclear facilities, and other Members have mentioned the European Aviation Safety Agency. Air tickets can be purchased up to a year in advance, which brings us close to three or four months before March 2019. What will we do about the lack of alignment and regulation on other transport questions and on agriculture, financial services and banking?

I finish on the human question of the European citizens in our communities. Not a surgery goes by without a European citizen coming to explain that, despite living in the UK for 37 years, contributing to the economy and bringing up a family, they feel deeply alienated and angry. The rhetoric around xenophobic feelings and around whether they feel accepted or not seems to have been heightened. Some families even want to return to European countries after living in the UK for 37 years, which is a terrible shame, all because of the lack of certainty and the lack of a scientific approach to Brexit. The Home Office lacks a firm approach, and it is constantly moving the goalposts. Crashing out of the EU would be worst for EU nationals, who would be left completely in limbo. The impact in certain regions would be horrendous, and the health sector would probably be worst affected, as our NHS is so dependent.

Will the Government please stop their confusion, division and chaos? Please do not drag us back again and again on this point. Be firm and give us the information that our constituents expect.

5.42 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): From the mood music in the Chamber, and from what I am hearing from the two Front Benches, it appears that the Opposition feel confident that their motion, if it is not successfully opposed, will to some extent cause the Government to release the papers. I therefore work on the basis that that may well be the case.

What will the papers look like, and what would be a responsible position for both sides of the House to take with respect to that information, and particularly with respect to redacting certain information that may be deemed commercially sensitive to the organisations that

[Huw Merriman]

have provided it? I ask that question in the true spirit of transparency, because, if information that has been passed to the Government on the basis that it would not be released thereafter is subsequently released—there may be confidentiality agreements in place, albeit they would not survive a vote of this House—the danger is that those companies would not be as willing to provide so much information to the Government, and therefore to the House, in future. Perhaps the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) will be able to work on that basis with Ministers to ensure that, in making this a success, we do not end up lacking information from our business partners.

I sit on the Select Committee on Transport and, despite having sat for only a few weeks, the Chair, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), has already twice had to warn Committee members not to leak documentation. That is a difficulty, and I hope that if, indeed, the reports do go to the Brexit Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) will take all the steps he can to ensure that, if certain redacted information is given to Committee members, we try to preserve the spirit in which those organisations delivered that information.

Looking beyond this challenge, and working on the basis that this information is to be given, I absolutely favour transparency and more information in the process; I am incredibly interested in what organisations have to say. I am well aware that often the advice of civil servants would be cautious, but I hope that Government Members will look beyond that and recognise that if we do not publish information—and we are therefore where we are today—Members such as the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) will try to make out that there is a conspiracy or a smoking gun in the documentation. There may well be nothing of the sort, beyond cautious civil service advice. I hope that my side can take that into account.

I stand here as someone who voted remain in the referendum, although I did not campaign for the remain team. I spoke to my constituents, held a series of meetings and wrote to 40,000 households to give them information about both sides of the argument, and then I very much left it to them to decide. I do not believe they were duped when it came to the decision. I find it patronising beyond belief when SNP Members say that all my constituents, 60% of whom voted the other way from me, did so on some false basis and are not capable of making their own decisions. It is incredibly patronising to my constituents and many others to be told that. I left it to my constituents to make their decision and they did so, and it is my job, as a democrat, to ensure that that decision goes through.

Anna Soubry: Does my hon. Friend not accept that it is becoming clear that a number of promises made to people who voted leave will not be kept and that, in fact, the opposite is happening? Those people will not get £350 million a week for the NHS; they will not see the scrapping of all the regulations and so on, because they will be embodied in British law; they will not see a particular reduction in immigration; and, arguably, they will not be better off. It is not that they were stupid by any means—they were simply conned.

Huw Merriman: The danger with that argument is it presupposes that everybody in this Chamber knows exactly the reasons why people voted the way they did. The reality, from the question on the ballot paper, is that more people voted to leave than voted to remain. That is all we know. We do not know the reasons why and it would be wrong for us to try to interpret them. I have been elected by those same constituents, so of course I would say they are right, but SNP Members may wish to think about the same principle: for whatever reason, they came to that decision and they were right.

What I want to do is make a success of it. This is the big concern about this debate, which is a great technical debate that I have found interesting, as a lawyer. The question is whether it moves us forward to making a success of leaving the EU? We must remember that 498 out of 650 Members of this House voted to trigger article 50. Surely it follows that it is in their interests to make a success of a decision that, ultimately, they made. Yet time and again the House is used as a mechanism to slow the process down and try to defeat the ultimate goal of those who voted in that manner. I find that a terrible shame.

Angus Brendan MacNeil *rose—*

Huw Merriman: I will not take any more interventions; the hon. Gentleman will have his own time.

As I was saying, I find that a shame. On Monday, our Transport Committee heard from four leaders—those of British Airways, EasyJet, Manchester airport and Heathrow airport. We challenged them on whether this would be a success for industry and they could not have been more confident that it would be. They were confident in their industry, but with the proviso that, between industry and politicians, we would make a success of it. My concern is that politicians seem to be the ones who do not have it in them to make a success of it. Again, I challenge all hon. Members who voted to trigger article 50 to talk this process up and make a success of it.

Mr Jenkin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been listening carefully to the exchanges in the debate. The motion on the Order Paper is clear and unqualified: it says that the impact assessments should

“be provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union.” During the debate, though, those who proposed the motion and others who support it have suggested that parts of those documents might be withheld. Have you received an amendment to the motion that might qualify what should be provided to the Select Committee, or is it for the Government to interpret what they should do after the debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I can answer the practical part of it very simply by saying that the Chair has received no such amendment. As far as I am concerned—and I can be very positive about this—the matter that is currently being debated is exactly the wording in the motion before us on the Order Paper. The way in which the Opposition interpret that might be different from the way in which the Government interpret it. That is what this Chamber is here for: to discuss those differences and come to a conclusion.

Anna Soubry: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Government to disclose to members of the media what they plan to do in relation to the documents we are discussing? I have just seen a tweet from the rather excellent political correspondent from *The Sun* newspaper, who says that he understands that the Government will release the documents, albeit heavily redacted.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for her very reasonable point of order. It is not for the Chair to rule on what the Government may say to journalists, but I say to the right hon. Lady that while a debate is going on in the Chamber about a matter of great importance, the place where announcements in connection with or pertaining to that matter of importance should be made is here in the Chamber.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You said that the debate is about not only the motion but how the Government interpret it. Should papers be provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee, surely other Select Committees—such as the International Trade Committee, which I chair, and perhaps the Health Committee and several others—should be in play. Then again, if the Government do a full U-turn and release the information, we should welcome that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. From his point of view as the Chairman of another Select Committee, he has made his point well. As I said earlier, that is not a matter on which I can make a ruling from the Chair at this moment.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There seems to be in the Government's mind some belief that they should do all the redaction. If the House decides that the impact assessments should be provided to a Select Committee, I believe it would be better if the Select Committee could then decide what it was going to publish. The serious, important point is that were any member of that Committee to breach the Committee's decisions and publish the impact assessments willy-nilly, off their own bat, I am sure you would agree that that would be a matter of privilege. It would be a contempt of Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his most interesting point of order, but it is hypothetical. I would hope that any member of a Committee would act in a way that would not be a breach of privilege and would not breach the rules of Parliament. The whole issue of privilege, its importance and the importance of behaving in a way that is commensurate with the role of being an hon. Member of this House is there not for the sake of tradition or any frothy reason, but to preserve our freedom through democracy. That is why these matters are of great importance.

We will now return to the debate because, as the Chamber well knows, these are not points of order for the Chair, but matters for debate. There is clearly disagreement, which is why we have debates on these matters. We will recommence with Mr Phil Wilson.

5.54 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Let me start by following on from what the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), said about the customs union. I have received information from the North East England Chamber of Commerce about the state of companies in the north-east and about how they will deal with leaving the customs union. It believes that the majority of its companies do not have the necessary skills to deal with the new customs arrangements that we will have when we leave. It says that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs shows no inclination of providing any support to businesses to ensure company compliance. In fact, the new intake of 1,000 HMRC staff will be there just to raise revenue, not to help ensure that companies get the documentation right. It also says that if we have a no-deal scenario where everything sent from and to the EU has to have a customs declaration for clearance purposes, the cost to business will be huge. A customs declaration currently costs between £20 and £40—in some cases it is £75. Sometimes companies are charged by the line.

There are 16,600 commodity codes and more than 300 custom procedure codes. Even taking the view that businesses will get to know the commodity codes and the custom procedure codes that they use regularly, it will not be an easy task to get used to the change. They will need training, which will not be available, and they think that they will need a major upgrade of software and IT equipment to deal with the changes.

Given that background, it is not surprising that many of our companies and businesses want to know what the impact will be of leaving the single market and the customs union in March 2019. More than 60% of the trade in the north-east of England is with the EU. My constituency has the biggest business park in the region, with more than 500 companies based there employing between 10,000 and 12,000 people. A few weeks ago, I was at a Brexit seminar on the industrial estate, and the one thing that I kept hearing about was the uncertainty. People kept saying, "What happens next?" Some said, "What are the questions that we need to ask?" I said that the one thing they needed was access to the impact assessments. We need to be able to work out how the sectors of our industry will be affected.

It might be easy for multinationals such as Hitachi, Nissan and Airbus to put capacity into the problem so that they can see how they will be affected by the various scenarios in the future. The vast majority of companies on the industrial estate—the business park in Newton Aycliffe—are small and medium-sized enterprises and they do not have such capacity. For them, it is all about tactics. It is not so much about strategy, but about getting through the next year, and they need help. They need to know how they will be affected in the future.

Let us look at some of the sectors that are represented in that business park in Newton Aycliffe. Some 814,000 people who work in the automotive sector generally are feeling insecure at the moment and need to know what is going to happen. The construction and engineering sector employs 2.9 million people; the electricity, marketing and renewables sector 112,000 people; the electronics sector 850,000 people; the IT, software and computers sector 1.4 million; the medical devices sector 50,000; and the professional services sector 1.1 million. The list goes on. All those sectors are represented on the Newton Aycliffe business park.

[Phil Wilson]

We do not want to reveal everything—that might not be in the national interest—but companies and the Brexit Committee need to be able to analyse what is happening. What are we frightened of? What do the Government not want us to see? I fear that much of the redacted information will be a bit negative. Some of it might not be in the national interest, and therefore should not be revealed, but some of it might prove that the line the Government are following is not in the national interest.

In supporting this motion, I am saying that we need openness. We need to take back control in this Chamber. Those who wanted to leave said that throughout the referendum; now we need to put it into practice.

5.59 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), who has just sat down, is another supporter of this motion who is now talking about the release of a set of justifiably redacted documents, as opposed to the complete documents. This underlines the fact that the House is debating documents, but we do not really know what is in them because we do not have them.

Some colleagues think that these documents will contain some dreadful smoking gun that will blow the Government's case out of the water. I can honestly say that I believe that the Government are far more concerned about releasing information into the public domain that will actually help the European Union in the negotiations, when the European Union clearly has no intention of releasing its impact assessments. Indeed, one of the reasons we are leaving the European Union is that this House has absolutely no power over which documents the European Union should be compelled to release because it is completely beyond the power of this House.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recall that the shadow Secretary of State said, very fairly, that he would anticipate that there may well be some redactions or even a summary?

Mr Jenkin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

We are beginning to see, in this rather messy and untidy debate, why this 19th century procedure is not used very often. The usual procedure would be that the Select Committee would request the documents, but it has not requested these documents. No writ or summons have been issued for any of these documents. We simply have this motion.

There is a sensitivity within Government about releasing documents that are used to make political points. Part of the Treasury's reputation was severely trashed when, in the run-up to the referendum, it released documents that were patently misleading and were used for propaganda purposes in a way that I think rather embarrassed Treasury officials.

Then there is the question of the status of the motion. The words "binding" or "not binding" do not appear in "Erskine May". There is a misappreciation of the meaning of these motions. By passing a motion, the House is not making law. There are no obligations that are enforceable through the courts as there would be if we were passing a set of regulations or an Act of Parliament. It is simply an expression of the will of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: "Erskine May" does indeed not say "binding", but it does say:

"Each House has the power to call for the production of papers by means of a motion for a return."

Power is something pretty forceful, and is much more than just an expression of will.

Mr Jenkin: My hon. Friend takes me to the very next point, which is that it would be unconscionable for any Government to ignore a motion. But I heard the Minister very clearly saying that he does not intend to ignore the motion. In fact, he made it clear that the Government will respond to the motion. This echoes what the Leader of the House said recently in business questions about Opposition day motions. She said that there should be a standard, and that the Government will respond to a motion in the House within, at most, 12 weeks of the will of the House being expressed in such a way.

The very fact that we are having a debate about exactly what would be released means that it is a matter for the Government and Ministers to interpret. If the House is then still not satisfied with what has been released, the House can come back to it. Let us not get in a paddy that there is some great constitutional principle. Parliament is sovereign not because it passes motions, but because, in the Diceyan sense, Parliament can make or unmake any law; and I reiterate that in this matter, we are not making law—at least, not law that is statute law and enforceable through the courts.

It is worth repeating to the House what the Minister reminded us during his opening remarks, which is that the House has previously voted, by a large majority, to protect sensitive information that is relevant to the negotiations. That is why I invite the official Opposition to think very carefully before repeating this exercise. These documents may not be very serious and there may not be very much in them, but this is a power to call for papers that should be used sparingly, precisely because these are the negotiations of a generation.

Unless the Government have the freedom to conduct the negotiations with the necessary confidentiality, the Opposition will undermine the ability of the Government to produce the better terms of settlement that the Opposition say they want. This is potentially extremely disruptive and irresponsible, and the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) knows it. This is more about party politics and exploiting the situation for party advantage than it is about supporting the national interest. There may be a great sea of Opposition colleagues jeering at that point, but they are jeering at the national interest when they jeer in that fashion.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): My hon. Friend has hit on the most salient point. My family business is on the industrial estate in Newton Aycliffe mentioned by the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson). That business, like all the others I have met on that industrial estate, care about one thing: getting the best deal for the United Kingdom. They do not want the Government or this House to do anything that will compromise that. Releasing these papers will do just that.

Mr Jenkin: The businesses I speak to in my constituency and around the country are increasingly impatient with the games being played here at Westminster and the games being played by the European Union. They want

us to leave the European Union and they want us to get on with this to end the uncertainty as quickly as possible. They do not want a protracted and uncertain future for this country, made worse by the irresponsible tactics of the Opposition.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The last Brexit promise left standing was the promise to take back control. What we are seeing today is the Brexiteers running away from control.

Mr Jenkin: It always struck me as odd that those in the Scottish National party believe in self-determination for Scotland, but want to sell out to a superstate European Union. I have never understood how they reconcile the desire for independence with wanting to be shackled to a superstate in which they would have but a pimple of influence compared to the influence they have in the United Kingdom.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Should we not use the correct terminology in this Parliament? Should we not understand what the European Union is? It is a union of 28 sovereign Governments. It is very far away from being a superstate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): That is not a point of order. There have been too many points of order and too many long interventions. I am now reducing the time limit for speeches to three minutes, because that is all the time we have left.

6.7 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. I have always believed in the ability of our country to pool sovereignty with the European Union. I have listened to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) over many, many years trying to persuade me about the sovereignty of this Parliament. It is great to participate in a debate that is demonstrating the sovereignty of this Parliament.

I first started asking questions on this issue on 4 September, using that sovereignty and my role as an MP to raise these issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) made a freedom of information request, again using her ability as an elected Member to get to the truth. We now see my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) assert the sovereignty of this House by dragging the Government to the House to raise these issues. We have heard from Select Committee Chairs, an important institution in this House, that they could well consider this information. They understand that some of it may be redacted, but it all goes to the issue of a sovereign Parliament: we cannot argue for taking back control and then seek to thwart the will of this Parliament, its Select Committees and hon. Members, to get to the heart of the truth.

I want to see the impact assessments, because there are things in them that I expect to read. I expect to read that the health service is going to do a lot with the £350 million. I look forward to seeing it. I expect to read, as we heard during the referendum campaign, that we do not need to worry about a skills gap because there are lots of people in our country who are going to step into those roles. I look forward to seeing what the

Department for Work and Pensions makes of the assessment on skills, along with its colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I look forward to hearing what assessment has been made by the Home Office of whether, when we have limited free movement and we ask the Indians for a trade deal, they will ask whether they can have visas. For all those reasons, it is important to understand whether the arguments that have been put forward by many Conservative Members are actually made in those impact assessments.

However, the real reason this is important is the seriousness of this debate. As night follows day, it will mostly not be us in this Chamber who suffer or struggle as a consequence of any shift in our economy. It is people's jobs and livelihoods and how they feed their children that matters, and for that reason, we must see those impact assessments. It is a crying shame that this process began because of parliamentary questions and freedom of information requests, and not because the Government felt able to be open.

6.10 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): First, I am very glad that these impact assessments and cross-sectoral assessments exist. I said over a year ago that we should be looking at the detail. As a British Conservative in the European Parliament, I worked hand in hand with British Conservative Ministers to champion better regulation. I said that, before we made decisions, we should consult stakeholders, look at the different impacts and assess the options. I thank the Government for going through that exercise. I am delighted that Ministers have been meeting stakeholders and talking to businesses, Government organisations and consumer groups.

However, I understand why the Opposition want to know more about what is going on. There is deep concern about this issue in the country. Brexit does carry risks—as a remainer, I warned about that. The risks have not gone away, and the country needs to be reassured that we are acting in its best interests. Transparency is really important.

However, the decisions are not black and white. Ministers will have been given price-sensitive, confidential information. I know that because stakeholders have told me that they have given such information. If that information is put in the public domain, the very jobs that Opposition Members say they want to protect would actually be jeopardised.

This information could also jeopardise our ongoing negotiations. It is not normal in a trade negotiation to show all our cards; indeed, it is normal to keep our cards close to our chest. That is what the European Parliament does. During the EU-US trade agreements, information on sector-specific issues was not shared at Committee meetings. The negotiators did not even come and give information in a public forum. Their feedback between the different rounds of negotiations was given behind closed doors. When information was shared with the relevant Committees, that was done in a highly confidential way. People would need to go to a room, leave their phone behind, read the papers in confidence and not disclose price-sensitive information. So let us not say that this information should be shared, without thinking through the impact of doing so.

6.13 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I rise to urge Members on both sides of the House to support the motion. I do so for the simple reason that, without publication, it is impossible for this House to do its job, which is to hold the Government to account. We must have a full, frank and informed debate about what Brexit means, and particularly about what a no-deal Brexit would mean for our society, for our economy and for jobs, trade and living standards. The fact is that this House and the British people cannot have that debate without access to the key information.

We face a productivity crisis, a weakened pound, creeping inflation, higher input costs and the slowest GDP growth in Europe—all challenges that would be deeply and dramatically compounded by a no-deal Brexit. No deal would mean customs chaos. Adding just an extra two minutes to customs proceedings at Dover would mean a 17-mile queue from Dover almost back to Ashford. No deal would mean airlines were not sure whether their planes would be able to take off post Brexit. No deal would mean thousands of citizens and businesses left in limbo—maybe temporarily, maybe not—when it was realised that many of their products were no longer eligible for sale across the EU. So let us hope that the Government will now drop their dangerous and vacuous no-deal bluff. The Government contend that to maximise leverage in the negotiations we must make it clear that we are prepared for and willing to accept a no-deal scenario. Taking this logic at face value, surely, then, the more bullish we look and the better prepared we appear to be to manage the new tariffs and customs duties at Dover or at the airport, the greater our leverage would be.

If the impact assessments were positive, they would not only have been published—their findings would be screamed from the rooftops. That is why the failure to publish makes it crystal clear that the no-deal rhetoric is a bluff—a bluff that weakens us and undermines our credibility in the negotiations. It is yet another example of the Brexiteer tail wagging the Tory dog; yet another example of the national interest playing second fiddle to the internal factional interests of the Conservative party; and yet another example of putting party before country, where the Prime Minister has put the placation of her own Back Benchers ahead of the interests of our country. I ask right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House to put country first and to support this motion tonight.

6.15 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I find the basis for this debate utterly baffling, especially in the light of the fact that on 7 December last year Labour Members voted not to demand any information from the Government that could affect our negotiating position. This debate is therefore in direct contravention to something that Labour Members previously supported. That reflects either a bumbling confusion or a deliberate fudging of their approach to the negotiations. They have adopted a strategy that involves accepting any and whatever deal is presented to the UK by the EU. If Britain was required to pay £1 trillion, they would still accept a deal. If Britain was to accept free movement after our departure, they would still accept a deal. If Britain was required to accept European Court of Justice jurisdiction

and forced to remain members of the single market and the customs union, they would still accept a deal. Indeed, if Britain was not to be leaving the EU, Labour Members would still accept a deal. They are not behind Brexit and they are not behind what the British people instructed this place to deliver in that historic referendum last year.

This is a complex negotiation, and it is important that we get it right. It is normal that in even the most basic trade negotiations there needs to be a degree of secrecy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) highlighted, based on her experience in the European Parliament. The European Commission made that very clear when it said recently:

“A certain level of confidentiality is necessary to protect EU interests and to keep chances for a satisfactory outcome high. When entering into a game, no-one starts by revealing his entire strategy to his counterpart from the outset: this is also the case for the EU.”

If that is the case for the EU, why cannot it be the case for Britain?

We need to retain room for manoeuvre, including the ability to give and take—to trade off different interests and maximise the value of concessions—and to do so without always having the other side know what we know.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Suella Fernandes: No, because I do not have time.

We need to retain our ability to negotiate with that degree of agility and speed. This trade negotiation is different from any other. We have a changing political context. It involves different parties—other countries that are members of the European Union. It involves elections and changing political contexts. We have already had elections in France, Germany and Austria, and we will have many more between now and 2019.

Parliamentary scrutiny is right, and it has been provided through questions, papers and debates. I urge Labour Members to get behind Britain, get behind Brexit and get behind the Government.

6.18 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The refusal of the Government to publish these impact assessments is sadly part of a pattern of shutting out scrutiny and opposition throughout. The basic issue is that the Government are being driven by hard-line ideological Brexiteers whose priority is to leave with as hard a Brexit as possible. They want a blank canvas on which to repaint the UK in their own desolate vision, shorn of rights for ordinary people and protections for the environment and consumers, and creating as free a market as possible.

The Prime Minister warned the EU27 of the danger of the UK setting itself up as an offshore tax haven if we did not get a fair deal, but the truth is that that is exactly what the hard-line Brexiteers want and she is too weak to stand up to them. Indeed, I suspect that the failure to progress in the negotiations is due, in part, to an inability to reconcile the pressures within the Conservative party with the needs of the country; of course, the Conservative party comes first. I suspect

that that will lead us to a situation in which we crash out without a deal, engineered to enable the Brexiteers to blame the EU27 for their intransigence.

The sinister and dangerous atmosphere that the Brexiteers seek to create is adding to the real nastiness in the country caused by the referendum. Remain MPs such as me have been described as “saboteurs”. The Governor of the Bank of England has been described as an “enemy of Brexit”. We still continually hear the phrase “the will of the people” used to describe the narrow victory for leave in the referendum, as though the 48% never existed. Last week, we saw an attack on academic integrity and freedom. It is like a Brexit inquisition designed to intimidate and silence scrutiny, in the same way as the Government are silencing scrutiny over these reports because they know how badly things are likely to go.

As other hon. Members have said, if the Government are so confident, why do they not publish the impact assessments? Let us see how strong the Government’s hand is. What have they got to hide? What is certain is that the Brexiteers want to rush through any deal before the absurdity of their position is exposed, hence the anti-intellectualism of this Brexit inquisition.

An even greater reason to shut down scrutiny and rush things through is the increasing evidence of manipulation of the referendum by foreign powers. The unholy alliance of Brexiteers, Trumpeteers and Russia is perhaps the most sinister aspect of the whole sorry affair, and I ask the Brexiteers why they want to align themselves with Putin’s Government in seeking the break-up of the EU. I support my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) in his call for an inquiry—which would, of course, have to be blocked by the Brexiteers in the Conservative party.

Disinfecting light must be shed on the Brexit process, and the first step to doing that would be the publication of the reports. When things go south after Brexit—and they will—the British people, who will suffer, will never forgive this Government for not revealing the truth while there was still time.

6.21 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Some of my colleagues will know I that always find the discovery of new and arcane parliamentary procedure in the Chamber interesting, so it has been particularly good to be here this afternoon.

I draw Members’ attention to the motion that we are debating, because some seem to be under a false impression about it. Anyone listening to this debate would think that the motion says that everything should be released publicly and immediately, but that is not what it says. It says that the information should be

“provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union.”

The Members who shouted in their speeches that the information would go out to the public have clearly not read their own motion.

I was interested to hear the slightly more conciliatory tone of the shadow Secretary of State and the Chair of the Select Committee, who both accepted that there would be an element of redaction and that certain information would legitimately have to be withheld in the national interest.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: No, I will not. There is little time, and I have sat through the whole debate listening to people who have had their opportunity to speak.

Although I think it right that the Government are not opposing the motion, we need to be much clearer about what it is about. The tone of some of the speeches has been a lot more sensible than that of others. Some Members have taken the opportunity to rerun the referendum, which is all very interesting, and I am sure it has been fascinating to listen to, but at the core of the matter is the fact that people made their decision in June last year, and we now need to make the process successful.

I have heard the talk about the issues surrounding no deal, but I have yet to hear a representative of a European country say that the EU must stay with Britain in the negotiations until we finally give in to what they demand. The EU has left the possibility of no deal on the table, so it is not unreasonable for the UK Government, as the other party in the negotiations, to do exactly the same.

I was reassured to hear the Minister’s earlier comments, and I am sure that the Government genuinely want to engage with the House and engage with information that helps and advances our debate. Some of what we have heard this afternoon has simply been playing to the gallery. Some Members are trying to pretend that information is not being made available, when it will be. Others are demanding that everything should be published immediately, even though their colleagues admitted that some of it will need to be redacted in the national interest or that a summary could be presented. I am sure that the Government will take that idea away and consider seriously whether a summary could cover the points that have been made.

For me, this has been a useful debate. I think such a motion should be brought forward, but Members should be up front and clear that arguing about this process is not actually getting us closer to a final deal. We must not do things in this House that go against the national interest, because people will not forgive us for that. If we chuck stuff out into the papers, that may have a real impact. It is right that the Government have had a chance to explore the options. Although this has been an interesting exploration of procedure, we need to be clear about what the motion is actually about.

6.24 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) for securing this important debate, and I thank all hon. Members who have called for the publication of the sectoral impact assessments.

Our economy is on the brink of the biggest change for generations. Sharing these reports is an important part of how Parliament and the Government will plan together for the big change ahead to achieve the best deal for British businesses and families. It is unclear to me why the Government are determined to keep 29 million British workers and their parliamentary representatives in the dark about the impact Brexit may have on their jobs, careers and livelihoods.

[Seema Malhotra]

This is not just an Opposition issue; Chairs of Select Committees have supported publication, and over 180 MPs from across the parties have backed a letter written by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and me to the Secretary of State. This matters because the situation we face is potentially very serious. One sign is that the Bank of England believes up to 75,000 jobs could be lost in the financial services industry as a result of Brexit. Another is that in the year since the referendum, we have fallen from the top to the bottom of the G7 growth league table.

To have a proper debate about the impact of Brexit on our economy, jobs and living standards, we need to know to the fullest possible extent the effects it will have on every sector. This is not about leave or remain, but about putting country before party. It is not about taking sides, but about a nation planning together. It is about leadership, transparency, clarity and responsibility.

Lilian Greenwood: I will be very brief. Does my hon. Friend agree that the opposition given by Government Members is wholly confused? Of the last two speakers, one said that the reports cannot be released because that would lay open our hand in the negotiations and the other admitted that it would not because they would be provided in confidence to the Select Committee.

Seema Malhotra: I will come on in a moment to talk about the confusion that I believe is holding back common sense in this debate.

We are getting the sense that there has been a change of heart by the Government. I welcome that because supporting the motion is the right thing to do. I hope that before the reports are provided to Parliament the Ministers will read them first. I hope that we will also receive confirmation today of the time by which this will happen. The list of studies was published this week, four months after they were first promised, but with 17 months to do until Brexit day, time is of the essence.

In two years, the Secretary of State has gone from saying of FOI requests that

“information is withheld from the public for no good reason other than to spare the blushes of the powerful”

to saying now that the Government need a “safe space” for policy development to be conducted in private. In a year, he gone from saying:

“We have more to gain than we have to lose, while the opposite is true for the EU”

to telling the Lords EU Committee yesterday that Britain’s Brexit withdrawal agreement will “probably favour” the EU. The confusion at the heart of Government must not now get in the way of a nation planning together for the huge challenges to our economy that clearly lie ahead.

The Government interpreted Opposition day motions on 12 October and 7 December 2016 as binding. In the interests of the country, they should do so in relation to the motion that I am sure and confident the House will pass today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Let me make it absolutely clear that when someone who has the Floor takes an intervention and allows someone who has not been sitting here waiting to speak to make

their point, then at the end of such a busy debate, many people will not have the opportunity to speak. That is what is about to happen, and every Member of the House ought to take responsibility for not taking interventions and for keeping their remarks short. Hon. Members are preventing other hon. Members from speaking.

6.29 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on his motion. The Opposition are absolutely right to table motions on Opposition days that force the Government to do things. It has been a general waste of this House’s time to have motions on motherhood and apple pie, which has been the tendency in recent years. To ensure that we have a serious, substantial matter on which to vote is a very encouraging trend and one that I hope will continue.

I have no doubt that the motion is, in all senses, binding. It is not parliamentary wallpaper. It is exercising one of our most ancient rights, to demand papers. It is interesting that in the instructions given to Select Committees they are given the right to send for people and papers, but that is the right of this House delegated to those Select Committees. It is not something inherent in Select Committees, and it is therefore something clearly that this House can, at any time, call back to itself, as, quite rightly, the Opposition have proposed today.

As to the papers themselves, I have no particular view—this is, in normal circumstances, a matter for the Government—and I would have gone along with the Government had they wished to oppose the motion. But in the event that they do not, they must publish these papers to the Brexit Committee in full. The motion does not allow for redaction, and a happy chat across the Dispatch Box between the shadow spokesmen and the Ministers does not reduce the right of this House to see the papers.

However, it may well be that the Select Committee, of which I happen to be a member, may decide not to publish large sections of those papers, for confidentiality reasons, but on the basis of the motion, unless a further motion is passed to amend it at some stage, that right must be with this House, not with Her Majesty’s Government.

My one criticism of the motion is that I think it a marginal discourtesy to the Select Committee not to have asked it in the first place whether it wanted this motion to be tabled, but in the grander scheme of things that is a minor complaint.

The Canadian example is important, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) criticised me for referring to the Canadian Parliament, but it is in a way a sister Parliament of this one.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to give my hon. Friend an extra minute and say, “Hear, hear!” to everything he says.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful, because I have always campaigned—this is one reason I was so keen to leave the EU—for the rights of this House. One of the great rights of this House is to hold the Government to

account and to use the procedures and facilities open to it to do that in a powerful and real way. That is something the motion does.

The Canadian example—over Afghanistan—shows that failure to meet the requirements of this House is a breach of privilege, and there is no protection for any information that the Government have received from outside sources on the grounds of confidentiality once it is required by this House. Any agreement the Government have made is superseded by the powers of this House and cannot be challenged in any court because it is a fundamental privilege of this House that it should be guided by its own rules.

I have no particular view on whether it is right or wrong to publish these papers—I would trust the Government on that—but I am pleased that the House of Commons is exercising its historic power, albeit from a 19th century precedent, and I welcome the Government's response.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Very few Members will now have an opportunity to speak and I am reducing the time limit to two minutes.

6.33 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I have spoken many times in the House over the past 20 years on freedom of information. I want to focus on that today. I was nearly thrown out of the Chamber by Michael Martin for my pains some years ago in pressing for extension to freedom of information.

The Government side have focused very much on why publication of these documents would damage the interests of the UK and affect the Government's policy making process, but the Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires the Government also to consider the public interest. That is why, having submitted freedom of information requests to the Government to ask them to release a sample of these reports, I am now appealing against their refusal to issue them.

These are the grounds on which I am appealing: the release of these reports would meet all the key public interest tests, demonstrating transparent and accountable Government decision-making processes; promote public understanding of the implications of Brexit; safeguard democratic processes, which would be severely damaged if the Government pursued a path that they knew was very damaging to the UK's interests; and secure the best use of public resources.

There is clearly great public and parliamentary interest in examining these documents, as Brexit will have a greater impact on people economically and socially, and on the UK diplomatically, than any other decision taken in the past 50 years. The Government have failed to take that into account, and I shall submit a freedom of information request to ask them to set out how they took into account the public interest test versus concerns around damaging the UK's interests.

I am afraid that we are left with the impression that the main reason for refusing to release these reports is that they confirm that the UK will be worse off after Brexit, and that the Government are trying to hide this inconvenient truth.

6.35 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The motion requires—some would say, compels—the Government to release the reports in their entirety, unredacted. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) just made that point. Yet a consensus appears to have emerged in this House this afternoon that it would be detrimental to our national interest to release these reports in their entirety. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) acknowledged that in his opening remarks.

Keir Starmer: What I said in my opening was in criticism of the blanket ban. I said that the Government should consider first whether any of the material needs to be withheld and, if so, whether bits of it could be released—summaries or gists. I was criticising the Government's approach because they had not already gone through that exercise, which they should have gone through; I was not actually talking about what the motion means.

Chris Philp: Many Members today have made it clear that they believe publication of either a summary or a redacted version would strike the best balance between keeping the House informed and protecting our national interest. I was going to ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman whether, if the Minister from the Dispatch Box made a commitment to publish a summary or a redacted version of these reports, the Opposition Front-Bench team would decide not to press the motion to a vote, because if passed as written, there is a danger that it would compel the Government to publish all the reports that Members on both sides of the House appear to agree would be damaging. It would be damaging for two reasons. First, contributors to those reports—companies—would have their commercial information revealed, even though the Government had given them an undertaking of confidentiality. Secondly, publication would reveal our position to our negotiating counterparts.

There is, I am afraid, a history of confidential material leaking out of Select Committees. Although the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), said that he would seek to prevent any confidential material leaking out, that has happened on a number of occasions in the recent past. In 2012, a Culture, Media and Sport Committee report on phone hacking was leaked. In 2016, a Select Committee report on arms export controls was leaked to "Newsnight". In 1999, a social security report was leaked to Gordon Brown's then Parliamentary Private Secretary. Robin Cook received a leak in 1999 in relation to the Foreign Affairs Committee, and in 2013 a Public Accounts Committee report on Wonga was leaked to Wonga. So there are legitimate concerns about whether material given to a Select Committee will necessarily remain confidential.

There has been a measure of consensus in the House this afternoon that a redacted or summary version of these reports would strike the correct balance. It may be that the Minister gives an undertaking from the Dispatch Box along those lines, and it would be in the national interest if, in the event that Members in the Opposition Front-Bench team found those assurances satisfactory, they did not press their motion.

6.38 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Government's position on this issue is hugely symbolic. Ministers' unwillingness to furnish a Committee of this House with basic information is a symbol of a Government in trouble, seeking to avoid proper scrutiny and challenge by elected Members of this Parliament. The Government's position on the motion is also symbolic of what is entirely wrong with this Government's approach to Brexit, and how we find our country moving through this historic approach since the referendum.

Last year, as the Prime Minister came to power, she found herself leading a nation that was clearly divided on the subject. The Government should have been straining, and should be straining, every sinew to bring this country back together, but instead we have an unelected Prime Minister, determined to press ahead with a who-knows-what Brexit regardless of the consequences for different parts of the country and sectors of the economy. The Government are willing to do this with as little scrutiny as possible, with Ministers taking a "Whitehall knows best" approach to a process that will profoundly impact this country for decades to come. Instead of bringing the country back together, this total lack of transparency and engagement with people's very real concerns is serving only to create further distrust and division.

Why is that important to the north-east? Well, we know that the Government have undertaken modelling of the impacts. It has been reported that the Department for Exiting the European Union has carried out analysis that concludes that the north-east of England and Scotland will be the region and country worst affected. It stands to reason, because 60% of our exports go to the EU and we rely on millions of pounds in agricultural, structural, social and university funding.

We were told loudly and clearly last year that leaving the EU was about taking back control and that voting to leave would ensure the primacy of this sovereign Parliament. Instead, we now have a minority Government determined to obfuscate at every stage, overriding parliamentary democracy at every opportunity. This must end today.

6.40 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Health Committee will shortly begin an inquiry entitled "Brexit—medicines, medical devices and substances of human origin". We will be considering, among other issues, how we can guarantee safe, effective and timely access to medicines and substances of human origin; the future of medical research and development; how we will co-operate and collaborate across Europe after we leave the European Union; and access to the appropriate workforce. The stakes could not be higher. The Committee does not want to damage the national interest; we want to do our job on behalf of patients, this House and the public.

We know that there are sectoral analyses of life sciences, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, medical services and social care. I did discuss with the Committee, in advance of our hearing yesterday, whether we wished to call for these papers, and we discussed many of the issues that have been raised in the House today. The Committee was unanimous in giving me the authority formally to request those papers from the Secretary of

State, and I did so. Therefore, although there has been much comment this afternoon about there being a discourtesy in not raising this with a Committee, our Committee has considered it and would like the papers, on behalf of our patients, in order to allow us to do our job better.

I believe in transparency. I understand the concerns that have been raised and so would be prepared to see the documents in a private setting, if it is believed that that is the right way forward. But I and my Committee believe that we can do a better job on behalf of this House if we have access to the information. I therefore call on the Secretary of State to release it to us.

6.43 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The 58 impact assessments that we know have been carried out on the instructions of the Government cover almost every imaginable area that will be affected by Brexit. Withdrawal from the European Union is arguably the most important decision that Parliament will take in over 40 years. It is only right and proper that parliamentarians should have the right to know what the impact will be on the different areas covered by the impact assessments.

Let me pick just a few areas covered by the impact assessments. On aviation, if I book a flight to Spain for 31 March 2019, will my flight be able to take off and land as it would now? What will happen to automatic flying rights if transitional arrangements are not agreed? On legal services, will lawyers be able to practise in other European countries that currently recognise their professional qualifications, or will they have to take exams or join the professional bodies of each country they wish to practise in? On higher education, will universities lose funding as a result of being unable to get students from EU countries to come over easily to study? Will universities stop attracting top academics from other EU countries? Will we struggle to get funding and collaboration on research projects? I could ask many more questions on the other areas covered by the impact assessments that the Government are refusing to release.

The Government say that they will not disclose the impact assessments because to do so would adversely affect their negotiations with the remaining EU countries. Do they honestly believe that the EU has not carried out its own assessments of what Brexit will mean for those 58 areas?

We, as Members of Parliament, have the right to be as well informed as possible about the effects of Brexit. The decisions that we take by 29 March 2019 will have a huge impact on a generation. We have a duty to make the best decision we can for our constituents, and that means being as well informed as possible. For those reasons, we must be given the impact assessments as soon as possible. We should not be kept in the dark by the Government. We have a fundamental right to know. The impact assessments must be disclosed to the appropriate Select Committees in full.

6.45 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The vote to leave the European Union was hailed by those who champion Brexit as "taking back control", yet we see the power of

this House being undermined almost on a daily basis: it seems that the Government have no intention of respecting that vote. Now the Government are keeping the realities of Brexit away from the British people. This lack of transparency and erosion of democracy is an utter insult to every single person who voted in the referendum, whether they supported leave or remain. Standing up for democracy is more important than ever, and I will do precisely that.

The referendum campaign was full of fake news, and it is about time we allowed the British people to assess what they want for this country, based on the truth. That is why I will continue to call not only for the impact assessments to be released, but for a referendum on the deal. What began with democracy should not end in a Government plot shrouded in secrecy. There can be only one reason why the Secretary of State refuses to release these impact assessments: he must be hiding bad news.

The EU must be fully aware that Brexit will probably have a damaging impact on the UK. The Secretary of State is kidding himself if he thinks hiding the impact assessments will solve anything. I ask the Brexiteers of this House, as they sit in their places opposing a referendum on the deal and opposing releasing the impact assessments: “What are you hiding; what are you afraid of?” It appears to me that they are hiding the reality of Brexit, because they are afraid that the promises they sold to the public will now be revealed as fake news. I support the motion.

6.47 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am pleased to wind up a debate on an issue that is fundamental to the way in which we approach the most important negotiations our country has faced arguably since the second world war.

I am pleased that strong voices have been raised on both sides of the House in support of our motion. We have heard some noise from the Conservative Benches seeking to defend the indefensible and say that no part of the documents should be published in any circumstances—doing so apparently in contradiction of the Conservative Front Bench.

Mr Bradshaw: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for raising a point of order, but I did give my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) prior warning. As you might have heard, Mr Speaker, there was a certain amount of confusion earlier about whether this motion is binding, and I would be grateful for your view on that.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I anticipated that this might arise at the end of the debate, and I say that motions of this kind have in the past been seen as effective or binding. I will leave it there for now, but if this matter needs to be returned to at the end of the debate, no doubt it will be.

Paul Blomfield: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is helpful.

I want to repeat what our motion seeks, so there can be no misunderstanding. We have not, and we would not, advocate publishing any information that would compromise the country’s negotiating position. We are

requesting that the 58 sectoral impact assessments—the economic assessments of how the Brexit process will affect the industries that account for 88% of our economy, the jobs of up to 30 million people, and the livelihoods of many more—be released to the Exiting the European Union Committee. It will then be for that Committee, as a cross-party body of the House, to agree a process for publication, and the Chair of that Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), made a powerful contribution on why that publication is so important. The issue here is that an absolute, blanket ban on publishing any information from the assessments is simply not acceptable. This is about pursuing an honest debate on the future of our country. It is, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said, about grown-up politics.

Members have talked about many sectors. Let me cite another: the nuclear industry. It has not been mentioned so far, but this crucial industry employs 15,000 people. Along with several colleagues, I am serving on the Nuclear Safeguards Public Bill Committee. Access to the nuclear industry assessment would enable us as Members of Parliament to scrutinise better, and make more informed decisions on, the legislation. That Bill is the first of many Brexit-related Bills, and it is vital that we as Members have access to the assessments when doing our jobs for the people we represent.

Too often, the Government seem to regard the House as an inconvenient hurdle to be sidestepped. We have seen that in their refusal to vote on Opposition day motions; in their power grab on delegated powers in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill; and in the £1 million they spent on trying to ensure that the House could not vote on triggering article 50. One of their own Members has criticised them for reducing this place to a student debating chamber. This is an opportunity for them to prove that that is not their intention. We will not have proper accountability if we are unable to assess the impact of the Government’s approach to Brexit on our economy and on the jobs and livelihoods of our constituents.

Chris Philp: In opening this debate, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said that the Opposition were “open to hearing from the Government if they have alternative mechanisms or procedures to allow publication in an appropriate fashion.” If those on the Opposition Front Bench hear such an appropriate alternative in the next few minutes, will they withdraw their motion?

Paul Blomfield: I will cover that point in my remarks—*[Interruption.]* Okay, I will cover it now. Facing defeat, those on the Government Benches seem to have made some attempts to blur what is being asked for here. We have no intention of withdrawing the motion. Let me be clear: we are saying that the Government should release the documents, in full and unredacted, to the Exiting the European Union Committee and that we should trust our colleagues on that Committee to decide on a sensible and transparent process for publication more widely.

Let me return to the Brexit Secretary’s own words—he is not here today—at a different time. When he was Chair of the Public Accounts Committee in December 1999, he applied a simple test on the release of information. It was

[Paul Blomfield]

“whether it makes democracy and government work better.”

He went on to say:

“The class exemption applying to all information relating to formulation and development of Government policy, including factual information, is a ludicrous blanket exemption.”—[*Official Report*, 7 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 774.]

Such an exemption was wrong then, and it is wrong now.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Blomfield: I am afraid that I will not give way.

The motion has been tabled in the interests of transparency and accountability. It has drawn support from both sides of the House, and it should command the support of the Government, not simply—as the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) said in his opening remarks—to pay regard to the motion but, as the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) said, to respect it. The credibility of our democracy is at stake. If the Government do not plan to honour this motion, they should vote against it. They should choose to sit on their hands only if they intend to respect the motion in full, and I hope that they will do so.

6.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): It is a pleasure to rise at the end of what has been a genuinely fascinating debate, and I would like to thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part. I particularly welcome the tone and substance of what was said by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) in his opening remarks and by the Chairman of the Select Committee the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

Members of the Government are, first and foremost, parliamentarians—[*Interruption.*] The Government recognise that Parliament has rights relating to the publication of documents, but Ministers also have a clear obligation not to disclose information when doing so would not be in the public interest. If the motion were to pass, we would need to reflect on those conflicting responsibilities. Whether people have talked about *Hansard*, prior practice, our responsibilities or the best interests of this country, when we all go back and reflect on *Hansard* and what has been said today, a surprising degree of consensus has emerged about our responsibilities.

Stephen Gethins *rose*—

Mr Baker: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman with a majority of two.

Stephen Gethins: The Minister is very kind, and I am glad that my SNP colleagues agree with me on the electoral system. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) was right when she pointed out that there was a tweet stating that the Government would agree to publish the impact assessments. Is that tweet from *The Sun* right or wrong?

Mr Baker: We have not stated any intention to publish redacted documents, although I did note what my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said about that and, in the cool light of tomorrow, we will revisit exactly what was said in *Hansard*. All we have said is that we will reflect on the outcome of this debate, having regard to Parliament’s rights in relation to the documents—[*Interruption.*] I am grateful to Opposition Members, but I am also delighted now that I have finished my—

Mr Speaker: Order. Excessive gesticulation is coming from right hon. and hon. Members in sedentary positions. I think the Minister is perfectly aware of the attempted intervention from his right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe, and it is inconceivable that he would be unaware of it. He is aware of it.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to Opposition Members, and I would like to say how much I have been looking forward to the moment that I give way to my right hon. Friend.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful for the Minister’s gracious response. Will he help the House to understand something? If the Government will not vote against the motion, will they commit at the Dispatch Box that they will therefore hand over the documents? If they will not hand over the documents, they must vote against the motion. What is it to be? Come on.

Mr Baker: I refer my right hon. Friend to what I said just moments ago.

Coming back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) said, *Hansard* is of course available very quickly these days and it is the case that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras said, according to *Hansard* “As I have said, we are open to hearing from the Government if they have alternative mechanisms or procedures to allow publication in an appropriate fashion. We are not wedded to the form we have put forward.” [Interruption.] Opposition Members say, “Disgrace,” but there can surely be no disgrace in simply reading back the *Hansard* record of their Front-Bench spokesman. I find that entirely bizarre.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Baker: I am on page one of my remarks with less than two minutes to go, and I therefore feel that I should apologise to Members for not getting through everything that I wish to say.

Throughout this process, it has been clear that the Government have always acted in line with the remit given to them by Parliament. The Secretary of State has been consistent in stressing the importance of parliamentary scrutiny and oversight of the Brexit process. A widely supported referendum Bill gave us the historic vote that will take us out of the European Union. We had legislation on the triggering of article 50, which preceded the Prime Minister’s letter to President Tusk, setting out the terms of our departure and our ambitions for the negotiation, including delivering a deep and special partnership with the European Union, which the Government are determined to deliver.

Turning to the matter at hand, it was Parliament's vote last year that we should not put into the public domain things that could compromise our negotiating positions. We have heard time and again from both sides of the House that we should not do that, and good reasons have been given for it—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the list of sectors analysed under the instruction of Her Majesty's Ministers, and referred to in the Answer of 26 June 2017 to Question 239, be laid before this House and that the impact assessments arising from those analyses be provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union.

Address to be presented to Her Majesty by Members of the House who are Privy Counsellors or Members of Her Majesty's Household.

Keir Starmer: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The motion having been carried unanimously and the wording being that

“the impact assessments arising from those analyses be provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union”,

can you confirm whether that means this motion is effective or binding and whether that means a failure of the Government to comply with it is, in fact, a contempt of the House?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his point of order. First, as I said in response to the point of order from the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) a few minutes ago, motions of this kind have traditionally been regarded as binding or effective. Consistent with that established pattern, I would expect the Vice-Chamberlain of the Household to present the Humble Address in the usual way.

I say what I do, as colleagues on both sides of the House and on both sides of any argument will recognise, on the strength of an understanding of advice received in relation to precedent grounded in “Erskine May”. When I am asked, as I think I was by the right hon. and learned Gentleman, about contempt or breach of privilege, what I would say is that, if anybody wishes to make an accusation of a breach of privilege or a contempt of the House, it must be done in writing to the Speaker. If I receive such a representation in writing, I will consider it and apply my best endeavours, and take advice, in reaching a view and reporting it to the House.

I have explained the position, I think, as clearly as I am able, but of course on this sensitive matter, about which I understand passions have raged this afternoon, I will take further points of order, if there are such.

Mr Leslie: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am saving up the hon. Gentleman. I do not want to waste him at an early stage.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The whole House is grateful to you for that very clear ruling. I do not know whether you noticed, but I observed defiance from the Government in the face of the ruling you have very clearly given that the motion is binding. Other than what you have said, which is very clear, are any other procedures open to Members of this House in order that this Government agree to this binding motion and come to the Dispatch Box to say that they will accept it and that these documents will be available for publication?

Mr Speaker: There is no other avenue open to the hon. Gentleman, whose indefatigability and commitment are understood in all parts of the House. Moreover, it would not be right, and I am sure he would not attempt, to read into what I have said anything more than what I have said.

Traditionally, such motions have been regarded as binding or effective. Consistent with that established pattern and tradition, I would expect the Humble Address to be presented by the Vice-Chamberlain of the Household in the usual way.

However, I would add that I think it sensible for the House to wait for the Government's response. I do not propose to leap ahead. I will wait for the Government's response. If I receive a representation, I will reflect upon it, and then I will revert to the House. Although the hon. Gentleman generously refers to my ruling, I have given only a very limited ruling to date. What I have given is on the record, and I do not resile from it, but I would need further to reflect on the basis of the Government reaction and any written representation which I may receive. I would then revert to the House. Obviously, I would intend to do so sooner rather than later, but I must assure him that it will not be tonight.

Dr Wollaston: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be helpful for you to inform the House what you feel a reasonable timeframe would be for the Government to respond?

Mr Speaker: I do not think I am obliged to do that, and I am not sure how much difference it would make. The issues are important but I do not think—I may be contradicted by senior procedural experts, to whose wisdom I should defer—that the matters are particularly complicated. One can take a view about this, one can consult “Erskine May” and one should reflect in a sober and considered fashion, but if the hon. Lady is asking me whether I envisage this being something that needs to be deliberated on over a period of several days, the answer is no.

Mr Leslie: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would you assist the House in explaining how serious it is for any person, a Member of this House or someone outside it, to be in contempt of the House? Were an individual to be found in contempt of the House, that would not be a frivolous matter—it is not something that should be just ignored. Page 191 of “Erskine May” sets out the consequences for individuals found in contempt of the House and the penal jurisdiction rights of this Parliament. I would be grateful if you explained to Ministers present that this is a very serious matter.

Mr Speaker: Well, it is a serious matter, but I think that the hon. Gentleman, who has a cheeky countenance, is trying to push the Chair—I make no complaint about it—further than the Chair should be pushed. The answer, put simply, is: obviously, a contempt of the House, if there were such, would be a serious matter. But the short answer to his question, which probably will not satisfy him but has the advantage of being factually true, is that it depends on the circumstances of the case, and the ultimate arbiter of the seriousness of a contempt is the House.

Chris Philp: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the debate, a number of Members seemed to be in favour of publishing redacted or summary versions of these papers, but of course that was not in the motion and nor was the motion amended. Were a new motion to be put requiring the Government to publish summary or redacted versions, would that then replace the motion just passed?

Mr Speaker: In answer to the hon. Gentleman, I say to him this: the House can always consider new motions if new motions are tabled in an orderly way on a specific day and the House debates them and chooses to vote upon them. He is fast becoming interested in parliamentary procedure, and I respect that. He may think it useful to him to reflect on the wise words of a distinguished representative of his own party, well known to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I refer of course to the late Lord Whitelaw, who was known to observe on one occasion, “On the whole, I think it better to cross bridges only when I come to them.”

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, “Erskine May” says on page 133:

“Each House has the power to call for the production of papers by means of a motion for a return.”

That is the basis of the motion we have debated today. Can you just underline how important it is that we police that power? It is the power by which Select Committees are able to ask for any papers from anybody. It is the power by which Select Committees or the House are able to require other people to appear as witnesses. If we do not police this power, we end up completely disenfranchising this Parliament; we make ourselves utterly impotent. “Erskine May” also makes it absolutely clear that things that include contempts are “actions which...obstruct or impede”—

the Commons—

“in the performance of its functions, or are offences against its authority or dignity, such as disobedience to its legitimate commands”.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that it is very important that the House polices the enforcement of its own powers. That, I think, is an observation so clear as really to brook no contradiction. The power to which Members have referred is a power that has of course been deployed by both sides of the House today: as the Order Paper testifies, the power was deployed on another matter by the Government; in this case, the Opposition have sought to deploy that power and a motion to that effect has just been passed.

On the question of the importance of the House guarding and overseeing the operation of its own powers,

the hon. Gentleman is correct: it is very important that the House does so. I say that without prejudice to a ruling on privilege or contempt in any particular case.

Seema Malhotra: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following on from the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), I seek your clarification on the timing of taking forward the requirements in the motion that has just been passed. I ask in the light of the fact that the list of sectors that was published was published four months after it was promised. Bearing in mind the urgency of the situation and there being only 17 months till Brexit day, can you clarify, Mr Speaker, whether it could be interpreted as contempt if there was such an extended delay as to make the information far less useful?

Mr Speaker: Were that proposition put to me as part of a representation by anybody alleging a contempt, I would consider that matter most carefully. I would certainly go so far as to say that it would be a most material consideration. I understand the House’s desire for clarity on this matter, one way or the other. The question of time, in both the context of the decision taken by the House tonight and the wider context of public policy, is an important question, and yes, it does form part of the equation that the Chair would have to address.

Christian Matheson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, and following on from that raised by the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Leader of the House said in the House last week that when the House passes Opposition motions unanimously, there will be a 12-week gap before Ministers have to respond. Can you confirm, Sir, that because the motion just passed was a substantive motion, the option to kick the can down the road for another three months does not apply and the Government should have to come to the House with a response forthwith?

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House said what she did in response to representations that were made by Members on both sides of the House in the specific context of earlier Opposition day debates, the motions for which were not binding. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but the Leader of the House, in a perfectly procedurally legitimate fashion, about which people can have different political opinions, offered to the House an indication of the intended Government handling of situations of the kind that occurred in recent weeks. Today’s debate was on a different type of motion, and therefore I would go so far as to say that I think it wrong to conflate tonight’s motion, with the instruction that it contains, with the Leader of the House’s response to a different set of circumstances a week or so ago. The situations are different and the response offered then should not necessarily be thought to apply to the situation now.

Mr Duncan Smith: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I quite enjoy voting in this place, but it was our determination not to do so. As I was listening to the debate—you were not in your Chair at the time, but a deputy of yours was—I thought the Government responded to this point and said that they would not choose to ignore this binding motion. Some of these points of order seem to be asking whether or not this House of Commons is in fact a court of law, which it is not. Any Government,

in choosing not to vote against a motion, therefore accedes to the idea that it is bound by the process and will respond in due course. Given that basis and the earlier response, I must say, Mr Speaker, that I think your earlier pronouncement was an end to the matter, as far as I can see, because it is quite clear that the Government have to respond.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. The Government do have to respond. He is quite right that I was not in the Chair, though of course the Chair is seamless—there was a distinguished occupant of the Chair at the time—and I have received advice on what took place when I was not in the Chair. I think, from an earlier point of order, there was some exchange about what constituted, and what did not constitute, ignoring a motion. Suffice it to say that enough has been said tonight. Points of order have been raised. I think that I have given a clear indication of what the general practice has been and what I would do if I were approached in writing, and it is right and proper, as the right hon. Gentleman implies, that we leave it there for tonight.

Mr Skinner: On a point of order, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: But who can refuse the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner)? Of course I will hear his point of order.

Mr Skinner: I know that Mr Speaker likes to reply to points of order, so I will just throw him one. He and I have been here a long time, so, like me, does he feel that the Government are dying on their feet?

Mr Speaker: It is not for me to make any such assertion. I have done my bit in allowing the hon. Gentleman to indulge his appetite and I should leave it there. I honestly think that I have said enough for tonight. Members know that what I have said so far is clear, at least in terms of the intended sequence of events. I thank the hon. Gentleman and note that he made his point with a smile.

St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust: Leasehold

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

7.17 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I wish to start by declaring an interest: the landlord of my current constituency home in Newcastle, funded by the taxpayer, is potentially affected by the grotesque situation that I am about to outline.

I have called this debate on the Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust to expose a situation that combines all the worst parts of Dickensian legal tragedies, Kafkaesque bureaucracy and Catch-22 conundrums, with charitable oppression thrown in. My constituents, who have worked their whole lives and invested in property, as they have been encouraged to do, are now facing their greatest asset becoming their greatest liability. Why? It is because of an obscure loophole in an obscure 1960s law, the failure of the Charity Commission to give clear advice on the good citizen role of charities, and the complexity and inadequacy of the leasehold system.

I do not know the total number of my constituents in this grotesque situation, but five of them have made the brave decision to come forward and speak publicly. Howard Philips and Phyll Buchanan purchased their leasehold house on the open market in 1998. At the time, no caveats were raised by the conveyancing solicitors or by the solicitors that handled their re-mortgage in 2003. They are now in their late 70s and feel that the time has come to move on. As they say:

“The house is not suitable for our old age. The cost of maintaining these Victorian Grade II listed houses is substantial and will be a burden for the remaining years on the lease. We cannot easily manage the six flights of stairs or afford to maintain the property.” But they cannot downsize because they cannot sell their property. Their lease has 70 years remaining and no mortgage company will advance a loan until the lease is extended. They cannot extend their lease because the charity that owns the freehold, the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust, refuses to do so.

The trust was formed for the benefit of the freemen of Newcastle upon Tyne and their wives and children, and is now a considerable property owner in Newcastle. It owns the freehold of the St Thomas area of Newcastle as well as numerous properties in this and other areas of the city. There is also an intermediate lessee and managing agent—Home Group, a housing association. In refusing to extend the leasehold, the trust is causing misery for leaseholders and forcing many into financial distress. For example, Michael Armstrong says:

“We are a low income family with three children and had planned to pay off our mortgage by selling the house and downsizing once our children had grown up and left the family home...Due to the fact that we cannot extend our leasehold, or buy the freehold...we are basically trapped in a very worrying and insecure situation and face the real possibility of losing our family home.”

Sasa Savic tells me:

“When I arrived in the United Kingdom as a refugee having lost everything during the war in the former Yugoslavia, I would have never imagined that I would be facing yet another battle to save my home.”

Since purchasing the property, Mr Savic has married and has two children. The property has only one and a half bedrooms, so the family cannot live there. He has to let it out, but that does not pay the mortgage.

[Chi Onwurah]

In effect, he is working to subsidise someone else living in it. What would happen, he asks himself, if he fell seriously ill? He says:

“That question has haunted me many times in sleepless nights. I usually do any repairs...on the property by myself, but this is getting harder and more difficult as my physical health is preventing me from doing as much as I once could.”

When Mr Savic purchased the property, he was not made aware of any leasehold restrictions that could occur in future years and, indeed, was offered the freehold to purchase by the trust in 2005. Unfortunately, he was not financially able to do so at that time.

Denise Cook, who bought a house in the St Thomas area for her elderly mother to live in, says:

“My mum spent thousands on this property...and to find now we can't extend or buy the lease has been extremely upsetting for us. We now find ourselves having to still pay the mortgage and associated costs for the next 60 years, we are now 60 my husband and myself and our own mortgage is coming to an end. We have no idea what the future will hold and it is of great concern we pass this debt on to our family.”

I could go on, as many more constituents are affected, but I hope that the Minister now comprehends the worry and misery this situation is causing.

Let me explain as best I can the complex combination of circumstances that have caused this situation. We all know that the leasehold system has fallen into disrepute and that is why the Government have recently conducted a consultation that received more than 6,000 responses. I welcome this and hope that the Government will soon bring forward legislation on the matter. But the specific legal issues surrounding the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust relate to an amendment of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967. The amendment—in section 172 of the Housing Act 1985—states that if a charity owns a freehold, it is not obliged either to sell or extend the lease of houses on its land. So my constituents cannot extend their lease and they cannot buy the freehold. In Mr Philips's words,

“we are devastated to find that our house is unsalable and our nest-egg is worthless because the charity that owns the freehold is refusing to extend our lease.”

Under this Government social housing tenants have a right to buy after only two years, but my constituents are not even allowed to extend their leasehold. The Minister has said that we need to help more people to achieve their dream of home ownership, so how can it be acceptable that my constituents stand to lose their homes because of this legal anomaly? As Mr Philips says:

“Every day we have to face this nightmare and it is taking a toll on our health.”

Their situation, however, is additionally Kafkaesque because the exemption applies only to houses. To quote Mr Philips again:

“Our neighbours who own maisonettes and are in a similar situation to ourselves have a legal right to extend their leases and even buy their freeholds from the charity, but the owners of houses...have no such rights.”

Will the Minister attempt to justify a situation where house owners are discriminated against when compared to flat owners with regards to leasehold law? It is 100 years since the Russian revolution, but this legal conundrum would not be out of place in Tsarist Russia.

It is not a situation that should endure in an accountable democracy worthy of the name and certainly not under a Government who claim to champion a property-owning democracy.

You may argue, Mr Speaker, that just because the charity does not have to extend the leaseholds that does not mean that it should not or cannot. Well, Mr Speaker, you would be right and wrong. We have heard that in the past the trust did offer to sell freeholds, but more recently it has changed its position. My constituents have tried to be flexible. Mr Savic says:

“I offered to sell them the property at 25% below what I paid for it. I am desperate to be free of the problem and I thought that their aim must be to use the property for their charitable purposes, but despite spending over £6,000.00 on both of sets of lawyers and surveyors all I got as a response through my lawyer is ‘no’, without even a letter of explanation why.”

As a consequence, the leaseholders have become mistrustful and suspicious of the trust and its motives, yet they have no recourse to the law.

As Mr Philips says:

“Litigation is not an option against a charity, especially one with assets of £44million.”

The Trust did respond to my enquiries. The St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust said it is “sympathetic to the residents” and acknowledges that this is a “horrible position to be in.”

But it claims that it

“cannot change it as things presently stand.”

This is because it has received legal advice informing it that it is under no obligation to sell or extend the lease, and fears repercussions from the Charity Commission if it does so. It pointed out to me that it has

“a duty to existing and future beneficiaries and to preserve the assets of the charity.”

In other words it would like to sell or to extend the lease, but feels that it cannot contravene advice that has been given to it as the Charity Commission would “take a dim view” of that.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of whether the beneficiaries, or potential beneficiaries, of the trust are particularly needy or destitute?

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his intervention. I would not like to pass judgment on the beneficiaries of the trust, but they are freemen of the city of Newcastle, and their children, wives, widows and associates. I therefore do not think they can be considered to be the most needy people in Newcastle. I also do not believe that these assets would meaningfully enrich the most needy in Newcastle.

When contacted, the Charity Commission said:

“Charities are independent organisations and their trustees are legally responsible for all aspects of their management and administration and compliance with charity law. It is important to emphasise that although”

the Charity Commission's

“functions include encouraging and facilitating the better administration of charities, and taking remedial action to tackle misconduct or mismanagement, the law prohibits the Commission from acting directly in the administration of a charity.”

Basically, the Commission claims this issue is nothing to do with it, even though it does advise charities to take legal advice. It does not, however, advise them to be

good neighbours or good citizens. My constituents are therefore left with no recourse to justice, while the charity and the Charity Commission pass the blame between themselves.

I am therefore calling on the Minister to put an end to this situation. Will he first commit to closing this loophole as part of his proposals for leasehold reform? The Labour party has pledged a full review of leasehold, so I hope he can commit to freeing my constituents from their current grotesque impasse as part of his proposals.

Will the Minister also join me in imploring the Charity Commission to make it clear that while charities must act in the interests of their beneficiaries, that should not be at the cost of making life a misery for others? Charities must be good citizens of the communities they are part of and on whose generosity they depend. That is certainly not the case here. Will the Minister also urge the Mary Magdalene charity to be charitable in its actions as well as its words?

As a good socialist, I find it ironic that I am advocating for property rights that this Conservative Government are denying. Some might argue that the houses should never have been sold to their tenants, given the complexities of the charitable leasehold system and the need for social housing in Newcastle and elsewhere, and some might think they had a point.

Housing remains one of the top three issues in my constituency, and we are all aware that house building is at 164,000 homes per year, which is far below the required level. Government proposals to build an average of 15 homes per local authority per year are not going to make much of a dent in the 7,000 waiting list we have in Newcastle.

However, these houses were sold and bought, and what faces us now is an issue of social justice. The life's work of these people is tied up in their property, and control of it is being withheld from them by impersonal bureaucratic forces beyond their control. As Mr Philips says:

"We are being held hostage by an obscure law originally drafted for a different purpose. Time is rapidly running out for us. We feel as if we are sinking in the bottom of a deep well and that nobody can hear our cries for help."

I can hear those cries. Those who are here today have heard them too. I very much hope that the Minister is listening.

7.33 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma):

I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for the timely manner in which this issue has been raised. I do empathise, as I am sure we all do, with the experience of her constituents, as she has related it. I want to be absolutely clear: the Government want to see fairness in the housing market, and that absolutely extends to the leasehold sector. She alluded to the fact that the Government have clearly signalled their intention to strengthen leaseholders' protections against unscrupulous abuses by freeholders, landlords and managing agents.

With regard to the specifics of the case the hon. Lady has raised, I know she corresponded several times with my predecessors. Her constituents will be incredibly grateful to her for continuing to highlight this issue of

great importance for them, and to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for attending the debate as the hon. Lady's constituency neighbour.

I will return to the specifics of the case that the hon. Lady has raised, but first I would like to use this opportunity to set out the Government's position on tackling leasehold abuses and clarify how the current legislation is applied to charitable organisations.

Chi Onwurah: I recognise the advantage of the Minister setting that out, but I hope that before he concludes his remarks he will specifically say what he will do for my constituents, for whom I called this debate.

Alok Sharma: I always try to respond to the issues that are raised in a debate, and I hope I will do so in this case too.

Many leaseholders have concerns about fairness and transparency within the leasehold sector. Our housing White Paper, and the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, have helped to move leasehold issues up the political agenda. The White Paper identified pressing areas for reform. We have talked about galvanising the house building market overall, but specifically in terms of leasehold. In our recent consultation, "Tackling unfair practices in the leasehold market", we consulted on whether new-build houses should be sold as leasehold and on the issue of onerous ground rents.

The consultation, as the hon. Lady pointed out, has closed. It clearly struck a chord with consumers and leaseholders. As she said, we have received over 6,000 responses, many of them extremely detailed. My officials are currently analysing those responses. I would like, before the end of the year, to announce the Government's response to the consultation and propose reforms to be taken forward.

Let me now turn to the hon. Lady's direct concerns about charitable organisations such as the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust. I understand that, as she set out, a small number of individuals have in the past acquired leases of houses on the St Thomas estate and now wish either to extend the lease or acquire the freehold. The freehold is owned by the Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust, and the head lessee is Home Housing Association. Both organisations have charitable status. Unfortunately, as she outlined, the leaseholders have not been able to enfranchise—that is, purchase the freehold interest—or, indeed, extend their leases. The frustrations and anxieties that this has caused are clearly evident in the stories that she relayed—particularly, as she pointed out, for families who wish to sell and relocate. The remaining terms on a lease may well mean that a prospective purchaser will find it very difficult to secure a mortgage.

So, specifically, what I am going to do? I have asked my officials to be in direct contact with the trust to see what help can be provided to leaseholders with regard to their desire to exercise their right to buy in terms of the freehold. We will cover what flexibilities there may be for the trust to apply existing legislation to help to resolve some of the issues raised by the hon. Lady, especially where the trust and the leaseholders are both willing and agree to progress either lease extensions or the purchase of the house freeholds.

[Alok Sharma]

Returning to the wider recent consultation, we will look at the responses and also consider issues on the disposal of charitable leasehold homes. This will need to show fairness to the needs both of the freeholder and the leaseholder, and also strike a balance with the needs of charities to remain on a sustainable footing to continue their good work. It may be the case that the hon. Lady's constituents were not fully informed about their rights and responsibilities when they acquired their leases, especially the whole issue of enfranchisement exemptions attached to these particular charitable leasehold properties. That leads me to another general area of concern about the transparency, or lack of it, in the way some leasehold property is marketed—in particular, whether there is clarity over the terms of lease agreements at pre-purchase, and whether sales teams are working in the best interests of prospective leasehold purchasers.

I will, as part of our wider work on leasehold reform, consider whether changes to legislation are required to improve transparency and fairness for leaseholders who want to enfranchise, where their freeholder is a charity and both parties agree that a lease extension or enfranchisement is mutually beneficial. I also want to ensure that the future marketing of leasehold homes, whether for private or charitable provision, is clearly promoted and advertised by charitable organisations to their beneficiaries. I hope that my comments have provided some comfort to the hon. Lady and her affected constituents. My Department will absolutely continue to liaise with her.

Ian Mearns: When he reviews this case, will the Minister accept that the charitable association concerned works on behalf of mainly wealthy beneficiaries, so the question of real social justice and injustice is heightened?

Alok Sharma: I do not think it is appropriate for me to comment on the beneficiaries of the charity. What I would say—I think this will be of interest to the hon. Lady—is that one of my officials has already spoken to a trustee, who has outlined that they may well be willing to sell the property, extend the lease or carry out the enfranchisement. Lawyers in the Department are looking to see what flexibilities are available.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for his comments and the tenor, which I appreciate, of his response to my debate. Will he confirm that he will work with the Charity Commission to ensure that, in this regard, charities set out to be good citizens and good neighbours, and that the brand of charities is not open to criticism?

Alok Sharma: I will, of course, consider what the hon. Lady has suggested. In terms of providing a positive outcome for her individual constituents, perhaps the most appropriate thing to do is to have that conversation with the trust directly. As I have said, the Department will continue to liaise with her on this case, and I hope that we will reach a conclusion that is satisfactory for her and her constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

7.42 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 1 November 2017

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Vaping

9.30 am

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of vaping.

I was pleased to secure this debate, because I have been interested in the phenomenon of vaping for some time. There are now millions of people vaping in the UK and many of them are former smokers. This is an important issue because if many of the reports and studies carried out on vaping are correct, it has the potential to save thousands of lives in the UK, and millions worldwide. It therefore has to be worth looking at very carefully. We all know that smoking is bad for a person's health—indeed, more than half of smokers will die from smoking.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate; he is making some excellent points. In my constituency in Nottinghamshire, there is a class dimension to this. Of those in managerial and professional occupations, 8% are still smoking cigarettes; that rises to 26% of those in routine and manual occupations in the Nottinghamshire population, so this is a social justice issue as well as a health issue. Vaping is much cheaper and safer, so it should not be taxed, and people should stop deterring it in public places. The hon. Gentleman is right: we have finally found a way to stop smoking. We should celebrate it, and I say that as somebody who has stopped smoking and now vapes.

Gareth Johnson: It is good to see some enthusiasm for this subject. The hon. Lady is absolutely correct: it tends to be more vulnerable people, if I can put it that way, who are affected by smoking, but smoking affects the whole of society. Almost everybody knows somebody who has died from smoking or has been seriously affected by the consequences. As she rightly says, we have potentially found what is almost a silver bullet that will allow us, at long last, to tackle the issue of smoking among those who want to stop.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more needs to be done with our young people in relation to vaping and the dangers of smoking? How can we achieve that?

Gareth Johnson: Importantly, over the last 20 or 30 years we have moved away from the James Dean image of smoking. For many people, it is no longer seen as being cool, although it was when I was growing up; it was somehow seen as being acceptable. An increasing number of people look to vaping rather than smelly tobacco, if I can put it that way. It is increasingly recognised that there is huge problem with smoking.

Unfortunately, statistics show that more and more people are viewing vaping as more dangerous than smoking. Vaping is clearly a lot safer than smoking

tobacco, but unfortunately the public perception is different from the facts presented by reputable organisations. Some 7 million people smoke in England alone, and some 8 million people do so across the whole UK, so potentially a large number of people can benefit from vaping. Although we have spoken briefly about smoking, my approach is not at all nannying. If an adult wants to smoke, that is their choice; I do not seek to lecture people on their tobacco use. It is an individual choice, but it needs to be an informed choice. We should therefore not obstruct people who want to access smoking cessation products, and vaping forms an important part of that.

I do not claim that vaping is risk-free; indeed, I would urge anybody who does not smoke not to take up vaping. There are risks, and it is unnecessary for non-smokers to take them. I also urge that our approach to vaping be evidence-based. When the Government make decisions on issues that affect vaping, they should base them on the best evidence available. Vaping should not be treated in the same way as tobacco simply because the term “e-cigarettes” has been adopted to describe vaping products.

We also need to be open-minded and objective about the pros and cons of vaping. Our views may change as more research is carried out, and that is fine. We may, over time, become more negative or more positive about vaping, but that should always be based on the facts available and not on a general dislike of smoking.

I am not a medical man at all, and I certainly do not claim to be an expert on health issues, so I have looked at what reputable organisations have to say about vaping. It makes incredibly interesting reading. For example, Cancer Research UK has said:

“the evidence so far shows that e-cigarettes are far safer”

than tobacco, even in the long term. It also says that

“Growing evidence shows e-cigarettes are helping people stop smoking”.

That is a pretty clear position. The British Heart Foundation has also looked into vaping and said:

“e-cigarettes are not harm-free.”

It has said:

“We would not advise non-smokers to take up e-cigarettes, but they can be a useful tool for harm reduction and to stop smoking.”

It also points out that long-term studies are, of course, not available just yet. That point is frequently brought up in this debate: because of the relative newness of vaping, we do not have the long-term studies that many people want to see. As I say, we need to be open-minded about vaping, but we should not turn our backs on the opportunities that it offers simply because we do not have long-term studies. It would be wrong for us not to engage with vaping for the next 50 years while we wait for long-term studies to be carried out. The opportunities are in front of us today.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the first major study on whether vaping helps pregnant smokers to quit, which is being led by Professor Hajek of Queen Mary University of London, working in conjunction with Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry? Does he accept that although there are apparent health benefits to switching to vaping if people are otherwise unable to give up smoking traditional cigarettes, it would be sensible to wait for the

[Sandy Martin]

report to be published in three years' time before making major interventions that might encourage pregnant women to start vaping when they are not already smoking?

Gareth Johnson: I am not aware of that report, but I think there is an inherent problem with pregnant women today having to wait three years to make that decision. My gut feeling is that the best approach would of course be for pregnant women not to smoke anything at all—not to smoke any tobacco products, and not to vape. I am not qualified to say whether it is beneficial for pregnant women to vape instead of smoking if they are unable to give up tobacco, so I would not want to comment on the report the hon. Gentleman mentions, but it throws up interesting questions. That is why I believe that this whole debate should be based on facts and evidence, rather than on an instinctive dislike of tobacco products that leads to lumping vaping in with them.

The British Lung Foundation has also commented on vaping:

“Given half of long-term smokers die as a result of their habit, using vaping to help someone quit smoking could literally save their life.”

The British Lung Foundation is also clear that vaping should not be seen as a permanent alternative to smoking or promoted to non-smokers, but nor should it be banned in public in the way that smoking is.

Public Health England famously—or famously in the vaping world—said clearly that it believes vaping to be 95% safer than smoking tobacco. The Royal College of Physicians and Action on Smoking and Health have chipped in with similar comments, so there is plenty of evidence that such products have potential, but they have to be judged on their own merits and should not be in the shadow of tobacco products. That is why, in my view, the EU tobacco products directive was wrong to incorporate vaping, which should have been dealt with separately.

That ludicrous approach is illustrated in the regulations that companies have to follow. If someone buys a vaping machine, the machine has to have a warning on it that it contains nicotine. The one I have here, which was sent out by a company called Totally Wicked, says,

“This product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance”.

They all have to comply with that requirement. The silly thing is, of course, that the machine does not contain nicotine—but it says it does, because it has to as a consequence of the EU directive. It contains nicotine only when e-liquid is added to the product; it is not included in the product. Companies have to put a caveat at the bottom of the product to say that the statement is not true, so that they do not get prosecuted under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968. That is one illustration of the ludicrous nature of an approach that lumps vaping products in with tobacco products, and that expects vaping organisations to act in exactly the same way as those involving tobacco.

The EU directive also imposes a requirement to sell e-liquid only in small quantities with a maximum of 20 mg of nicotine, which I understand some heavy smokers find insufficient. I do not want to turn this into a Brexit debate—we have enough of those taking place

in the House of Commons at the moment; there are plenty on today and tomorrow, if anybody is interested—but we have to recognise that there is an opportunity after Brexit to depart from some regulations, where appropriate. I ask the Minister to put March 2019 in his diary, so that he can consider which of the regulations can be looked at again, are unnecessary or can be altered.

The rules on advertising are also inconsistent. An advert on a bus is fine, but an advert in a magazine or newspaper is not. The trouble is that it sends out a mixed message, which helps neither the public nor the industry and adds to the problem whereby increasing members of the public believe that vaping is potentially more harmful than smoking tobacco. That ultimately stops the benefits that do seem to exist, according to people far more qualified in the medical field than me.

Most people agree that there is a necessity for more evidence, and I am pleased that the Select Committee on Science and Technology is about to carry out an inquiry on vaping, which aims to collate the available information and give recommendations. I hope that it will look at studies on the health implications and give its view on which studies are the most and least credible. The public should not have to rely purely on whichever report is given the greatest prominence in the press. The inquiry will be important, but what is ultimately needed is more fully independent assessments of the health considerations around vaping.

The Government have launched a tobacco control plan, which I am sure the Minister will mention. I welcome the aim in that plan to reduce the number of people smoking in the UK, and it is to be welcomed that the usefulness of vaping is recognised in the plan.

To conclude, although vaping is not risk-free, it has been found to be a useful tool for millions of people who want to stop smoking. It should therefore be given the recognition it deserves. It has huge potential to save lives. I therefore ask the Minister to meet the vaping industry as soon as his diary allows, to discuss how vaping can be best utilised.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Before he comes to a conclusion, would he agree that part of the traditional problem with smoking has been that when the number of smokers declined and we got down to about 20%, it was then difficult to make further inroads? Similarly, if a third of smokers have still not moved to vaping, again we have the problem that we have reached the hard core of people on whom more work is needed. I also congratulate him on taking a responsible attitude to the issue of vaping, rather than endorsing people moving from non-smoking to vaping.

Gareth Johnson: The hon. Gentleman's point does seem to be correct. Ultimately, if people want to smoke, are aware of the risks and are happy to take them, that is entirely their right as adults. I do not seek to dictate how people should lead their life. However, in my experience, most smokers do want to stop but find it very difficult to do so. That is why we should embrace the potential of vaping as an important tool in enabling people to give up. Patches, chewing gums and all those things—even a bit of willpower every now and then—are

all very useful, but vaping potentially offers the most successful method for people to stop smoking, should they wish to do so.

We need an objective, logical and fact-based approach to vaping. In short, we should follow the evidence, which at present shows that it is an opportunity simply too good to ignore.

9.45 am

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on bringing forward this topical issue for debate. I want to reflect on his comments about the ever-increasing popularity of vaping. The evidence is clear that vaping is less harmful than smoking, as it does not contain many of the harmful substances produced by smoking tobacco, such as tar or carbon monoxide.

When vaping was first introduced, it was targeted mainly at regular smokers attracted by the healthy alternative. In 2015, the Office for National Statistics noted that 50% of vapers were using it as an aid to stop smoking; 10% of them cited cheaper prices as the main reason for using e-cigarettes. Within a year, both numbers dropped, to 46% and 8.1% citing the cheaper price. One explanation that is frequently given nowadays is the perception that e-cigarettes are less harmful than cigarettes, but also, more strikingly, the range of different flavours available. That was cited in only 1% of cases in 2015, but it climbed to 5% within just one year.

Those numbers clearly reveal an effort made by vaping companies to diversify their customers and expand their market. My question and concern is whether vaping makes smoking more fashionable, particularly among the young. In my Gordon constituency, there are three vaping shops in the small town of Inverurie, which has a population of 15,000. That is hardly due to more traditional smokers looking to quit; it is, rather, due to non-smokers picking up vaping. However, they may be people who were going to turn to smoking anyway, particularly the young. Again, here the statistics speak for themselves. In 2015, only 2.8% of 16 to 24-year-olds were e-cigarette users, while 5.8% of them were users in 2016. The number of male users in that age category has more than doubled, so it looks as if young men who might perhaps have taken up smoking have turned to vaping instead.

Although vaping is indeed less harmful than traditional cigarettes, it still contains nicotine. I am also concerned about the misuse of e-cigarettes as a way of abusing other substances such as drugs, but I keep in mind the very powerful lobby with a vested interest in maligning the vaping industry.

Whether or not more people pick up the habit as a result of successful marketing campaigns, the biggest benefit is to those around vapers or smokers. Vaping is a matter of personal choice and, unlike smoking, it does not affect the health of those around the vaper. Passive smoking kills 600,000 people annually worldwide and is one of the major causes of lung cancer, and it is particularly dangerous for children. That makes vaping by far the better choice for those around people who choose to have the habit. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford and would encourage the Minister to engage with the vaping industry. Tobacco blights the health of our society.

9.49 am

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I was only going to intervene today, but there are other things that I wish to say. Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Howarth.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said that vaping is the most successful way to stop smoking. I absolutely and fully support his contention that vaping is a valuable way of persuading people who have failed to give up smoking through other methods, and I support any attempt to use vaping to crack the hard nut of breaking addiction to nicotine. When he sums up, however, will he confirm that vaping induces a certain degree of nicotine addiction if there is nicotine in the substance that is vaped?

The reduction in smoking in this country over the past 20 years is one of the best possible advertisements for health education and smoking prevention measures. The number of people who have managed to give up smoking is fantastic. I gave up in 2013 and have not touched a cigarette since. I gave up lots of times before that, but when I gave up in 2013 it was conclusive. I have never used any substitution products, because the problem for me was breaking the addiction to nicotine, rather than to the smoke itself. Now that I have broken my addiction to nicotine, I have absolutely no intention of going back to any form of smoking product.

I believe that there is an issue with the nicotine addiction element of vaping. I look forward to seeing all of the studies, including that of pregnant women.

Gareth Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that nicotine is an addictive substance. There is no doubt that if someone stops smoking and moves on to vaping, their addiction continues. One of the benefits of vaping is that the substances can have a reduced amount of nicotine or no nicotine at all, which some vapers have found useful when they want to overcome their addiction to nicotine.

Sandy Martin: I fully accept that and I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Vaping is clearly a valuable tool in the attempt to reduce further the number of people who smoke, but I urge caution. Health education measures that enable and encourage people who are hard-nut smokers to move on to vaping should be fully supported, but we should wait until the studies report before introducing measures that make it easier for people who do not already smoke to start vaping.

9.52 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) for securing this debate on nicotine vapour products. I fully agree with him about their potential to save thousands of lives. We should always bear that in mind. I am grateful that he clarified the point about the public perception of the safety of vaping versus traditional cigarettes. We need to get that important message out there, especially given that some of the briefings we have seen show that people think it is as dangerous. Clearly, it is not.

I also agree that we need a fact-based approach, and that a lot more research needs to be done. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) for mentioning some of the studies, and I look forward to

[*Martyn Day*]

seeing their results. The hon. Member for Dartford mentioned one of the most interesting dilemmas, which relates to the rules on advertising and the anomalies. How do we accurately advertise the benefits of this product to the people who would benefit from it—the 7 million smokers who are not vaping—without making it attractive and sexy to people who do not smoke at all? Finding that balance will be challenging, and I do not envy anyone who has to come up with the regulations that deal with that problem.

The positive case in favour of vaping has been well made today. Most of the harm caused by cigarettes and other smoked tobacco products comes not from the nicotine but from the smoke, which contains a huge number of carcinogens. I am very grateful to the Royal College of Physicians for its work in estimating that the hazard from long-term vapour inhalation is about 5% that of the harm of smoking. We need to get the message out to smokers that vaping is much safer. More than one quarter of all cancer deaths can be attributed directly to smoking. Smoking is associated with 10,000 deaths and about 128,000 hospital admissions each year in Scotland alone. It costs the Scottish NHS more than £300 million to treat smoking-related illnesses. It does not take a genius to work out that it is in the interest of our public purse to encourage people on to smoking cessation products.

A statistic that I have seen—I have forgotten which briefing it was in; it may have been by the Independent British Vape Trade Association, but I apologise if I have misattributed it—states that for each person we can persuade to stop smoking, we will save about £74,000 in public health benefits. That would have a huge impact, so we need to take it very seriously.

Smoking is, without any doubt, the primary preventable cause of ill health and premature death, which is why the Scottish Government are taking radical action to attempt to stub it out. We aim to create a tobacco-free generation by 2034. Smoking rates, especially among young people, are at record lows across Scotland.

We also share the view of the Royal College of Physicians and ASH that e-cigarettes should be regulated to encourage their use as a means of stopping smoking but to discourage their use by non-smokers. That is very much the dilemma that we have with advertising.

In Scotland, we know that e-cigarettes are almost certainly safer than cigarettes and have a role to play in helping people to quit smoking, but I certainly do not believe that children or young people should have access to them. A public consultation paper, “A Consultation on Electronic Cigarettes and Strengthening Tobacco Control in Scotland”, was launched in October 2014, following which the Scottish Government introduced the Health (Tobacco, Nicotine etc. and Care) (Scotland) Act 2016. The Act had cross-party support, although a number of concerns were raised during debates in the Scottish Parliament. Among other measures, it banned the sale of NVPs to under-18s, made it illegal to buy NVPs for under-18s and required all shops to have an age verification policy. That is key to preventing a new generation of people from using nicotine-based products.

In Scotland, there has been record investment in NHS smoking cessation services. We know they have a cost benefit for every pound we spend. My area is

served by two NHS trusts: Forth Valley and Lothian. This issue falls under devolved competences, so it is worth pointing out that neither trust outwardly endorses e-cigarettes, unlike some stop-smoking services elsewhere.

Although I have been unable to ascertain accurate local figures, ASH states that there are 3 million vapers across the UK, half of whom have given up smoking, and that about 97% of all vapers are either current smokers or ex-smokers. The information available suggests that vaping is not currently a gateway to tobacco products and that it helps people to stop smoking, so it is genuinely a positive measure.

Vaping also helps to reduce second-hand smoke, as the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) has said. In Scotland, the number of children affected by second-hand smoke in the home has reduced from 11% to 6%. I do not know what proportion of that reduction was caused by NVP products and what proportion was caused by the “Take it right outside” campaign, but both have clearly contributed to it.

There is clearly a role for vaping to play in helping people to stop smoking. Despite my thick throat—I have managed not to cough today—I have never smoked in my life, but I have many friends who have done so. Looking back over the years since the smoking ban was introduced in Scotland in 2006—I thought it was a birthday present for me, as it was introduced on my birthday, 26 March—I can see that it has certainly improved the lives of many people. I have friends who gave up largely due to that event. Some managed to stop through sheer willpower—a minority, I have to say—while others struggled and used different cessation products. Vaping is probably the most popular method in my social circle. It certainly makes a real difference.

Vaping is significantly less harmful than continuing to smoke. Harm reduction is not as good as cessation, but it is way better than smoking. Realistically, given how addictive nicotine products are, that may be the best we can expect for many people. I believe that vaping can lead to a serious reduction in smoking. I welcome this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Dartford for securing it.

9.58 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) for securing this debate. It is timely and important, especially because we have just seen the end of Stoptober, which vaping played a role in advertising. I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions, and I welcome the array of views and opinions they conveyed. It is clear that there is strong interest in the House in this topic. Although we are small in number here, the quality of the contributions made up for that.

E-cigarettes have been around since the mid-2000s, but in recent years we have seen them boom. Recent figures estimate that 2.9 million adults now use e-cigarettes, compared with only 700,000 in 2012. That increase is expected to grow as more people turn to e-cigarettes to reduce their tobacco consumption or to quit tobacco completely.

The interest in e-cigarettes can also be seen in the rapid growth in availability of such products and the advertising around them. In 2014, it was estimated that

there were 460 brands and more than 7,500 flavour solutions. The *BMJ* highlighted that the advertising and promotion of the products had grown from £1.7 million in 2010 to £13.1 million in 2012—if we had the figures for 2017, they would obviously be a lot higher.

Labour Members welcome e-cigarettes as part of our drive towards a smoke-free society and because of the role they can play in the smoking cessation landscape. What remains important, however, is that e-cigarettes are regulated correctly to ensure that the health of our country is improved, not diminished—which, at the end of the day, is our main goal when it comes to smoking cessation. I will also use my contribution to this debate as an opportunity to further discuss smoking cessation, which is a crucial aspect of the debate around vaping, and the importance of continually looking at this market as we move towards a smoke-free society.

Smoking cessation is crucial. It improves the health of individuals and our nation significantly, and reduces the prevalence of cancer, lung disease and COPD—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—diseases which we know are all too persistent. If smokers quit smoking when diagnosed with lung cancer, it is estimated that even at that late stage they will live nearly a year longer than if they continued to smoke. For those living with COPD, smoking cessation is the only treatment that can prevent the progression of the disease in smokers. It is also the most cost-effective one. The cost per QALY, or quality-adjusted life year, for smoking cessation in COPD patients is around £2,000, compared with between £7,000 and up to £187,000 per QALY for drugs to control the symptoms of COPD. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NICE, has estimated that for every £1 invested in specialist stop smoking services, a return of £2.37 will be generated in savings on smoking-related diseases and in ending loss of productivity.

I hope that such issues will be addressed as the Government implement their recently published tobacco control plan, and it is welcome that e-cigarettes have been included as part of that work. E-cigarettes, however, must never be seen as a silver bullet to achieve our vision of a smoke-free society. E-cigarettes are a crucial player in the cessation landscape, but they are not the only player. It is important that we maintain the position set out by research and evidence from the World Health Organisation and in the tobacco control plan that nicotine replacement therapy is four times more effective when prescribed by a doctor and monitored than when simply bought over the counter, which is how e-cigarettes are acquired.

It is important that smoking cessation is a wide-ranging package that reduces smoking in society. Sadly, however, I have to say that the Government's actions are undermining that approach. As the King's Fund and the Royal Society for Public Health have identified, public health cuts will reach £800 million in the five years to 2021 and, in 2017-18, spending on tobacco control services faces cuts of 30%. That is concerning, because ASH has identified that a growing number of local authorities no longer have a specialist stop smoking service accessible to all smokers.

Even across the wider health service, it is clear that there are failures to implement NICE guidance on smoking cessation. An audit by the British Thoracic Society of 146 hospitals found that 27% of hospital patients were not even asked if they smoked, and provision

of NRT and other smoking cessation treatments in hospitals was classed as poor. Is the Minister aware of that and is he ensuring that action is taken?

What is the Minister doing to address those genuine concerns? I would also welcome knowing his thoughts on promoting vaping and other smoking cessation treatments for in-patients during their stay in hospital, which is championed by Professor John Britton and chimes well with the position set out in the tobacco control plan:

“Promote links to ‘stop smoking’ services across the health and care system and full implementation of all relevant NICE guidelines by 2022”—

I am sure the Minister knows the quote well, as he published the plan, which I am pleased about.

That all shows the serious concerns within the smoking cessation landscape, and the worries for its future and for our move towards a smoke-free society. It is important to include vaping as part of the landscape, but it cannot detract from the other treatments available, which we cannot allow to wither on the vine because something new and shiny has come along. That is partly because the evidence for the impact of e-cigarettes on our health is still not definitive. Public Health England's review of vaping products showed that they were 95% less harmful than tobacco products—which is excellent—because of the lack of carbon monoxide being inhaled and the reduction in the many other health implications that come with smoking tobacco, but that does not mean there are not concerns or split opinions over the health, harm and safety of such products.

It is paramount that such views are continually looked at and that we review our positions on the products regularly. That is why it is welcome that Public Health England will publish its update on vaping research and evidence by the end of this year. Will the Minister also outline plans to evaluate heat not burn? Although not vaping, such products are something else on the market seen as a way of limiting and reducing harm from smoking. The impact of those devices needs further research.

Gareth Johnson: I did not mention the available heat-not-burn products simply because I could not find any independent information on whether they were beneficial for health or still dangerous. I would be grateful if the hon. Lady enlarged on any information that she has found out about those products, because I found it difficult to find anything.

Mrs Hodgson: I do not think that I know much more than the hon. Gentleman, which is why I mentioned heat not burn. I have asked some questions about it because some independent research is needed. The manufacturers of heat-not-burn products have done their own research and make quite strong claims that although they are still tobacco products, they are far less harmful, but we need independent research to back that up before anyone can substantiate the claims. Will the Minister update us on when research into vaping and perhaps heat not burn will be happening?

As we come to the end of the year, the Minister will be aware that if we see any delays in publishing reports or plans, I will of course be on his case. I welcome the Science and Technology Committee also looking into this matter, and I will keep a close eye on the developments

[Mrs Hodgson]

of that inquiry while looking forward to its findings. It is important that we take a pragmatic approach to e-cigarettes, which is reflected in Public Health England's 2016 statement, which had the support of 12 health charities:

"We all agree that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful than smoking...but we must continue to study the long term effects."

The Opposition agree, as it is clear from the evidence so far that e-cigarettes are far less harmful than tobacco smoking, but the evidence remains inconclusive. That is why monitoring must be maintained to ensure that we fully understand the impact of such products in the short and long term.

The Minister has had a lot to think about during this short debate, and I am sure that in his response he will address each and every one of the points made. I implore him in that response to remember the wider smoking cessation landscape and how important it is to ensure that vaping is included as part of that wider package, which is sustainable and effective in reducing smoking in society and thereby improving the health of the nation.

10.9 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing another timely debate. Only a couple of weeks ago we had an excellent three-hour debate in the main Chamber on the Government's new—I suppose it is still new—tobacco control plan. I want to say a little about the state of the evidence as we see it on e-cigarettes and how they fit into our plans to cut smoking further. I will touch on vaping by young people, which a few hon. Members have mentioned, and our approach to regulation.

E-cigarettes were a popular subject during the debate in the main Chamber on the TCP. Every speaker bar none mentioned them in one way, shape or form, so there is a lot of interest in them across the House. That reflects the radical changes in popularity of alternative nicotine delivering products in recent years. We have moved from a position where the nicotine delivery market—if I can call it that; I think we need a better term—is dominated by the traditional cigarette, to one where we have a much wider range of nicotine delivering products.

About 2.4 million people in England use e-cigarettes. That represents huge growth over the past decade. However, we cannot be complacent. My hon. Friend referred to the number of smokers; there are still 7.3 million smokers in this country. Two hundred people die every day due to smoking and it is still the biggest preventable killer in our country. The financial burden that that puts on the NHS in England and other public services is obviously huge, but that is dwarfed by its impact on people's lives and the unnecessary loss of loved ones. Let us remember that a regular, long-term smoker loses an average of 10 years of their life due to their habit. It is a high cost.

The tobacco control plan sets out stretching ambitions to reduce, during this Parliament, adult prevalence to 12% or less; the prevalence of 15-year-olds who regularly smoke to 3% or less; and that of pregnant smokers—an issue rightly raised by a number of hon. Members—to 6% or less. We have been somewhat criticised for that not being ambitious enough, which is why I stress the words "or less". They are not targets; they are the absolute maximum that I expect, and we want to do better and beat them. We want to reduce the burning injustices that see some of the poorest in our society die significantly earlier than the richest in our society, so the plan will focus on people in routine and manual occupations, where rates are higher. We want to focus on other groups particularly affected by smoking, such as people with mental health conditions, those in prison and pregnant women.

In the previous debate on smoking, colleagues on both sides of the House highlighted the increasing role that e-cigarettes play in helping people to quit smoking. We heard all sorts of examples from right hon. and hon. Members of parents, friends and family members who have used e-cigarettes to wean themselves off smoking, which is always good to hear. Let us be clear that quitting smoking and nicotine use completely is the best way to improve health, as was said in the opening remarks of that debate. However, the evidence is increasingly clear that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful to health than smoking tobacco. The Government outlined in the new plan that we are committed to supporting consumers to stop smoking and to use less harmful nicotine products.

E-cigarettes have become by far the most popular smoking quitting aid in the country. The evidence shows that they can help smokers to quit, particularly when combined with additional support from local stop smoking services. That is why, as part of the TCP, the Government asked Public Health England to include messages about the relative safety of e-cigarettes in its quit smoking campaign for Stoptober. I look forward to seeing how that played out when the data are available. There has never been a better time to quit and I am hopeful that many people took up the challenge this Stoptober. I am pleased to say that the Stoptober campaign highlighted e-cigarettes for the first time among the array of tools that smokers can use to improve their chances of successfully quitting. Public Health England, for which I am responsible, is already preparing its new year quitting campaign, and I am sure that hon. Members will be pleased to know that it will reprise those messages. It is through consistent messaging that we hope to reverse the harmful, mistaken and increasingly widespread belief that vaping is no safer than smoking.

My hon. Friend rightly raised the issue of independent evidence on e-cigarettes. I reassure him that the Government are utterly committed to rigorous scrutiny of the evidence on e-cigarettes. We do not do non-evidence-based policy making and nor should we. In that spirit, I highlight highly reputable organisations such as Cancer Research UK, led by the brilliant Sir Harpal Kumar, and the Royal College of Physicians, which hon. Members have mentioned. They rightly support e-cigarettes as a measure to stop people smoking, to ultimately move to no nicotine dependency.

I commend the work of the UK e-cigarette research forum, an initiative developed by Cancer Research UK in partnership with Public Health England and the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies. The forum brings together policy makers, researchers, practitioners and the non-governmental organisations to discuss the emerging evidence and knowledge gaps on e-cigarettes. There are big knowledge gaps, which the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) mentioned a number of times. Such groups will allow us to keep strengthening the evidence base on e-cigarettes, which hon. Members have called for. We look around the world for our evidence base, and I note with interest that the New Zealand Ministry of Health recently published a position statement on e-cigarettes that recognises their potential contribution to achieving its “Smokefree 2025” goal.

The public rightly have genuine concerns, however, about the benefits and potential long-term dangers of e-cigarettes and new, so-called novel tobacco products. We take those concerns seriously, as any responsible Government would, and we outline in the plan that the Department will monitor the impact of regulation and policy on e-cigarettes and novel tobacco products in England, including evidence on safety, uptake, the health impact and effectiveness of these products as smoking cessation aids, to inform our actions and regulate their use. That has to be the right thing to do. Public Health England will also update its evidence report on e-cigarettes and other novel nicotine delivery systems annually until the end of the Parliament in 2022.

In the spirit of independent scrutiny, I warmly welcome the recent announcement by the Science and Technology Committee, which hon. Members have mentioned. It is chaired by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who I spoke to recently but who is unable to be here, and will hold an inquiry to examine the impact of electronic cigarettes on human health, the suitability of regulations guiding their use, and the financial implications of a growing market, both for business and for the NHS. This is an excellent opportunity for an independent view of the risks and benefits of e-cigarettes. What is there not to like about that? I say that as a Minister: people are doing the research for me and paying for it. The Government have a statutory duty—we will not leave it all to everyone else—to conduct an implementation review of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 by the end of May 2021, to assess their impact, and we will do that.

I will touch on the regulatory framework introduced by the EU tobacco products directive, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford mentioned. The directive has enabled us to regulate e-cigarettes to reduce the risk of harm to children, protect against any risk of re-normalising tobacco use, and provide assurance on relative safety for users and legal certainty for businesses. The inclusion of e-cigarettes in the directive ensures that we can sensibly regulate these products. The directive is not perfect and nobody pretends that it is, but it gives a sensible basis for regulation. My hon. Friend asked me to put March 2019 in my diary—it is inked in. With one leap we will be free and we will be able to take back control, as the phrase goes. It will be an opportunity for us to look at every regulation that we are subject to, review them and go through them with a fine-toothed comb, and he has my assurance that I will do so in every area for which I am responsible.

I recognise that there are real concerns that vaping is a gateway for youth smoking, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) touched on. However, there is no great evidence in the UK that vaping is leading young people to smoke. There is some evidence that some young people experiment with e-cigarettes, but that regular e-cigarette use is confined almost entirely to young people who have smoked, so it is the gateway out as opposed to the gateway in. To ensure that that remains the case, we have implemented domestic age-of-sale legislation that prevents the sale of e-cigarettes to under-18s and we have prohibited the advertising and promotion of e-cigarettes in the major media streams, including TV, radio, newspapers and the internet. By and large, the banned media streams are those with the largest reach, and by controlling them we have significantly reduced children’s exposure to marketing and images of those products. The Government have no plans to ban advertising in other media, but we keep everything under review.

There is a vibrant e-cigarette market in the UK—in many ways it is a business success story—with nearly 2.4 million users. The industry is worth nearly £1 billion to the UK economy. It started out as small, independent, non-tobacco-industry organisations—a cottage industry—intent on designing solutions for people to get the benefits of nicotine delivery without the harms of smoking.

My Department will continue to work closely with the vaping sector through the Independent British Vape Trade Association. The Department does not work with the UK Vaping Industry Association because of its links to the tobacco industry. Her Majesty’s Government take their duties seriously, as they should as a signatory to the World Health Organisation framework convention on tobacco control. I feel that I should put on the record that, under article 5.3 of that convention, we have committed to protect our public health policies from the commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry. The guidelines for the implementation of article 5.3 permit parties to engage with

“the tobacco industry only when and to the extent strictly necessary to enable them to effectively regulate the tobacco industry and tobacco products.”

I will briefly mention another innovation, namely heat-not-burn products, which the shadow Minister asked about. Two heat-not-burn products have been notified for use on the UK market as novel tobacco products. It is important to stress that, even in comparison with e-cigarettes, that market is relatively new and very small-scale in the UK. We simply do not know enough about those products. We will continue to adopt a pragmatic, sensible and cool-headed approach to regulation, based on the best possible public health advice, which I receive from advisers including Public Health England. As part of that approach, my Department has asked the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment to give a view about those products’ potential harm reduction in comparison with conventional smoking. The committee is due to respond later this year. I hope that that helps the shadow Minister, who I know will remain on my case—that is not in doubt.

We will discuss Brexit today, tomorrow, the day after and probably the day after that, too. There are concerns among people in the industry and e-cigarette users about the introduction of the EU tobacco products

[*Steve Brine*]

directive impacting on e-cigarette innovation and consumer choice. As stated in the tobacco control plan, the Government will review where the UK's exit from the EU offers opportunities to reappraise tobacco and e-cigarette regulation to ensure that it continues to protect the nation's health.

The hon. Member for Ipswich spoke excellently, as always. I congratulate him on quitting and not going back; that is excellent. The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) talked about innovation and, as always, made a calm and sensible speech. I congratulate him on getting his birthday on the record—that, too, is now inked in our diaries.

The shadow Minister referred to “something new and shiny”. This is literally something new and shiny, but it is not for Ministers to get carried away by new and shiny things in any way, shape or form. The Government have been criticised both for being too tough on e-cigarettes and for being too lenient. That suggests to me that we have the balance about right while we look for more evidence. We have proportionate regulation that allows us to protect children, and that is absolutely right. We keep the evidence under constant review.

Gareth Johnson: I mentioned previously to the Minister that he may wish to meet the vaping industry. I am glad that he has the Brexit date in his diary, but I wonder whether he will be kind enough to indicate whether he is willing to put in his diary a meeting with the vaping industry.

Steve Brine: I mentioned that we work closely with the Independent British Vape Trade Association, which I am perfectly happy to meet, but I also mentioned that

we take the WHO framework convention seriously. The door is always open to people we can meet. That is all part of us trying to understand the evidence base.

To conclude, we are clear that e-cigarettes can play a useful role in helping people to quit smoking. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said, the majority of smokers want to quit, and we should help them. E-cigarettes are one of a variety of stop-smoking tools available to support them.

10.24 am

Gareth Johnson: I will briefly reiterate what I said at the end of my opening speech. No one pretends that e-cigarettes and vaping are without risk, but they may be the best hope we have ever had for helping people to quit smoking, which is what this debate is all about. Vaping could save millions of lives worldwide. It should therefore be looked at very seriously, with an open mind and an evidence-based approach. If we do that and take advantage of the opportunities that vaping brings for the health and wellbeing of people in this country and worldwide, the whole world will be better as a consequence. I thank the Minister for his response, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for her contribution, and all other Members who contributed to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of vaping.

10.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Olympic Sports/GCSE PE

11 am

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Olympic sports and accepted GCSE PE activities.

This is an important matter, especially to all those students and their parents who find themselves in what I would describe as a deeply unfair situation, if I may be so bold. The mother of my constituent Kyle Ross-Waddell, who is here today with his parents, contacted me in the summer about the position he found himself in at Bramcote School in my constituency. In short, this young man is an exceptionally talented speed-skater, to the extent that he is now one of only 12 15 to 18-year-olds who are part of the national academy for primarily speed-skating, but also related sports, that is based at two centres in Nottingham and Sheffield.

In Nottingham we have a fine tradition of skating, started by Torvill and Dean, and we have a national centre in Nottingham. As a result of that, all manner of young people are now excelling in various forms of skating as a sport. Kyle is undoubtedly in that elite squad, and it has been recognised that he has genuine potential in short-track speed-skating that will take him into an elite Olympic squad.

I am proud that for some years now, Governments of whatever colour have had a policy—it has been controversial in some respects but has undoubtedly worked—of encouraging youngsters who have that elite status over the course of their development so that they achieve the very highest recognition, in the Olympic games. I will go no further than that, because I would stray into matters that do not concern us in this debate, but the importance of providing those youngsters with the training, expertise, aspiration, coaching and so on that they require to achieve at the highest level has been recognised.

I am proud that Kyle is in that elite sector, and I am proud of his achievements, as his parents undoubtedly are. At the age of 14 to 15, he chose PE as one of his GCSE topics. As part of that GCSE, a youngster has to choose three sports to be examined in. Unsurprisingly, Kyle chose speed-skating as one of those three. In fact, he made it his main sport, for obvious reasons—he is exceptionally good at it. The system is that a youngster is watched and examined to see how well they play that sport. It is not just their knowledge of the sport or other sports; their ability to play that chosen sport forms an essential ingredient of the eventual marks they get for GCSE PE.

Bramcote School assumed that the system that then prevailed would continue. Speed-skating had not necessarily been put on the main list of sporting activities, but it was recognised, as with a number of other sports, that if some national centre of excellence or other access locally was available to ensure that a pupil's physical ability to play that sport was properly assessed, they could make it their main sport and therefore study it as part of their GCSE.

That is where it all went horribly wrong. Bramcote School thought that the system would prevail whereby if the local board agreed that there was local provision to test the young person, they could carry on and make it their main sport, even though it was not on the list. Unfortunately, the Government changed the system.

The previous Administration decided to take off the list speed-skating and a number of other sports—I have the full list—many of which are accepted Olympic sports and part of the elite programme that I am very proud to say my Government and previous Governments have been so keen to support.

Kyle found, at the end of the first of his two years of studies, that he could no longer study the sport he does so brilliantly. He has been able to choose another sport, but it is not one he particularly excels in. I am not saying he does not play it very well. Indeed, I have a lot of evidence that he is extremely good at both football and athletics. I refer to the wise words of his headteacher, Paul Heery, who said in a letter to me when I raised this with him at the end of the summer:

“This decision has been a controversial one for a number of sports, and their associations and governing bodies have raised their concerns. As you indicate in the letter, our PE teachers are confident that they can assess practical skills to GCSE level—where they have had to assess unfamiliar sports in the past, they have taken advice, used available information and used their experience and judgement.”

I have had testimony from a number of people, notably a gentleman called Andy Baldwin, who is a long-standing PE teacher of great experience. He was head of PE and sport at Fernwood School in Wollaton, in the city of Nottingham and the constituency of the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). In a lengthy email to my constituent's mother, who is also a constituent, he explains that this system is simply unfair. My constituent and many others have effectively been—one hesitates to use these words, but I think it is proper in this context—discriminated against, because their sport, which they are extremely good at, has been taken off a list, to their profound disadvantage.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): This is a really important speech. I speak as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for sport. In this country, we should champion and be proud of sporting excellence. Sometimes that will be in uncommon sports, and we should have the flexibility to champion people's potential, because we will all celebrate it if they do make it to the Olympics. I also wish to put on record that I wish Kyle the very best of luck in his career.

Anna Soubry: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I know Kyle will be pleased to hear those words.

There is an outbreak of unity across the normal political divides on this issue. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who wanted to attend the debate but cannot. He has been good enough to share with me correspondence relating to his constituent, Natalie Crawford, whose name he has said I can mention. She happens to be a friend of Kyle's family. She has represented her country in the youth Olympics in speed-skating and yet finds herself—I think she is now doing her A-levels—unable to put that sport on her curriculum so that she can be examined in it. That truly cannot be right.

I believe a review is being conducted in 2018. I am grateful for the letter that my hon. Friend the Minister sent me when I wrote to him back in the summer, but I urge the Government to give this their most urgent attention. I am sure that this matter can be resolved,

[Anna Soubry]

but we need to get on with it. Someone like Kyle cannot wait until 2018, when he is due to complete his GCSE studies and sit his exams. Until the review, many other youngsters across the whole of England and no doubt Wales will be seriously discriminated against because of an arbitrary list. I will be corrected by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) if I am wrong, but I think that sports such as judo, in which this country has done so well at the Olympics, have been taken off the list. Again, that cannot be right.

I am very grateful to my constituents for bringing this matter to my attention, and I am lucky to have secured the debate. I look forward to the Minister's comments. I urge the Government to look again at this list and take action not in 2018, but as soon as possible.

11.9 am

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on securing the debate. I know that she is passionate about sport and physical activity and is a keen follower of a number of sports teams, including, I understand, the Leicester Tigers.

Like my right hon. Friend, the Government are committed to ensuring that all pupils are healthy and active, which is why PE remains compulsory at all four key stages in the national curriculum. It is also why, through the primary PE and sport premium, we have invested more than £600 million of ring-fenced funding for primary schools to improve PE and sport since 2013 and have doubled that funding to £320 million a year from this September.

My right hon. Friend raises the issue of some Olympic sports not being included in the activity list for PE GCSE. We should all be incredibly proud of the recent performances of our Olympians and Paralympians. At the Rio 2016 Olympics, Team GB became the first team to win more medals at a games immediately after hosting them. They won 67 medals—the most since 1908—and came second in the medal table. ParalympicsGB also finished second in the medal table, winning 147 medals—the most since national lottery funding began. Indeed, I could expand as to where Yorkshire would have ranked in the medal table if it were an independent country—but I will not.

Not all Olympic sports are included in the PE GCSE activity list, but their inclusion or non-inclusion does not represent a view on the legitimacy or value of the activity. The revised PE GCSE was first taught in September 2016, as part of wider Government reforms to ensure that qualifications are high quality, demanding and academically rigorous and prepare students for further and higher education and, of course, employment. For PE, the subject content was revised to address comments that the current GCSE and A-level were not of comparable rigour to other subjects, did not provide suitable progression and had led to inequalities in assessment.

As part of the revisions, awarding organisations proposed revising the list of activities that could be assessed in the practical element of the course. That was to ensure that all the activities reflected Ofqual's principles that non-exam

assessment should ensure sound assessment practice, be manageable and ensure that a qualification is not easily distorted. In determining which activities should be included in the list, awarding organisations considered the range and demand of skills and techniques in the activity; the application of tactics and strategy in the activity; the ability to develop skills over a significant time; whether there were suitable conditions in which to perform; and whether the level of performance could realistically be assessed by PE practitioners—probably the key point in this situation.

Anna Soubry: I should say for the record that I am a lifelong supporter of Notts County; I watch Nottingham Forest as well; and I enjoy watching Nottinghamshire County Cricket Club. I wanted to put that on the record, but I am very serious about this issue. Does the Minister agree that in the modern world, as Mr Baldwin points out to me, PE teachers are of course perfectly capable, through their knowledge of the subject, of assessing performance in all sports? They particularly rely on videos, and they have those skills, those abilities, so even if it is an unusual sport, they can test someone's performance. And let me add that as well as judo, fencing, pentathlon, sailing, shooting, archery and many other Olympic sports have been removed from the list.

Mr Goodwill: I hear what my right hon. Friend says, but the feedback from the awarding organisations was that, in some cases, the proficiency was not there across the country to assess some of these sports. When applicants put in for a GCSE exam, they may not necessarily all be of Olympic standard, and it is important that assessments can be made across the ability range in these sports. Often, specialist skills and knowledge are needed for some of the sports to make the assessment.

I understand that for some pupils, such as Kyle, the revisions to the activity list may be frustrating, but in many cases, pupils who excel in sports that are not on the activity list will also be highly proficient in a range of other sports that are included. It is important that GCSE PE can be assessed reliably and that the activities included in the list are of comparable demand among pupils and are manageable for schools to assess. I have discussed the issue with the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), and we agree that it is simply not practical to expect that every sport can be assessed as part of GCSE PE. Indeed, I bumped into her on the way to this debate and mentioned that it was taking place.

As we previously committed to doing, the Government will review the activity list in autumn 2018, following the first examinations next summer. We will agree that process with the exam boards and announce details closer to the time.

In the case of my right hon. Friend's constituent, Kyle Ross-Waddell, I understand that he is on the short track speed-skating talent pathway. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate him on the progress that he is making and to wish him the very best for his future development.

Justin Tomlinson: I know that my hon. Friend the Minister takes a keen interest in this area, but surely, if Kyle proves to be successful, we will cheer every bit as

loudly for his success as we will for anyone in any of the other sports in the Olympics, so we should rightly be celebrating and encouraging sporting excellence in all the sports that count in the Olympics.

Mr Goodwill: Of course we should celebrate sporting excellence, but a number of sports may not be particularly practical for schools to offer. For example, clay pigeon shooting is an Olympic sport, but I suspect that concerns would be raised were it to be a sport taught in schools.

In terms of practicality for teachers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe said that the decision was arbitrary. It was not arbitrary: the list has been reduced considerably to ensure that a PE practitioner will be able to recognise the key skills and fluency of movement in the activities proposed. The awarding organisations have removed activities that are so specialist or niche that specific expertise in the activity is required to assess them. An example is martial arts, which have been mentioned. For a number of activities used in previous specifications, experience suggested that teachers and moderators were often unfamiliar and at times uncomfortable with the assessment of them and were relying too heavily on outside expertise to inform assessment decisions.

Again, I thank my right hon. Friend for calling the debate and I reiterate that the inclusion or non-inclusion of sports in the activity list does not represent a view on their legitimacy or value. Today's debate will be helpful in further shaping our thinking on the activity list, and we will provide further details of the review next year.

I wish Kyle all the best in his PE GCSE and in the other subjects that he is taking. I rather suspect that if he does stand on the podium at a future Olympics, people will not be looking too closely at what grade he got in his PE GCSE, although I understand from his school that he is expected to excel in the sports that he is currently taking.

Question put and agreed to.

11.18 am

Sitting suspended.

Residential Premises: Product Safety and Fire Risk

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered product safety and fire risk in residential premises.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate; given how many colleagues have turned up to support it and speak in it, I will take no more time than I need. I have timed my speech at eight minutes.

I pay generous tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has led a determined parliamentary campaign on these issues, supporting the attempts of the London fire brigade, Which? and Electrical Safety First to improve product safety. I am grateful to those organisations for the material that they have supplied for the debate; to the Library for the debate pack that it produced yesterday; and to the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, which weighed in this morning. All the safety organisations agree on what was and is needed.

I do not need to say very much about the scale of the problem. Three fires a day in the United Kingdom involve tumble dryers; more than 4,000 fires in 2016 were caused by faulty appliances and leads; and 2,000 fires in London between 2011 and 2016 involved white goods. The Grenfell fire was started by a fridge-freezer, and deaths have occurred elsewhere, too—one in 2010, five in 2011, two in 2014—as a result of similar sources of ignition.

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. She is well liked and respected across the House, and much is expected of her. The Library debate pack generously details her efforts: correspondence and meetings with Whirlpool and others in the sector, press notices, written statements, meetings with colleagues, parliamentary and other questions, steering groups, working parties, support for Register My Appliance Day, and more. Those are all commendable, but many of us want a conclusive, robust and ambitious Government response, and it will continue to reflect badly on this Administration if one does not come soon. As London fire brigade's letter states:

“There has been over three years of reports and recommendations but as yet no action from Government...the review of the UK product recall system was first announced in November 2014. This was then launched in March 2015 with consumer champion Lynn Faulds Wood leading the review which reported in February 2016 with a series of recommendations. A steering group was then set up to take these forward. Following the Shepherds Court fire, a new working group to replace the steering group was set up in autumn 2016 which published its recommendations in July 2017.”

The Government are due to publish their response at any time; I would be grateful for an update from the Minister. Yesterday, in her latest letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith, she repeated her expectation of an “autumn response”. When I was Minister for time at the Department of Trade and Industry—not many people know that there is a Minister for time, but it was me once—my office once promised an “autumn response” in an answer to a parliamentary question. When I inquired what that meant exactly, I was told it meant “by 21 December,” which was the date of the end of the

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

Session that autumn. Will the Minister clarify whether the response to the working party will come in late December or early November?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He has been a champion for product safety. Does he agree that the Whirlpool tumble dryer revelation is a warning that the electrical sector needs to heed before there is loss of life? The Government must play a part by enforcing codes of practice on an industry that is managing to fly under the radar.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes the central point to which I am sure all Front-Bench spokespeople will refer when they wind up the debate. I will come on to Whirlpool's response and the central recommendations of the Faulds Wood report.

Page 7 of the Library debate pack includes an interesting detail that had previously escaped me: if people have used their credit cards to buy faulty equipment, credit card companies could be held liable. The credit card companies may therefore sue manufacturers for faulty goods. I have not heard that point mentioned in any of the debates so far, but if the credit card companies weighed in and threatened to sue Whirlpool, that might be a game-changer. That is not within the scope of this debate, but I mention it as an aside.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Like the hon. Gentleman, I am an officer of the all-party group on fire safety rescue; our erstwhile chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), is also present. We all know the terrible devastation that a white goods fire can cause, but can the hon. Gentleman put an economic figure on it? It is sure to be a costly figure for the country.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I have to confess that I do not have a figure. Most of the evidence that I have seen from the organisations that have briefed us relates more to public safety and the risk to life, but other hon. Members may very well be able to provide a figure. Looking round the Chamber, I think I see all the officers of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, who are all hoping to contribute as the hon. Gentleman has done.

The recommendations of the Faulds Wood review state:

"There is a need for the creation of an official national product safety agency... There should be an official trusted website... There is an urgent need to improve funding, training, resources and procedures for... the enforcement authorities".

Which? makes the point that trading standards officers have 260 pieces of legislation to enforce, and product safety is therefore not a priority. It further states:

"Local authority trading standards cannot be expected to hold to account multinational companies for product safety incidents of national concern".

That is surely true. Indeed, it was under pressure from Which? that Peterborough trading standards officers took action against Whirlpool, following the Shepherd's Bush fire in 2016. Whirlpool updated its safety advice to consumers, warning them to stop using their machines until they are repaired. However, the modification programme it initiated did not have the capacity to deliver. In April, the Minister reported to the House

that Whirlpool had resolved 1.5 million of the 3.5 million affected machines, and in October the Government spokesperson in the House of Lords reported that the figure stood at 1.7 million. It would be interesting to hear an update from the Minister today.

There are clearly big issues to address, not only for consumers but for retailers, manufacturers and the Government. As consumers, we need to recognise that completing product warranty forms is in our own interest; I understand that anecdotal evidence suggests that people do not complete them for fear of receiving unwanted sales literature, although personally I think it has more to do with laziness. According to the Library,

"YouGov research showed that just over a third of us currently register our appliances."

Retailers should be required to register customers' purchases and personal details for safety recall purposes. Those details must not be used for promotions—although in this age of information sharing and data capture, it is almost impossible for any of us to avoid sales material and promotions.

London fire brigade has a number of simple requests to manufacturers, and these requests are supported generally. They include changing fridge-freezer construction to protect insulation materials from components that could catch fire; better permanent marking of model and serial numbers, so that appliances can be identified after a fire; and using capacitors in fridges and freezers in a way that prevents them from starting fires. Which? also mentions non-flame-retardant backings for fridge-freezers.

Finally, what should the Government do? That is obviously the biggest challenge, especially with a Government who—with respect—are set against any new regulation on business. I have already mentioned the key recommendations of the Faulds Wood report for a national safety agency, an official trusted website and better enforcement; all its other recommendations flow from those. As an aside, all the safety organisations have raised concerns about what will happen after Brexit, not only to our own safety standards and markings, but to information sharing with other countries on advice, failures and recalls. It would be helpful if the Minister could also address that issue in her wind-up.

In conclusion, I am told by the London fire brigade that there have been 14 such fires in my constituency in recent times. I have referred to some of the other regional and national statistics, including those on fatalities. I understand that this is the fifth debate on this subject since March 2015. We have also had two Government reviews and there is an ongoing working group. There have been three major incidents in tower blocks since 2009—Lakanal House, Shepherds Court and Grenfell—all of which had an electrical source of ignition. The Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had a hearing yesterday to explore these issues and I hope it will soon launch a major inquiry. Of course, we still await the Government's conclusions on their latest review, as I have mentioned.

Meanwhile, the average success rate for an electrical product recall is apparently between 10% and 20%. We all know, including our major safety organisations and the Government, that that is just not good enough, because lives are at risk. What can the Minister do about it?

I look forward to hearing the contributions of fellow Back Benchers and the responses from the Front Benchers. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to raise this issue.

2.41 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate. He has real expertise in this area. He was a first-class Fire Minister, as indeed was the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who is sitting next to him. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for whom this was a constituency issue in 2016, and he has not let the matter drop. In the light of the disaster at Grenfell, I am sure that I share with colleagues a sense of optimism that, at the end of the debate, our excellent Minister will leave us with a positive plan of action.

In this debate, what I term white goods are large electrical goods used domestically, such as refrigerators and washing machines. I have been provided with an excellent brief by the secretariat of the all-party fire safety rescue group, Mr Ronnie King, and by Electrical Safety First, a UK charity dedicated to reducing and preventing damage, injuries and death caused by faulty electrical goods.

In 2016, 1,873 fires were caused by domestic electrical white goods, which is a truly shocking figure. Five fires a day in the UK are caused by electrical goods, and three a day involve tumble dryers. Of course a fridge-freezer was the initial cause of the Grenfell Tower disaster; the inquiry into that is taking evidence, and we will see where that leads us.

Electrical Safety First proposes that the Government provide free mandatory electrical checks for homes in tower blocks. Colleagues might say, “Free checks are all very well and good, David, but who’s going to pay for all this?”, but perhaps we could come up with some innovative ideas; I could ask the Minister how we could address that.

Housing associations and local authorities should have a legal responsibility for ensuring free mandatory electrical safety checks, including of fixed electrical installations and appliances in properties. Housing associations and local authorities should keep a register of the white goods contained and operating in their tower blocks, regardless of an apartment’s tenure, and should ensure that tenants register those products. The cost of that is enormous—between £48 million and £60 million over five years, which is a huge amount of money—but again, I say to the Minister that we might be able to come up with an innovative way to deal with that cost.

Current policy, as my hon. Friend the Minister knows, is that there is an “expectation” that landlords will keep electrical installations safe, but we all know that there is a vast gap between an expectation and ensuring that a policy is delivered.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman not think it important that the safety checks be compulsory, not mandatory? If we are thinking about ways of introducing them, let us look at what we do about gas safety checks: every landlord has to provide a certificate.

Sir David Amess: I hope that the House will unite in the view that we cannot compromise on safety, and I very much agree with the hon. Lady’s point, which I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will take on board. As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, it is simply not good enough for these products to go unchecked for years in socially rented properties.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith told the House about a serious fire in Shepherd’s Bush in 2016 that was caused, as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, by a faulty Whirlpool tumble dryer. Whirlpool was aware of the fault but failed to recall the products, instead advising customers not to leave them unattended and saying that repairs would be carried out in due course. That does not seem good enough, really. Most Members present attended the Adjournment debate on this issue in September last year.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills established a working group on product recalls and safety in July this year, and I congratulate the Government on that. Its key recommendations are: having centralised technical and scientific resource capability, to support decision making and co-ordination of activity in local authorities and the businesses they regulate; having a detailed code of practice that is informed by behavioural insights research; and considering establishing central capacity to co-ordinate product safety corrective actions. Furthermore, it was recommended that manufacturers and retailers work together, through standards-setting bodies, to develop technological solutions to product marking. Finally, the registration by consumers of appliances and other consumer goods with the manufacturers should be encouraged, to make corrective actions—including product recalls—more effective. Of course, to go back to the earlier point, it is compulsion that the House is looking for, but I understand that it is pretty difficult to frame a law that achieves that effect.

In August this year, the London fire brigade wrote to the Government on the anniversary of the Shepherd’s Court disaster. The Total Recalls campaign aims to: make white goods safer by having a single, publicly accessible register of product recalls, including of international products; publicise recalls better, to reduce confusion; publish risk assessments when a fault is identified; ensure greater regulation of second-hand appliances, which is very important; change the way that fridges and freezers are manufactured—a big ask—and ensure that all appliances are marked with model and serial numbers. Also, sleeping risk should be included as a factor in risk assessments.

Dany Cotton, the London Fire Commissioner, says:

“How many more devastating white goods fires does there have to be before the Government makes it easier for consumers to check whether their fridges and freezers are on the recall list?...This is not the time for further reports and recommendations, it’s time to take action.”

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will understand the slight sense of frustration there.

In 2014, a coroner at the inquest of Santosh Benjamin-Muthiah, who died after a fire caused by a faulty Beko fridge-freezer, recommended a series of measures to improve product recalls. These changes are yet to be made. The review has been ongoing for almost three years, and as yet there have been no substantial improvements made to the system. It is about time that we acted on the group’s recommendations.

[*Sir David Amess*]

As we have heard, in September a press release from Which? referred to a fire in Wales that killed two people, which was caused by a Whirlpool tumble dryer. Neil Gibbins, the chairman of the group, has said that “significant progress” is being made. There has also been talk about the publication of a standard PAS—publicly available specification—7100 form, which would set out the process for monitoring product safety and the actions that should be taken if something goes wrong. That idea is under consultation, and I believe that the steering group is meeting on 8 and 9 November. The PAS will give guidance to enforcing bodies to help them work with the product supplier to achieve a successful resolution to a safety issue. The report also highlighted the need for additional specialist resources to help provide guidance and enforce it if necessary. Neil Gibbins said:

“I am anticipating an update on this from our BEIS colleagues at the next meeting of the working group, scheduled for Nov 28th ... We must ensure that British Standards continue to be devised and updated by people who have access to the best possible information to help them make decisions, and that agreed standards are applied, and where they are not, action is taken.”

Jeff Williams, a former offshore engineer with responsibility for fire safety systems, wrote to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse to say:

“Connection between faulty goods and cladding, for example a tumble dryer may be in action a yard from flammable cladding—you cannot make flammable materials safe by using fire barriers—the only solution is to use non-combustible materials.”

I am vain enough to say that our all-party fire safety rescue group does good work, and if we had been listened to, I believe that the Grenfell disaster would not have taken place. I do not want to be giving interviews after there is a fire in a school, to find that our recommendation that all new school buildings have sprinklers fitted was ignored. The voices of the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse, and for Hammersmith, should be listened to. The figures are shocking. We had the recommendation from the working group and from London fire brigade. Now is the time for action. We do not want to read terrible headlines yet again in our newspapers in the months and years to come.

2.51 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). As a member of the all-party fire safety rescue group, I identify entirely with everything they said, and without being boastful, we have made warnings that have not been heeded.

I want to concentrate on a particular area of concern, which is the safety of cables used in construction projects. I am indebted for what I am about to say to Tratos, a company that produces cables in my constituency. It has concerns about the way that the flammability of cables is classified in this country, and strong views about how that can be improved.

In July this year, a construction products regulation came into force, as a result of which all cables sold in the EU must now adhere to new, improved common standards. That should result in safer, consistent building regulations, and, as a consequence, improved public safety. The EU has not been prescriptive in specifying

which classification of cable performance should be used for buildings and infrastructure. Instead, it is the responsibility of the regulator in each EU member state—which in this case is the Minister—to determine what that standard should be. I will advance the argument that the standard we are adopting is not good enough.

The Minister’s Department has not specified which class of cables should be used in buildings. Instead it requires all electrical installations in buildings to comply with British standard 7671—a minimum requirement that is equivalent to European class E. That allows more flammable cables that are less resistant to the spread of flames to be used in this country, and means that the UK is no closer to having a safer building environment for any buildings that use cables of that kind. Construction products regulation presents a real opportunity to ensure that the cables used in buildings and infrastructure are safe. Tratos has a manufacturing capability in my constituency, and it has declared that all CPR for fire cables should meet at least European class CCA, as that would ensure much greater safety.

I am sure that Members and the Minister will have seen images of cladding tests that show that the lower the classification, the quicker the fire spreads. There is a similar testing process for cables, which shows that the CCA category is much more resistant. The result is almost identical to that for cladding. The higher the specification for the cable, the less quickly the fire spreads.

Chris Davies: The right hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. Would he make that point about all white goods? My understanding is that it is primarily washing machines and tumble driers that are the first to go up, and that a higher percentage of them do so. Is he talking about all electrical goods, right down to washer-drier combos, microwaves and so on?

Mr Howarth: At the start of my remarks I identified entirely with the two previous speakers, and I wholeheartedly agree with everything that they said on that subject. I then said that I intended to speak specifically about cables used in buildings.

Tratos does not see the argument for introducing the CCA standard as if it were a sort of gold plating or a gold standard; it sees it simply as a good way of reducing the risk to public safety. It cites two reasons for that. First, it would ensure that regular plant auditing and regular audit testing of cables from the production line takes place. On a visit to the Tratos plant production facility in my constituency, I saw how rigorously it conducts its own testing. It also argues that if we introduce that standard, the reaction to fire would be better because there is no continuous flame spread, there is a limited fire growth rate because of the resistance to spread, and there is a limited heat release rate.

Tratos suggests—I wholeheartedly endorse this—that the UK regulator stipulate a minimum requirement of European class CCA for CPR. That is higher than at present, and will therefore provide better public safety. It also suggests a programme of market surveillance for CPR and cable compliance, to ensure that substandard cables are eradicated from the market. I understand that some countries produce inferior cable standard products, and export them to this country, where they are relabelled as meeting the British standards classification, although that does not by any means approach the European standard that we expect.

In the wake of Grenfell, it is timely to look at all aspects of regulation—white goods is clearly one of those, as is cladding and other factors in building, such as building layout and so on. All those things must be considered, and I argue that the standard of fire resistance for cables should be added to that list, because potentially, such cables could lead—I hope they do not—to another disaster on the scale of Grenfell.

2.59 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate. He said some nice things about my expertise and the length of time that I have wrestled with this issue, but that is a fraction of what he has put in.

I am grateful that the chair of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who we have heard from, and the chair of the all-party group on home electrical safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who I hope we will hear from, are both here. I acknowledge the many organisations that have supported us in these campaigns, such as Electrical Safety First, Which?, the London fire brigade and other fire services, and the Chartered Trading Standards Institute. I apologise if I have forgotten any. They are very different organisations but they have an interesting unity of view on what needs to be done. I hope the Minister is listening to that view as well as to the individual arguments. I wish to emulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse in his precision, but that is not my strong point.

Yesterday, I attended the evidence session of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which is looking at this issue. I congratulate the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) on that revealing and interesting session. I hope the Minister and her civil servants will find time to look at it.

This debate is not about one company, one product or even one type of goods—white goods or any other. Product safety goes a lot further than fire risk, and fire risk goes a lot further than individual products. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) mentioned cabling. I was involved in a BBC investigation earlier this month that revealed the rather frightening figure of 4 million metres of unsafe cabling from a now defunct Turkish company installed in residential premises in the UK. That may partly be down to the Health and Safety Executive, which realised that 11 million metres of faulty cabling was out there and tried to ensure that it was not used, but did not go ahead with a compulsory recall. There are echoes here of what happened in the white goods cases. Clearly, the danger of cabling buried in walls as a potential fire risk is in some ways even greater than the danger of goods that are on display.

As I say, this issues goes a lot wider but I will concentrate on three events that concern white goods manufactured by the Whirlpool company. Whirlpool is not the whole story but I do not think that is coincidental. All three have already been mentioned, so I will not labour the points, but I will briefly go through them to draw some more general conclusions and put some questions to the Minister.

The first tragic event happened on 10 October 2014 when two men, Bernard Hender and Doug McTavish, died at their flat in Llanrwst. The preventing future deaths report has yet to be published, but we have the transcript of the coroner for north Wales's narrative verdict from 1 September. That inquest concluded:

“On the balance of probabilities, the fire was caused by an electrical fault in the tumble dryer in the laundry room of the flat”.

That was a tumble dryer manufactured by the Whirlpool company. I have read the whole of that verdict. It took three years for that inquest to report, and it is incontestable that the delay was partly because of Whirlpool bringing forward often spurious points such as whether the fire was caused by spontaneous combustion. That attitude, which was also shown with regard to the next fire I will talk about, is extremely regrettable.

Although the precise electrical fault was not identified, there is strong evidence to suggest that it was not the known safety fault in Whirlpool tumble dryers—the collection and ignition of dust and lint—but an electrical fault in the door mechanism. In evidence yesterday to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, Whirlpool said that about 20 such fires have been identified, but there has been no product safety notice, let alone a recall notice, in relation to that particular fault.

The second event, which particularly concerns me, is the very serious fire at Shepherd's Court on 19 August 2016. Late on a Friday afternoon, that 19-storey block of flats was fully evacuated and 50 people were made homeless, some temporarily and some for a long time. According to the fire brigade and other experts, it was only through luck, the circumstance of its happening in the afternoon and the quick and professional response of the fire services that there were no serious injuries or deaths on that occasion. In the view of the residents and their lawyers, Whirlpool has dragged its feet, notwithstanding that from an early stage it was clear that the particular fault—the one that is subject to a product safety notice but not a recall—in the 5.5 million Whirlpool tumble dryers that were manufactured over 13 years and sold in the UK caused the fire. That is not in dispute. A year on, however, we are no nearer to an admission of liability or to any action taken by Whirlpool to deal with the people who, in many cases, lost their entire life: their belongings, their furniture and their flats, when they left because of that fire.

The third and most tragic event is the Grenfell Tower fire, which happened on 14 June. We knew quite soon after the event that it was caused by a Hotpoint fridge-freezer that was manufactured by Whirlpool. We still do not know much more about that. I am grateful to the Minister for answering my most recent correspondence on this subject before the debate. Her response goes some way towards dealing with some of the points that I would have raised, but it also raises further questions. I will try to be concise in saying what those are and if she can answer them today, that would be helpful.

In relation to the product safety notices for the Whirlpool tumble dryers, it is right to acknowledge that Whirlpool has gone to considerable lengths to modify those dryers—1.65 million of them, according to the Minister's letter. There are other issues that I will not go into today about the speed at which that was done, how that was done, whether that is sufficient and whether further

[*Andy Slaughter*]

problems result. That is a substantial programme of modification, but 5.5 million dryers were manufactured. Whirlpool's own estimate—it has to be an estimate because no one knows how many have worn out, been put out of use by other methods or possibly burnt out without causing a fire—is that at least 1 million are still in use in the UK. Which? and other organisations estimate that the figure is probably nearer 2 million. Certainly a substantial number of tumble dryers with a known fault that has caused hundreds of fires are still causing a problem, probably in every constituency in the United Kingdom.

Notwithstanding whatever efforts Whirlpool has gone to—the Minister will doubtless say that the success rate in identifying a faulty product is about 40% compared with the typical 20%—this fault is so serious because of its potential risk to life and property and the number of dryers that more has to be done. It is absolutely clear that Whirlpool is not in the mood to do more. I pray in aid for that the evidence that it gave to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee yesterday.

It was remarkable that Whirlpool turned up at all because in the two or three years of various all-party groups and Committees asking it to attend, it has studiously refused and sent out the same standard letter. The Minister may want to say more about its attitude, but in terms of its accountability to Parliament, it has been extraordinarily disrespectful and continued, in the view of Committee members, to show that disrespect yesterday. It sent not the managing director or anyone with the competence to talk about the technical side of its programme, but effectively its PR man, who was able to answer very few of the questions, even the quite basic questions that I could answer. I urge the Minister to look at that and to deal with Whirlpool in the light of the attitude it continues to show.

We cannot sustain the position whereby there are 1 or 2 million highly unsafe products probably in daily use. Let us not forget the background: this company, against all professional advice, refused even to tell its customers not to use the machines. There is a great suspicion that that was because it could not cope with several million people suddenly saying, "I can't dry my clothes any more."

Jim Fitzpatrick: I heard only the evidence from Electrical Safety First, Which? and the London fire brigade at the BEIS Committee yesterday. From what my hon. Friend describes, the way in which Whirlpool answered the questions will surely feed the appetite of the Select Committee to have a full inquiry so that it can summon Whirlpool and interrogate it to get full answers rather than the dismissive ones that seem to have been given yesterday.

Andy Slaughter: I am not sure the Committee has reached such a conclusion, but I sincerely hope it does. If anything will have encouraged it, it was the desultory way in which the manufacturers dealt with the matter yesterday.

Whirlpool's view over months and years was that it was perfectly all right for customers to continue to use the machines, provided they were in the same building and awake—not even in the same room. It persisted with that view even against the evidence from the Shepherds Bush fire where the victim, my constituent, was in the same room when the fire started and took every possible

correct action: pulling the plug out, calling the fire brigade, shutting the door, and doing everything they could to prevent the fire from spreading. It took another six months for Whirlpool to change its advice and only, as has already been said, under threat of legal action from Which?, which I applaud. It was disgraceful to see Whirlpool pretending yesterday that that was not the cause of its change of policy, but that it just suddenly lighted on the fact and, after a couple of years, decided to do that. I think all Members will be angry at the dismissive attitude that was shown.

What are we going to do about the Whirlpool situation, specifically in relation to Grenfell? I am grateful for the Minister's clarity in saying that the broader issues to do with the cause and spread of fire are matters for the public inquiry. We accept that. As I understand it, the specific issue of a fault within the model of fridge-freezer identified is a matter for her Department. I will press her a little further and ask when we will know that. We knew quite quickly that it was a fridge-freezer, which model it was and which flat it was. We know the model number, so that indicates to me that it was not completely destroyed. I would hope that by now there was some indication, because there could be a variety of faults. It could be within the fridge-freezer, it could be to do with its use or the cabling or anything of that kind. If it is a fault in that model or similar models of fridge-freezer, that needs quick action in terms of product recall and product safety notices.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, but there are two others who wish to speak and I will be calling the Front-Bench speakers at half-past.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful, Mrs Main, for your very gentle chiding. I will bring my remarks to a close.

I have concentrated on the specifics, but my final point is on the generalities. The Minister said that the working party group will report in the autumn. We look forward to that, but we are already disappointed by the fact that the group's ambitions do not go far enough. There are three key issues that the organisations I have talked to are concerned about. The first is effective registration, so that when white goods are sold, we know, as far as possible, where they are. The second is recall and better attention to proper product recall when things go wrong, as in the Whirlpool case. The third, and perhaps most important in many ways, is enforcement. With the best will in the world, given the job they try to do under difficult circumstances and with limited resources, local trading standards organisations are not enforcing. I therefore wholeheartedly support the Which? campaign for a national body to deal with and oversee such matters. I await the Minister's response.

3.15 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on his passion and championing of this matter. I am the chair of the all-party group on home electrical safety and I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

This is the sixth debate we have had on this or closely related subjects since March 2015, when the then Minister, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), offered very reassuring words, particularly on counterfeit electrical goods. But those words have proved to be empty, especially when it comes to trading standards helping to prevent products from entering this country. Can they really do that when some trading standards budgets have been cut to £200,000?

We have debated Whirlpool and its tumble dryers and consumer rights, but when are we going to stop debating and start taking action? I have asked numerous questions about legislation, and on paper it appears the legislation is robust. Is it simply not being enforced? Why? Because local trading standards have been decimated by the Government's austerity policies.

Trading standards police online marketplaces such as eBay and Amazon, which fall short of complying by allowing counterfeit goods to be sold on their sites. The Minister knows that electricity is one of the biggest causes of fires in the home. Clearly, some consumers misuse products that can cause fires, but how many fires have been caused because manufacturers, such as Whirlpool, have refused to take appropriate action? How many are as a result of online sales?

What discussions has the Minister had with the Home Office about fires caused by faulty electrical goods? What is the strategy to cope with it? Where is the "fire kills" campaign? It has been very quiet recently. The Minister has been co-operative in her approach and has been willing to meet and engage on the issue, but what is the way forward now? The Lynn Faulds Wood review, which had excellent recommendations, is being ignored. We have had a working group and a recent report, but what is happening now? When will the Government stop having reviews and working groups and start taking action? How many more fires and incidents involving white goods and substandard and counterfeit products do we need to have before the Government take the right measures?

We need a public body that protects consumers, such as the Food Standards Agency. I firmly believe that such a body would not only protect consumers, but act as a central point for co-ordination.

I recently met Apple as I wanted to understand the issues with counterfeit mobile phone chargers, especially when I have seen them myself. Apple informed me that it has a particular issue with Amazon, which it alleges is selling counterfeit Apple products. I am looking forward to Electrical Safety First's report, due shortly, which will highlight how unsafe counterfeit chargers really are.

In the interests of fairness, I met Amazon yesterday, who tried to reassure me on what it is doing to prevent counterfeit electrical goods from being sold on its site. I put to it Apple's accusation that it had been directly selling on its site counterfeit Apple products: a matter, I understand, that has been the subject of a lawsuit in the United States. In the UK, consumers are confused. How do they know that an Apple product is an Apple product when they buy on these sites? It is unacceptable and the Minister needs to look at online sales urgently. Perhaps a conversation with Amazon and Apple would be beneficial.

Although I have concerns about some of Amazon's selling practices, it is not all bad; I believe that it has a good product recall strategy. It holds the appropriate

information to recall products quickly and effectively. However, I do not believe that the service extends to notifying customers who have bought counterfeit products. If global companies are engaged in disputes about whether counterfeit goods are being sold, what chance does the consumer have of identifying counterfeit products online? The potential risk to their homes and families is too important for such a speculative approach.

I reiterate my previous call for a dedicated operation to identify counterfeit and substandard goods—something similar to Operation Jasper. It is, I accept, important to tackle counterfeit handbags and clothing; but they do not kill people. Electrical goods are different, and the consequences can be devastating and tragic. Given those serious concerns, will the Minister give a cast-iron guarantee today that she will now consider a full-scale operation to tackle online sales of electrical products? I know that she will attend a meeting of the all-party group in December, but in the meantime will she meet me and a delegation of manufacturers that are victims of online electrical counterfeiting? That will enable her to understand their problems. Consumers deserve our protection, and they deserve to be safeguarded.

3.21 pm

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for obtaining this important debate. It has been good to hear from fellow members, from both sides of the House, of the APPG on fire safety rescue. The Grenfell Tower fire has brought fire safety to the top of the agenda yet again, but it has been at the top of the agenda before, and we all need to make sure that we are not here again next year or the year after, re-running the same arguments. It is time for action, and I am sure that the Minister is in listening mood.

A number of product safety issues to do with the recall and fire safety of domestic appliances led to two recent Government reviews—the Faulds Wood review, which my hon. Friend outlined earlier, and that done by the working group on product recalls and safety. Concerns have been raised in Parliament and elsewhere about the recall of Whirlpool tumble driers. Only yesterday, in an evidence session held by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, Whirlpool's communications director admitted that an estimated 1 million faulty tumble driers, which are at risk of bursting into flames, are still in people's homes. It took six months for the company to decide to change its advice to consumers, after an Indesit model caused a serious fire in Shepherd's Bush. No one was killed in that blaze, but 100 families were evacuated and 26 were accommodated in hotels owing to the extent of the damage. It is considered that had that fire happened during the night, there would have been a number of deaths.

The manufacturer is not going to act quickly to recall models. I suggest that it is time to legislate to force it to do so. The consumer protection organisation Which?, Electrical Safety First and the fire brigade all agree that an overarching product safety body is needed to help protect consumers and advise them on what to do when products are faulty and potentially dangerous. Will the Minister give us her view on that sensible suggestion?

The Select Committee also heard from Leon Livermore, chief executive of the Trading Standards Institute, who told MPs that council funding cuts had affected the

[Teresa Pearce]

work of local trading standards services, slashing the amount of market surveillance they were able to do. He said:

“The current product safety system is already under pressure and won’t survive Brexit”.

If we cannot rely solely on trading standards departments to keep people safe, we need regulation. This is not regulation for regulation’s sake; the issues are important. There were 1,873 kitchen fires caused by white goods in 2015-16, and the London fire brigade reports that in London there is a fire a day involving white goods—and there have been deaths and injuries. Even so, it seems that the Government have yet to implement any safety recommendations made by the London fire brigade following the Whirlpool fire.

On the issue of fire safety in general, Electrical Safety First was calling for stronger regulation for many years before Grenfell. It has looked into the issue and says that mandatory electrical checks for homes in tower blocks should be free. I believe that that is right. It estimates that making electrical checks of all homes in tower blocks might cost about £10 million pounds a year. That is a lot of money, but it is not really a cost—it is an investment and will save money in the long run. It will also save lives. House fires are a cost to us all.

At present, regulations specify an “expectation”, as we have heard, on social and private landlords to keep electrical installations safe. However, that language is very vague and should be clearer. The truth is that more can be done to reduce the fires caused by domestic appliances in England. As the Minister will know, the Housing and Planning Act 2016 gave the Secretary of State powers to impose proper duties on private landlords to ensure that electrical safety standards are met for the benefit of tenants across the country. Until that happens, people are safer, with greater state protection, if they live in temporary bed and breakfast or a house in multiple occupation than if they live in a privately rented home. That cannot make sense. Will the Minister let me know when the Secretary of State intends to publish and bring into force the fire safety regulations for the private rented sector? I am sure that the Minister has listened to the experts on the issue. If she has not already had a meeting with Electrical Safety First, I ask her to do so, to look at their costings and see how we can move to a system of mandatory electrical checks for homes in tower blocks.

Finally, will the Minister commit to continuing to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that this will be the last time we have to ask in the House for proper regulation on fire safety?

3.26 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am very pleased to speak in this important debate on product safety and fire risk in residential premises. I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for bringing it to the House.

There is a clearly a problem, as we have heard. Electrical faults and accidents cause three quarters of all house fires in Scotland alone, according to Electrical Safety First. In England, more than five fires a day are caused by faulty white goods. We certainly need a better recall system for faulty or potentially faulty products. Currently, it would seem that the system is not working.

The success rate for recalls is rarely more than 10% to 20%, despite the huge risks of electric shock, fire or even death that faulty electrical items can present. That suggests that thousands of dangerous items remain in unsuspecting people’s homes across the UK. The recall system across the UK must be improved. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) pointed out, the debate is about much more than one product or company; it is a much wider issue. I am sure that the Minister was listening carefully to the well-made points about cabling that were put by the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth).

From what I have heard in this debate, we can all agree that there must be a single, publicly accessible register of product recalls, which will allow consumers to be aware of products in their homes that could put them at risk. If people can find that important information all in one place—independently produced, full, clear and transparent—I am sure that it will be trusted. A one-stop shop for recalls and safety notices, where consumers can check their products, report incidents and seek advice will, over time, save lives. The UK Government launched such a one-stop shop last year, but it has been criticised as difficult to navigate, and it does not contain all product recall information in one place. I understand that there has been confusion when consumers are directed to other sites listing recalls, none of which is comprehensive. I know that the fire service has been pressing for a one-stop shop that is easy for consumers to use, clear and comprehensive.

Which? has campaigned for an end to the current fragmented system. It has called for a national body to be established, with responsibility for ensuring that manufacturers keep households safe and ensure that dangerous products are not in people’s homes, in the light of the risk that they clearly pose. That idea was mooted by Lynn Faulds Wood in 2016. She was commissioned to undertake a review of consumer product recalls, but her findings were dismissed by the UK Government on the grounds of cost. Since then, many of us have feared that the Government have failed to comprehend the scale of reform required for a reliable product safety system. I am sure that the Minister will reassure us on that.

We also need more education about the risks associated with faulty electrical items. Electrical Safety First has revealed that nearly 2 million adults have knowingly ignored a recall notice, citing reasons such as inconvenience, reluctance to manage without the product and a real underestimation of the risks associated with continuing to use it. It should be noted—I think this was mentioned earlier in the debate—that there seems to be a reluctance among some consumers to register products, as they do not wish to hand over their personal data in case those are used for marketing purposes. Surely we can tackle that by forbidding companies from using information from product registration for marketing opportunities. That cannot be beyond the wit of this Parliament.

In addition, product recall campaigns must be more innovative and creative about how they attract the public’s attention, so that they can penetrate the public’s consciousness much more deeply. I think we can all agree that the lack of a national body with responsibility for consumer product safety means that the current system is necessarily fragmented. With Brexit on the horizon, overhauling the UK’s consumer enforcement

regime is an even greater priority. We must do that before even greater stress is loaded on to an already weak system. Brexit may be an opportune time to review the regulatory regime and address its weaknesses, and I hope the Minister can offer us reassurance on that. The challenges are real. These products are coming from a wider range of countries, with differing levels of product safety regulation and compliance checks. That makes ensuring product safety much more complex in an already weak system. Before Brexit happens, we need a new national body with responsibility for consumer safety.

The number of domestic electrical fires is increasing, sadly, and as we have heard this afternoon the most recent and tragic example of that was the Grenfell Tower fire. The review process has been ongoing for almost three years, but we still wait for substantial and meaningful change that will help protect consumers, as the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) so eloquently pointed out. As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, the working group on product recalls and safety, building on the work started by the recall review steering group, finally published its report in July this year, but its recommendations do not represent the fundamental reform needed to fix the broken system of product recall. I am persuaded that the only meaningful way forward—it is pressing as Brexit looms—is the establishment of a national body with responsibility for consumer product safety. The clamour for that cannot be disregarded any longer.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) might be interested to know that in Scotland, statutory guidance has been given under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014. It imposes a new duty on landlords to carry out electrical safety inspections of installations, fixtures and fittings. That came into force in December 2015. The Minister will want to look carefully at that, because in England there is only an expectation of safety inspections. She may wish to consider imposing a similar duty on landlords in England. That issue was of concern to the hon. Members for Southend West and for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce).

Before I conclude, I should mention the dangers of counterfeit goods, which were eloquently spelled out by the hon. Member for Swansea East. Those dangers are particularly important as Christmas approaches. Everyone loves a bargain, but counterfeit goods are now easily available across the internet, and those goods are not put through the same vigorous safety checks as legitimate items. Often they are very dangerous. Consumers often have no notion of how much danger electrical counterfeit goods pose to them and their families. We have a job of work to do in highlighting those dangers to the often unsuspecting consumer, who is simply looking for something that may seem like a bargain but which in the end could cost them more than they could possibly imagine. I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say. I am particularly keen to hear her thoughts on plans for a national body with responsibility for consumer product safety.

3.34 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate. I also commend my right hon. Friend the

Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) on highlighting the danger of electrical cables. I am sure the Minister was listening carefully to that part of the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse is a distinguished former firefighter, and I think I speak for everyone when I say we are grateful for the expertise he brings to the debate around fire safety. That expertise was reflected in his contribution today. I also thank Members for their insightful, thoughtful and often harrowing stories of constituents who have faced the consequences of a fire as a result of faulty white goods. We can all agree that it is a terrifying thought, and we all should do everything we can to stop such things happening.

It saddens me to say that residential fires caused by white goods have become all too familiar, with devastating consequences for families across the UK. In my home town of Sheffield, faulty white goods caused 103 fires in residential homes between April 2014 and March 2017 according to the South Yorkshire fire and rescue service. In London, we have seen the horrific effects of such fires. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) detailed so eloquently the Shepherd's Bush fire in 2016, which left 50 people unable to return to their homes. Subsequently, we have had the tragedy that shocked the nation—the Grenfell Tower fire. Both fires are thought to have been started because of faulty Whirlpool household appliances. We have heard today about the attitude shown by Whirlpool in dealing with this immensely serious issue. Such horrendous incidents have brought into sharp focus the fact that our product safety system is not fit for purpose, and an urgent and serious overhaul is required if consumers are to be confident once again that the products they buy are safe to use.

For most consumer products in the UK, it is the responsibility of businesses to ensure conformity with the general requirements set out in the EU's general product safety directive and implemented by the General Product Safety Regulations 2005. The power to enforce product safety law and oversee product recalls falls to local authorities' trading standards bodies. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that the deep and continued cuts to local authority budgets since 2010—according to a study commissioned by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, they have led to some local authority services being cut by 50%—have widely diminished the ability of trading standards to properly inform and enforce product safety measures.

Indeed, there is often a lack of knowledge within trading standards departments on what advice to give manufacturers and the appropriate action to take if faulty goods have been identified. That is no wonder, given the reductions of up to 56% in the staffing of trading standards bodies since 2009, according to National Audit Office figures published in 2016. Incidentally, the lack of expertise within trading standards bodies, as well as their lack of knowledge of the advice to give and action to take, has given manufacturers the flexibility to decide for themselves what action to take. That, of course, is often not in the best interests of consumers and safety.

In the case of Whirlpool, potentially dangerous advice has been issued about the safety of appliances and the circumstances in which to use them. In a Westminster Hall debate on 26 April 2017 led by my hon. Friend the

[Gill Furniss]

Member for Hammersmith, we heard about Whirlpool's total lack of responsibility and accountability. As a result of the lack of expert knowledge and enforcement, we are seeing the vast failure of the product recall system, which is simply not working.

According to Electrical Safety First, an average success rate for an electrical product recall in the UK is between 10% and 20%. That means there could be millions of recalled electrical items still being used in UK homes. There is not a single register for UK product recalls readily accessible to the public online, which makes it difficult for consumers to check whether appliances they have in their home are subject to product recall. That means not only that dangerous products may still be in people's homes but, worryingly, that those same products are sometimes being sold in second-hand shops. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be much better regulation to control the second-hand selling of any product subject to a recall notice? In the United States, is it illegal to sell something under recall, and fire investigators in London, for example, have found dangerous appliances subject to a product recall being sold in second-hand shops, which is of great concern.

The bruising evidence requires serious action. People's lives are on the line, and we ought to do everything we can to ensure that the products they buy are safe to use. There has been a series of reviews and recommendations of the current product safety regime. In March 2015, Baroness Neville-Rolfe launched an independent review into the consumer product recall system, led by the consumer champion Lynn Faulds Wood, who is widely respected in consumer protection. Her key and central recommendation was that

"an official national product safety agency...to show leadership and coordinate the system, promoting, protecting, informing and empowering business and consumers"

be created. Sadly, the Government's response was that they do not

"believe that setting up a new public body in the current financial climate would be an effective use of taxpayer's money."

Can the Minister inform us what assessment the Government made of the cost to the taxpayer of setting up such a body, what that cost was, and whether other sources of funding for the body were considered?

In 2016, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's working group on product safety was launched. When it finally published its recommendations in July 2017, shortly after the Grenfell Tower disaster, I was dismayed by its half-hearted response to what consumer groups such as Which?, Electrical Safety First and the Chartered Trading Standards Institute had been calling for. The report did not acknowledge that real change is needed in the product safety regime and did not go far enough in ensuring that consumers would have easy access to information about the products they buy or that proper enforcement mechanisms would be in place to remove faulty goods effectively from the market.

There is pretty much a consensus among consumer bodies that the product safety system is not fit for purpose, and that a centralised Government agency, as proposed by Lynn Faulds Woods in 2016, is necessary to co-ordinate and enforce product safety laws. We also saw that broad consensus displayed yesterday in the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Will the Minister explain why the Government are so intent on resisting that common-sense approach, backed by a wide variety of consumer bodies and consumer champions?

Leaving the European Union will bring about its own set of opportunities and challenges for UK consumer protection, but thus far we have heard very little about the Government's plans for consumer protection after March 2019. In a Westminster Hall debate on 10 October about the effects of the UK leaving the EU, it was clear that the Government had side-tracked consumer issues in the negotiations. As I said then, consumer protections did not feature in the Brexit White Paper, or as any of the 12 negotiating principles.

I am particularly concerned, and it has been strongly expressed to me, that the ability and robustness of the current product safety regime to withstand the pressures of the weight of the EU consumer rights laws that will be transferred into the UK is questionable. There is therefore an even more urgent need to seriously overhaul the UK's product safety regime to ensure that consumers can easily access information about product recalls in a single place, and to co-ordinate and strengthen the enforcement mechanisms available so that consumers are properly protected after Brexit and beyond.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing today's important debate. I know that he has long championed product safety, drawing on his great expertise in fire safety, and it is a matter that he and I have discussed outside debates such as this.

Every injury and fatality in the fires that have happened recently is of course an absolute tragedy for the families and friends of those affected. No one can fail to be moved by the tragic stories of those affected by the fires in Grenfell Tower and in Llanrwst, or by any of the other fires that have been mentioned today. I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) reported about the three-year inquest into the two tragic deaths at Llanrwst and the critique he made of Whirlpool's involvement in that inquest. Those are some of the reasons for my commitment to improving the system, so that we have fewer tragic cases such as those we have heard about in today's debate.

I have picked up on the sense of urgency now required of the Government and I understand the frustration that some hon. Members expressed at the pace of change. I am aware that it is more than a year since I have been the lead Minister in this area and more than a year since the fire in Hammersmith that prompted the latest wave of concern. One of my first actions as Minister was to bring together fire safety experts and stakeholders in the expert working group on product recalls and safety. I am sorry that the recommendations have disappointed the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), but virtually all the organisations—with the exception of Which?—that she said were frustrated by some of the proposals not going far enough are members of the group and have the opportunity to input into the recommendations and the follow-up. Having received

the group's report, we are now at the stage of taking the actions needed to deliver improvement. I have been asked by several hon. Members, not least the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, when we will publish our response. We will do so later this year, hopefully by the end of November or in early December.

However, we are already making improvements that have been recommended by the expert group in a number of key areas. One such improvement is the new code of practice on recalls and corrective actions being developed by the British Standards Institution. That will help manufacturers and enforcers follow best practice on recalls and make them more effective in future. The consultation on those proposals closed last week, and we expect the code to be available by the end of the year. That will provide important clarity to businesses about how we expect them to prepare to deal with incidents involving unsafe goods, and how they should work with trading standards and my Department in the event that a recall or corrective action programme is necessary.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse and many others who spoke today mentioned Lynn Faulds Wood's call for a national product safety agency. The working group has also called for more central capacity to support consumers and local trading standards agencies on product safety and recalls—something that the London fire brigade and Which? have also been seeking. We are now actively considering how that can be delivered, and we will address that particular recommendation later in the year in our response to the working group's report.

With regard to the recalls website and registration, we recognise that consumers need access to the best recalls information to keep their homes safe. We have upgraded the Government recalls website on gov.uk, as urged by hon. Members, to make it easier for consumers to check for recalls and to register their appliances. We know that more can be done, should be done and needs to be done, and we are working to deliver further improvements to the website.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned, the success rate of recalls is thought to be as low as 10% to 20%. We have heard a lot of criticism of Whirlpool's response to fires, but its success rate is now more than 50%, in terms of machines it has either modified or recalled. I responded to the question asked by the hon. Member for Hammersmith earlier this week by letter, but this morning Whirlpool let us have the most up-to-date figures for its tumble dryer modification programme. Whirlpool has provided the figure of 1.7 million machines that it has now modified or replaced. It has therefore resolved almost all the registrations that have been made, so the numbers are not likely to rise significantly until more consumers register their appliances.

One reason why recalls are not always—virtually never—as effective as they should or could be is the difficulty in contacting owners and getting them to respond. Some people respond very quickly. Some were contacted by Whirlpool up to 10 times and still failed to register their machine or take the necessary next steps.

People can protect themselves by registering their appliances with the manufacturer so that they can be contacted quickly if their products are subsequently subject to any corrective action or recall. We have made that easier by including registration links on the central recalls website. Now, if people register their email address, they can get an automatic notification of any product that has been put on recall since they registered.

Safe homes are not only delivered through effective recalls of electrical products; they are also delivered through planning and building regulations that require buildings to be of a safe design and construction. That involves meeting fire safety regulations that require houses of multiple occupation to fulfil fire safety standards, a product safety system that requires all domestic appliances to be safe when they are sold, and appropriate action to be taken when faults are found.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) made some important points about the cabling of buildings. I will follow up with colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, who have responsibility for building regulations and construction products, and make sure that either they or I write to him in response to his points.

Several hon. Members called for product safety checks in tower blocks, including the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, I asked the working group to advise me on the merits of that approach for tower blocks. The general view of the working group was that there were logistical and technical difficulties. The chair wrote to me and said that there was some interest in the approach, and he reported that a number of members of the expert group

“have been in active discussions with housing associations, community groups and fire and rescue services to consider and identify best practice”

for checks in tower blocks, but there were “logistical and technical challenges” to the approach of mandatory safety checks. He said that,

“most general safety checks of electrical goods...may not pick up a range of potential issues or problems in an appliance. It would be more effective to concentrate any outreach activity of this nature on checking appliances against recall lists, and registering appliances for any future safety alerts.”

Fire and rescue services already have good community safety programmes in place, with more than half a million home visits each year. I will explore with colleagues in the Home Office the possibility of using those visits to provide information and advice about registering appliances and checking against recall lists, as per the advice from the chair of the product safety group. We believe that is likely to be more effective in identifying any potentially unsafe goods than visual checks on them.

There has been some criticism today of standards for electrical appliances, including for fridge-freezers. It is important to remember that standards are not the law; the law requires products to be safe. The standards themselves are updated regularly to ensure that they reflect modern technologies and so that safety can be continually improved.

As hon. Members will know, my Department has been working with the London fire brigade and others, through the British Standards Institution, to improve the international and European standards for fridge-freezers. My officials recently met the Association of Manufacturers of Domestic Appliances to discuss how we can increase levels of fire resistance in those appliances, as well as the director of standards at the BSI, and Which?

The European standard is currently being reviewed and the BSI has submitted proposals for amending the standard to CENELEC, the European standards organisation that is responsible for the current standard.

[Margot James]

That will be considered at CENELEC's next meeting later this month. Officials are continuing to seek views from the Government's chief scientific adviser on revisions to and interpretation of the standard, and recently met the chair of the BSI technical panel for fridge-freezers.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister say whether, as part of that investigation, action is likely to be taken to phase out or get rid of fridge-freezers with plastic backs, which is a particular concern raised by Which? and the London fire brigade? I expect the Minister has seen the same videos as we have of the extraordinary spread of fire through plastic-backed rather than metal-backed fridge-freezers.

On fridge-freezers, would the Minister also address the Grenfell point? When does she think we will know the actual cause?

Margot James: The answer to the question on timing is that the safety inspections have been completed on the particular fridge-freezer that led to the fire. The report on that investigation will be published very shortly; I will ensure the hon. Gentleman has a copy immediately after it comes out. I am sure that the aspect of the capacitor, and the insulation in which the capacitors are often placed, will form a part of the report, as well as of the discussions that the BSI is having at European level.

The hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough talked about Brexit and asked for reassurance on our intentions. I am pleased to be able to reassure Members that our priority is to continue the UK's strong history of protecting consumers, to ensure that consumers can rely on safe products now and in the future. We will ensure that, as part of our relationship with the European Union post Brexit, we maintain close links with the existing European consumer protection bodies.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse recognised in his speech, it is important that we all play our part in keeping people safe in their homes. The Government must get the framework right and ensure that there is appropriate enforcement to support businesses in compliance. Manufacturers and retailers must comply with the law by not placing unsafe products on the market and by taking the proper action if products are found to be unsafe. Consumers also have an important

role to play in making sure their homes are safe, following safety advice and registering their domestic appliances so that they can be quickly contacted should a problem be identified.

I am mindful of the challenges presented by second-hand machines. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) also raised the issue of counterfeit electrical goods. I accept her invitation to meet manufacturers to hear about their concerns first hand.

I understand the calls to do more and to do it faster. As hon. Members will agree, it is important that the changes we make deliver protections that work, and that we address the concerns as urgently as we can, within the constraints of making sure that they are the right solutions. We know that more needs to be done. I believe the actions that we are now taking will improve safety, and I agree with hon. Members that we definitely need to do more.

3.58 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to have a few seconds to finish off the debate. The Minister knows that it has been one-way traffic pretty much all the way through, with Back Benchers who are members or officers of the all-party parliamentary group, ably led by our friend, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess); there were also members from the all-party parliamentary group on electrical safety, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). We even had an audience from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who kindly gave her time to come and support the debate, which was very welcome. We equitably shared the time—with the exception of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). That was totally understandable because he has led the campaign from the start and had a lot more to say than the rest of us. We are grateful to him.

We look forward to the Minister's conclusions being published in late November or early December. We should perhaps ask a parliamentary question to identify exactly what early December means, but that is only teasing. We hope it will be an oral statement, though there will certainly be a written statement. There will be pressure to submit an urgent question to get this on to the Floor of the House. I am grateful for all the contributions, including from the Front-Bench spokespeople.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Charing Cross Hospital

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of Charing Cross Hospital.

It is a pleasure to see you slide effortlessly into the Chair at the beginning of this debate, Mr Rosindell. I am grateful for this opportunity to raise what is perhaps the central issue for my constituents: the future of the major hospital in my constituency, although it also contains the world-class Hammersmith Hospital. This issue matters not only to me but to many people across west London, and I am very grateful that my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), and for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), are here.

Next year is the 200th anniversary of Charing Cross Hospital and the rather more recent 45th anniversary of the building on the current site, although there has been a hospital—Fulham Hospital and its predecessors—on the site since 1884. It has a long and prestigious history. It is one of London’s major teaching hospitals and is part of the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. It does not rest on its laurels, and has an unprecedented, and growing, level of demand.

I will spend just two minutes on what one might call the history, simply to set the scene. I deliberately titled this debate “the future of Charing Cross Hospital”, and I have been in contact with the Minister’s office to indicate how I would like to move forward on an issue that is a long-standing sore for the local community, if not entirely this afternoon—that might be asking slightly too much—then certainly over the next weeks and months.

This is not just about history, but about a devastating series of decisions. They are not new decisions. The first plans to downgrade the hospital substantially were made back in the 1990s. I remember being involved in campaigns led by the former Member of Parliament for Brentford and Isleworth, Ann Keen. When she later became a Health Minister, I knew that the hospital was in safe hands. I hope it will be in safe hands with this Minister.

The current events were, to begin with, a great surprise—it may surprise the Minister that I say that—because the plans for the changes at Charing Cross were made largely in secret over two years between 2010 and 2012. When they were announced in 2012, the plan was for a full-scale clearing of all Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust buildings from the site, and for a new clinic to be built on 3% of it. It was modified in 2013, partly because of the pressure and partly to give some cover to the Conservative-controlled local authority and others, so that they could get behind the changes. The new proposal was for what was described as a new hospital but is in fact—I say this advisedly—a collection of primary care and treatment services with an urgent care centre. It is going to be called a local accident and emergency unit and a local hospital, but let us not get hung up on the terminology. It is very clear what actual services will be provided on the site if the proposals go ahead. They will be on 13% of the floor area of the existing hospital. That is what has caused these problems and difficulties.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour on securing this debate, and on his leadership in the campaign on the future of Charing Cross. The great fear among my residents—particularly in the eastern half of my constituency—and among people from a far wider area is about the loss of the full-scale accident and emergency service at Charing Cross, which would potentially mean downgrading many in-patient and out-patient services linked to it.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful for the clarity that my hon. Friend brings on that point. What is proposed is the loss of all consultant-led emergency services—type 1 A&E services. The site will therefore lose blue-light ambulances, emergency surgery and emergency consultant services. That is a very substantial change to the health facilities available.

The change came under the heading, “Shaping a healthier future”, which I am afraid my constituents regarded as a rather Orwellian title. That programme has now been subsumed within the sustainability and transformation partnership proposals, which are now nationwide, but essentially the meat of the proposal has not changed over that time. I do not deny—I look for points of agreement if I can—that some of the objectives are perfectly laudable, such as specialisation and the bringing together of expertise on a particular site, as has happened with stroke services, major trauma, renal services and so on, even within the three hospitals in the Imperial trust. That is to be commended. No one objects to improvement to primary, social and community care, which may in time lead to less pressure on acute services. If the consequence is not just better health outcomes but a saving for the public finances, we do not object. The problem, and the reason why there has been a breakdown of trust, is that the changes are being advanced before we know the consequences.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the plans may be transformational, but they are certainly not sustainable, given that London is heading to a population of 10 million before long? It is projected that there will be 12,000 more people in his borough, Hammersmith and Fulham, between the last census and the next one in 2021. We were both at a meeting on Monday night, and he pointed out that the borough has a target of 20,000 new homes by 2035. Where are all those people meant to get treatment, given that we have lost A&E at Charing Cross and Hammersmith, and maternity and paediatrics at Ealing? Demographically, that is illiterate.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend puts it very forensically. The difficulty is that however much the aspiration may be to relieve acute services, most independent analysis—whether from the King’s Fund or the Mansfield review, which specifically looked at west London—shows that that is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future. The precious little additional investment in primary and social care is barely keeping up with the pressure on those services. That is where the lack of confidence comes from. However pious and laudable the aspirations, what is hoped for is simply not happening in fact.

I welcome the announcement that nothing will happen in the current sustainability and transformation partnership period, which runs to 2020. That is an admission by the

[Andy Slaughter]

Government that the pressure on services is so great that one could not possibly think about the proposed downgradings at the moment, but that is simply to put off a wrong decision. It means that nothing can happen physically to the Charing Cross site, other than maintenance, until 2021. I have been told privately that it probably means a number of years beyond that, because the eastern part of north-west London, which includes the three Imperial hospitals, has now been put in the slow lane behind what is happening in the western half, so it is unlikely that any changes will happen before 2025. That is 13 years after the first proposals were put forward; that is a very long time in politics, but it is a very long time in the NHS as well.

I am looking for something of more substance from the Government. We have had virtually nothing in writing, or in terms of consultation or engagement with the public, since those announcements back in 2013. Substantial expertise in the community has sprung up in the vacuum that has been created by the health service simply not engaging—expertise through the hospitals movement, trade unions and local people generally. An independent survey conducted by a polling organisation recently showed that 90% of people in the west London area opposed the proposals—that has been borne out in every other survey that I have seen—and 82% think that they have not been involved properly in the decisions. I urge the Minister to listen to that, to turn over a page and to engage with the community on these matters.

Going back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton, last month the four-hour waiting time target was achieved only in 70% of cases for the two hospitals in Imperial. Figures are not disaggregated, so I cannot give them exactly for Charing Cross—only for St Mary's and Charing Cross combined. That has been a regular pattern over the previous months and years, in particular since the closure of the A&E departments at the Central Middlesex and Hammersmith Hospitals.

The population is growing hugely—as are the health demands, because the area's population is not only ageing, but mobile and diverse, and those are not on the whole people who do not need acute care. For many years Charing Cross has had good practice: people who arrive at that hospital and have something that can be dealt with by a nurse, a GP or an urgent care centre—in some way other than through consultant care—are simply filtered off, because all those services are available on site. This is not a case of unsuitable use; this is a case of growing demand, and lack of resources to deal with that demand.

I will sit down in a moment, because I want to give the Minister a proper opportunity to respond. I urge him not to read out the brief again because, with respect, I have heard it a number of times over the past five years. I genuinely wish to engage in reassessing what has happened. I welcomed the debate in the other place on 18 October, which was called by my friend Lord Dubs, a Hammersmith resident. More eloquently than I could, he too led a debate specifically on Charing Cross, in which a number of peers took part. The Minister there responded:

“there will be no reduction in A&E or acute capacity at Charing Cross Hospital unless and until a reduction in acute demand can be achieved”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 18 October 2017; Vol. 785, c. 659.]

Those are very welcome words to have put on the record. I am sure that the Minister here will not resile from that today, but will there therefore be an assessment of whether the changes are likely to happen in the foreseeable future? If they are not going to happen for another four, eight or 12 years, or however long, I put it to him that the Government cannot persist in saying simply, “We will do this when the time is right.” That creates uncertainty, demoralisation among staff, and a motivation for management not to maintain or keep up services because they are in effect throwing good money into a building that they believe will not be there in the foreseeable future.

That is my first request to the Minister: that we have a proper assessment of whether those “Shaping a healthier future” proposals are still fit for purpose, as the Government believed in 2012—although I did not. My second request involves the land on the hospital site, because none of it has been designated as surplus land for redevelopment. I push the Minister to say what exactly is meant by that. In 2012 and 2013 we were told in terms that the land not used for health service purposes would be disposed of privately to subsidise the cost of building on the land that would remain within the health service. Will that not now happen, or is it simply that no formal proposals have yet been brought forward?

As I said, this has been a hospital site for well over a century, and the hospital has existed for two centuries. It would be a great pity if that were to change on my watch and the Minister's, particularly when the hospital is needed most by people in my constituency and others who have used it throughout their life and their family's lives.

4.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to have been left sufficient time to address, I hope, some of the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I am grateful to him for engaging with my office in advance to indicate his line of questioning. He has made his points with characteristic skill and calm composure, which is much appreciated.

I will set the issue of Charing Cross within the context of the wider north-west London sustainability and transformation partnership to which he referred briefly. That is how the NHS is looking at the future of healthcare provision for populations throughout the country. Charing Cross, within the Imperial trust, sits firmly in the north-west London STP, the footprint for which has funding of some £3.7 billion. Between 2015-16 and 2020-21, that funding is expected to rise by more than £600 million—an increase of some 17%.

The Government's position, as the hon. Gentleman is aware, is that any potential service change affecting Charing Cross is a matter for the local NHS. It will be determined primarily through the prism of the STP and the leadership of that wider NHS group. In our view it is right that decisions on service configuration are led by local clinicians, who understand better than the national NHS the healthcare needs of their local population, and that those decisions are made in consultation with local people, which was one of his challenges to the process. All proposed service changes will be based on clear evidence that they will deliver better outcomes for patients.

Dr Huq: Is the Minister familiar with the King's Fund analysis of the STP plans from February this year, which concluded that, despite all the warm words about the new models of care, they are driven more by financial imperatives than by clinicians?

Mr Dunne: I do not agree with that. The analysis at the time was of course of the preliminary drafts of the STP plans, before any assessment by NHS England or the Department of Health. The plans are evolving and becoming partnerships, and they will move at differing speeds in different parts of the country, depending on the quality of the work and the extent to which they meet the four tests for service change, namely that they should have support from GP commissioners; be based on clinical evidence; demonstrate public and patient engagement; and consider patient choice.

In addition, NHS England introduced a new test from 1 April this year on the future use of beds, which is pertinent to the Charing Cross case. It requires commissioners to assure NHS England that any proposed reduction in the number of acute hospital beds is sustainable over the longer term and that key risks, such as staff levels, have been addressed.

The north-west London STP plan was published in November 2016. It confirmed that the "Shaping a healthier future" programme, to which the hon. Member for Hammersmith rightly referred and which was published in 2012, had set out the right plans to reshape health services across north-west London to respond to rapidly changing health and care needs. "Shaping a healthier future" forms a core part of the STP plan and I understand that the STP leadership intends to take that forward. There was a full public consultation in 2012 on the plans for a more integrated approach to care, whereby specialist services would be consolidated on fewer sites across north-west London to improve quality and efficiency, and routine and chronic care would be expanded to improve access, particularly in the community. It was proposed that Charing Cross would become a growing hub for integrated care in that services network. Following feedback from the public consultation, the proposals were refined to retain a wider range of services than was initially proposed on the Charing Cross site.

In October 2013, the Secretary of State for Health clearly set out, following the full public consultation, that both Charing Cross and Ealing Hospitals would retain A&E services, even if in a "different shape or size" from current arrangements, and that proposal remains. No final decisions have been made about the exact nature of services that are planned to continue at Charing Cross Hospital. It is certain that, even if changes are made, there will still be a thriving Charing Cross Hospital. There will be engagement with the public in due course on the detailed design and implementation of services on the site, which will include cancer, outpatients, diagnostics and 24/7 local A&E services.

As the hon. Member for Hammersmith quite rightly said, the STP is initially focusing on developing new models of care to reduce demand on acute services. I am grateful to him for welcoming the improvement of services in the community, so that it can be established that those services work before acute reconfiguration takes place through the proposal.

Dr Huq: The Minister is being generous in giving way. He pointed out that no final decisions have been taken, but can he not appreciate that that uncertainty creates a

lack of morale among the staff? I had to visit Charing Cross very regularly for my late mother, who we lost during the election campaign, as her specialist Dr Perry was there. Staff morale is sapped: they are demoralised because they do not know what is going on.

Mr Dunne: I am very sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's mother; she has my considerable sympathy and condolences. I will come to the issue of staff morale, which she is right to raise.

It is important that, whichever side we are on in this debate, we do what we can to ensure that the staff of all our NHS facilities—in this case Charing Cross Hospital—have confidence and clarity that they have good career prospects at that hospital. However we describe the challenges in our local NHS, we should not try to undermine the importance of those facilities to our local residents and, therefore, the importance of encouraging staff to continue to work there.

Andy Slaughter: The Minister is being generous in giving way. What I said was that I applaud the aims of improving community services. My CCG faces having to make £17 million of further savings—that creates great difficulty for maintaining services, let alone improving them. The Imperial trust has huge deficits and, as far as I can see, most of the sustainability transformation funds for last year have gone to addressing those deficits. That is the difficulty, which is why I asked for a review of where we are going—because hopes are not being fulfilled.

Mr Dunne: It is fair to say that part of the STP's objective is to help the NHS in a particular area to work more co-operatively, to encourage better public health for the population as a whole, and thereby work within the available budgets that have been allocated by NHS England. We think that creating a coherent plan for the entire area is the most logical way to try to ensure that that happens.

As I have said, the service change is a matter for the local NHS, which has been clear that there will be no changes at Charing Cross before 2021, as the hon. Gentleman has acknowledged. He did not mention that, in the meantime, NHS England has confirmed its commitment to Charing Cross Hospital and invested £8 million in the hospital in the last year alone. That funding enabled refurbishment of urgent and emergency care wards, theatres, out-patient clinics and lifts, as well as the creation of a patient service centre and the main new facility for north-west London pathology. Further significant investments are also planned, notwithstanding what the hon. Gentleman says about the current financial situation of the Imperial trust.

It remains the case that the STP is planning, in due course, a phased new build across north-west London rather than refurbishing existing buildings, including on the Charing Cross site, but it is not yet at the point of finalising that plan. I can confirm, as the hon. Gentleman asked me, that no hospital run by Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, including Charing Cross, has declared any site surplus land. He asked what commitment that means for the future; clearly, until the plans are completely finalised it would be wrong of me to give any further indication of what that might mean in relation to land, because that will depend on the configuration of the buildings, which have yet to be designed. It would be an unrealistic expectation to be definitive about that today.

[Mr Dunne]

I am glad that the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) raised the point about the workforce. It is unsurprising that discussions about proposed service change have created some uncertainty for staff, patients and other stakeholders, including local residents. However, there has been a very clear position on the future development of Charing Cross since the STP plan for north-west London was published a year ago. This position has been shared widely with staff and all stakeholders. As I said earlier, I sincerely hope that my remarks can help to reassure staff working at the hospital that there will be no changes to service levels until 2021 at the very earliest, and that the local NHS commitment to Charing Cross Hospital has been reaffirmed.

In August, the trust leadership undertook a review to more fully understand staff morale at Charing Cross and to develop actions in response. The conclusion was that site-level data do not indicate that Charing Cross is affected by poor morale or that it has more difficulty than other sites in the trust in recruiting and retaining staff. However, there are higher vacancy levels in a few specific staff groups in certain areas, such as elderly care. In response to that review, the trust leadership team has established an action plan, including organising a succession of staff briefings. This week, the trust announced a public meeting for local residents on 27 November to ensure clarity on the future position of Charing Cross and to share information about recent and planned investments on the site. I strongly encourage the hon. Member for Hammersmith to attend that meeting, if he is able to do so, to understand what the trust is saying and to provide reassurance to local residents on the state of the hospital.

The trust has been in correspondence with the leader of Hammersmith and Fulham Council regarding mailings that the council has sent to residents that do not reflect the evolving position at Charing Cross. As well as raising constituents' concerns, we have a responsibility to allay fears when discussing this subject. We can best do that by being clear about what is and is not in prospect, and by encouraging constituents to take up the offers of engagement made by local decision makers. I understand that the council has expressed some concern about doing that.

The Government remain committed to supporting the local NHS in engaging well with its local population and local clinicians, to ensure that decisions about services in north-west London are made in the best interests of patients, now and in the future. I hope that the hon. Gentleman's constituents, who are paying attention to this debate, will make the most of the opportunities to participate in future public engagement on the design of services in their area, and that as many as possible will attend the meeting at the hospital on 27 November.

Question put and agreed to.

Puppy Smuggling

4.30 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of puppy smuggling.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce this debate. I know that many Members, as well as my constituents, have deep concerns about this important issue. I thank all the individuals and bodies that sent me information relating to the debate, especially Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club, Battersea dogs home, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the British Veterinary Association and the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

It is difficult to get an accurate picture of the scale of the problem, but Dogs Trust research suggests that the illegal import and sale of puppies is an underground issue worth tens of millions of pounds—perhaps up to £100 million—per year. Hundreds of puppies are intercepted at our ports each year, and that is just the tip of the iceberg; thousands more must slip through the net. Britain is a particularly attractive target for puppy smugglers because of the relatively high prices that many breeds command; breeds such as pugs, dachshunds and bulldogs fetch up to £1,500 each in the UK. Puppy smuggling gangs can make up to £35,000 a week from the trade. This industry is supported by people motivated entirely by money with a callous indifference to animal welfare.

Puppies as young as four weeks old are taken from their mothers in Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and elsewhere, and transported hundreds of miles in terrible conditions to British ports, often with little food and water. They are often transported using false pet passports, and they are frequently too young to have had the proper vaccinations. At ports, their false documents all too often are believed, and not enough border officials are trained to be able accurately to assess the age of a young puppy—if they are visually checked at all. Those young puppies are then sold on to often well-meaning but unsuspecting families, who of course fall in love with them the first time they set eyes on them. Only later, when the puppies succumb to the stress of their arduous journeys or are taken to a vet who ascertains their true age, do those families realise the problem. The puppies are sent on to quarantine, where they receive appropriate medical attention. That can cost families hundreds if not thousands of pounds before they can finally take the puppies home.

Rather than being sent back or put to sleep, as happened in the recent past, many puppies that are intercepted by officials at the border are taken under the wing of the Dogs Trust puppy pilot scheme, where they are quarantined and provided with appropriate medical treatment, paid for by Dogs Trust. We all appreciate that. Many of those puppies then find homes with families via the Dogs Trust network of rehoming and rescue centres, including a large one in my constituency. Despite the hundreds of interceptions, there are just a handful of prosecutions each year for puppy smuggling, which illustrates the challenges with bringing cases to court and the need for alternative deterrents, such as on-the-spot fines, which I shall come on to.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): My hon. Friend raises prosecutions. A £500 fine was recently handed out in my constituency, yet huge amounts of money are made out of this industry. Under Operation Delphin, which has been operating at the port of Cairnryan in my constituency, more than 500 puppies have been seized and returned to puppy farms in southern Ireland in the past year. Does he welcome that huge success, and the fact that that operation has been extended for another year? He commended a long list of people—Dogs Trust and others—but we should also commend the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which has led that enormously successful operation.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend raises very important points. Everyone acting on puppy welfare deserves a great deal of credit. He gave some fantastic examples, which we can learn from and should expand. He also mentioned Ireland, which is a particular problem. I have been contacted in the past week by many people who have highlighted border control between Ireland and Northern Ireland as an acute problem.

Clearly, no one wanted this situation to arise; it came about as an unintended consequence of the relaxation of the pet travel scheme in 2012, when changes were introduced to try to harmonise pet travel across Europe. Those included reducing the minimum age of entry from 10 months to just 15 weeks, which produced challenges, because it is difficult for anyone other than a trained vet accurately to ascertain the age of a very young puppy. The pet travel scheme was further amended in 2014, but the number of dogs entering the UK trebled between 2011 and 2016.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I share the hon. Gentleman's support for the work that Dogs Trust has done, especially with the puppy pilot scheme, but does he share my view that if it is easier for people to move puppies, we need stronger penalties to ensure that there is a genuine deterrent to them doing so?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. Indeed, we should focus on on-the-spot fines and penalties. This trade is perpetrated for the purpose of making money, and we need to hit perpetrators in their wallets. I agree completely.

Since 2014, Dogs Trust has investigated the extent to which puppy dealers use the pet travel scheme as cover to illegally import puppies into the UK for sale. In July 2017, Dogs Trust completed its third undercover investigation of the trade, which was carried out in Lithuania and revealed some sobering findings. Dogs Trust found breeders openly supplying puppies under the legal age of 15 weeks, vets willing to falsify data on pet passports or sedate puppies for their journey through the border, and transporters willing to take under-age puppies into Britain. Dogs Trust obtained alarming footage of one such journey, in a van that carried four puppies for 29 hours in pet carriers stacked among other packages, with no food or ventilation. Those puppies were given water only twice. Dogs Trust also found Lithuanian breeders advertising puppies online for sale in the UK, and one case study showed a breeder who had advertised 40 puppies for sale.

The Minister is no doubt aware of a number of policy asks by bodies such as Dogs Trust. Although he has said previously that the UK carries out more pet

checks at borders than many other EU nations, the fact remains that an increasing number of illegal puppies pass through the UK border undetected.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I would welcome my hon. Friend's thoughts about how Brexit might affect this trafficking and give us the opportunity to have greater control of our borders in this respect, too.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. Indeed, several recommendations can really be carried out only if and when—or rather when—we leave the EU, because at the moment we have to abide by certain conditions. Indeed, leaving the EU may enable us to be a little more active in this area. I will make a couple more points about that later.

If Government agencies could provide an enhanced presence at our ports, make more checks outside normal office hours and introduce mandatory visual checks at the border, we would both increase the likelihood of intercepting smuggled puppies and, I hope, disincentivise breeders from transporting puppies that are visibly under age. Visual checks are not always carried out. That was proved by Dogs Trust, which was able to smuggle a child's toy dog through the British border on not one but two occasions without anyone noticing that it was not a real dog.

Other suggested changes include introducing on-the-spot fines, as Members have mentioned, perhaps to the value of the puppies seized, which may be more than £500—it may be £1,500 or more. Big fines would better reflect the seriousness of the crime.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. I hear what he says about the various actions that can and should be taken, but does he agree that there is an onus on owners, too, to ensure that puppies come from a legitimate source?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes an important point and has stolen the end of my speech in some ways. This is the key point. One of the purposes of the debate is not only to make policy recommendations but to help educate the public, who are innocently buying puppies without full knowledge of where they came from. The onus is on them as well to take action, and I will make a couple of suggestions for changes in a moment.

As well as on-the-spot fines, other areas for changes could include such things as further co-ordination and co-operation between UK and eastern and central European law enforcement, Government agencies and Departments and of course veterinary bodies, and especially a crackdown on those vets who supply fake passports for pets. The all-party parliamentary group for animal welfare identified that puppies are at their most desirable between the ages of about two and three months, so by raising the minimum age to, say, six months, we could reduce the incentive to import young puppies. Raising that minimum age would also make it easier for border agents to assess the age of puppies more accurately.

Some wish to go further and ban the third-party sale of puppies altogether. There are some valid arguments for that. That would allow purchases to be made only through responsible breeders and official rehoming centres, effectively banning the sale of puppies through pet shops, for example. The Government have already

[Nigel Huddleston]

committed to introducing new regulations for dog breeding. I hope they will consider all options—another option suggested by many is formal recognition of the Kennel Club's assured breeder scheme.

We must seek to avoid the unintended consequences that further regulation could bring, such as encouraging an underground market or increasing the burden on those who are fairly, legally and professionally breeding in the UK.

Mr Jack: Does my hon. Friend agree that while the legislation may be fit for purpose for breeding puppies, it is not for their transportation?

Nigel Huddleston: Indeed—another important point, which is often overlooked. When I ask the Minister to look at all options, that is precisely the kind of thing I hope he will consider, and I know he is considering. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), one of the key purposes of the debate is to raise the awareness of the onus that is on those considering purchasing a puppy.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that, in calling the debate, he is highlighting the explosive growth in social media platforms, which have driven demand where people are looking at dogs as fashion accessories? I hope he will touch on dealing with that as well, because that is undoubtedly driving this despicable trade.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point. There are 8.5 million dog owners in the UK today, and that number is growing. The reasons why people wish to purchase dogs, and very young puppies in particular, are many and varied. The vast majority have perfectly honourable reasons, but some people view them as fashion accessories. I think we all question that kind of motivation.

However, anyone looking to buy a puppy needs to ask certain key questions. Where did the puppy come from? Does it have a passport? Has it had appropriate vaccinations? Of course, one of the most obvious things is: can we see the puppy's parents? That immediately gives an indication as to whether the puppy was born locally. That does not mean that everyone is questionable, but it is a very strong indication.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I very much support what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but does he agree that there is also the issue of adequate resources being allocated to both the Border and Immigration Agency and local authorities to ensure that regulations are properly enforced? That is an issue that we cannot get away from.

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly fair and valid comment about prioritising resources. It is the responsibility of all of us in politics to consider that carefully every single day. We also need to recognise other bodies, including the likes of Dogs Trust, which finance some of the solutions. We should applaud that. The Government need to play a role, but so do many other bodies and groups as well as individuals.

I am aware that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) mentioned, some of the suggestions are reliant on changes in the law that we may or may not be able to make until we leave the EU. I am sure the Minister will comment on some of those later. There are some things we can do now, and there are some things that we may not be able to do for a couple of years, but I hope we can pay attention to all of them and plan for the future now, not just when it occurs.

I know the Government are aware of all the issues I and others have raised today and I appreciate, and am proud of the fact, that they have made many changes and raised issues around animal welfare recently. That is to be applauded. I respectfully request, therefore, that the Minister and his colleagues carefully consider the various suggestions and actions that will come out of the debate. I look forward to hearing his response.

4.45 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing this important debate on puppy smuggling. It is a subject close to my heart; indeed, I sponsored a debate on puppy farming in the previous parliamentary Session. I am therefore pleased in one sense that this debate is happening, but in another sense I am displeased that it has to happen. However, I congratulate him on making it happen.

Puppy smuggling is enabled—even encouraged—by third-party sellers such as pet shops and puppy dealers, which are vessels for the irresponsible, low-welfare commercial dog breeding, in the UK and abroad, commonly described as puppy farming. Endorsing any commercial puppy movement from abroad to the UK conveniently hands responsibility for any animal welfare standards designed to protect breeding dogs on puppy farms, and laws on puppy transportation, to the country of origin—well out of our control. This is clearly unacceptable, and can only encourage an even greater lack of breeder traceability, transparency and accountability than is found in legal puppy farming in the UK.

Putting an end to the legal sale of puppies through third-party agents licensed by the Government as pet shops—anyone in the business of commercially buying and selling puppies without their mums—and not just from high street premises, will go a long way towards eradicating the unacceptable activity of puppy smuggling. Little improvement can be made while this “legitimate” outlet—the market—exists.

Mrs Helen Grant: Does the hon. Lady agree that banning third-party puppy sales might help to reduce impulse purchases, especially around Christmas?

Dr Cameron: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point and pre-empted a point that I was going to mention later. I thank her for that excellent contribution.

The decision to implement a wholesale ban now rests with the Government, but despite the ongoing efforts of many wonderful parliamentarians, some on the Minister's own party's Benches, who have, for years, repeatedly raised this issue, the Government stubbornly continue to resist a ban. As recently as 17 October, the Minister told the House:

“We do not believe that a ban on third-party sellers is necessary”—*[Official Report, 17 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 820.]*

That brief dismissal is unacceptable. It shows complete disregard for the suffering of the dogs and puppies, and for the emotional—and often financial—impact that has on owners. I would like to see the Minister tell those owners whose puppies die within a few days of purchase that banning the trade is not necessary, or visiting a licenced commercial breeding establishment, here or abroad, that sells smuggled or legally puppy-farmed puppies without their mums through pet shops and dealers and then saying honestly that it is necessary for those poor dogs to lead that kind of half-life. It is not necessary.

There is no possible justification for this appalling industry that sells pups from puppy farms, whether they are transported from abroad or bred in the UK. We cannot allow that to continue to be legally acceptable, because it cannot be done without causing some degree of harm. We all know that the Government know that, too. Moments after reassuring the Commons that a ban was not necessary and that it was better to aim for more robust licensing, the Minister effectively revealed that the Government already knew that that was not enough. Furthermore, he told the House not only that a ban was not necessary, but that

“that view is shared by many stakeholders.” —[*Official Report*, 17 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 820.]

Only two—Dogs Trust and Blue Cross—have made their views known and continue to refuse to support a ban on puppies sold in pet shops. Will the Minister reveal who the “many stakeholders” are who do not believe a ban on third-party sales is necessary?

If an activity is licensed, it is supposed to be safe. The licence is supposed to reassure the public that the trader is to be trusted. To the public, it is an official legal stamp of approval. Yet the Government have no confidence that so-called robust licensing for third-party sellers will offer effective protection. By continuing to advise purchasers to buy only from reputable breeders, and to see the puppy with its mother in the place where it was born, the Government are essentially contradicting themselves and telling purchasers not to buy from those “robustly” licensed third-party sellers.

It takes an incredible amount of willpower to walk away when confronted by the reality of a puppy that seems to be in an unsatisfactory situation. The Minister said that consumer pressure would drive down the sale of puppies from third parties such as pet shops, but it is completely unrealistic to expect puppy buyers to separate the wheat from the chaff at the moment of purchase, nor should that burden rest with them. They will inevitably think of the puppy first and the consequences later. The British public should not have to try to make sense of the fact that Government guidance recommends seeing a puppy with its mother, while the Government are content to permit puppies to be sold without their mothers by third-party sellers in licensed pet shops.

The Government’s priority is to protect people by protecting puppies. Today, let us all send out a strong cross-party message that there is no justification for the existence of puppy smuggling, farming or trafficking—whatever hon. Members want to label it—and that removing their primary market is the first step toward eliminating that horrendous trade. Dogs and their people deserve better. I urge the Minister to please do the right thing. It would be a timely move, with the Christmas

rush for puppies about to rear its ugly head. I urge him to commit to banning the third-party trade in puppies and removing the legal market for smuggled pups.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): I advise Members that if everyone is to get a chance to speak, they need to restrict their speeches to three to four minutes.

4.51 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing the debate.

I will be honest: when my wife first suggested it, I was not a particular fan of having a puppy come into my family; I could think of all the problems of having a brand-new puppy around the house. But my wife is a determined woman, and six years later we are very proud to have Murphy the Dalmatian, an integral part of our family. I mention Krystle and Murphy because I wanted to get them both on to the official record of the House of Commons at some point, and today’s debate has allowed me to do that.

While many of us celebrate and enjoy having a puppy, and in later years a dog, as part of our family, unfortunately many have a very difficult experience because of the problems we have heard about today. Of those puppies intercepted by the Dogs Trust’s puppy pilot, 469 have been cared for in quarantine, and 5.2% died while in quarantine. Those statistics shed a light on the problems that hon. Members have mentioned.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire that the problem has arisen out of something that was supposed to be good. The pet travel scheme was introduced in 2012 to allow people to travel around Europe with their dogs—to take them on holiday, rather than having to worry about leaving them at home—but there have been unintended consequences. Dogs Trust is on its third report on the issue, and there are still serious problems.

There have been positive developments. I welcome the advances made in Lithuania in 2015. Now, to get a passport, any dogs must be signed off by an official state vet, but that has not solved the problem completely and there are still issues with Poland, Lithuania and others. I welcome the fact that there is some movement, but it is not enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) mentioned punishments. The latest report by Dogs Trust gives an example of a breeder in Poland with potentially 20 breeding bulldog bitches. The bitches have four puppies in their litter each year, resulting in potentially 80 puppies coming to the UK. Each pup can be sold for £1,500. The breeder’s turnover, from one puppy farm in one country, could therefore be £120,000, yet the punishment is a couple of hundred pounds. That does not send out the right message. I also welcome my hon. Friend’s point about the agencies. The Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is doing great work in Scotland, but there is a lot more we can do.

I realise that time is short. I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate, and I am interested to hear the experiences of others. Many hon. Members here, on both sides of the House, competed in the Westminster

[Douglas Ross]

dog of the year competition just last week. Unfortunately, Murphy and I could not take part because it is 584 miles from Elgin to London, and I would not put my dog through that, yet people buy farmed puppies that travel across Europe, for potentially 30 hours and over thousands of miles, followed by an onward journey in the UK. That is a message that we must get across. There is a message for Ministers, for the puppy breeders and for some of the people who buy these puppies.

4.55 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I declare an interest as the proud owner of Rocky the wonder dog, Westminster dog of the year 2017. I also put on record that, as Rocky is a handsome chocolate Labrador with a fine pedigree, we wanted a mini-me and, on a number of occasions, we introduced him to female Labradors in the hope that we could breed from him. Sadly, after four encounters with the opposite sex, we realised that he is too much of a romantic, as he just kept licking their faces, so we put that hope to one side.

More seriously, it is both shocking and disappointing that West Yorkshire is one of the worst places to be a dog. It is the worst county outside London for animal cruelty, with the second-highest number of complaints to the authorities—7,920, beaten only by London with 11,812. Puppy farming is part of that larger picture of cruelty to animals. On top of the home-grown, unlicensed UK trade, an extra 40,000 dogs per year come into the country from Ireland through Holyhead and Fishguard. Puppies from further afield in Europe, usually coming through Dover and the channel tunnel, are stored in pods until buyers are found, and then placed in fake homes to appear legitimate. Fake papers are then arranged to reassure buyers that the dog is genuine. Sadly, nearly 50% of people who bought a puppy last year did not even see it with its mother or in its breeding environment.

We know, do we not, that puppy farmers are not dog lovers? They do not care about puppies' welfare. Why should they, when profits through the unlicensed trade can exceed £2 million per year? Without proper guidelines, that can only get worse. With high profits and a low chance of being caught or prosecuted, there is an even greater incentive. The RSPCA estimates in its puppy report "Sold a pup?" that 430,000 puppies come from unlicensed UK breeders each year. The desire for designer and handbag dogs has fuelled that rise, with only 70,000 puppies—10% of those sold annually in Britain—entering the market through legitimate breeders.

The cruelty with which these poor animals are handled is truly heart-breaking: four-week-old puppies, with umbilical cords still attached, subjected to a 30-hour journey; puppies sedated to smuggle them across the border without documentation, put into baskets with cling film over the top and only a small hole to breathe through; puppies observed vomiting or eating their own faeces during a packed minibus journey from Lithuania. While I am sure that all parties welcome the recent tightening of the law on irresponsible and criminal breeders by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the number of prosecutions is far too low and the lack of visual checks at ferry ports and borders is unacceptable. We can go still further to protect these innocent animals.

Mr Jack: I draw to the hon. Lady's attention the fact that the problem is not just in Europe or Lithuania, but very much in southern Ireland. Only this summer, a father and son drowned off the coast of Galloway with a boat full of puppies, smuggling them across the Irish sea. Does she acknowledge that we must pay attention to southern Ireland and the puppy farms? Those farms operate on an agricultural basis, with bitches stored in cages and fed with automated machines, and puppies coming by boat and by car, 40 in a van. As we said earlier, 40 in a van can bring in £40,000. Yet the fine is £500.

Tracy Brabin: I could not agree more—it is despicable. They are taking that risk and are prepared to go to sea because the profits are so great. We have to stop that. We have to ensure that all puppies are microchipped. If people see anything suspicious, they must have the opportunity and the wherewithal to report it, and Dogs Trust has an excellent website where that can be done.

We need, as a Parliament, to work with our European partners, including border and veterinary authorities. We also need to think about signing the RSPCA's "puppy contract" between buyer and seller, which states that they have met or will meet their obligations to puppy welfare. As we know, Christmas is around the corner, and I urge anybody wanting a puppy to be vigilant. No one wants to bring a beautiful puppy into a family, only for that puppy to fall ill or even die because it has been bred by unscrupulous breeders who care only for profit. I encourage the Government to think again about further tightening the legislation and banning third-party puppy sales.

5 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber.

One thing we have not fully taken on board during the debate is supply and demand. We are clearly not breeding enough puppies in this country to fulfil the required demand, which is sad. I am a former member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and we held an inquiry just last year that I will come on to in a second. I was very much against puppy farming. We have just heard a very eloquent description of puppy farming and the reasons why we should be against it.

I have been a dog lover all my life, and I declare that I, too, am a dog owner. Travelling from Wales is not quite as far as from Scotland, but my wife would not let me bring it; she is the boss, as is the wife of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) in his house, I am sure. As a dog lover, I was appalled to see a puppy farm. What struck me was that the dogs could not be dogs. Living in the countryside, we have always allowed our dogs to run freely—under strict supervision—where there is no stock around. That is for another day, but it was a sad experience. I have changed. I am all for banning third-party sales. One of the biggest problems is not just puppy farming but the importing of puppies. I think we are all saddened because we realise that this is big business. It is a massive business out there, and we need to tackle it as quickly as we can.

During the previous Session, when I sat on that Committee, we published a report on animal welfare, which looked into this matter in great detail. I have a lot to say, but I will not be able to get it out in my remaining three or four minutes. However, I will just pick out a couple of the report's conclusions. They were primarily on the failures that allowed puppies entry into the UK—enforcement checks at ports and intelligence sharing between agencies. This is a massive issue, but it is easily remedied; that is the sad thing. The Government need to pay a little more attention to this matter. The pet travel scheme—PETS—has been mentioned already. Under PETS, the minimum age for entry into the UK is 15 weeks, with vaccination not before 12 weeks followed by a three-week incubation period. However, as Dogs Trust told us during that inquiry, the data on passports were being falsified to evade contravening PETS.

In a former life, before coming to this place, I spent a few years running a veterinary group. It was always distressing to see children and dog owners leaving after their dogs, including puppies, had been put down, through no fault of their own. They had paid a lot of money and taken on what was a fashionable breed and, sadly, they left the veterinary surgery without that dog, because it had died through an illness it had picked up on the way to this country. That is not acceptable. People may think they have found a very good deal or possibly a bargain for the dog of their lives, but unless the Government put the proper controls in place, we will sadly see a great disservice being done to the people of this country.

The British Veterinary Association—I declare at this point that I am an honorary associate—has scrupulous enforcement procedures here, but it was not the vets in this country that allowed those animals to come in; it was vets from outside, from southern Ireland or on the continent. I ask the Minister to look at that when he responds, not just today but in future. I understand that time is against us, so I will leave it there. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire for introducing the debate. It is really important that people in this place fully take this on board.

5.4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak on this subject. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on bringing the debate to the Chamber. I have had dogs probably all my life; from a very early age, I cannot remember not having a puppy or a dog alongside me. I use springer spaniels for hunting purposes; way back in other days, it was either collies or Jack Russell terriers. I was recently telling a friend that I remember having a Jack Russell terrier that slept at the end of the bed before I got married. When I got married, I came home and the wee dog trotted down to the bedroom, and I said, "Not tonight, mate; you're up in the kitchen. Sandra's in the bedroom now." Things change, and the wee dog had to realise that life was not the same as it used to be. Dogs were very much part of the family; that is how it was in my house.

I have been contacted by a number of constituents regarding this sensitive issue. I agree that there must be more regulation. I am glad to see the Minister in his place; I know he is a man who understands these issues. I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that we will all be heartened to hear his reply. It will hopefully mean

more legislation or looking at more regulation. I believe there needs to be regulation to protect these puppies from people who have not thought of the puppies' welfare but only of lining their pockets, as other Members have said. We have strong legislation in Northern Ireland. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs—the agricultural body in Northern Ireland—operates a statutory scheme for dog-breeding establishments and continues to work with all key stakeholders to promote safe breeding at all times.

DAERA also shares information with the environment Department in Dublin, which has responsibility for this, as well as enforcement bodies on the UK mainland. There needs to be better information sharing, especially pertaining to sales from Scotland to Northern Ireland and vice versa. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), who has just left the Chamber, referred to one case of which I am personally very aware. Dogs Trust, the RSPCA and other bodies have suggested that puppies entering the UK via puppy smuggling from abroad simply should not be sold if the legal third-party trade—without the mum and away from the location it was bred—is banned, thus simply removing the market for them. I say to the Minister, very gently and honestly, that there are methods that could be put in place very quickly. It has been suggested that there must be a dedicated campaign aimed at the public to educate them on the signs.

Rachel Maclean: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, when almost one in three people admit they are clueless about how to find a reputable breeder of puppies, it highlights the issue he has just raised?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. People see the cuddly wee dog and just want to hold it in their arms and be friends with it. It wants to be friends with them; the great thing about a dog is that it will always wag its tail and want to be friends, no matter what happens. So yes, we need to be educated on that. It has also been suggested that there must be a dedicated campaign to educate the public so that they can anonymously report to the authorities, in an attempt to cease this illegal trade. It is important that we do that as well. Only policing by consent—public scrutiny, with prospective puppy buyers visiting the breeders and insisting on seeing the pup interacting with its mum and littermates—supported by new, improved legislation can ever make the impact necessary to improve welfare standards, traceability, transparency and, importantly, accountability. We really need that in place.

There is a possibility that some underestimate the level of puppy smuggling. I agree that there are people out there who do not really understand it in its entirety, but I believe that those here in the Chamber, and to be fair, perhaps many who are not, understand it very well. I put on the record, for the purposes of *Hansard*, RSPCA figures that suggest there could be at least 700,000, and as many as 1.9 million, animals illegally sold annually. The RSPCA further highlights that poor breeding, dealing and trading practices can have a significant, long-term impact on animal welfare, not just for the young being sold but their parents, resulting in animals having chronic health and behaviour problems and dissatisfied consumers seeing their newly bought puppy suffer from illness and, in some cases, even dying soon after purchase.

[Jim Shannon]

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) referred to Labradors. As someone who has had hunting dogs all his life, and still has them, I am aware of a malady within Labradors—especially the hunting variety—called hip dysplasia. It is a hereditary thing. If somebody really knew their business, they would check for that beforehand to make sure that a Labrador was not affected. In the past three years, the British puppy market has changed, with the number of imported puppies increasing. More than 60,000 puppies a year come from places such as the Republic of Ireland, Lithuania and Hungary, leading to increased disease risks and criminal gangs earning up to £2 billion.

I received an email from a vet who expressed the opinion that implementing much stricter rules would make impulse purchasing more difficult, as people would be unable to see a cute puppy online and buy on a whim. That would be hugely beneficial. My wife Sandra has been a volunteer in the local Assisi shelter for many years—I think it is 11 years. She often tells me horror stories of young dogs that are no longer puppy-like and have lost their appeal, which is when people abandon them and hand them in. This should not be allowed to happen. That is why I, along with others, ask the Minister to implement changes soon and make a difference.

5.10 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I will keep my speech short, to allow other Members to speak. I merely want to highlight the issue of social media driving an unprecedented demand for young puppies, which are viewed by some people as accessories.

We need to get a message across to the public. I highlighted a statistic in my intervention earlier. It is also the case that one in five people spend no time at all researching the origin of the puppy they buy, having seen it on Instagram or another social media platform. Some pups are purchased in 20 minutes or less. How on earth can someone ascertain the origin of a puppy on that basis? Statistics also show that almost one in six puppies purchased in 20 minutes or less experience illness or ongoing veterinary treatment.

The level of public awareness is clearly not what it needs to be at the moment, despite the wonderful efforts of the Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club and other organisations. The Government need to act to address this issue. We can all make these points in the Chamber, but it needs to be backed up by action. Bringing in extra fines will enable us to better resource enforcement facilities, in order to protect these puppies. I very much welcome the points that have been made and hope the Government will look at strengthening the law.

I hope Members will forgive me for putting on record the name of my own wonderful rescue dog, Phoebe, who is a Jack Russell cross—I could not let this moment go by without mentioning her. She was a worthy competitor against the dog of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), although Phoebe was more interested in stealing the bacon sandwiches from the table than in competing like the hon. Lady's lovely dog. I congratulate her on her win. That competition was a great opportunity for us all to highlight this issue.

5.12 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am glad to be able to make a contribution to the debate, and I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for securing it.

The overproduction of puppies and the smuggling of them from abroad raises serious and disturbing questions. It is incumbent on all of us to give due consideration to the ethical sourcing of all pets, as was so eloquently set out by the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). Sadly, where there is demand and money to be made, there are always unscrupulous elements waiting to meet that demand, who will find ways around the law to import animals illegally from breeders in other countries. It is essential that awareness is raised of the risks involved.

As the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) pointed out, the money that can be made relative to the punishments levied demonstrates that we need greater deterrence for offenders. There is a real risk to puppies' health. How a puppy is bred and reared, especially in its early weeks, influences its health, welfare and socialisation throughout its life. That is why the standard and quality of breeding practices matter so much. As we have heard, smuggling often involves long-distance transportation at a very young age. That can give rise to severe anxiety, stress and fear, which can have a huge impact on the quality of the rest of the dog's life.

Sadly, far too many commercial breeders, back-street breeders and imported puppy sellers are driven purely by profit, and the health and welfare of the animals is not a priority. We must work towards an end to third-party dealers, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and others have said. That would help to stop unscrupulous breeders. The legislation must also be drafted properly. We heard of the damaging changes to the pet travel scheme in 2012 that resulted in an influx of puppies being illegally imported into the UK for sale from central and eastern Europe, as well as Ireland, as corrupt breeders abused the system. Such mistakes must not be inadvertently compounded; they must be comprehensively addressed.

We need new resolution and determination to end the illegal trafficking of pets—something the European Parliament called for only last year. As we have heard, that involves microchipping pets across member states of the EU, because harmonising the databases will make it much easier. We know that criminal gangs take advantage of the lack of harmonisation, so that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Disturbingly, puppies are the third most valuable illegally traded commodity in the EU after drugs and arms. That should give us pause for thought. It is increasingly important that we work with our European partners to prevent the illegal trade in puppies. It is a concern that Brexit may put a bureaucratic strain on or barriers against such co-operation. If that happens, the puppy smugglers will win. We need to strike a blow at the very heart of this cruel and vile trade. As we have heard today, the political will for that exists across the House. I urge the Minister not to delay and to work with Members across the House for a resolution.

5.15 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. This is a really important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member

for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing it. We have had important contributions from Members on both sides of the Chamber. I would like to specifically congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on Rocky winning the Westminster dog of the year show. I was there, and he was absolutely fabulous. I congratulate all Members who brought their dogs along.

It has been said that Britain has the best animal welfare in the world. The last Labour Government's Animal Welfare Act 2006 was undoubtedly a landmark piece of legislation, but if we want to maintain our position as the world leader when it comes to animal health and welfare, we need to build on the foundations laid by that Act. As any MP will tell you, animal welfare is the single biggest issue that comes into our postbags, by a long way. There is a huge public appetite for robust action to improve the lives of animals and to strengthen animal protections in our laws. We are a nation of animal lovers and we want to see the animals here well loved and living happy lives. Puppy smuggling is just one of many serious animal welfare issues we read about in our postbags, and I have received hundreds of emails about it.

It is obvious that the humane treatment of animals should be a benchmark for a civilised society, and we as parliamentarians must send out a strong message that the illegal importation of puppies is a cruel practice that must stop. The animal and plant health agency, alongside the Dogs Trust, has done a lot of crucial work to tackle the smuggling of puppies, and that is to be welcomed.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Perhaps one thing we should do as part of the efforts is to raise awareness among the public that they are able to adopt dogs from animal sanctuaries, and that abandoned and maltreated dogs can also make incredible pets.

Sue Hayman: That is an incredibly important point. One good thing about the Westminster dog of the year show was that there were dogs there for rehoming. That was very important.

It is time for the Government to act on this. We need to look at how to drive up standards for online advertising and raise awareness of rogue pet dealers among the general public. We also need to ensure we have a robust pet travel scheme in operation. I am a dog owner, and I have long believed that we must do more to block wholesale puppy imports that abuse the pet travel scheme and ensure that all puppies have legitimate documentation. One thing that came out of the Dogs Trust's work was that chips were being put in collars and then reused. We need to be very clear about the tricks being played.

Government agencies need the resources to tackle puppy smuggling by enforcing the current legislation. We need to ensure we have sufficient border guards, and there needs to be greater international co-operation between police forces, to crack down on this problem internationally. I also would like to see the Government commit to banning the third-party sale of dogs, which would help to drive down demand for smuggled puppies. Dogs should be available only from licensed, regulated breeders or approved rehoming organisations. Unfortunately, the current legislation does not protect the welfare of all dogs or the interests of all consumers, so the only solution to protect the welfare of puppies is to ban third-party sales entirely.

International studies have shown that puppies obtained from pet shops are more likely to be aggressive towards people, fearful, prone to separation anxiety and infected with parasites and pathogens to a significant level. As we know, puppies continue to be bred in large numbers in central and eastern Europe and in Ireland, sometimes in horrific conditions. Responsible breeders do not sell puppies through third parties. The third-party licensed pet shop market depends on and sustains that low-welfare breeding. As long as there is a market for cheap, intensively bred puppies, welfare problems will persist, because the incentives for non-compliance, as we have heard, far exceed the penalties. Availability may artificially inflate demand, so reducing the supply of cheap, poorly bred puppies from dealers and smugglers will promote a more responsible buying culture.

When we bought our dog, Max, another chocolate labrador, we knew how to find a responsible breeder, but not everyone does. It is critical that we protect the public from irresponsible breeders and help people to make responsible purchases, because animal welfare must come before profit. Last week, the Minister said that prospective puppy buyers should always insist on seeing the puppy interacting with its mum in the place where it was born. That advice is inconsistent with the ongoing legality of third-party sales, as it concedes that neither animals nor consumers can be protected by the regulations imposed on the industry.

I do not think it too ambitious to want to move on and to ask the Government to do more. Animal welfare must not be swept under the carpet or undercut, so I ask the Minister to commit today to continuing to show his understanding of the needs of puppies and do everything he can to stamp out this appalling trade.

5.22 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing the debate. I know, based on the number of hon. Members present, that people care deeply about this issue. Hon. Members who have attended similar debates in recent years will know that, both as a Back Bencher and as the Minister responsible for companion animals, I have championed this cause and tried to make improvements, particularly to the legislation on the breeding of puppies—an issue to which I shall return.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire pointed out, puppy smuggling is an abhorrent practice and is partly driven by demand for certain breeds in this country. We need to ensure greater public awareness of these things. If a person is told that someone wants to meet them at a motorway service station to sell them a puppy, that should set alarm bells ringing that something is not right. Everyone has a role to play in solving this problem, but in the time I have, I shall restrict my comments to what the Government are trying to do to improve things.

First, I shall explain a bit about what is required now. Under our current regulations, predominantly shaped by EU law, any dogs imported for commercial reasons—

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on the Government's brave and right decision to increase sentences for animal cruelty, which will certainly help to deal with the scourge of puppy smuggling. Secondly, may I encourage him to

[Neil O'Brien]

use the opportunities of Brexit to bring about reform of the 2012 legislation, to which he has just referred, so that we can clamp down more firmly on puppy smuggling? Thirdly, may I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and encourage the Minister to encourage other people to take on rescue dogs? I have seen in my own family how even very difficult dogs can become wonderful pets with the right family.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend and I have worked together on European issues in the past, so we come from a similar position on that. A number of hon. Members have mentioned their dogs. I had a pet dog called Mono, a particularly erratic border collie, which came from the RSPCA, and I would always recommend that as the first choice for people.

As I was saying, under the existing regulations, we have something called the Balai directive, under which all commercial dogs are supposed to come in. There has been growth in the number of dogs coming in under those commercial provisions, but also, following changes to PETS—commonly called the pet passport scheme—in 2012, we have seen significant growth in the number of dogs and puppies coming in under that pet travel scheme.

There are really three potential problems of which we need to be aware. First, are there people who are flouting the system altogether, not having any kind of passport or documentation and simply smuggling puppies in in the most literal sense? I have asked that question many times and I can give hon. Members some reassurance. Border Force obviously carries out lots of checks at the border for people who are people trafficking, for drugs, and for customs issues. Whenever they come across dogs that are hidden and do not have the documentation, they alert the local trading standards officers so that they can take action, but we do not get many of those cases. In the last 10 months, there has been one case of people coming in with no documentation at all.

The second issue is whether there are people bringing puppies into the UK on the PETS travel scheme, which is supposed to be for people's pets, with the intention of selling them commercially. That is where there is greater concern and where our efforts have been focused.

The final issue is whether the existing commercial arrangements go far enough, because the truth is that checks under the Balai directive are more thorough than under the PETS travel scheme, but the difference is not that great, and applying that may not achieve very much.

I want to let hon. Members know that we have been working with Dogs Trust and the Animal and Plant Health Agency in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Two years ago, following a similar debate to this, I asked them to get involved to toughen our approach at the border, and I can say that where we have come across examples of fraudulent vets, predominantly in east European countries, issuing fake documentation, we have taken action. For instance, the chief veterinary officer has written to authorities in Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia to highlight in particular the problem

of under-age puppies. In January 2017, the Hungarian authorities wrote to advise us that they had responded to our letter and taken action, including police investigations of the veterinary practices and transporters involved. In July 2015, the Lithuanian authorities introduced legislation meaning that passports can now be issued only by a vet from their state veterinary service. Where we have seen problems, we have acted, which has led to change in some of these countries.

As I said, we are working with Dogs Trust to carry out more physical checks at our borders and particularly at the port of Dover. I thank Dogs Trust for the work that it has done in helping us to put the puppies that are seized into quarantine and, hopefully, find homes for them. Following that work, which started in December 2015—two years ago—in response to a similar debate to this, we have seized 649 non-compliant animals. The Animal and Plant Health Agency has played a leading role in that by helping to age the puppies involved. In most cases, the people are single, one-time offenders. I have asked whether we have a small number of repeat offenders. That appears not to be the case, but we are taking action on that front.

A number of hon. Members mentioned third-party sales. When I was the Minister responsible for companion animals, we took action on that. We have completed a consultation. We are bringing forward regulations that will ensure that anyone selling pets, whether online or in a pet shop, will need a licence, and they will have to abide by a statutory animal welfare code for dogs. We have introduced in that some provision to have “earned recognition” for groups such as the Kennel Club that run their own schemes.

The changes that we have made, both to the threshold before which people need a licence to breed puppies in the first place and to put it beyond doubt that anyone selling a puppy needs a licence and must comply with the dog welfare code, will deal with this problem. We should also recognise the work done by groups such as the Pet Advertising Advisory Group, to prevent people from going on and selling if they have high-velocity sales. A lot of progress has been made there.

I want to touch on the options that we will have when we leave the European Union. There is obviously a chance to look at these things afresh. We could, for instance, review the approach that we take on commercial animals so that we tighten the restrictions for those coming in—tighten the requirements. We could introduce more checks and restrict the ability of pets to travel from other European countries. If we think that a European country has weak authorities, we could address that by putting a particular restriction on it. It will be open to us to start to consider these things once we leave the European Union, but while we are in the EU, we must focus on doing the work we are doing to tackle this problem at the border and seize these under-age puppies.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of puppy smuggling.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 1 November 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Recovery Taskforce

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): On 25 July 2017, I appointed the independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce to support and challenge the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) following the Grenfell Tower disaster.

I am grateful for the taskforce's work over the last three months, working with the council, community and partner organisations to understand progress on the recovery plan.

I received the taskforce's first report yesterday. I am considering its findings and will be discussing these with RBKC. Before recess I plan to make an oral statement to the House and will publish the report.

[HCWS213]

Tenant Fees Bill

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government want a private rented sector that provides fairness, security and stability for tenants and landlords and are keen to see all tenants receiving a good and affordable service. We recognise the valuable service that good letting agents provide to both landlords and tenants in ensuring that properties are safe, compliant and professionally managed.

We continue to promote competition as the best driver of value and service. However, the Government are prepared to act where markets are not working for all consumers, and the lettings market is a clear example of this. Tenants have little control over letting fees because the agent is appointed by the landlord and as a result those fees can run into hundreds of pounds. This is not fair.

It is not simple for tenants to understand and compare agent fees since there is significant variation in the way that agents charge for their services. Further, agents charging fees to both landlords and tenants increases the risk of unfair practices in the form of double charging.

The Government committed in their manifesto to banning unfair letting fees paid by tenants following an announcement at the 2016 autumn statement. A ban is necessary to recognise the stronger market position of landlords and to reflect that agent services are primarily provided on their behalf. Landlords will choose the agent that provides the quality of service that they are seeking at a price that they are willing to pay. Banning unfair letting fees will sharpen and increase letting agents' incentives to compete for landlords' business, resulting in a more transparent and competitive private rented market with a higher quality of service.

The ban will make renting fairer for tenants by enabling them to see what a given property will cost them at the advertised rent level without any additional hidden costs. This will facilitate movement into and within the private rented sector. Tenants will have confidence that they are only committing to a property that they know that they can afford.

The draft Bill sets out the Government's detailed approach to banning letting agent fees to tenants. The Bill will also ban landlords from charging tenants letting fees and ban agents and landlords from requiring tenants to make payments to third parties. This mitigates the risk of tenants being charged agent fees through other routes, avoids creating a situation where landlords are encouraged to self-manage their properties purely on financial grounds and avoids some tenants being charged fees while others are not.

The Bill will cap the amount of money that can be required as a deposit at the outset of a tenancy at six weeks' rents. This will improve affordability for tenants while ensuring financial security for landlords.

The Bill enables agents and landlords to charge a holding deposit to a tenant to ensure that there is a financial commitment from a tenant to a given property. It also sets out the circumstances in which agents and landlords will be required to refund the holding deposit to tenants.

The Bill requires local authorities to enforce the ban and contains a provision for tenants to recover any unlawfully charged fees. It creates a civil offence with a fine of £5,000 for an initial breach of the ban and creates a criminal offence where a person has been fined or convicted of the same offence within the last five years. Civil penalties of up to £30,000 can be issued as an alternative to prosecution.

The Bill will amend the Consumer Rights Act 2015 as it applies in relation to housing in England to clarify that the requirements on letting agents to display any letting fees, which redress scheme they are a member of, and whether they have client money protection should apply to property portals. It makes new provision regarding fines in the event of a continuing breach of these requirements in England and will also require letting agents to display the name of the client money protection scheme to which they belong (if they are required to belong to such a scheme).

Finally, the Bill will establish a lead enforcement authority to provide oversight, guidance and support with the enforcement of requirements on letting agents. This includes the ban on letting fees and related provisions, the requirement to be a member of a redress scheme under the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013, the fees transparency requirements of the Consumer Rights Act 2015 as they apply to letting agents in England, and the requirements to be a member of a client money protection scheme under the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

We very much welcome the forthcoming parliamentary scrutiny on whether the draft Bill achieves its aim of delivering a fairer, more competitive, and more affordable lettings market where tenants have greater clarity and control over what they will pay and where the landlord is the primary customer of the letting agent.

[HCWS212]

EDUCATION

Safeguarding

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): I am pleased to publish this statement about the safeguarding of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children jointly with the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis).

Today the Department for Education and the Home Office are publishing three documents relating to the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children.

The new safeguarding strategy for unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children

This new safeguarding strategy sets out the additional actions the Government will take to safeguard and promote the welfare of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children that recognise the increasing numbers and specific needs of these children in the UK.

The strategy includes commitments to:

- increase placement capacity, improve the skills and confidence of foster carers, and review funding available to local authorities;
- improve information and advice available to children and families who are reunited through the Dublin regulation;
- support professionals caring and working with these children through revised guidance, information and resources;
- improve processes for transfer of children from Europe and supporting local authorities to assess and provide support for both them and their families.

Alongside the safeguarding strategy, we are publishing two related documents: the Government's response to the consultation to revise the statutory guidance; and the updated guidance, now called: "Care of unaccompanied migrant children and child victims of modern slavery", for local authorities on the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and trafficked children—first published in 2014. This updated guidance acknowledges the safeguarding challenges that local authorities and partners continue to deal with to give these children stability. I will place a copy of these documents in the Libraries of both Houses.

Events around the recent migration crisis have meant that it was necessary to update the guidance to be of maximum use to local authorities who are caring for a bigger and more varied cohort of children. A number of respondents during the public consultation requested that there should also be further recognition of the needs and vulnerabilities specific to unaccompanied children and the measures required to keep them safe, and the guidance has been expanded accordingly. The updated statutory guidance also reflects legislative developments such as the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and policy developments such as the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the local authorities, non-governmental organisations and carers who have helped us develop the safeguarding strategy. They will play an integral part in delivering its commitments and we continue to be immensely grateful.

We would also like to express our deep thanks and gratitude to Edward Timpson for all of his work supporting vulnerable children. We are pleased that we can fulfil

the commitment to publish this strategy, set out in a joint written ministerial statement in November 2016, in our new roles as Minister of State for Children and Families and Minister of State (Immigration and International).

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-11-01/HCWS216/>.

[HCWS216]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Hillsborough: Bishop James Jones Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Following the conclusions of the fresh Hillsborough inquests, the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) commissioned the Right Rev. James Jones KBE, the former Bishop of Liverpool to produce a report on the experiences of Hillsborough families, *Official Report*, 27 April 2016, column 1436. As my right hon. Friend said at the time, we were keen to understand and learn from the families' experiences and I am grateful to Bishop James for undertaking this important piece of work.

During the course of his review Bishop James met members of the Hillsborough families and in part those discussions helped shape the terms of reference for the review which were published on 18 January 2017, *Official Report*, column 33WS. I made it clear at the time that Bishop James' report would be published once his review was complete.

Bishop James has now completed his review and I am today laying before the House and publishing his report, "The patronising disposition of unaccountable power"—A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated (HC 511). The report will also be available on gov.uk. We welcome this thoughtful and considered report which raises important points. The Government will want to study carefully the 25 points of learning and we will provide a full response in due course. The Government will ensure that they do nothing to prejudice the active Hillsborough criminal proceedings.

[HCWS215]

Violence Against Women and Girls

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have today laid before Parliament and published a report on progress toward ratification of the Council of Europe convention on combating violence against women and domestic violence (the "Istanbul convention"). The UK signed the Istanbul convention in 2012 to signal the UK's strong commitment to tackling VAWG and this Government remain fully committed to ratifying the convention.

The report sets out the steps which the Government and the devolved Administrations have taken to tackle VAWG since signing the convention, and the remaining steps required as we progress toward ratification. The report is set out in line with the Istanbul convention's key objectives and provides an overview of work being taken forward across the UK, with dedicated

funding, for example £100 million for England and Wales, to ensure victims get the right support when they need it.

As this report sets out, in most respects the UK already complies with, or goes further than the convention requires. Since signing the convention, we have continued to step up our efforts to combat VAWG. We have significantly strengthened our laws and introduced new tools to protect victims. This includes the criminalisation of forced marriage, two new stalking laws, and the national roll-out of domestic violence protection orders and the domestic violence disclosure scheme and a new offence of domestic abuse covering controlling and coercive behaviour.

We know there is more to do. That is why we are introducing a new stalking protection order to protect victims at the earliest possible stage, and a landmark Domestic Abuse Bill, to transform our approach to these crimes. The Bill will protect and support victims, recognise the life-long impact domestic abuse can have on children, make sure agencies effectively respond to domestic abuse and extend our extra-territorial jurisdiction over VAWG-related offences in England and Wales.

The publication of this report fulfils the requirement of section 2 of the Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Ratification of Convention) Act 2017. I will be updating Parliament on progress in due course.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office and it will be published on the Government's website at gov.uk.

[HCWS217]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Loan Guarantee Agreement (Egypt)

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): In November 2016 the IMF approved a three-year, \$12 billion loan to support the Egyptian Government's comprehensive economic reform plan. This also required the international community to commit support to fill the Government of Egypt's remaining financing gap, and in mid-2016 the G7 countries committed to provide \$600 million of support.

The World Bank's share of this international support package has been provided through a series of three \$1 billion development policy loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The first two loans have already been disbursed, and the third is due for disbursement in the last quarter of 2017.

In order to obtain the IMF loan, the Government of Egypt have committed to undertake the boldest economic reforms in a generation. While necessary, these reforms will be difficult for the population in the short term, with a sharp currency devaluation leading to a short term increase in inflation. If the impact on citizens is not managed, discontent among the population may increase the political risk of the reforms, which could undermine Government commitment to them.

A loan guarantee from the UK will enable the World Bank to increase the size of its upcoming development policy loan. This will support measures to protect the poor, which will mitigate the impact of the reform programme and therefore increase the likelihood that the necessary reforms will be implemented.

As a result I have today laid a departmental minute outlining details of a contingent liability estimated at \$224 million (equivalent of £169 million) which DFID proposes to undertake, in respect of the World Bank Group. This guarantee does not involve DFID providing any resources up front. Resources will only be disbursed if Egypt defaults on its loan the risk of which is low.

The IBRD's internal rules on loan exposure to any one country constrain the extent to which it can increase its lending to Egypt. This proposed UK guarantee will allow the IBRD to increase the size of its 2017 loan by \$150 million (equivalent of £113 million). DFID's contingent liability under this agreement is expected to be \$224 million (equivalent of £169 million), covering the equivalent of £113 million of loan principal, plus the equivalent of around £56 million of interest payments, assuming current exchange rates and interest rate levels. The agreement would be in place for the expected 35 year life of the IBRD loan. The guarantee will be denominated in US dollars to maximise the value of additional IBRD lending. As a result, the size of the contingent liability will vary depending on movements in the exchange rate between the US dollar and sterling. The IBRD loan will have a variable interest rate, hence the interest payment element of the liability will also vary along with movements in global interest rates.

For the guarantee to be triggered, the Government of Egypt would have to be in arrears with the IBRD for over 180 days. The risk of Egypt defaulting, and the UK guarantee being called upon, is the same as the risk of Egypt defaulting on other IBRD lending. This risk is deemed to be low. Defaults on IBRD lending are rare. There are strong incentives for Egypt to avoid a default, as this would prevent the IBRD from providing any further funding to Egypt, would halt disbursements on already agreed lending and would lead to penalty charges. In the event that the Government of Egypt does default on a loan repayment to the IBRD, and the liability is called, the UK will provide a payment to the World Bank, in proportion to the UK's guaranteed share of the overall IBRD loan. The payment will prevent the loss on the loan from impacting on the World Bank's other lending activities. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure. If the Government of Egypt subsequently provides a payment to reduce its arrears, the World Bank will transfer the right to pursue and retain recoveries to the UK Government, should it wish to do so. This will avoid undermining the Bank's preferred creditor status, which is so critical to its ability to borrow at very favourable rates from the market and pass these on to its borrowers.

[HCWS214]

Official Development Assistance

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): I am pleased to be able to update the House on the Government's significant recent achievements in modernising the global definitions of official development assistance.

No task is more urgent than ending extreme poverty. Our aid saves lives and brings hope to people who have none. It is right that that we have clear, common international rules about what counts as aid. The UK is a firm champion of the rules-based international system.

As one of the few leading countries to honour our promise to invest 0.7% of national income as aid, it is in our interests to ensure that the quality, poverty-focus and value for money of other countries' aid investments match our own high standards.

The world is changing rapidly, with extreme poverty now increasingly concentrated in fragile states, and climate change increasing the risks of natural disasters. The global rules that govern aid spending—agreed by the 30 leading donors comprising the OECD Development Assistance Committee—were first set over 40 years ago. We are determined to ensure that they remain up-to-date and effective in the face of the complex challenges of the 21st century.

As a country that plays by the rules, we take a leading role in influencing and shaping these rules. We committed in our manifesto to work with like-minded countries to change the rules so that they are updated and better reflect the breadth of our assistance around the world. At a meeting of leading donors earlier this week, the UK delivered on this commitment.

The UK has argued for flexibility in the rules for how the world responds to catastrophic humanitarian crises such as the recent hurricanes in the Caribbean, and how the rules can properly recognise the unique vulnerabilities of small island developing states. As a direct result of the UK raising this issue, the DAC has for the first time agreed on the need to create a new mechanism to re-admit countries that had graduated from ODA eligibility back to the list of ODA-eligible countries, if their GNI per capita falls low enough, for example as a result of a catastrophic natural disaster or other crisis. This addresses a long-standing gap in the rules and recognises the fact that development is not linear.

In addition, members of the DAC have agreed to establish a process which could allow previous ODA recipients to receive short-term ODA support in the event of catastrophic humanitarian crises, such as the recent hurricanes in the Caribbean, even where their gross national income per capita would normally rule them out of receiving ODA. This is a significant and welcome step, and a clear response to the UK's work on this issue.

We have also achieved changes that more than double the amount of our multilateral contribution to UN peacekeeping operations we can count as ODA, from 7% to 15%. This will help incentivise stronger international support for such missions. This is important because people cannot pull themselves out of poverty when they are surrounded by war and violence—and global stability helps prevent the chaos in which terrorists and extremists thrive.

Further, we have secured changes that recognise that 85% of the UK's contribution to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank can count as official development assistance for 2016—a critical acknowledgement of this organisation's important work to boost investment across a range of developing countries.

As a result of these changes, we have formally confirmed that over £100 million of UK Government spending will be classified as ODA this year and count towards the 0.7% target.

This set of changes builds upon an ambitious set of reforms to the ODA rules that the UK Government have already delivered in recent years. The meeting in Paris this week confirmed previous reforms that will ensure that a wider range of military activities—such as demining—can count as aid, and recognition that certain types of work to tackle violent extremism should count as aid.

Over the long term, we want to continue to build consensus for further reforms that support delivery of the sustainable development goals. We will work with the DAC to examine whether the ODA rules could do even more to better incentivise and capture the development effects of UN-mandated peacekeeping activity that creates the necessary conditions for sustainable development. The system should properly recognise the contribution of the multilateral system to poverty reduction—especially that of the Commonwealth. We would therefore support a review of both the UN and Commonwealth Secretariat's regular budgets in order to better capture their ODA-eligible activities. Further, we believe the DAC can do more to ensure that other countries' aid meets the same high standards on gender equality and transparency that the UK's aid does. We will work on these issues over the coming years.

Taken together, we believe that the new steps this week—on UN peacekeeping, support to the AIIB, assisting countries hit by disasters, and re-admitting countries which fall back into low-income status, including as a result of catastrophic crises—represent very significant achievements. Combined with the important reforms which were agreed last year, these successes demonstrate that, when we work patiently and constructively with international partners, we can drive through important changes and get these rules updated. Over the coming months and years, the UK will continue to work in a patient and constructive spirit to maximise the impact of the significant reforms which have been agreed, and to secure further progress. Our commitment to maintaining the integrity of the global rules remains strong. And our objective, throughout all our efforts, will be to deliver the best possible outcomes for the world's poorest and most vulnerable people.

[HCWS211]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 1 November 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Tower

The following is an extract from proceedings on an urgent question on Grenfell Tower on 19 October 2017.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked about financial support through financial flexibilities, but I would be grateful if he specifically confirmed, or even agreed, that what he is referring to is a loan and that financial provision needs to increase because budgets have been cut.

Charities have raised more than £24 million for the survivors of this horrific tragedy. How do they access that money, and how much of it has already been accessed?

Sajid Javid: First, on flexibilities, in some cases it may well be a loan. If a council's housing revenue account borrowing limit is increased, that will be an additional loan, but in some cases councils have approached us to ask for a one-off authority to make a transfer from their general fund reserve—in that case, it will not be a loan.

I am glad that the hon. Lady highlights the charities. Charities raised more than £20 million of funding immediately after the tragedy, and they continue to raise money. I commend their work, which will really help the victims of this tragedy. More than half the money has been distributed so far. Of course, distribution is not a Government job—it is up to the charities—but the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has tried to co-ordinate for the charities so that they can work together to ensure that they help victims in the best way.

[Official Report, 19 October 2017, Vol. 629, c. 1000.]

Letter of correction from Sajid Javid:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) in proceedings on an urgent question on Grenfell Tower.

The correct response should have been:

Sajid Javid:...I am glad that the hon. Lady highlights the charities. Charities raised more than £20 million of funding immediately after the tragedy, and they continue to raise money. I commend their work, which will really help the victims of this tragedy. More than half the money has been distributed so far. Of course, distribution is not a Government job—it is up to the charities—but the **Charity Commission** has tried to co-ordinate for the charities so that they can work together to ensure that they help victims in the best way.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 1 November 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	809	WALES—continued	
Engagements	809	Leaving the EU	807
WALES	799	Leaving the EU: Balance of Powers	808
Heathrow Expansion	802	Leaving the EU: Inward Investment	805
Infrastructure Investment	803	Swansea Main Line: Electrification	799

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 1 November 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT .	23WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	26WS
Grenfell Recovery Taskforce	23WS	Hillsborough: Bishop James Jones Review	26WS
Tenant Fees Bill	23WS	Violence Against Women and Girls	26WS
EDUCATION	25WS	INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	27WS
Safeguarding	25WS	Loan Guarantee Agreement (Egypt)	27WS
		Official Development Assistance	28WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 1 November 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>
COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT .	1MC
Grenfell Tower	1MC

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 1 November 2017

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 799] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Wales
Prime Minister

Armed Forces (Statute of Limitations) [Col. 823]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Richard Benyon)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Opposition Day [4th allotted day]

Armed Forces Pay [Col. 826]

Motion—(Nia Griffith)—agreed to

Exiting the EU: Sectoral Impact Assessments [Col. 878]

Motion—(Keir Starmer)—agreed to

St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust: Leasehold [Col. 936]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Vaping [Col. 367WH]

Olympic Sports/GCSE PE [Col. 383WH]

Residential Premises: Product Safety and Fire Risk [Col. 388WH]

Charing Cross Hospital [Col. 411WH]

Puppy Smuggling [Col. 418WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 23WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 1MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
