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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 26 February 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Domestic Violence

1. **Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to reduce the incidence of domestic violence. [903993]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Let me begin by updating the House briefly on the recent tragedy in Leicester. Five people are now confirmed to have died in an explosion last night at a shop in Hinckley road. Five others remain in hospital, one with serious injuries. I thank the fire crews who are continuing to search for survivors, and the hospital staff who are working tirelessly to save lives. I know that I speak for all of us when I say that our thoughts are with the family and friends of those who have died, as well as those who have been injured.

Domestic violence is a devastating crime that shatters the lives of victims and families. The Government have introduced a new offence of coercive and controlling behaviour, rolled out new tools to tackle domestic violence—such as protection orders—and committed £100 million to support for victims.

Jo Platt: The number of domestic violence offences in Greater Manchester rose by more than 20% last year, and the local police identified my constituency as a particular hotspot. The police, local authorities and support groups are working flat out to ensure that cases are reported, families are supported and prosecutions take place. Given the significant Government cuts in those services, what steps will the Home Secretary take to ensure that the forthcoming legislation will resource public services adequately so that they are equipped to deal with the rise in domestic violence?

Amber Rudd: I agree with the hon. Lady that tackling domestic violence and abuse is a priority. It will always be a priority for the Government, which is why we are introducing a domestic violence and abuse Bill. There will be a consultation first, and I hope that the hon. Lady will participate in it. There has been an increase in reporting, and although it seems counterintuitive, it is

right to welcome that, because it shows that the police are taking domestic violence more seriously, which is exactly what we want.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The Southern Domestic Abuse Service, which is based in Havant, does great work tackling domestic violence in southern Hampshire. Will my right hon. Friend support the local and regional charities that do such great work, and will she back the service's recent campaign to raise funds in order to build a women's refuge in southern Hampshire?

Amber Rudd: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating southern Hampshire on taking action to protect women and to raise funds for refuges. The support of local charities, councillors and local activists is often necessary to ensure that the women in their communities are kept safe.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Marianne and Tracy, two domestic violence victims in my constituency, came to see me to ask me to support their petition asking the Government to do more to tackle serial domestic abuses by, for instance, providing a publicly accessible register to help to prevent perpetrators such as George Ward, their former partner, from successfully targeting new potential victims through dating websites such as Tinder.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is right: serial domestic abusers are one of the worst elements of this whole subject. I encourage her, and her constituents, to participate in the consultation so that we can ensure that that particular trend is addressed.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's article in today's edition of *The Times*, which sets out a clear commitment to this important issue. Does the Secretary of State agree that the increased use of screens and video links so that victims of domestic violence can give evidence without having to face their attackers will not only lead to increased reporting, but give the victims a voice in court?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for referring to that article. The purpose of the announcements that I have made today is to ensure that victims are more confident about coming forward and of feeling safe, and to ensure that we can be more certain of securing the convictions that they expect and we all want.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): We on the Labour Benches also wish to thank the brave fire crews in Leicester, and our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.

It is welcome that the Home Secretary has expressed concern about domestic violence, but we know that, on average, two women a week are killed by a current or former partner. That is the end point of too much domestic violence. We also know that the number of refuge services in England has sharply reduced over the last few years. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that it fell from 294 in 2010 to 274 in 2017. It is all very well for the Home Secretary to talk about the role of charities, but what will the Government do to address the funding crisis that refuges now face?

Amber Rudd: I point out to the right hon. Lady that there are more beds available to women seeking them now than there were in 2010. This Government will always make sure there are sufficient numbers of beds for the women who need them, so that women are kept safe when they need to be. Since 2010, domestic abuse prosecutions have risen by 26% and convictions by 33%. It is good that women are able to come forward and that convictions are taking place, but terrible crime and gender-based violence against women remains, so I share the right hon. Lady's view about the need to do something. She can rest assured that this Government are taking action, and I hope she will support the Bill we will be introducing.

EU Nationals: Residence Rights

2. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What her policy is on residence rights for EU nationals after the UK leaves the EU. [903994]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): European Union citizens resident before we leave the EU are covered by the agreement we reached in December. We welcome the contribution they have made both to our economy and our societies, and they and their families can stay and carry on living their lives here.

Alan Brown: The reality is that many sectors that rely on EU nationals are struggling with recruitment, and the Government have created further uncertainty with mixed messages about the status of EU nationals who come here during any transitional period, so will the Minister provide clarity for businesses and people thinking about coming here? What will be their rights, and will they match the rights of the 3 million EU citizens already living here?

Caroline Nokes: At various points over the last six weeks I have in this House—and, indeed, in Committee—highlighted the rights that will be available to EU nationals living here. The Government have undertaken to provide regular updates, and I can assure the House that that will indeed be the case going forward.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): When might the immigration Bill actually be brought forward, and what is the reason for its lengthy delay?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Of course, that Bill was the subject of an urgent question in the House, and I made it very clear then that it will be coming forward in due course.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): While protecting the rights of EU nationals who are already here, can the Minister reassure my constituents that, whatever the other details of the final Brexit agreement, it will include the end of free movement?

Caroline Nokes: We have been very clear that, when people voted to leave the European Union back in 2016, that involved the end of free movement, so I can certainly reassure the right hon. Gentleman's constituents that that will be the case.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased that the Government are delivering on their pledge to secure the rights of EU citizens here—especially those from Taunton Deane. Will my right hon. Friend comment, however, on how straightforward applying to stay might be, and whether we might have a little more detail?

Caroline Nokes: It is very important that we make it clear that, for EU citizens already living here and who have come here before the specified date, we want as smooth and seamless a process as possible. They will be able to apply digitally online, and we want that process to open on a voluntary basis later this year.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The most recent migration statistics show immigration from outside the EU, which the Government have always been able to control, going up, while EU citizens are leaving in their largest numbers for almost a decade. The Government have again postponed their White Paper on post-Brexit immigration strategy. Rather than taking back control, are this Government in fact driven by confusion and inaction?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are working very hard to make sure we have a sustainable immigration system both now and going forward. I welcome the fact that there are so many students coming here to study—he will of course be aware that there is no limit on the number of students who can come to this country—but what I really welcome is the number of EU citizens who came to this country not just looking for a job, but with a job to go to.

Regional Organised Crime Units

3. **Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of regional organised crime units in tackling serious and organised crime. [903995]

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): Serious and organised crime does not respect force boundaries, which is why we organise our response at regional level, giving us the ability to tackle organised crime groups head-on. The Government have invested £140 million in ROCUs since 2013, and last year we announced £40 million of additional funding to enhance ROCU capabilities further in areas such as cyber-crime and undercover work.

Mrs Trevelyan: Does my right hon. Friend agree that when using informants to tackle serious and organised crime such as paedophile rings, it should be unacceptable to use paedophiles as informants in such investigations?

Mr Wallace: I understand my hon. Friend's concern, but I can assure her that the use of informants is strongly controlled by robust safeguards and independent oversight. We must not shy away from using informants, as their use in certain circumstances is vital in stopping some of the worst in society carrying out their crimes.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Minister heard, as I have, from police up and down the country about the influence of Russia in our serious

and organised crime? I hear time and again about Russian money and influence, and about Russians coming in via Malta and Cyprus.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that a number of active Russians and indeed other nationals are involved in organised crime in this country. That is why the Government are reviewing the organised crime strategy that was first published in 2013 and why we introduced the Criminal Finance Act 2017 to give us the powers to deal not only with the people inflicting these crimes but with their money, should they choose to push it through this country.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Security and Economic Crime Minister will be aware of the great number of loyalist and republican crime gangs that operate with organisations in England, Scotland and Wales, and also internationally. He knows that they are subject to the paramilitary taskforce, but will he meet me to discuss how we can ensure that that succeeds?

Mr Wallace: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that matter. We realise that the best way to tackle organised crime is similar to the way in which we have often tackled terrorism in the past—that is, alongside the criminal justice outcome, to use the broad shoulders of the whole state, local authorities, financial regulation, the police and neighbourhoods to tackle these people.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the article in *The New York Times*—because I sent it to him—about the British television series “McMafia”. Indeed, he was mentioned in that article. Does he agree, though, that while it is important to recognise that many Russians are involved in organised crime, it would be utterly wrong and simplistic to demonise a whole nation and its immigrants in the United Kingdom?

Mr Wallace: There is absolutely no intention of demonising a nation, an ethnicity or a culture. However, it is important to note that illicit money flows into the United Kingdom come predominantly from China and Russia, and that we have to tackle that. The powers in the Criminal Finance Act 2017 will allow us to go upstream and to take real action. If we take their money away, those people will know that they and their dirty money are not welcome in this country, and that they can either go to prison here or go home.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to have had the opportunity to visit the National Crime Agency this morning to see the great work that its staff are doing to tackle crime. However, there is little doubt that the tech giants could be doing a great deal more. I know that the Prime Minister has recently asked them to do so, but she was also asking them to do more in her early months as Home Secretary nearly eight years ago. When can we have more emphasis on action rather than words?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the empowerment that the internet gives to criminals, terrorists and radicalisers is extraordinary. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has helped to

lead the charge in the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, and recently visited silicon valley to ensure that companies there start to deliver. We have seen significant changes involving the taking down of radicalising material and enabling us to catch the bad people who are doing the crimes. It is, however, important to note that one of the ways in which the National Crime Agency, the police and our intelligence services get to the bottom of these crimes is through the use of the powers given to them under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, whose effectiveness some Members in this House still try to block.

Moped Crime

4. Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce moped crime. [903996]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is standing up for his constituents in Sutton by asking this question. The Government have drawn up a comprehensive action plan with the police, motorcycle and insurance industry leaders, local councils, charities and representatives of the motorcycle riding community to focus on the causes of moped-enabled crime, and on what works and what needs to be done to prevent these crimes.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does she agree that the police already have the necessary legal powers to tackle this issue, and that what is important for the Londoners across the 32 London boroughs who are increasingly becoming victims of this crime is that the Government should continue to work with the Met police and the Mayor of London to ensure that those existing powers are used more effectively to tackle this scourge?

Victoria Atkins: I agree that the police have the powers they need, but those powers need to be used in conjunction with charities, local authorities and so on to ensure that we have a thorough response to the problem. We are reviewing the law, guidance and practice around pursuits, because there are concerns about the policy and because we want to be sure that the current arrangements provide the right legal protections for officers who pursue offenders. We will publish the outcome of the review shortly.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I represent a relatively low-crime area that has seen a big increase in moped crime, so what are the Government doing to support the campaign among petrol station owners to stop serving masked riders?

Victoria Atkins: One of my first meetings shortly after my appointment was with the Petrol Retailers Association. Of course, we have to consider all sorts of measures to see what will work, which is why it is so key that our action plan involves not just law enforcement and councils, but those who ride their motorbikes quite legitimately.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): This is not just about mopeds; scrambler bikes and quad bikes are terrorising parts of my constituency. In Maesteg and Caerau,

riders on these bikes are chasing people and blocking them from gaining access to public rights of way. What more can the Minister do to try to tackle the scourge not just of mopeds, but of the other types of off-road bikes that can access footpaths and pavements?

Victoria Atkins: We are keen that police forces collaborate on crimes enabled by mopeds and other smaller vehicles. For example, the Metropolitan police is now using DNA sprays, and we have great hopes that that will help to catch offenders. Such measures should be shared around constabularies to ensure that offenders are brought to justice.

Mr Speaker: I must say that I feel considerably better informed about the moped situation now than I was five minutes ago. I hope that colleagues feel the same.

Tier 2 Visas

5. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of removing the tier 2 visa cap. [903997]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The cap on tier 2 visas was set in 2011 following advice from the Migration Advisory Committee. It enables the Government to control migration and encourages employers to look first to the domestic workforce before recruiting from overseas. The Government are clear that carefully controlled economic migration benefits the economy, but we remain committed to reducing migration and protecting the jobs of British workers. We keep all immigration routes under review to ensure that the system serves the national interest.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the Minister, but given that the cap has been reached three times in the past three months, what would she say to employers that are desperate for skilled staff, such as Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge? They find those people, but then discover that the Government say that they cannot come here. Is it really Government policy to deny the national health service the skilled people that it needs?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that no medical professionals on the shortage occupation list have been refused a visa. It is important that we keep things under review and ensure that we recruit more doctors and nurses from within the UK, and my right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary is committed to ensuring that the number of training places for both nurses and doctors increases.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the levels of staff and skills shortages in a series of economic sectors, including the NHS and social care? How does she see the impacts on these sectors if there are further restrictions on migration for such purposes?

Caroline Nokes: Nurses are on the shortage occupation list, meaning that no nurse is turned away. The important thing is that we keep the matter under review and that we understand the situation through our work with the Migration Advisory Committee, which is looking at the

pattern of EU work routes in this country, so that we come forward with an immigration policy that reflects the needs of our economy.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Has the Home Office decided whether EU citizens wanting to come to the UK to work in our NHS post Brexit will be subject to the tier 2 visa cap? If no decision has yet been taken, when do Ministers intend to end the uncertainty facing NHS employers?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He will have heard me say earlier that we will come forward with an immigration Bill in due course. He will also have heard me undertake to ensure that the House is updated on our EU exit policies in regular time, and that will of course happen.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I start by associating my party with the Home Secretary's remarks about the tragedy in Leicester. Our thoughts and prayers are very much with the families.

The Minister suggests that the tier 2 cap situation is under review. With respect, that is not good enough. Failed applicants in the past three months may have no option but to apply again in the months ahead, making it ever more competitive for tier 2 certificates of sponsorship, which will make the problem much worse. Surely, if there is some sort of review, or if we have to wait for the Migration Advisory Committee, it makes sense to lift the cap in the meantime.

Caroline Nokes: We are very clear that businesses should look first to employ people from within the UK, and we remain committed to reducing migration to sustainable levels. Interestingly, businesses have told us that our system compares well with our global competitors and that businesses like its speed and certainty.

Stuart C. McDonald: The system works well for some businesses, but not for all. Breaching the tier 2 cap essentially meant that, to qualify for a certificate of sponsorship in December 2017, a job was required to offer a salary of £55,000 or above. That might be common enough for multinational companies in London, but it is much rarer elsewhere.

Given the Government say that they want a system that works for the whole United Kingdom, will the Minister make available information on the geographic spread of jobs that qualified for certificates of sponsorship over the past three months when the cap was breached?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, of course, we keep a separate shortage occupation list for Scotland, if that is what he is referring to, but that broadly reflects the shortage occupations across the whole UK. We look carefully at this issue, as he might expect, but it is important that he reflects on the fact that we are determined to have an immigration system in the UK that works for the whole country.

Security Spending (Calais)

6. **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): How much and what proportion of the Government's actual and planned spending on security in Calais will be allocated to anti-trafficking and child protection. [903998]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Since 2014 the United Kingdom has invested approximately £200 million to fund joint co-operation on illegal migration in northern France and committed another £44.5 million at the recent UK-France summit. Funding focuses on improving port security and infrastructure; facilities for children; accommodation; tackling organised crime, including trafficking; and support with returning migrants. We have allocated £3.6 million to work with France to improve identification and transfer of asylum seekers between the UK and France, including children, under the Dublin regulation.

Stella Creasy: Border Force tells us that it is stopping around 1,000 people a week who are trying to get to the UK, a third of whom are minors, but those children are not being taken into care or asked whether they have family elsewhere—just like Mohammed Hassan, a teenager who had family in Bahrain but was stopped by our Border Force, sent back and died two days later trying again. What action are the Government taking to make sure that our Border Force people are not sending children into the hands of traffickers?

Caroline Nokes: I am sure the hon. Lady would welcome my comment about working to combat organised crime, and we should always reflect that many perilous journeys that are made are in the hands of organised criminals. Any loss of life is an absolute tragedy, but it is important we reflect that our juxtaposed controls are an important part of our border. Our Border Force staff are incredibly well trained and look for vulnerabilities wherever they might see them. She makes an important point, and we are committed to doing more to make sure we meet our allocation of Dubs children. Also, under the Dublin regulation, we continue to resettle thousands of children every year.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that our recent agreement with the French Government will not merely treat the symptoms of the problem but address the deeper-rooted problem by reducing the number of migrant journeys to northern France?

Caroline Nokes: An important component of the recent treaty looks at the whole route of migration. It is critical that we understand we cannot solve this solely by working with France. There is a real commitment with both Italy and Greece to make sure that, particularly with reference to our Dubs commitment, we resettle the children we are determined to bring to the UK.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Thousands of unaccompanied children at risk of trafficking and exploitation still sit in camps in Europe and further afield. Many of them have family members in the UK, so will the Minister amend the immigration regulations so that these desperate children can join their relatives here in the UK to be granted safety and sanctuary?

Caroline Nokes: We have a number of schemes that already allow children to come to the UK, including Dublin and the Dubs commitment that I have outlined. We are determined to make sure that we meet our international commitments and our humanitarian commitments, to make sure that, where we can help

children in desperate need across the continent and, indeed, in the wider middle east and north Africa region, we do so.

Online Radicalisation

7. **Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con):** What steps she is taking to safeguard people from online radicalisation. [903999]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have been clear that there should be no space online for terrorists and supporters to radicalise, recruit, incite or inspire. The UK has led the way in setting up the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, to ensure that the larger communications service providers and all internet providers take down that material.

Rehman Chishti: I thank the Home Secretary for that answer. From speaking to experts such as Professor Peter Neumann from King's College London, I am aware that the vast majority of Daesh supporters have moved away from using online systems such as Facebook and Twitter, and are now using private messaging systems such as Telegram. What steps has the Home Secretary taken, by working with such organisations, to help to tackle these threats?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. He is right to say that a lot of the activity by radicalised people has migrated to the smaller sites. That is partly due to the some of the success that Facebook and Twitter have had; these people are now moving to the smaller sites. We reckon that more than 450 were set up just last year. It is so important to have the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism because the larger companies have committed to working with the smaller companies to show them how to adapt their platforms to keep the terrorists offline.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): But how does it give the public confidence in the Government's anti-radicalisation and anti-terrorism strategy for the former British soldier James Matthews, who fought alongside our Kurdish allies against ISIS in Syria, to be prosecuted for terrorist offences?

Amber Rudd: There are certain elements to this and I cannot be drawn on individual ones because that particular case is sub judice. However, I understand that there are concerns about the level way in which the Government are approaching this. No individual from this country can go out and fight with another person's army or terrorist organisation in order perhaps to promote their own way of life. We have to be very clear and even-handed about this.

Prisoners: Social Media and Mobile Phones

8. **Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab):** What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on monitoring crimes committed by prisoners via social media and mobile phones. [904000]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Prisoners' illegal use of mobile phones enables their continued offending, threatens the safety and security of our prisons, and harms our communities. The Government have introduced

legislation to disconnect mobile phones in prisons remotely; they have invested £2 million in mobile phone detection equipment; and the Ministry of Justice is working closely with mobile network operators to deliver cutting-edge technology to prevent mobile phones from being smuggled into prisons and then working.

Clive Efford: I thank the Minister for her answer, but I have recently been dealing with two cases where violent partners have been running a campaign of threats and intimidation from within prison against their former partners, yet they are still up for parole. It does not seem that the police locally, who are investigating these crimes, are contacting the MOJ and the Prison Service to ensure that this is taken into account when these people are considered for parole.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will appreciate that I am not able to comment specifically on those cases, but I ask him to write to me about them so that we can see what further can be done. I want to emphasise that it is getting harder and harder for prisoners to get mobile phones into prisons and to then use them. Indeed, at least 150 phones have been disconnected since the telecommunications restriction regulations came into force.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): We know that in December some 79 illegal mobile phones were seized as a result of joint operations between police and the Prison Service at HMP Hewell. What steps are being taken by the Home Office, police and crime commissioners and the Prison Service to set up proper protocols and systems for joint working between the police and the Prison Service? Obviously, illegal activity is taking place on the outside in order to get these phones in, as well as within the prisons.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, as Chair of the Justice Committee he knows a great deal about this. More than 23,000 handsets and SIM cards were seized from prisons last year. The Government are investing £25 million to create a new security directorate in prisons and £14 million to transform our intelligence, search and disruption capabilities in prisons at the national, regional and local levels. That includes more than £3 million to establish serious organised crime units to deny offenders space to operate in prisons.

Police Efficiency

9. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** Which is the (a) most and (b) least efficient police force in the UK. [904001]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Her Majesty's inspectorate reports regularly on efficiency. In its last report, it ranked two forces as outstanding, Thames Valley and Durham, 30 forces as good, including Northamptonshire, and 10 forces as requiring improvement.

Mr Hollobone: Are the most efficient forces getting together with the least efficient forces so that the least efficient can raise their game?

Mr Hurd: That is an excellent question. One of the great challenges that faces our 43-force police system is how we encourage and support greater collaboration and the greater spreading of ideas. We have joint working groups on emergency services collaboration and it is something that we look at closely.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): For my constituents there is only one true test of police efficiency: can we sleep easily at night, free from crime, and are there police on the streets to keep us safe? On Merseyside, where the police are rated good, reported incidents of burglary are up by 22%, rape is up by 32%, robbery is up by 31% and the list goes on. The only thing that is down is the number of police: we had 4,700 police officers five years ago; today, the number is less than 3,500. What can the Minister do to reassure the people of Merseyside about this terrible situation?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady omitted one other figure that is up: the amount of cash available to Merseyside police. It is up £5.2 million next year and I hope she will welcome that number.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): In Northamptonshire, we have seen cutting-edge policing and fire service innovation, which is leading to better outcomes for local people. How can that innovation be shared with other forces? Will the Government continue to support innovation as much as possible?

Mr Hurd: I think it is fair to say that Northamptonshire is closely associated with best practice on collaboration among the emergency services and sets an example to the rest of the country. My hon. Friend will be aware that the local police and crime commissioner, Stephen Mold, has applied for joint governance of fire and police. That is in the system.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Sutton police are very efficient. Is the Minister aware of the London Mayor's plans that would see the merger of Sutton, Bromley and Croydon police? Does he share my concern that that would lead to their being less efficient and unable to focus on the needs of each borough in the way they should?

Mr Hurd: Like the right hon. Gentleman, I am a London MP, and my constituents express similar concerns about plans in north-west London. The bottom line is that these operating decisions are being driven by the police and crime commissioner team and the commissioner. They are accountable to the public for their decisions.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary identified forensics as one of the key areas impeding police efficiency. Crucial forensics tests can make the difference as to whether a person is jailed or loses their family or their job, yet shockingly the Minister told me in a recent written answer that private providers in civil cases do not need to meet any specific scientific standards. There is no regulation in this area at all. Forensics is becoming the wild west of the criminal justice system, so when will the Government stop dithering and give the regulators the powers they have been calling for?

Mr Hurd: I do not think the hon. Lady's description of a wild west does justice to the regulators' work in this space. In fact, everyone agrees that standards have increased on our watch. We have made it clear that we want to put powers on a statutory basis and are actively exploring opportunities for the parliamentary time to do just that.

Fire Services

10. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the correlation between trends in the number of firefighters and in fire service response times. [904002]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is true that fire response times have increased gradually over the past 20 years, but over the same period the number of fires, fire-related fatalities and non-fatal casualties has decreased. There is no clear link between response times and firefighter numbers. As I am sure the hon. Lady will know, a range of factors influence response times, including changing traffic levels and call-handling policy.

Liz Twist: Tyne and Wear fire and rescue service has the lowest per-incident spending power of any fire and rescue service. When do the Government intend to start to fund fire and rescue services based on risk, not just on demand?

Mr Hurd: Tyne and Wear will receive £47.7 million of core spending power in 2018-19. That is an increase of 0.8% compared with 2017-18. It also has £23 million of non-ring-fenced reserves, representing almost 50% of revenue.

Fire Services: Funding and Pay

11. **Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What assessment she has made of recent trends in funding and pay for firefighters. [904003]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is the responsibility of the National Joint Council to consider what pay award is appropriate for firefighters in England. Central Government have no role in the process.

Thelma Walker: Firefighters go into burning buildings to save lives. They are professional, compassionate heroes who put their lives at risk to save our families. Can the Minister look every one of them in the eye and tell them it is acceptable that they have received a pay cut in real terms?

Mr Hurd: What I say to the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* I do apologise—man flu. What I say to the hon. Lady is that the Government are determined to make sure that firefighters, who do difficult, dangerous work—as we have seen today in Leicester—get fair pay for their work. It is also very true, as she suggested, that over recent years they have been asked to make sacrifices as part of the contribution to getting on top of the deficit we inherited from Labour.

Active pay negotiations are going on between the employer and employees at the moment, which we are watching closely. It is for them to sort out. We believe that fire authorities have the resources to make an appropriate offer, but we are watching the situation closely and engaging with them. If we can help, we will, but we need to see a business case for that.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Last night's fire in Leicestershire, in which five people sadly lost their lives, once again highlighted the bravery of our firefighters. The number of firefighters has been cut by 11,000 since 2010, and their wages have seen a real-terms cut. The current level of un-earmarked reserves equates to just three weeks' operating costs, at the same time as deaths in fires have increased. I ask the Minister to reconsider the levels of funding and resourcing for our fire service. There has been praise today for our firefighters. When will the Government pay them a fair wage for the courageous work they undertake?

Mr Hurd: No one disputes the courageous work that firefighters do: we saw it at Grenfell and we saw it yesterday in Leicestershire. The point is that active negotiations are going on between those who are responsible—employer and employee. Central Government do not have a role in that process, unless we are called in for additional support.

The hon. Lady mentions reserves. Labour is in denial on this. The fact is that the fire system, which claims to be short of cash, has increased its reserves by £288 million since 2011. Reserves can only be increased by not using the money received, so our question to the fire service is, "Tell us what you're going to do with the public's money."

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

12. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What steps the Government are taking to support refugees and asylum seekers. [904004]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The level of support provided to refugees and asylum seekers will vary depending on their status in the UK and the route that they were granted. Last week in Lebanon, I heard first hand how important our resettlement scheme is and how it helps individuals and families fleeing danger and conflict to rebuild their lives.

David Linden: I thank the Home Secretary for that answer, but a recent report from Refugee Rights Europe showed that two thirds of asylum seekers feel unsafe or very unsafe in their accommodation. At my surgery on Friday, I met a Malawian constituent who showed me photographs of her accommodation, which is simply unacceptable. Will the Home Secretary agree to meet me to discuss not just my constituent's case, but that recent report by Refugee Rights Europe?

Amber Rudd: We are committed to ensuring that all asylum seekers are kept in safe accommodation, so I will of course meet the hon. Gentleman to look at the evidence. But I take this opportunity to thank the city of Glasgow, which does so much—way above proportionately—to look after vulnerable people and to assist with the Syrian and vulnerable people refugee scheme.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking Worcestershire County Council, which recently agreed to resettle 50 more Syrian refugees,

taking the total to 100 in the county? That is a real contribution to this country's efforts to resettle the refugees.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that up, and I join her in thanking her council for doing that. The great success of the Syrian and vulnerable people resettlement scheme was something that I was able to celebrate last week, when we passed the halfway mark—we passed 10,000, of whom half are children. It is the generosity of British people and the support of local authorities and councils that has allowed that to take place. We must all be mindful of the work that our councils and communities do.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am very pleased that one of the first families to be resettled from Syria under the community sponsorship scheme lives in my constituency. But they are trying to bring over their parents for an important family visit, and the parents are in a refugee camp in Lebanon and cannot supply the necessary evidence to complete their application. Will the Home Secretary or Immigration Minister meet me to discuss the case and the wider issue affecting refugees seeking to make visits here?

Amber Rudd: I understand the difficulty and heartbreak that there can be for the wider families when families are resettled over here. We have to allow the UNHCR to do its job and to make its selection based on who is the most vulnerable. There are some schemes, small though they are, that allow for additional family resettlement. I welcome the hon. Lady meeting one of my ministerial colleagues to discuss the matter, but I must put before the House the fact that, although we do resettle families, resettling the wider family would take up too much of the space allowed.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I recently met refugee families at an event run by the volunteers of the Milngavie refugee action group. One woman there showed me heartbreaking footage on her phone of injured children being removed from rubble. She had been sent the footage by her sister, who is stranded in Syria. Given how few Syrian refugees we have taken in to date, what hope can the Government give to refugees here who fear for the lives of their parents and siblings who are stuck in danger in Syria or in refugee camps in neighbouring countries?

Amber Rudd: We have all seen those pictures and images of children—I saw for myself just last week the children in the refugee camp in Lebanon—and the situation is heartbreaking. The UK is doing the right thing by taking up to 20,000 refugees by 2020. That is five times as many as were resettled from the region under the former Labour Government, and it is more than any other European country in terms of resettlement from the region. The UK is doing its bit, but this is a dual approach. As the hon. Lady no doubt knows, we are one of the largest bilateral donors to the area, having put in £2.4 billion since the Syrian crisis began.

Leaving the EU: Preparations

14. **Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind):** What steps her Department has taken to prepare for the UK leaving the EU; and if she will make a statement. [904006]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Department continues to make preparations for a range of possible outcomes from the UK's negotiations with the European Union, working in close co-ordination with the Department for Exiting the European Union and others. We are already recruiting additional staff in Border Force and across the wider UK Visas and Immigration department to ensure that the correct preparations for leaving the European Union are well under way.

Charlie Elphicke: Can my right hon. Friend tell the House how much has been invested in our borders since the referendum and how much is planned between now and Brexit day in March 2019? Will the Home Office be ready on day one, prepared for every single eventuality?

Caroline Nokes: As I reassured my hon. Friend, we are making preparations for every eventuality. The Home Office has already invested £60 million in 2017-18. We will continue to review the funding position as negotiations continue and details of the final agreement become clearer. As he might expect, we are in continuing discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The phase 1 agreement before Christmas rightly confirmed the Government's commitment to the avoidance of a hard border in Northern Ireland, including any physical infrastructure or related checks and controls. The Minister will know the concerns of the Police Service of Northern Ireland that any infrastructure at all could pose a security threat. So far, the Government have not set out any way in which to operate border and customs checks—if the UK is outside a customs union—without some kind of physical infrastructure such as, for example, cameras at or near the border. Will the Minister confirm that the Government's commitment to no physical infrastructure also means a commitment to no cameras at or near the border, which would also pose a security threat?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady will be aware that we have made a very firm commitment to no hard border, and that we will continue to update the House as negotiations progress.

Alcohol Abuse

15. **Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind):** What recent assessment she has made of the effect of alcohol abuse on levels of crime and costs of policing. [904008]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): As a proportion of overall violence, alcohol-related violent crime climbed steadily from 41% in 1995 to 55% in 2009-10. More recently, it has fallen back to 40% of all violent crime in 2016-17. The cost of alcohol misuse to society is estimated to be around £21 billion a year, with alcohol-related crime estimated to account for around £11 billion a year. We continue to work with the police to equip them with the right powers to take effective action.

Kelvin Hopkins: The Minister is obviously aware of the terrible damage that alcohol does, but is she aware of a recent report implicating alcohol as a major factor

in child abuse among other things? When are the Government going to take serious, comprehensive and effective action to reduce alcohol abuse, and the suffering and cost that it still inflicts across our society?

Victoria Atkins: Both the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care take this issue very seriously. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Secretary of State for Health recently announced a report on helping children of alcoholic parents. Violent crime is down and alcohol consumption overall is down, particularly among young people, but of course it is very important to look at this issue, particularly in relation to domestic abuse. We will be looking at how we can deal with it, in combination with the Department of Health, as part of our modern crime prevention strategy.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It has just been confirmed that all alcoholic drinks in Scotland must cost at least 50p per unit from May this year. Will the Minister now review our alcohol strategy to allow us to take up this evidence-based policy that will do so much to tackle the scourge of cheap, high-strength alcohol and reduce pressure on our emergency services?

Victoria Atkins: We are of course aware of the Scottish Parliament's policy on this, and we are looking at it with interest. We set out our alcohol strategy in the 2016 strategy on dealing with modern crime, but we keep the issue under review.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I was one of those who was persuaded years back that we needed to reform our late-night drinking laws. The reality is that this has been a failure. Will the Government seriously consider talking to our police forces and local authorities about how we can ensure a more rational way of dealing with late-night drinking, so that we do not see the problems that it currently causes?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. This is obviously a matter for review and for police and crime commissioners and local police forces to look at in their own local areas. We have changed the late-night levy to try to make it more flexible and targeted, so that district councils and others can use it for the areas that present the most harm in terms of the night-time economy.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): On Saturday night I was out with Inspector Simon Jenkinson and his team seeing how they police Torquay's night-time economy. Does the Minister agree that it is important that councils work with their local policing teams? Will she agree to meet to discuss how we can review some of the more outdated provisions, such as the Vagrancy Acts, which have a real impact on our night-time economy?

Victoria Atkins: Local councils and local policing teams know where the hotspots of trouble can be in their local areas. That is why it is essential that councils and police work together. Of course I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this important issue.

Topical Questions

T1. [904018] **Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I would like to update the House on the UK's recent ranking as one of the least corrupt countries in the world following our decisive action to tackle corruption both at home and abroad. Transparency International's corruption perceptions index ranks 180 countries on perceived public sector corruption. In the latest index, published only last Wednesday, the UK moved up two places from joint tenth least corrupt in the world to joint eighth. We now have the second-highest score in the G20.

Our improved position reflects the proactive approach that this Government have taken to combat corruption, but we recognise that there is still more to do. The national anti-corruption strategy published in December establishes an ambitious framework to tackle corruption to 2022 and contains over 100 commitments to guide Government efforts. I know that Ministers and the Prime Minister's anti-corruption champion, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), will support me in driving efforts across Government and around the world.

Mr Speaker: That was a most useful answer, but far too long. It is one of those answers that officials draft and to which a Minister, however busy and distinguished, needs sometimes perhaps to apply the blue pencil. But we are extremely grateful to the Home Secretary for what she has said.

Mr Sweeney: Despite overwhelming evidence from over 90 cities around the world, the Home Secretary still intransigently prevents a pilot study on unsafe drug consumption in the city of Glasgow, where drug-related deaths are at epidemic levels. Why is she being so intransigent on this issue?

Amber Rudd: I do not find the evidence as conclusive as the hon. Gentleman does. We have looked at this. It is an area that is constantly having different reviews and different champions. If he wants to come and meet the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, I am happy for him to do that, but we cannot see, at the moment, any reason to change the policy.

T2. [904019] **Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con):** What progress is being made in bringing together the work of the police service and the fire service as emergency services? Is there not a case also for looking at whether the ambulance service should come under the same jurisdiction?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. To his last point, the answer is yes, and Northamptonshire is a good example of where emergency services are working across the lights. I am delighted to say that on 1 October, Roger Hirst of Essex police became the country's first police, fire and crime commissioner. Six other police and crime commissioners have submitted proposals to take on fire, and we aim to make an announcement soon.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Ministers will be aware that I visited Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre last week, after a year of asking the Home Office to be allowed to visit. Are

Ministers aware of the long-standing concerns about the quality of medical care at Yarl's Wood—concerns that were raised with me by so many women last week? Is the Minister aware that victims of trafficking and sexual abuse are being held at Yarl's Wood, contrary to Government undertakings? Is the Minister aware that some women at Yarl's Wood are on hunger strike—a hunger strike that the Home Office flatly refuses to admit is happening? The women of Yarl's Wood are desperate, and we owe them a duty of care. Will the Minister agree to meet with me, so that I can share with her the specific concerns that so many women raised with me?

Amber Rudd: I am always delighted to meet the right hon. Lady and to listen carefully to any suggestions that she has and her experiences of visiting Yarl's Wood. We take the health of everybody at any detention centre very seriously. There are high standards there, and if there are any examples otherwise, we will always take a look at them. I was concerned by some of her suggestions afterwards when she made her speech. Immigration detention centres play an important part in enforcing our immigration rules. Some of the people there are very dangerous, and it is right that they are detained and then removed.

T3. [904020] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): As soon as the Government's best-value inspection of Northamptonshire County Council is concluded at the end of March, will the Policing and Fire Minister facilitate the transfer of the fire and rescue service to the police and crime commissioner?

Mr Hurd: As my hon. Friend knows, an application has been made with a business case that has been independently assessed. We have had to delay a decision on that because of the inspection in Northamptonshire, as we need to make sure that the financial projection assumptions made by Northamptonshire County Council are built on rock rather than sand. He appreciates that. As soon as that process is resolved, we want to move ahead with a decision as quickly as possible.

T5. [904022] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Many constituents have contacted me about the limited provisions on refugee family reunion. Will the Minister undertake to expand those provisions, in line with my constituents' concerns?

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She will be aware that we had a Westminster Hall debate on that subject last week and that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has a private Member's Bill on it, which will come forward on 16 March. This is a policy area where we enable some refugee families to be reunited here. We have a proud track record of so far resettling 10,000 of the 20,000 we are expecting under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. This is an important policy. We are determined to be as compassionate as we can within the commitments we have already made.

T4. [904021] **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Kent police, which has been rated outstanding for the third year in a row by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary?

It is the only police force to get such a rating and is doing a fantastic job in keeping the residents of Kent and Medway safe.

Mr Hurd: I can certainly do that. Kent police is regularly rated excellent for the good service it delivers. It performs well across all strands of inspection and has been rated outstanding for the legitimacy with which it keeps people safe and reduces crime. Through my hon. Friend, I would like to congratulate the commissioner, the leadership and all the frontline officers in Kent for the outstanding work they do.

T6. [904024] **Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): In Rotherham, 1,510 adult survivors of child sexual exploitation have now been identified by the National Crime Agency. Both the Minister and the Home Secretary know that unless there is a package of support around those adults, the cases will start to falter. Will the Minister support Rotherham's funding application to get a package of care around those adult survivors?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for the meeting that she asked me to attend with leaders of Rotherham Council and the police. There has been and continues to be significant Government investment in response to child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, including £5.17 million to fund transformational change there, funding for police forces to meet the costs of unexpected events and up to £2 million for children's social care in recognition of social workers' increased workload resulting from the investigation of CSE. We have previously provided approximately £5.6 million for Operation Stovewood in the last two years, and we are considering an application for funding for the costs of investigation in 2017-18.

T7. [904025] **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that although we are leaving the European Union, the Government remain committed to very close security and counter-terrorism co-operation with our European friends to keep our constituents safe?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right that successful data transfer—through existing schemes such as Schengen Information System II and the European Criminal Records Information System and, indeed, the use of Europol data—is one of the things that keeps all our citizens safe and keeps other European citizens safe too. That is why the UK has proposed a third-party treaty, so that we can engage just as successfully and just as fully with the European Union as we have done previously, keeping Londoners in Paris and Parisians in London just as safe after we leave as they were before.

T8. [904026] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I understand that the Minister met the family of Alfie Dingley this morning. Following statements in the House last week that the Minister wants to help to find a solution within the existing regulations, will he update the House on when Alfie and others in a similar position will receive the medicines they need?

Mr Hurd: I confirm to the hon. Lady that I did indeed meet the parents and grandmother of Alfie this morning to progress exactly what I said at the Dispatch Box last week about our intention to explore every option within the existing regulations to help Alfie.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But should not the provision of prescription medicines, even if derived from narcotics, be a purely clinical matter?

Mr Hurd: As I have said, I am looking at this through the lens of what we can do within the existing regulations to support Alfie, and those decisions will be clinically led.

T9. [904027] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What discussions has the Home Secretary had with Cabinet colleagues on preparing for cyber-attacks against critical national infrastructure?

Amber Rudd: This is an area that we will constantly keep under review. It is an area that is sometimes covered by the Cabinet. We have the national cyber-security strategy, backed up by the National Cyber Security Centre. It is something we are very aware of and will continue to discuss in order to make sure that this country is kept safe.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I have been contacted by a local optician in Elgin. He is a tier 2 sponsor, but because optometry is not listed as a priority profession, he has been affected by the tier 2 cap being reached in recent months. Will the Minister and colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care consider including optometrists as priority professionals for tier 2 visas?

Caroline Nokes: The tier 2 cap operates to ensure that our immigration system brings the best talent to the UK while still controlling numbers. Any profession on the shortage occupation list automatically gets priority. The shortage occupation list is determined by the independent Migration Advisory Committee. It has not yet included opticians on the list, but as my hon. Friend will know, it is currently carrying out a major labour market review.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): We know that we have a flat-cash police settlement this year and we know that local ratepayers are going to have to pay increased rates to meet the need, but do we yet know who is going to pay for the police pay rise, given the Police Federation's 3.4% request today?

Mr Hurd: As the former Policing Minister knows very well, we have to look at the police settlement in the round, balancing the cash that the taxpayer pays from the centre—the Home Office—and the cash that the local taxpayer pays through the precept. We responded to both the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council on additional precept flexibility. That allowed us to put forward a settlement that will see investment in the police increase by £450 million next year—an increase that the Labour party opposed.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Is the Home Office confident that it and its agencies can compete with the private sector, and recruit and retain people with the key digital and cyber skills that we need?

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): For security reasons, I am unable to comment on specific recruitment levels and on the geographical

distribution of police and intelligence agencies in specialist areas, but I assure my hon. Friend that we are seeing strong levels of recruitment. GCHQ and the National Crime Agency are doing great work in encouraging the next generation of cyber-sleuths through their Cyber First programme.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure the Policing Minister will be as concerned as I am about the 309 assaults on police officers in Humberside in the past year. What more will the Government do to keep our brave police officers safe on the streets?

Mr Hurd: I absolutely share the hon. Lady's concern about an increase in assaults on police, which is why we are looking very favourably at supporting the emergency workers protection Bill—the “protect the protectors” Bill—to try to have greater safeguards through the law. On engagement with police leadership, we keep under regular and constant review the application of operational tools at their disposal, such as Tasers.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): In using the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to penalise rogue landlords and breaches in planning law, local authorities can act as a deterrent and also compensate council tax payers who end up footing the bill. Given that Sussex local authorities have used only one such power, what more can my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime do to encourage them to use more of them?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right to point out his worries. We hope that the Criminal Finances Act 2017 will give a new boost to training local authority officers to deliver on it and increase the amount we take from rogue landlords and property owners.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): A number of migrant workers are starting to lose their jobs because of delays in the renewal and extension of visas. What can the Home Secretary do to speed up the process, so that they do not face that problem in the future?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will have to give me a bit more information—which sort of migrant workers and where? Of course, there has been no change to EU citizens being able to come and go, nor will there be until we have actually left the European Union. In terms of any other types of migrant workers, I ask him to write to me with more information.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service has already spoken about the benefits of collaboration between emergency services and will be aware of proposed closer working between Warwickshire and West Midlands fire services, while there is already a strategic partnership between Warwickshire and West Mercia police services. Is there any potential conflict if Warwickshire's blue-light services collaborate with bodies from different areas?

Mr Hurd: There is no conflict as far as I can see. We are keen to encourage the greatest levels of collaboration between our emergency services.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When constituents have no recourse to public funds, serious delays in processing their visas result in them being plunged into abject poverty. What is the Home Secretary doing about that?

Amber Rudd: I did not hear the start of the hon. Lady's question, but I think she was referring in particular to women who have no recourse to public funds. I am concerned about that, and it will be covered partly in our consultation. If she has other concerns about that particular cohort who are applying for refugee status, I urge her to contact my Department.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): With Suffolk police being one of the lowest-funded forces with the highest number of case loads per officer in the country, will the Policing Minister set out a timetable for reviewing the police funding formula?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is an assiduous campaigner on behalf of Suffolk police, and he knows that next year, as a result of the funding settlement, it will get an additional £3.6 million. I have made it clear that we will be looking at the fair funding formula in the context of the next comprehensive spending review, because we think that is the most appropriate framework to do so. Although we do not have an exact timetable, I expect that work to start soon.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I note the encouraging words from the Immigration Minister, as well as her excellent pronunciation. Refugees

would be greatly helped by the passing of the private Member's Bill on family reunion, which will receive its Second Reading in the House on Friday 16 March. It is supported by the British Red Cross, Amnesty International, the Refugee Council, Oxfam and United Nations agencies. Given the Minister's good, warm words, which I welcome, how much thought have the Government given to supporting that Bill to enable families to have very clear rights to be together, which of course is the best security they could have?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I am sure he will understand the trepidation with which I seek to pronounce his constituency name—that was the second time I have managed it in a week. As I have said, we will look very carefully at his Bill, which I understand he published only at the beginning of last week, and we will have a full opportunity to debate it on 16 March.

Mr Speaker: The pronunciation struck me as magnificent, and I hope it will be shared with the hon. Gentleman's constituents, preferably sooner rather than later.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are lots of people wishing to speak, but I am afraid there is no time. If there are points of order—I had an indication that there was likely to be one—they must come after the urgent question.

Syria: De-escalation Zones

3.39 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): (*Urgent Question*) To ask the Foreign Secretary what action the UK Government are taking on the conflict and humanitarian situation inside de-escalation zones in Syria following attacks on civilians in the last week.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for raising this vital issue.

In seven years of bloodshed, the war in Syria has claimed 400,000 lives and driven 11 million people from their homes, causing a humanitarian tragedy on a scale unknown anywhere else in the world. The House should never forget that the Assad regime, aided and abetted by Russia and Iran, has inflicted the overwhelming burden of that suffering. Assad's forces are now bombarding the enclave of eastern Ghouta, where 393,000 people are living under siege, enduring what has become a signature tactic of the regime, whereby civilians are starved and pounded into submission. With bitter irony, Russia and Iran declared eastern Ghouta to be a "de-escalation area" in May last year and promised to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid. But the truth is that Assad's regime has allowed only one United Nations convoy to enter eastern Ghouta so far this year and that carried supplies for only a fraction of the area's people. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in eastern Ghouta in the last week alone and the House will have noted the disturbing reports of the use of chlorine gas. I call for those reports to be fully investigated and for anyone held responsible for using chemical weapons in Syria to be held accountable.

Over the weekend I discussed the situation with my Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Sa'ad Hariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon. Earlier today, I spoke to Sigmar Gabriel, the German Foreign Minister, and I shall be speaking to other European counterparts and António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, in the next few days. Britain has joined with our allies to mobilise the Security Council to demand a ceasefire across the whole of Syria and the immediate delivery of emergency aid to all in need. Last Saturday, after days of prevarication from Russia, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2401, demanding that "all parties cease hostilities without delay" and allow the "safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid" along with "medical evacuations of the critically sick and wounded".

The main armed groups in eastern Ghouta have accepted the ceasefire, but as of today, the warplanes of the Assad regime are still reported to be striking targets in the enclave and the UN has been unable to deliver any aid. I remind the House that hundreds of thousands of civilians are going hungry in eastern Ghouta only a few miles from UN warehouses in Damascus that are laden with food. The Assad regime must allow the UN to deliver those supplies, in compliance with resolution 2401, and we look to Russia and Iran to make sure this happens, in accordance with their own promises. I have invited the Russian Ambassador to come to the Foreign Office and give an account of his country's plans to implement resolution 2401. I have instructed the UK

mission at the UN to convene another meeting of the Security Council to discuss the Assad regime's refusal to respect the will of the UN and implement the ceasefire without delay.

Only a political settlement in Syria can ensure that the carnage is brought to an end and I believe that such a settlement is possible if the will exists. The UN special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, is ready to take forward the talks in Geneva, and the opposition are ready to negotiate pragmatically and without preconditions. The international community has united behind the path to a solution laid out in UN resolution 2254 and Russia has stated its wish to achieve a political settlement under the auspices of the UN. Today, only the Assad regime stands in the way of progress. I urge Russia to use all its influence to bring the Assad regime to the negotiating table and take the steps towards peace that Syria's people so desperately need.

John Woodcock: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that response. Last week, 527 people were killed in Ghouta, including 129 children. The bombardment killed over 250 people in just two days—the deadliest 48 hours in the conflict since the 2013 gas attack, also on Ghouta. This House failed them then; now surely we must find the courage to act. Right now, a team led by British surgeon, David Nott, is ready to evacuate 175 very sick children from Ghouta and 1,000 adults needing life-saving treatment. The UK could take them. Will the Government commit to doing that?

The EU is today announcing stronger sanctions on regime officials. Will we also impose sanctions on Russian individuals and companies involved in the conflict? Will we have the courage to recognise what is blindingly obvious—that for all the so-called agreement to new resolutions, the Security Council is broken while one of its permanent members flouts the basic laws and systems of order that it was created to uphold, and that, in these dreadful circumstances, being cowed into inaction by this strangulated body is a greater violation than seeking to act even without its authorisation? Will we work with any and all nations committed to returning humanity to Syria to consider the imposition of a no-fly zone over Ghouta, or for peacekeepers to allow aid to get in, or indeed, for strikes on the forces responsible for these atrocities, like we failed to authorise in 2013?

The men and women of Ghouta who lie in pieces, deliberately targeted by Assad's Russia-enabled bombs, and the dead children whose faces are altered by the chlorine gas that choked them should not be strewn in the rubble of eastern Ghouta. Those bodies should be piled up in this Chamber and lain at the feet of Governments of every single nation that continues to shrug in the face of this horror.

My final question comes from a doctor in Ghouta who spoke to a British journalist yesterday, his voice apparently thick with exhaustion and resignation. He said:

"I have a question for the world. What number of victims does the world need to show responsibility. Its moral responsibility. Its legal responsibility. To stop these crimes."

Boris Johnson: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the continuing and campaigning interest that he has shown in this matter. He speaks for many people in this country in his indignation and outrage at what is taking place.

[Boris Johnson]

Let me take some of his points in turn. On the evacuation of medical cases, particularly children, I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is in discussion about that very issue with David Nott, to whom the hon. Gentleman rightly alludes. On the point about holding the perpetrators to account and perhaps even bringing Russian agents to justice, we will certainly gather what evidence we can, knowing that the mills of justice may grind slowly, but they grind small. We will want in the end to bring all those responsible to justice.

On the hon. Gentleman's central point that we in this country and in the west in the end did not do enough to turn the tide in Syria and that we missed our opportunity in 2013, no one can conceivably contradict him. We all understand what took place and the gap that we allowed to be opened up for the Russians and Iranians to come in and support the Assad regime. We all understand the failure that took place then, but we also have to recognise that there is no military solution that we can impose. It is now essential that the Russians recognise that, just because Assad is in possession of half the territory of Syria, or perhaps 75% of the population of Syria, that does not mean that he has won. He has come nowhere near to a complete military victory and I do not believe that it is within his grasp to achieve a complete military victory. Nobody should be under the illusion that that is what will happen. Nobody should be under the illusion that the suffering of the people of eastern Ghouta is simply the sad prerequisite or precursor to an eventual Assad military victory. I do not believe that that is the case. I believe that it will prove almost impossible for the Assad regime to achieve a military victory, even with Russian and Iranian support.

The only way forward—the only way out of this mess and this morass—for the Russians is to go for a political solution. The Sochi experiment did not work. Now is the moment to encourage that regime to get down to Geneva and begin those political talks, which I believe will have the support of the entire House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I was going to wait, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That is very decent of the hon. Gentleman, but if he feels a question welling up in his breast, he should share it with the nation.

Tom Tugendhat: Many hon. Members wanted to ask questions early, so I was going to wait and allow them to do so.

Mr Speaker: We are saving the hon. Gentleman up for the edification of the House.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is correct in saying that, in the end, it will be a political and diplomatic solution, but do we not have a responsibility to demonstrate to the world that the use of chemical weapons will not be tolerated? At the very least, are limited strikes to deny the Assad regime the ability to continue this horror within our responsibility?

Boris Johnson: Many people in this country will share my hon. Friend's sentiments, and many people will believe that the United States of America did exactly the right thing when it responded to the abomination of the attack at Khan Sheikhoun in April with the strike at the Shayrat airfield. If the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons produces incontrovertible evidence of the further use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime or its supporters, I would certainly hope very much that the west will not stand idly by.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for securing it.

During the Opposition day debate in the House a month ago, I warned of the Assad regime's impending criminal assault on eastern Ghouta. Sadly, that is exactly what we have seen in recent weeks. Whatever words we use to describe the assaults, and even if we say, as UNICEF said last week, that there are simply no adequate words, one thing must be made clear: because of the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, the targeting of hospitals and medical centres, the use of starvation as a weapon of war, and the alleged use of chemical weapons, the assault is simply a war crime and there must be a reckoning for those responsible.

In the brief time I have, may I ask the Foreign Secretary three questions? First, all hon. Members welcome the UN Security Council statement calling for an immediate ceasefire, but it was clear to anyone reading the text with care that it in fact excluded military action against terrorists. That will allow Assad and his allies to justify continuing their assault against the jihadist armies of Jaysh al-Islam and Tahrir al-Islam inside eastern Ghouta. It will also allow Turkey to justify continuing its assault on Afrin. To stop the assault on eastern Ghouta, therefore, should the UN not instead be clear that there must be a temporary cessation of all military action within Syria, and not the conditional cessation that Assad and his allies are using to justify continuing their assault?

Secondly, I ask the Foreign Secretary what practical discussions there have been at the UN and elsewhere about opening a corridor from eastern Ghouta to Mleiha or Harasta, both to allow access for humanitarian relief and to allow civilian safe passage out of the city.

Finally, while I appreciate that it is the view of some in the House that the suffering of eastern Ghouta can be stopped only by yet more western military intervention, I believe that that would simply prolong and deepen the war. Ultimately, we can end this dreadful conflict and the suffering of all the Syrian people only through genuine peace talks involving all non-jihadi parties and the agreement of a political solution, so may I ask the Foreign Secretary this: what is Britain doing to drive this process forward?

Boris Johnson: As I am sure the right hon. Lady will appreciate, United Nations Security Council resolution 2401 was, in fact, a considerable success of diplomacy, given the position that the Russians had previously taken. I think that it represents a strong commitment to a ceasefire on the part of the entire international community. It is now up to the Russians to enforce that ceasefire, and to get their client state to enforce it as well. That is

the point that we are making, and the point that we will definitely make to ambassador Yakovenko. As for the issue of humanitarian corridors, I think that all these ideas are extremely good and we certainly support them, but it will take the acquiescence of the Assad regime to achieve what we want.

The right hon. Lady asked about the UK Government. The UK Government have been in the lead in Geneva and the United Nations in driving the process of holding the Assad regime to account through Security Council resolutions, and we continue to do that. We are calling again for the Security Council to meet to discuss the failure to implement resolution 2401 today. As the right hon. Lady knows, the UK Government are part of the Syria Small Group, which is working to counterbalance what has turned out to be a doomed—or perhaps I should say “so far unsuccessful”—Russian venture at Sochi. That is because we think it is our job to bring the international community together. I am not talking about the Astana process or the Sochi process. We should bring the members of the international community together, as one, in Geneva, with a single political process. That is what the job of the UK Government is, and that is where we will continue to direct our efforts.

Mr Speaker: Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat: Thank you for your patience, Mr Speaker. I am extremely grateful.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's response to the urgent question. May I share with him the disappointment that I am sure many Conservative Members feel as a war continues and Stop the War does not protest outside the Russian embassy, but stays silent about the brutality that we are seeing?

My right hon. Friend rightly said that Britain should be at the centre of this process. May I ask him what conversations he has had with Minister Zarif and Minister Lavrov over the last few days, given that Minister Lavrov was instrumental in first blocking and then delaying the UN process? May I also ask him whether it is true that both President Macron of France and Chancellor Merkel of Germany have spoken to President Putin of Russia? What contact have we had with Russia over the last few days?

Boris Johnson: I can certainly tell my hon. Friend that we are directing all our conversations and all our energies to getting the Russians to accept their responsibilities. I cannot go into the details of the contacts that we have had with them over the last few days, but suffice it to say that we believe that it is overwhelmingly in their interests to begin a political process. I feel that if they do not do that, they will be bogged down in this conflict for years, perhaps decades, to come. There is no military solution. There are 4 million people in Syria whom Assad does not control, and whom the Russians do not control either. We are therefore exerting all the influence we can to bring the process back to Geneva, where it belongs.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for requesting it.

This is a multi-faceted war. Robert Fisk of *The Independent* has warned that it is Ghouta today, but it will be Raqqa later. We welcome the united approach of the UN Security Council to this critically urgent issue,

and, indeed, the efforts of the UK Government in helping to secure it. However, there is concern about the fact that the resolution does not make it clear how the ceasefire will be enforced, how the injured will be evacuated, and how returning aid workers will be protected. Will the Foreign Secretary provide some clarity on that, and might he think about working to achieve an improved resolution?

We know that, yesterday, both Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron spoke to the Kremlin to urge Russia to use its influence to ensure the ceasefire is respected. Following on from the question of the Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), what representations are the UK Government planning to make to Russia to ensure the ceasefire is announced and, indeed, implemented, and especially for safe corridors, in which Russia could play a big part?

With Syria and Turkey now disagreeing over whether the ceasefire applies to Turkish forces in north-west Syria, and Iran insisting it does not apply to parts of Damascus, there is a real risk that the limited scope and clarity will lead to the ceasefire being disregarded. Can the Secretary of State confirm if there will be any further discussions aimed at ensuring there is zero ambiguity among all parties as to what the ceasefire entails, especially given Robert Fisk's warning that the bombing in Ghouta will not end any time soon and, indeed, that there are other cities further down the line that will, when the dominoes start to topple, suffer the same fate?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the safe return of aid workers is paramount, and we are working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development to ensure that that is possible and that people can go about their jobs looking after the humanitarian needs of the victims in safety. The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the need to bear down on Russia and make it clear to the world that Russia bears responsibility for bringing its client state to heel and delivering it to the talks in Geneva—and, as I have said many times to the House, that is pre-eminently in Russia's interests.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this ceasefire is absolutely vital not only to get humanitarian aid in, but to aid the medical evacuations across Syria and especially in eastern Ghouta?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and she will have heard the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) detail some of the suffering taking place in eastern Ghouta, including the signs that hundreds of children are victims, some of them perhaps now of chemical weapons. It is crucial that those victims receive the medical attention they need, and, as I told the House just now, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is working with the doctors concerned to see what we can do.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Russian Defence Minister has announced that, starting tomorrow, there will be a daily humanitarian pause from 9 o'clock in the morning until 2 o'clock in the afternoon, but does the Foreign Secretary agree that limiting the bombing

[Hilary Benn]

to 19 hours a day, as opposed to 24, will be of scant comfort to the residents of “hell on Earth”, as the Secretary-General of the United Nations has described eastern Ghouta? What further action is the Foreign Secretary prepared to take, above that which he has already described to the House, to ensure that Russia abides by the terms of the resolution it supported—a humanitarian pause for 30 consecutive days to ensure humanitarian aid gets in? Is not the reason we are having this discussion today that in the past the words of the west have failed to have any impact whatsoever?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I remember him making a passionate speech on that very subject. It is a great shame that at a critical moment this House did not give this country the authorisation to respond to the use of chemical weapons, which we might otherwise have done. From that decision all sorts of consequences have flowed, and it has put Russia in the position it now finds itself in. The right hon. Gentleman is right that it is absurd for the Russians to say they are going to desist from bombing for a certain number of hours per day. There needs to be a complete ceasefire, there needs to be an end to the carnage in eastern Ghouta, and Russia needs to be held to account—and the Russians who are responsible for this will eventually be held to account, because we will make sure there is in the end some judicial process that allows us to hold those responsible for war crimes to account.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): This is the same neighbourhood where, following another chemical attack in 2013, President Obama rubbed out his own red line, and this place—wrongly in my view—turned its back and abandoned these people to their fate. When Russia breaks the terms of the resolution and when President Assad breaks international law and gasses his people again, both of which will happen, are we going to carry on with this merry dance and with warm, angry words and stomping our feet, or are we in this country eventually going to say that enough is enough and actually do something?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Boris Johnson: When such questions are posed in this House, there is often cheering and noises of assent from the Benches on both sides, and I have to say that I share that sentiment. I would like to see us in a position to do something and not to allow the use of chemical weapons to go unpunished, but I remind the House of what happened in 2013 when we did have that choice. We had that option then, but we failed to take it. Let us not let the people of Syria down again.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I seek two points of clarity from the Foreign Secretary? He says that we must “bear down on Russia”. Can he tell us explicitly whether anyone from his Government has sought to contact President Putin directly about the situation in Ghouta? He also says that he has met his Turkish counterpart. Did he ask him explicitly about Operation Olive Branch, and did he discuss ensuring that, whatever the Turkish forces are doing, our Kurdish allies are able to receive aid?

Boris Johnson: Unfortunately, I am afraid that I cannot tell the hon. Lady about any contact between this Government and President Putin over the past few days. I certainly have not had any myself, but as I told the House, the Russian ambassador has been invited to come, and contact has certainly been made with Sergei Lavrov—[*Interruption.*] I will just make this point to the hon. Lady. In the end, there must be a political solution to this crisis, and it is up to the Russians to deliver their client. That is the best way forward.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for bringing this urgent question to the House. As far back as 2017, the United Nations said that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons on more than two dozen occasions. Would my right hon. Friend now concede that, sadly, due to their regular use over the past few years, chemical munitions are now an accepted weapon of war in the modern era?

Boris Johnson: No, I do not think that anybody in this House would want to concede that. We do not concede that chemical weapons are an acceptable weapon of war, and we want those who use them to be held properly to account.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary said in response to a question from the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) that if there were further evidence of the use of chemical weapons, he hoped that we would not stand idly by. So why are we standing idly by while civilians are being slaughtered in their hundreds now, in flagrant breach of a binding United Nations resolution?

Boris Johnson: I do not believe that we are standing idly by. To say that we are doing so is to do a grave disservice to the work of the many hundreds of British people working in the Department for International Development and in our military who are doing all sorts of things on a budget of about £2.5 billion. We are the second biggest contributor to humanitarian relief in this area, and to say that we are doing nothing does a grave disservice to the efforts of this country. If the right hon. Gentleman is seriously advocating military intervention, which seems to be the position being taken up by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), he and the hon. Lady need to be clear about what they are advocating—[*Interruption.*] I have to say to the House that the last time military intervention was seriously proposed, a very modest proposal was put to the House and the House rejected it. If it is the view on the Labour Benches that Labour Members would now support military action—[*Interruption.*] They are making an awful lot of racket, but I am asking them a serious question. If it is their view that they would now support military action in Syria, I think they should be explicit about it—[*Interruption.*] They are chuntering away at me and accusing the UK of not doing anything in a way that I think is gravely disrespectful to the huge efforts that are being made by this Government.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the president of the Council of Europe recently had to resign due to a visit to see Assad without the Council’s knowledge and with the support of Russian MPs. What, if any, direct relationship should there now be with the Syrian regime?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question about relations between the Council of Europe and the Syrian regime. I think there should be no such relations at the present time.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is crucial that those who commit international war crimes know that the world is watching and that we will not forget. What steps are being taken to enable UN monitoring forces to ensure that careful records are kept of attacks on hospitals and other civilian infrastructure and of the indiscriminate killing of women, men and children, so that the perpetrators of such crimes can ultimately be held to account?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Lady asks an important question. As I said to the House, careful records and tabulations are being made of exactly what is happening with a view to holding the perpetrators to account.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The overwhelming majority of abuses in Syria have been committed by the Assad regime and his backers. Will the Foreign Secretary assure us that everything will be done to ensure that those who flout international law and human rights laws will be held properly to account?

Boris Johnson: We will certainly do everything we can both to gather the evidence that is necessary and to hold the perpetrators to account.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is good that the UN Security Council has passed a resolution, but why should President Assad fear the Security Council? What will it do to enforce the resolution?

Boris Johnson: The answer has already been given several times in the House this afternoon: the greatest fear and constraint upon Bashar al-Assad and other members of the Assad regime are the eventual consequences that they will face in terms of prosecution for war crimes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Meanwhile, just up the road in Afrin, our friends the Kurdish peshmerga, without whom we would not have been able to defeat ISIS, are being backed by Assad's military forces against a Turkish invasion. Whose side are we on there?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I neglected to answer that part of the question from the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). We view the Turkish incursion into Afrin with grave concern. Everybody understands Turkey's feelings about the YPG and the PKK, and everybody understands Turkey's legitimate need to protect its own security. However, we do have concerns about the humanitarian consequences in Afrin, which I raised with my Turkish counterpart yesterday morning. We are also concerned about the possibility, which seems to be happening, of the diversion of Kurdish fighters, who have been so effective against Daesh, from the eastern part of Syria back to Afrin and the Manbij gap area to take on the Turks. We simply do not welcome that diversion in the fight against Daesh.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Last week, I met with Dr Ahmad Tarakji, the president of the Syrian American Medical Society, which is supporting the 100 doctors left in eastern Ghouta, where the benighted people are being bombed, besieged and starved into submission. When the International Development Secretary discusses the doctors in eastern Ghouta, will she also undertake to channel funding into SAMS? It exists on \$35 million a year, which is tiny in DFID's funding landscape, and those doctors are the last human rights defenders in eastern Ghouta. We are funding the White Helmets, so why are we not funding SAMS?

Boris Johnson: That is an excellent question. As I am sure the hon. Lady knows, the SAMS hospital is where we received the evidence of children arriving with symptoms as though they had been poisoned with chlorine gas, so we applaud and support the work of SAMS. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has told me that we will certainly look at what we can do to fund SAMS.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. In 1995, in relation to the Srebrenica massacre and genocide, the international community authorised international humanitarian military action. Will he clarify whether a similar threshold has now been met in relation to taking action in Syria? If so, it is now for the international community to decide whether or not it wants to take that decisive action.

Boris Johnson: The concept of international humanitarian military action, as was employed after Srebrenica, is certainly one that many people have considered. In all candour, I must say to the House that we are not at that point at the moment. I appreciate very much the sincerity of the demands from Opposition Members, if I have understood their sentiments correctly, for a more robust military posture, with airstrikes perhaps—I do not know quite what is being recommended—but I would be misleading the House if I said there is a strong will in the international community to engage in quite that way. In response to the individual use of chemical weapons perhaps, but not a sustained military engagement.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has rightly said that trying to sort this out will involve getting the Russians to bring their clients, the Syrians, to the peace negotiation table, and we seem a very long way from that. Given its importance, will he tell the House whether the Prime Minister has talked to President Putin to express our strong wish in this country that that should happen?

Boris Johnson: As I am sure the hon. Lady knows very well, the Prime Minister is in regular contact with President Putin of Russia and has repeatedly made clear the view of the British Government that there is only one way forward, which is for the Russians to put pressure on the Assad regime to get to the negotiating table. I think that view may at last be gaining ground in Russia, because the Kremlin has no easy way out of this morass.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Foreign Secretary has noticed that the very fact a ceasefire in eastern Ghouta on humanitarian grounds has been

[Kevin Foster]

announced in Moscow says it all for who exactly is pulling the strings in this situation, and who should be taking responsibility for the slaughter. Does he agree it is vital that the UK Government, along with their allies, work to ensure that the resolution is fully implemented, and not just for five hours a day?

Boris Johnson: The House has spoken as one on that matter this afternoon, and that is what we will continue to convey to Moscow.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary just said that the Prime Minister has regular discussions with President Putin, but has she had recent discussions with President Putin, as we know full well that both President Macron and Chancellor Merkel have? If the Prime Minister has not, both sides of the House urge her to have those urgent conversations.

Boris Johnson: I will, of course, make sure that the views of the House are communicated to the Prime Minister. I can tell the hon. Lady that the Prime Minister has regular contact with her Russian counterpart and has repeatedly made that point.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Given the slaughter in eastern Ghouta, and given the regret expressed on both sides of the House, including by the Foreign Secretary, does he not agree that the time is long overdue that we urgently review how this House makes different sorts of decisions about intervention and about what sorts of intervention to take?

Boris Johnson: If the hon. Lady is saying that she would like the right to approve such interventions to be once again taken back by the Executive and not necessarily to be a matter for the House of Commons, that is a very interesting point of view.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Three years ago, the YPG and the YPJ had already defended Kobani against the better-armed Daesh forces and took the fight to Raqqa and won. Why are the British Government now effectively supporting a similar brutal offensive by the Turkish army against those same Kurdish forces in Afrin province? Has it got anything to do with the recent £100 million fighter jet deal signed by Turkey and British arms exporters? Will the Foreign Secretary today call for a de-escalation zone in this part of Syria?

Boris Johnson: I must correct the way the hon. Gentleman has expressed it. The UK is not effectively supporting the Turkish incursion in Afrin. As I said to my Turkish counterpart yesterday, we have grave reservations about humanitarian suffering and the consequences for the struggle against Daesh.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary attempted to make party political points earlier on. May I just ask him to go back and read a previous Foreign Secretary's answers to me and other Members—some on his own Benches—calling for no-fly zones and humanitarian corridors at the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012? His Government—the coalition

Government—refused intervention at that time. Is it not a fact that the Russians are in the dominant position they are now because people failed to support the democratic and, at that time, peaceful Syrian opposition?

Boris Johnson: Of course I mean absolutely no disrespect to the hon. Gentleman, who, in common with Members on this side of the House and from across the House, took a different view in 2013—on the other hand, that was not the prevailing view. I seem to recall, unless my memory fails me, that it was the then leader of the Labour party who took a contrary view. As a result of that decision, we see this particular political conjuncture in Syria, in which Russia, as Members from across the House have said, has the dominant role.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): One of the agitators in the region is Iran. What engagement has the Foreign Secretary had with his Iranian colleagues in order to try to find a way through this crisis?

Boris Johnson: I spoke to my Iranian counterpart on Friday, I believe it was, about what Iran could do, both in the Syrian theatre and in the region more widely, to promote the cause of peace. I hope that the Iranians will use their considerable influence to do that.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The pro-Assad media organisation al-Watan yesterday reported, unequivocally, that Russian jets were involved in striking targets in Ghouta. Is it the Foreign Secretary's understanding that in recent days Russian jets have struck targets and broken the ceasefire that the Security Council called for just on Saturday, in its resolution?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that information. I have to say it would be shocking if the Russians were to be convicted in the eyes of world opinion of breaking the ceasefire that they signed up to in New York. I will study the evidence that he has cited and we will certainly be putting it to the Russians.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary is right in one regard: this is an amoral Russian leadership backing this immoral and wicked Government in Syria. But he is missing one point: the Russians are particularly vulnerable on one count. I refer not to bombing them, but to economic sanctions. The word from the American Treasury and from many Americans is that Europe and Britain have gone soft on sanctions. We need Russia to be totally isolated by the toughest sanctions that this world has ever known. Will he renew sanctions of an extreme kind?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman will know very well that it is actually the UK that is in the lead in the EU in calling for Russia to be held to account, not just for Ukraine, but for what it is doing in Syria.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary said that there can be no military victory in eastern Ghouta, but I fear that Russia, Iran and Assad are not looking for that sort of military victory. They are looking to weaken resistance and instil fear and tension—not only in the middle east but in north Africa

and eastern Europe—and to build a cadre of battle-hardened troops and proven military weapons so that they can impose their order on the rest of the world. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that?

Boris Johnson: That may indeed be their ambition, but they have not an earthly chance of achieving it.

Mrs Moon: They are achieving it!

Boris Johnson: Well, as I told the House, there are still substantial numbers of people in Syria—around 4 million, which is around a quarter of the population—who are not under the regime's control. Furthermore, the hon. Lady should remember that the Assad regime is basically a minority regime that seeks to impose itself on a Sunni majority in the country. It is sowing the seeds of its own destruction by its continued brutality. It is not a strategy that can work in the long term, which is why a political process has to begin now.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): On Friday, I was pressed by the Afrin diaspora in my constituency about the Turkish bombardment and invasion. I understand that today President Macron picked up the phone and spoke to President Erdoğan to remind him that the humanitarian truce applies. From what the Foreign Secretary has said, though, I am still not clear what representations Her Majesty's Government or the Prime Minister have made to President Erdoğan to underline that the truce does apply.

Boris Johnson: I remind the hon. Gentleman of what I think I said pretty clearly to the House just now. Yesterday morning, at my initiative, I had a long conversation with my Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, about what is happening in Afrin, the suffering that is taking place there and the UK Government's strong desire that restraint should be shown—notwithstanding Turkey's security concerns, which we all understand—and that the primary focus should be on the political process in Geneva and on the defeat of Daesh.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is now nearly five years since the then American Secretary of State and Russian Foreign Minister came to an agreement about the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria. What further diplomatic steps can the Foreign Secretary take to ensure that that happens, including by securing better access for representatives of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman will know, after the Khan Shaykhun episode and the work of the joint investigative mechanism to establish almost certainly the culprits behind that chemical weapons attack, Russia has, alas, vetoed any further such activity by the OPCW. Again, it comes back to the Russians and the question that they must ask themselves, which is what kind of international actor they want to be and how they want to be regarded by the world.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary has said that a peaceful solution is possible if the political will exists. What if the political will does

not exist? If chemical attacks, including the use of chlorine gas after a ceasefire, are not this country's red line, will he tell us what is?

Boris Johnson: I do not wish to go back over the points that I have already made this afternoon about the red line that was, alas, crossed in 2013. Where there is incontrovertible evidence of chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian regime, with the connivance of the Russians, then—to answer the question that has been posed many times—the people responsible for those attacks should be held to account. By the way, it was as a result of UK lobbying and the activities of this Government that after the Khan Shaykhun attack we listed several members of the Assad military and imposed new sanctions on Syria. That is the way forward. To get to the question asked by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), in the end it will be the fear of prosecution, sanctions and being prosecuted for war crimes that will have the most powerful effect on the imagination of these individuals.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I agree entirely with the Foreign Secretary that we must aim for a political solution. Do today's revelations in the media that we have spent more on our air campaign in the region than we have on humanitarian aid in both Syria and Iraq during the same period show that we should put our money where our mouth is and prioritise aid, sanctions and peace negotiations, not a costly air campaign next door that does not seem to be working?

Boris Johnson: Much as I admire the hon. Gentleman's idealism, I must respectfully disagree with him. I believe that our military campaign has been highly effective in removing Daesh from Raqqa and Mosul. It was invaluable. The UK had the second biggest number of missions in the air campaign, as the House will know, and it was crucial that we did that. At the same time, as I have said to many hon. Members, we should not neglect the towering work of our humanitarian aid workers. We support the White Helmets very generously, for example, and they have saved 100,000 lives, which is something in which the people of this country can take a great deal of pride. Britain is leading in the humanitarian effort in Syria.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the last decade of bloodshed and tragedy in Syria, we have seen that the old adage that the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must holds true today. The latest machination of that has the UN warning that civilians in Afrin are effectively trapped by the ongoing violence. If the Foreign Secretary will not urge his Turkish colleagues to stop the violence altogether, can he not, as an immediate step, urge them to open up corridors to a safety zone that can be guaranteed by the NATO alliance?

Boris Johnson: We certainly have urged our Turkish counterparts to do everything they can to minimise humanitarian suffering, and I will study the proposal the hon. Gentleman makes.

Points of Order

4.32 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the Foreign Secretary's contributions, he suggested that in my contribution to the urgent question I had called for military intervention in Ghouta. Actually, I simply called for him to pick up the phone to the Russian president. I wonder if there is a way to correct the record to make it clear what I said.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has found her own salvation. The Foreign Secretary is nodding approvingly from a sedentary position, which I think is confirmation that he accepts the truth of what the hon. Lady has said. There is a satisfactory conclusion, and I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary—*[Interruption.]* He may come to the Dispatch Box if he wishes.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Further to that point of order, I am happy to accept the hon. Lady's assurances that she was not in fact calling for military intervention.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. From memory, I think the record will confirm that the hon. Lady was not advocating that. I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was disgusted on Wednesday when someone, consumed with hatred, tried to pull off the turban of one of my Sikh guests, as he queued up outside our Parliament buildings, and shouted "Muslim, go back home." It has been brought to the Government's attention on previous occasions that the hate crime action plan to properly record and monitor hate crimes completely ignores Sikhs. The Sikhs regard the turban as a crown on their heads. Indeed, Mr Speaker, when you presided over the launch of the national Sikh war memorial campaign, for which I am extremely grateful, you will have ascertained the substantial strength of feeling in the community about the need for a statue of turbaned Sikh soldiers in our capital. More than 80,000 turbaned individuals died for the freedom of this country—our country.

Given that considerable context, Mr Speaker, when giving your advice, perhaps you would be kind enough to impress on the House authorities and the police the need to take this matter very seriously and to bring the assailant to justice.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in offering me advance notice of his intention to raise it. First, let me take this opportunity from the Chair to empathise with the hon. Gentleman and all decent people across the House on this subject. It was a truly appalling incident. I feel a great sense of shame that such an act could have been perpetrated in our country. The hon. Gentleman's friend and visitor to Parliament must have been very shaken by his experience. The act can have been motivated only by hatred, ignorance or—more likely—an extremely regrettable combination of the two. The matter is under active consideration by the police. It would therefore be

inappropriate for me to comment in detail upon it. In any case, I would not be able to do myself, although I have received a report of the incident.

Let me make it absolutely clear that I take the matter extremely seriously, as, I am sure, do the House authorities. It is absolutely imperative that visitors to this place are—to the best of our ability and that of the police and security staff here—safe from physical attack and abuse. Moreover, I say to the hon. Gentleman that if I am provided with an address, I would like to write, on behalf of the House, to the hon. Gentleman's visitor to express our regret about the attack that he experienced. I think that we will have to leave it there for today, but I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for airing the matter.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There is a convention in this House when a Member of Parliament visits someone else's constituency that they should write to them, informing them that they have done so. Many Members of Parliament from England may have stayed and dined—or, indeed, drowned their sorrows—in my constituency on Saturday, after the rugby. Now, I do not really want them all to write to me, but I wondered whether there was a mechanism to find out who they were so that I could write to them in order to remind them of the convention, and also maybe to just about gloat about Scotland's Calcutta cup success on Saturday.

Mr Speaker: Far be it from me to rain on the hon. Gentleman's parade after he has shown such considerable ingenuity and sense of humour to raise this matter. The convention, of course, applies only to visits that are undertaken on official business, but I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised this matter. I am pleased to say that, so far, no Member of Parliament representing a Manchester constituency has been so unkind as to raise with me the fact of my own team's defeat at Wembley yesterday.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope that I have not brought on a trickle, still less a flood. I was admiring the forbearance and courtesy of the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). I hope that he is enjoying his day, possibly more than I have been enjoying mine.

BILL PRESENTED

DOMESTIC GAS AND ELECTRICITY (TARIFF CAP) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Greg Clark, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary Chris Grayling, Secretary Michael Gove, Andrea Leadsom and Claire Perry, presented a Bill to make provision for the imposition of a cap on rates charged to domestic customers for the supply of gas and electricity; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 168) with explanatory notes (Bill 168-EN).

Estimates Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2017-18

Ministry of Defence

[Relevant Documents: First Report of the Defence Committee, Gambling on 'Efficiency': Defence Acquisition and Procurement, HC 431; Second Report of the Defence Committee, Session 2017-19, Unclear for take-off? F-35 Procurement, HC 326; Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 21 February 2018, on Departmental Priorities, HC 814; Written evidence to the Defence Committee, on the Ministry of Defence Supplementary Estimates 2017-18, reported to the House and published on 20 February 2018; Written evidence to the Defence Committee, on the Armed Forces Pension and Compensation Schemes 2017/18 Supplementary Estimates, reported to the House and published on 20 February 2018.]

Mr Speaker: I should inform colleagues that, following recommendations by the Procedure Committee, this year the subjects for the estimates debate have been chosen by the Backbench Business Committee based on bids from Members. The subjects chosen by the Backbench Business Committee were then recommended to the Liaison Committee, which in turn, under Standing Order No. 145, recommended them to the House, which agreed to them on 22 February. Needless to say, I am sure that all colleagues present are intimately conscious of this chronology of events, of which I am merely serving to remind them. We will start with the motion on the supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Defence and the debate on the spending of the Ministry of Defence. This debate will be led by a notable knight of the Lincolnshire shires, namely Sir Edward Leigh.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Ministry of Defence:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £8,852,638,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,363,500,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,703,385,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Mr Ellwood.*)

4.40 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This is the first proper departmental estimates debate, thanks to the Procedure Committee and the Backbench Business Committee. In our 2012 report to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, "Options to Improve Parliamentary Scrutiny of Government Expenditure", Dr John Pugh, who was then a Member of Parliament, and I included a recommendation to introduce additional estimates days on subjects to be suggested by a budget committee that we also proposed to create. Dr Pugh decided to test this matter by trying to talk on the subject of estimates on estimates days. He was ruled out of order by your Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker, despite speaking about estimates on estimates days.

The reason we are here today is thanks to the work of the Procedure Committee, which I had the privilege of serving on in the previous Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Of which the hon. Gentleman was, I think I can fairly say, a distinguished ornament.

Sir Edward Leigh: I put it to the Procedure Committee, and it recommended to the Backbench Business Committee, that we take on the role of determining estimates to be debated on estimates days. Scrutiny of the Government's supply estimates was listed under "unfinished business" at the end of the previous Parliament. It is thanks to the current Committee and its Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), that this business is no longer unfinished and we have now decided to debate estimates on estimates days. It is quite shocking how little power or influence the House of Commons has over spending in the estimates procedure, with a budget of some £800 billion a year. We have one of the best post-hoc systems in the world, through the Public Accounts Committee. We have one of the weakest systems in the world in terms of parliamentary scrutiny of what we are planning to spend, not of what we have spent.

Estimates days, as they have existed, have borne little relation to the actual content of the departmental estimates. Let me give a little bit of history, which is always interesting. This debate has gone on for quite a long time. In 1911, the then Clerk of the House, Sir Courtenay Ilbert, said:

"The sittings of the committee of supply continue through the greater part of the session, and, under existing standing orders, at least twenty days must be set apart for this purpose".

Already, estimates days were just being used as a kind of general critique of government rather than actually to deal with what we were going to spend. Another report, in 1981, said:

"By 1966 there was a considerable discrepancy between the theory of supply procedure, under which individual estimates were put down for detailed consideration at regular intervals, and the practice, under which supply days were used by the opposition to discuss topics of their choice",

which often had little, if anything, to do with the votes concerned. Indeed, the Clerk Assistant told the House that by the 1960s more and more supply day procedures had gone through which were "Little short of farcical". I am glad that thanks to the Procedure Committee, and all the work that has been done and the debates that we have had, we are now going to talk about money.

However, given that the Government intend this parliamentary Session to last for two years, the already insufficient allocation of days for estimates days is doubly inadequate. Overall, in the past 100 years the House of Commons has delegated its role to the Treasury. We in this Chamber should be doing more. Why should we leave it just to unelected civil servants to debate what we spend and how we allocate spending among Government Departments? This House is asked to approve Executive spending even though we are not given much clarity about what that spending is expected to deliver, nor indeed the means to influence spending levels or priorities. As long ago as 1999, the Procedure Committee said that "when motions are directed to future plans, motions recommending that 'in the opinion of the House' increases in expenditure or transfers between certain budgets are desirable, should be permissible."

I believe that Select Committees should have stronger powers to investigate and scrutinise public spending. In Australia, Select Committees also sit as estimates committees, with Ministers and departmental body heads

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

appearing before MPs or Senators to justify their spending. In other Commonwealth countries, quite a lot of work has been done on this. For instance, in several other countries with public financial management systems that are based on the British system, estimates include spending information at a programme level, with past spending information for each programme and medium-term estimates of the cost of the programme covering the Budget year and at least two further years. Good estimates help us to understand the link between Government priorities, desired impacts and the contribution of programmes to them.

There is still a lot of work to do. I would have thought that parliamentary scrutiny of the Budget was at the very heart of this body's *raison d'être*. We have fought wars on this very subject yet are not particularly bothered by the comparatively little scrutiny we have of Government spending. Debates such as this one will, I hope, encourage broader participation of Members of this House in the formal budgetary process. We have a range of experience and points of view. I hope that this use of the debate to look at the Ministry of Defence estimates might also encourage us to have a more substantial debate on defence in general.

When I saw that at last we were going to get this estimates day debate, I approached my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, because I thought there was no better subject than defence to lead off on in discussing Government spending on an estimates day. That is why we are here, and this is a real opportunity. I will now talk a little bit about defence, although I recognise that there are people who are far more expert than me in this Chamber.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and thank him for achieving this debate. Is he surprised and disappointed that the Secretary of State is not here to respond? We are very much aware, through the press, that the Secretary of State appears to be pushing for greater budgets for the armed forces. It would have been nice if he had been here today to tell us all about the work he is doing.

Sir Edward Leigh: Well, I think it is very nice that we have such an impressive Minister as the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), sitting in front of us.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): On that introduction, how could I fail to get to my feet? The Defence Secretary sends his apologies. He is with the Prime Minister, telling her what he is doing, which I think is appropriate, given the challenges on finances that we face.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am grateful for that.

Given our commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence, as is required of NATO members, which most NATO countries ignore, we will have to spend more on defence regardless, in order to keep with up that target. That is the challenge we face.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for the way he has introduced the debate. Of course it is important that we scrutinise the estimates, but we need substantial amounts of money to consider. Does he share my concern about a lack of amphibious capacity, which could reduce our capacity to carry out humanitarian missions, for example?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an extremely good point, and if I have time I will deal with amphibious capacity later in my speech.

This is a real challenge. As Professor Malcolm Chalmers, deputy director-general of the Royal United Services Institute, pointed out in his evidence to the Defence Committee:

“While the MoD budget is set to grow by 0.5 per cent per annum over the next five years, national income (GDP) is projected to grow by an average of 2.4 per cent per annum over the same period.”

That means that the current Government commitments to defence spending imply that UK defence expenditure will fall from 2.8% of GDP in 2015-16 to 1.85% in 2020-21. I believe that Ministers need to come clean and make it clear whether they intend to abandon the 2% commitment, as seems to be the case.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that the Government are committed to a 0.5% increase, but does he agree that that is just on equipment, not personnel? Something like 55% of the budget goes on daily running costs and people, and that will be completely constrained if no new cash is put into the people side of the budget.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an extremely good point, and I will come on to deal with the people side.

As the Defence Committee has pointed out, there appear to be some shenanigans going on in relation to how we reach the 2% target, and this is a really good opportunity for us to discuss money in detail and for the Minister to reply to these points. The criteria seem to change from year to year, with new bits—war pensions and other expenditure—qualifying when they have not previously done so. NATO is apparently satisfied, but this rather gives the impression that we are meeting our targets only by means of creative accounting, and when it comes to the defence of the realm, surely creative accounting is not good enough.

Let me say a word about procurement. What are our procurement procedures, and are we getting value for money? Professor Julian Lindley French testified, again to the Defence Committee:

“If you look at the \$90 billion being spent by the Russians as part of their modernisation programme, the \$150 billion or so being spent by the Chinese and what other countries around the world are doing, what strikes me is how few assets—both platforms and systems—the UK gets for its money.”

As a former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, I am talking not just about more money for the MOD, but about spending the money more wisely.

The MOD committed itself to new purchases arising from its 2015 strategic defence and security review before it established how they could be paid for. This requires the MOD to generate £5.8 billion of new savings from within the defence equipment plan itself,

in addition to £1.5 billion from the wider defence budget, which is already under pressure. We never of course know what crisis may happen, and if a crisis happens and our troops have to be deployed, where will the money come from? In such a case, will we end up taking money from procurement that we had not expected to take?

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way on that very important point and for his excellent introduction to the debate. Does he recognise the issue of the defence inflation rate, which in recent years has been 3.9%, while background inflation has been just 0.8%, leading to a real depreciation in real purchasing power for defence? Is that not the root cause of the problems we are seeing with the attrition of defence capability?

Sir Edward Leigh: That point on purchasing power is a very pertinent one. I hope that the Minister replies to it, because it is a point well made.

Uncertainties and over-optimism—there is over-optimism—in the project costs mean that the final costs of the defence equipment plan may be significantly understated. The MOD's cost assurance and analysis service reported that the costs in the 2016 plan were understated by £4.8 billion. Over a period of years, the MOD has failed to agree a workable way forward with the prime contractor on the procurement of a Type 26 warship, which has compromised maritime capability and placed further upward pressure on costs.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does he see the recently announced combat air strategy as a similar sort of programme, and what might its impact be on procurement?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a good point. Again, I hope the Minister replies to it. It may be a case of when times change, procurement policies change, but will that result in more pressure? What I am saying—several Members, particularly my hon. Friend, have made this point in their interventions—is that the defence equipment plan has no leeway to cope with new equipment requirements resulting from emerging threats. As the National Audit Office's investigation of the plan put it:

“The Department's Equipment Plan is not affordable. It does not provide a realistic forecast of the costs of buying and supporting the equipment that the Armed Forces will need over the next 10 years.”

If it does not do so, what is it for? The NAO continues:

“Unless the Department takes urgent action to close the gap in affordability, it will find that spending on equipment can only be made affordable by reducing the scope of projects”.

We have had training exercises cancelled, and we know that soldiers, sailors and airmen need to keep active so that they are fully trained and at the ready. Cancelling training exercises is short-sighted and a false economy.

Just to be fair for a moment to the MOD and the pressures it is facing, we are not the only ones having problems. Documents linked to *Die Welt* newspaper show that the German military has secretly admitted that it cannot fulfil its NATO obligations. The Bundeswehr was due to take over the rotating lead of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, but despite committing 44 Leopard 2 battle tanks to the force, it was revealed that only nine are operational. It begins to look as

though the arrangements for the conventional defence of Europe are a bit of a shambles.

The reality is that we are underspending, just as we did in the lead-up to the second world war. Back then, we were capable of jump-starting and expanding our defence capabilities because we faced an existential threat. God willing, we will not face that kind of threat in the coming years, though we can never rule out the possibility.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): One of the problems with being in a NATO alliance—I know this as a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—is that there is nowhere to hide from our allies, and allies are noticing that Britain is withdrawing from exercises. They are concerned because they have seen Britain as an ally on which they could rely and depend. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most worrying things is the lack of credibility of our armed forces—valiant though they may be—because of the cuts we face in expenditure?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a very good point. With France, and after America, we are the leading military power in Europe and we have to set an example. If we withdraw from exercises, that creates a bad impression.

I am glad to see that the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) is here. He introduced his Backbench Business debate on defence last month and pointed out that the risks this country faces are only intensifying. If we face a multiplicity and variety of threats, surely our capabilities must reflect that. Russia is indeed a threat again, because it realised that the only way to be taken seriously is to be seen to be a threat. We treated Russia with contempt during the 1990s and it has drawn the lesson. It is a geopolitical gamble that we may not approve of, but in terms of Russian influence it has paid off. What have we been talking about for the past hour except Russia? According to some estimates, its economy's GDP is equivalent to that of Italy or even that of Australia. Russia's emphasis on its defence spending has made it an extremely important geopolitical player. Although we are constantly told that times have changed and that defence spending is not as important as it was, perhaps the Russian example shows that defence spending does pay off. I am not for one moment defending or approving of Russia or anything it does, but it has drawn the obvious lessons from the 1990s. There is a threat from Russia and we need to take it seriously.

Surely one lesson we can draw from the past, particularly from the lead-up to the second world war, is that, in terms of commitments, we must have a real presence. There is no point in our having a token commitment to or presence in the Baltic states; we need a real presence if deterrence is to work.

Many other threats are developing from Russia, the Chinese and other potential opponents: cyber-attacks and information warfare are all potential threats.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman rightly identifies the potential difficulties on the north European plain. Should not the Ministry of Defence therefore reconsider its decision to withdraw from north Germany and reinstate our capability there?

Sir Edward Leigh: Yes, I certainly think it should reconsider it. All the old, conventional threats are still very real and require conventional responses. We have to maintain our original capabilities while also expanding and improving them.

On the range of capabilities, last year Hurricane Irma wreaked devastation in the Caribbean, and HMS Ocean was a key element in our response to that tragedy. Now, apparently we have sold HMS Ocean to the Brazilians, but we have a proud humanitarian tradition on these islands and it is our duty to maintain it. This is not just about responding to threats; it is also about our humanitarian duty. We have direct responsibility for our overseas territories and bonds of close friendship with other members of the Commonwealth.

Ministers have so far refused to commit to keeping HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, which give our armed forces an amphibious landing capability, as the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) said in an earlier intervention. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) pointed out last month that

“40% of the world’s population live within 100 km of the coast”.—
[*Official Report*, 11 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 516.]

I voted against the Iraq war, but the fact remains that we made a very effective contribution with our amphibious invasion of the al-Faw peninsula in 2003. I may not always be in favour of using military options, but I want, and the British people demand, that we have as many options on the table as we can and that we maintain our capabilities.

Meanwhile, there are proposals to cut the Royal Marines, some of our most useful, well-trained, high-quality and greatly effective troops. The variety of roles they can undertake underpins the ability of Great Britain to project our military power. As I will mention in a moment, this has led to low morale and a culture of fear for the future in one of the most important and valuable parts of our military.

Then there is the Navy. I received an email—one of many that have been sent to many Members from all sorts of sources—from a former Army major, writing to me through “gritted teeth”:

“the area of defence that has been shockingly neglected is the Royal Navy. Put Trident to one side and disregard the vanity project that is HMS Queen Elizabeth and you have virtually no ships. The Royal Navy has to be the most important service for an outwardly facing island nation.”

I agree with that. In December 2017, all six of our Type 45 destroyers were laid up in Portsmouth, whether for repairs, equipment failures, routine maintenance or manpower shortages. The possibility of a significant crisis requiring a naval deployment catching us not ready is strong—too strong.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He is absolutely right. In December 2017, not only were none of our destroyers out, but, as revealed by an answer to my parliamentary question, for the first time in history not a single Royal Navy frigate or destroyer was deployed overseas. That demonstrates powerfully the scale of the pressure on our Royal Navy and its lack of capability.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a very good point and that was a worrying incident.

On recruitment and numbers, the Public Accounts Committee “Army 2020” report notes that

“the Army’s recruiting partner, Capita, missed its regular soldier recruitment target by 30% in 2013-14 and it recruited only around 2,000 reserves against a target of 6,000. A huge step-up in performance is required if the Army is to hit its ambitious target of recruiting 9,270 new reserves in 2016-17. The size of the regular Army is reducing faster than originally planned but the size of the trained Army reserve has not increased in the last two years because more people have left the reserve than joined.”

We have shifted from an emphasis on the Regular Army to one that includes a very strong Army reserve. All the same, we still need a Regular Army, but we are not meeting targets for that either. Our force strength numbers are not up to scratch. In April 2016, we were short by 5,750 personnel. A year later, that had increased to over 6,000. By August 2017, it was over 7,000 and the latest statistics available show our armed forces are short of their full strength by 8,160 men. The problem is getting worse.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend highlights a very important point. What I cannot understand is why it takes the best part of a year for someone to be able to join the armed forces. Surely that should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Sir Edward Leigh: There is clearly a problem, one I hope the Minister will deal with later. Why does it take so long to recruit? Are we putting off potential recruits with our very slow processes?

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Just before my hon. Friend moves on from the issue of recruitment, does he agree that the performance of the Capita recruitment partnering project contract has been distinctly sub-optimal, and that if this continues for very much longer the Ministry of Defence would be wise to seek an alternative?

Sir Edward Leigh: My right hon. Friend is of course a former Minister for the Armed Forces and really does know what he is talking about. The Government should listen to him.

There is a problem with morale. Those who perceive service morale as low increased by 12% on the previous year in the Army and 15% in the Royal Marines in 2017. The overwhelming majority, 74%, feel proud to serve—we are proud of them for feeling proud to serve—but only a third feel valued by their service. What is the point of training men and women if we fail to keep them?

Mr Sweeney: On retention, the hon. Gentleman referred to the reservists and the recruitment challenges that they face. My infantry battalion—a reserve battalion—has seen a significant influx of former regular soldiers echeloning through from the Regular Army as it has been severely downsized, including by, in effect, the disbanding of an entire battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland. The concern is how long these former regular soldiers will remain reservists before they move out altogether, because they have benefited from a transition payment. Could that financial incentive just be temporary, and will we see a further pressure on reserve recruitment in the longer term?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a fair point. Pressures build on pressures.

In conclusion, the problems are many, but they must be tackled head on. Speaking personally, my record on spending and saving is clear: I think that the state should spend as little as possible. However, we also have responsibilities of absolute necessity, such as the defence of the realm. It is not pompous to say that—it is an absolute fact. That is the first responsibility of what we do in this House and we are falling short. The Government simply have to commit to spending more if we are to have the armed forces that this country requires. In order to maintain our independence—not just our sovereignty, but our freedom of action and ability to make our own decisions rather than be dictated to by circumstances—we need highly trained, fully manned, well-equipped armed forces. For a trading island nation on the cusp of Brexit and turning her face to the world, Great Britain must turn the tide of decline in defence.

I hope that this debate will prove to be a turning point, but that is up to the Government to decide. One thing is sure: further stagnation and cutting capabilities will set us back further. Once again, I am reminded of the wise words of Admiral Andrew Cunningham during the battle of Crete. Exposed to German air assault, his ships were taking heavy losses as they helped to evacuate the Army from Crete to Egypt. Some suggested that he should suspend the Navy's part in the evacuation, saving his ships but ending the tradition of solidarity under fire among the armed forces. Cunningham knew that the Navy must not let the Army down and he refused. He said these words:

“It takes three years to build a ship, but it takes three centuries to build a tradition. The evacuation will continue.”

Our traditions of a great nation and great armed forces must continue. That is why this important debate must continue, too.

5.7 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the fantastic overview that the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) set out of the defence estimates. For Members who do not find themselves—as many of us do—becoming defence-obsessed, due to our concerns at the lack of funding being sent into the defence of this wonderful realm, it was a fantastic primer on the concerns that we must face as a country.

I want to look at the reserve forces, an area that the hon. Gentleman also raised. I declare a sort of interest as the chair of the all-party group on reserves and cadets. I recently met an academic from the University of Bath, Dr Patrick Bury, who has been looking at the progress of the Future Reserves 2020 plan, the main purpose of which was to provide direct support to a reduced Army and to increase the reserves to 35,000. Following the meeting, I rather upset a Minister in the Ministry of Defence, who received more than 100 parliamentary questions in the lead-up to Christmas. He took me aside to remonstrate with me for giving him so much work. I pointed out that if he had answered some of the questions the first time around, there might have been 50% less questions, but that is the way of asking and pursuing parliamentary questions.

The information I will speak to in today's debate is all provided—sometimes reluctantly, but it was provided eventually—by the Ministry of Defence following parliamentary questions. I am deeply concerned that the

expenses involved in Future Reserves 2020 not only show a programme that is struggling to achieve its goals, but are such that we need either to redefine or to look at whether the money we are spending, given the outcomes we are achieving, would be better spent elsewhere. We all know that the Ministry of Defence cannot afford to waste that expense. Every penny counts in the Ministry of Defence.

To provide context and make the costs clear, what is the current reserve structure? The reserve model means that Army reservists sign a contract in which they commit to achieving a certain amount of training time, and to achieving training targets over a financial year. That involves 27 days' training, including a two-week continuous period away, which is known as annual camp. If the reservists achieve that commitment, they are considered to be fully trained and up to date, and ready to fulfil their role in supporting the Regular Army—in other words, they are deployable—and are rewarded with a tax-free bounty cash payment.

It goes without saying that, for a reservist to achieve a high level of practice and well-honed skills, they would need to achieve that minimum level of training. It is only 27 days. Many members of the armed forces parliamentary scheme spend more than 27 days in the armed forces and do not qualify to be reservists. They nevertheless give that commitment. Unlike those in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, the reservist is not compelled to complete their commitment to get their pass-out certificate. They have only to complete a minimum of 27 days. The only compelling desire is achieving the tax-free bounty.

We can therefore use that tax-free bounty as a useful way of assessing how many people in the reserves are deployable. It is possible to be an Army reservist without achieving any training targets in a financial year, so if we want to know about the Army reserves, we need to look at how many achieve their bounties. Let us look at the cost of the programme. The easiest way to calculate the cost is to look at the bounty payments combined with the number of reservist service days claimed over the past few years. I am making a general assumption. A basic private's pay in April 2017 was £46.42 a day—some will earn more, and therefore my numbers might be lower, but I am giving the benefit of the doubt and working on the assumption that everybody gets the minimum payment.

In 2016-17, 1,008,290 reserve days were claimed, and 14,930 reservists qualified for their bounty. That resulted in a spend of £68 million—it was nearly £69 million. In the year 2015-16, 957,390 reserve service days were claimed, and 14,990 reservists qualified for their bounty. In 2014-15, 884,050 reserve service days were claimed, and 14,270 reservists qualified for their bounty. Therefore, despite the rising costs, and despite continual recruitment, the true number of qualified reservists has remained stable, at just less than 15,000. It is not just that we are failing to meet targets year on year, as pointed out by the hon. Member for Gainsborough, but we are not increasing our numbers of deployable reservists.

The wages and the bonuses are low.

Mr Kevan Jones: What my hon. Friend is describing is fascinating. Does she agree that Army 2020 was really designed to give the Government political cover in the light of the reduction of the Regular Army to 82,000?

[Mr Kevan Jones]

It is not just a question of the retraining days; it is a question of whether the 15,000 reservists to whom she referred can actually be deployed alongside regular troops. I am told that in some cases there is no joint training at all.

Mrs Moon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What we have here is a consistent pattern of only about 15,000 deployable reservists. Despite the money that has been poured into the reserve forces, we have not increased their number, but we have massively decreased the number of regulars. Our Army capability is therefore shrinking. That is something that we must be very worried about, but what worries me even more is the fact that we are spending huge amounts of money while receiving little or no return.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend has referred to the significant reductions in the regular forces. As was mentioned earlier, a large number of former regular service personnel have moved into the reserves, but they may be doing so on a temporary basis. That may explain why so few people—in real terms—are achieving their bounty qualifications each year.

Mrs Moon: I intend to talk about the reserve bonus scheme in the next part of my speech. I am sure my hon. Friend will welcome that.

Part of the problem is that, despite the theory that employers would be willing, and even encouraged, to allow people to take their time to go to, for instance, the annual camp, it is not happening. As people are under pressure to remain in work and to retain their jobs, they are not willing to give those 27 days. They are not able to make that commitment.

Further inefficient costs to the Army reserve can be seen when we look at the “regular to reserve” bonus scheme and its failure to retain personnel. The scheme was introduced in 2013 as a way of enticing former regular soldiers to join the reserves in order to keep their expertise within the military and pass it on to the new reserves who were being recruited. We were retaining capability, and also using the former regulars to train the reserves. The incentive for ex-regulars to join the scheme is, again, financial: a £10,000 bonus is paid in four instalments, provided that they meet the requirements of training and attendance at each stage.

As of October 2017, 4,350 ex-regular soldiers have joined the reserves under the scheme. At first that looks like a good number, but the question is, how many have been retained? In 2017, only 480 of those soldiers achieved all four instalments, which indicates a dropout rate of 89%. I accept that that figure does not take into account the fact that entry into the scheme may be staggered over the preceding four years, but it none the less demonstrates that retention of ex-regular soldiers in the Army reserve is a problem.

I can give an example. An ex-regular soldier who turned up at my house to do a piece of work had signed up for the reserve bonus scheme, and had found that once he had left the military and started work, the pressures of civilian life—being back with his family and getting into the new job—meant that he could not retain the commitment that he had thought he would want to ease his transition out of the military and into

the civilian world. These are men and women with vital knowledge and expertise who are used to military life. Their retention is vital, but even with that offer of £10,000, there is not enough to keep them and for them to commit to what is being asked. This further suggests that the current model of the Army reserve just is not working.

The situation looks bad on its own, but if the cost of the scheme is taken into account, it looks a lot worse. Breaking down the entrants to the scheme into their respective ranks and assuming this distribution follows through the key milestone payments, and using these elements and combining wages and bonuses, the scheme so far has cost just over £29 million, with only 480 soldiers reaching all four payments. I am sorry to bat on about this, and I know the figures are boring, but I am deeply concerned. We have a reducing capability in our Army. We have been sold a pup, with a promise that the reserves would fill a gap in the regular forces, but that is not happening.

Defence is an expensive business—there is no getting around that—but it is also a business in which we cannot afford to lose highly skilled and highly able individuals willing to give the time and effort to get through their training so that they are deployable. I know that many Members of this House, including the Minister, are eager to fulfil our commitment to them so that they retain their membership of the reserves and their employability. I honour, and express my gratitude for, the service of all those reservists, but are we getting value for money in a way that allows us as a country to have the forces that we need? It is my concern that we do not, and the MOD's own figures suggest that the reserves model as it stands cannot provide us with the numbers we need.

The challenges and menaces we face are very real. Many of our platforms are not fit for purpose and the readiness of our forces is just not in place, and we have heard about the disastrous Capita contract. I appreciate that the Minister has apparently suggested that he will resign if the military is cut further, and I hope he does not have to resign, because he is a good Minister, whom we trust, rely on and respect, but we also need the Minister to hear the concerns that we are expressing.

None of us want our Army to be damaged. All of us know that our personnel can, when fully trained and fully committed, be some of the best in the world; that knowledge is shared across our NATO alliance. But we are getting weaker, and that is unacceptable. I call on the Minister to look at how we are spending in terms of the reserve forces.

Toby Perkins: My hon. Friend is making an important point about the numbers, but does she share my concern that a huge amount of experience is being lost from our military? There are people performing roles with a few years' experience who would have taken 10 or 15 years to reach that position in the past, and the experience of many of them—excellent soldiers and sailors though they are—might come under pressure in the fiercest of circumstances.

Mrs Moon: My hon. Friend is right, and this is also making them so much easier to be bought off by companies who seek the expertise and qualifications they achieve in the military. They feel dissatisfaction when they see the forces they joined—particularly the Army—being hollowed out. That is leading many more to consider leaving.

I shall make one final comment. I have spoken to a young man who was working as a full-time reservist when I first met him. He has told me that a lot of his time as a full-time reservist was spent going out and trying to recruit. He said that one of the most frightening things was that so many of the youngsters he spoke to about joining the armed forces had no understanding of military life. They had no idea of what NATO stood for, for example. This is a wider problem that we as a country need to tackle. We need to get the message out about how invaluable our armed forces are and how critical it is that our young people should seek the life, the experience, the skills, the challenge and the satisfaction of a military career, whether as a reservist or full time.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we still need to do a lot more for people leaving the service? There are still too many ex-military personnel finding civilian life very difficult. Does she agree that we need to support them as they adapt?

Mrs Moon: I agree with my hon. Friend; it is difficult for people who have been in an all-encompassing environment to transition. I know many ex-MPs who have found it very difficult to transition out of this place, because it is not just a job; it is our whole life and requires great commitment. That is what the military is like as well, and that transition is grave.

I shall take no more interventions, but before I finally sit down, I want to make the point that life in the military does not mean that someone will get post-traumatic stress disorder. It worries me that that possibility seems to have got into the public consciousness. Life in the military will offer someone a chance to grow, to mature and to become an asset to their country, and I just wish that more people understood that, rather than thinking about the downsides of joining our military.

5.27 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). As a former Defence Minister, I too can attest to being on the receiving end of a rolling barrage of parliamentary questions. This points to her great assiduity when it comes to defence matters, which she has demonstrated again in her speech this afternoon. I am glad to have been called to speak on the Defence estimates, which, for reasons I will explain, include an important change in the Government's defence policy. I therefore believe that the estimates need to be increased. In giving important evidence to the Defence Committee last week, the new Secretary of State for Defence argued that "state on state" threats were now the primary threat to the security of the United Kingdom. This is an important shift in the Government's position, and it has the logical knock-on effect that defence expenditure should now be increased to meet these new circumstances and the far more serious challenge that they represent.

It is important to put this change into historical context. I shall begin by going back to the 1980s, when the Berlin wall was still standing and the cold war was at its height. Britain, then as now, was a key member of NATO, and we spent about 5% of our GDP on defence, principally to deter the Soviet Union and the other Warsaw pact countries. As the Chairman of the Defence Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for New

Forest East (Dr Lewis), has pointed out in the House before, in the 1990s after the wall had come down, we, like other countries, took a peace dividend. This reduced our defence spending to between 3% and 3.5% of our GDP.

As we entered the new millennium, the horrific events of 9/11 led to massive shifts in strategy. The United Kingdom became involved in expeditionary conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where our forces became increasingly optimised to fight wars with a counter-insurgency element, at reach, against technologically inferior but nevertheless very determined enemies. As a result, and with the MOD already under considerable financial pressure, we optimised our force mix accordingly while deprioritising areas such as anti-submarine warfare and air defence to the point where, today, we have only 19 frigates and destroyers and have seen a major reduction in fast jet squadrons. As the process continued, by the time of the 2010 strategic defence and security review and the accompanying national security strategy, it became the Government's policy that there was no existential threat to the security of the United Kingdom. With echoes of the 10-year rule of the 1930s, state-based threats to our security were effectively seen as no longer relevant. However, the events of the past few years have shown those assumptions to be highly erroneous.

The activities of a resurgent Russia in annexing Crimea and effectively invading parts of Ukraine have shown a Russian willingness to use military force on the European landmass in order to achieve its political objectives. We have also seen heavy Russian involvement in Syria, which the House was discussing a little over two hours ago, and massively increased Russian submarine activity in the North sea, the north Atlantic and the GIUK gap. Russia has also exerted pressure on the Baltic states, which are now members of NATO and covered by the article 5 guarantee. All of that is occurring at a time when we have reduced our defence expenditure further to where it sits today: barely 2% of our GDP.

Mrs Moon: I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman is going to address our undersea cables and the risks posed by Russian submarines in particular. I was recently at a meeting at which Defence Ministers from several states expressed grave concerns about the number of Russian submarines that they were seeing off their coasts and alarm at those submarines seeking the undersea cables that come ashore in their countries. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of that issue?

Mr Francois: I am sure that the Minister may want to say something about that when he replies, but he will be constrained, because it is difficult to discuss the exact details of such matters in an open forum. However, when I served in the Ministry, I was certainly aware of a potential threat to those undersea cables, and everything that I have understood since then leads me to believe that that threat has increased, not decreased, so the hon. Lady makes an important point. The Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, sounded a timely warning in his recent very good speech to the Royal United Services Institute about growing Russian military capability and areas where we need to bolster our own Army in response.

In the United States, the recently published defence strategy, authored by Secretary Mattis, has declared that state-on-state competition, particularly with Russia

[Mr Francois]

and China, is now viewed as the primary threat to the security of the United States and its allies. That important change in policy was then echoed to some degree by our Secretary of State for Defence in his evidence to the Defence Committee only last Wednesday, and it is really important that the House appreciates what he said. During the sitting, he explained that the threat to the United Kingdom from other states, such as Russia and North Korea, is now greater than the threat posed by terrorism, telling the Committee:

“We would highlight state-based threats... as the top priority”.

He went on to say that state-based threats have “grown immeasurably over the past few years.”

When I put it to the Secretary of State at that hearing that what he was announcing—the primacy of state-based threats to our security—was a massive change in focus and that it would have a knock-on effect on how Britain’s military was structured and its readiness for war, he replied unequivocally, “Yes it does.”

That means that the defence review that is currently under way—the modernising defence programme—is now taking place against a significantly revised strategic background, in which deterring military threats from other states such as Russia, North Korea and, to a lesser extent, China is now to become the primary focus of this country’s defence policy. This new context brings with it certain important implications.

First, we absolutely must retain our independent strategic nuclear deterrent as the ultimate guarantee of our national security. All three states I just mentioned are nuclear armed, and it is important that we retain our deterrent to deter any nuclear threat against us.

Secondly, if we are to deter state-on-state threats, clearly we must bolster our conventional defences. Joseph Stalin is reputed to have said, “Quantity has a quality all of its own.” We can no longer rely on advances in technological capability always to give us the edge in any future war. We also need to make sure we have sufficient mass—the number of platforms—to deter our potential enemies. That means, for instance, rebuilding our air defences and bolstering our anti-submarine warfare capabilities to help to protect the sea lines of communication across the Atlantic, which will be vital in any conflagration on the European mainland.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and I am interested in his comments on rebuilding our air defences. Is he as encouraged as I am by the announcement last week of the combat air strategy? Does he also agree that, given the enormous cost of modern aviation programmes, we will have to look at doing one of two things? We will either have to take a very serious strategic look at what kind of aviation military capacity we want and then to plan accordingly or, if we want full-spectrum military capability, it will ultimately mean more money.

Mr Francois: I agree with my hon. Friend. He is right that the Secretary of State for Defence announced the new combat air strategy at the Committee, but what he announced on state-on-state threats was even more important. If we now have to deter Russian aviation capability as a state-on-state threat, it will be extremely expensive but, as my hon. Friend the Member for

Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) wisely reminded the House in his excellent introduction to this debate, the first duty of Government, above all others, is the defence of the realm. Our whole history as a nation reminds us that we forget that at our peril.

Thirdly, we must seriously consider how we could reconstitute forces in a national emergency. We must accumulate war reserves in order to show that we have the ability to sustain a fight if we were ever to get into one. As just one example, the Committee took evidence from BAE Systems executives a few months ago. When we asked how long it would take to build a Typhoon from scratch, we were told it would take four years or, if they attempted to accelerate the process, perhaps three years at best.

Those long lead times for manufacturing sophisticated modern military equipment mean that, in reality, we would likely have to fight a so-called “come as you are” war, which involves using equipment that is either immediately available or that can be reintroduced into service at short notice. It follows from this that we should now adopt a practice of mothballing highly expensive and complex equipment when it goes out of service—rather than disposing of it all, often for a pittance—so we have the ability to reconstitute at least some mass, should that be required if the skies were ever to darken again.

Fourthly, in light of the new strategic situation of state-on-state threats, spending 2% of our GDP on defence is simply not sufficient. We helped to deter Russia during the cold war by spending 5% of GDP on defence. If we now have to deter Russia again, we will simply not be able to do so by spending only 2% of GDP on defence—our allies also need to make a greater contribution. If we are to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent, bolster our conventional forces and build up our war reserves, we obviously need to spend something much nearer to 3% than 2% on defence. If we will the ends, we must also will the means.

Finally, I went to the cinema recently to watch Gary Oldman’s wonderful portrayal of Winston Churchill in “Darkest Hour”—he got the BAFTA and I very much hope he gets the Oscar, too. That film brought home graphically what happened to our nation after the policy of appeasement in the 1930s and our having run down our armed forces to the point where they were unable to deter war. I humbly suggest that my friends the “pinstripe warriors” of the Treasury, as I call them, should be taken en masse to watch that film as part of their continued professional development, in the hope that that might yet bolster our overall determination as a nation to defend ourselves.

5.40 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am going to make a relatively brief contribution to this debate. I wish to make one simple point, which I shall base on something I have mentioned before in this Chamber. First, for the record, I probably ought to draw the House’s attention to the fact that I have a family member serving in the armed forces.

What we should do first is bank the good news, which, as we all know, is that the armed forces enjoy popular support the length and breadth of this country. I have made mention before of the Territorials and cadets in my constituency, all of whom are greatly supported by the local communities. It gladdens everyone’s heart

to see the cadets parade on Remembrance Sunday. Even better is when, as happens now and again, the 4th Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland—the Seaforth, Gordons and Camerons—come to exercise their right to parade through my home town of Tain with bayonets fixed and colours flying. I assure Members that people from my home town and round about turn out in great numbers to see this. Equally, when HMS Sutherland pays her occasional visit to the county of Sutherland, at Invergordon in Easter Ross or indeed off the north coast, people are very pleased to see that warship.

I wish to take the opportunity to give my personal thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). He may not know about this, but a Royal Navy warship—a small one, I suspect—is going to visit Wick on 6 April. That is hot news in the royal borough of Wick and I assure him that the ship will be very well received. As a humorous aside, I might add that my own way of saying thank you to the 4th Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland when it came to parade was to give the sergeants' mess a bottle of very good whisky made in my home town which goes by the name of Glenmorangie. The commanding officer was not at all pleased with me for having done that, but I shall spare hon. Members the details.

So I have set out the basic premise on which I base my argument, which is that we have the foundation of good will, and the point I wish to make today is simply that we should build on it. In the past, small local projects could be undertaken by the armed forces for the good of the community. In the past, the Royal Engineers could come out to build a small bridge, repair a footpath and so on. One might say that that was not a wise expenditure of armed forces money, but they do have to train. We should try to get back to that kind of involvement of the armed forces in the community. I am not talking about doing this in a social work way; it should be a genuine involvement.

Mention has been made of how so many people are unaware of what the armed forces do and even of what NATO stands for. One way of reversing that decline is to get the people in Wick to come on board this warship on 6 April—they will learn something—and to come to see the 4th Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland parading. That will build up knowledge, and will build up even further confidence in and enthusiastic support for our armed forces.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is making a good series of points about the outreach of the armed forces and their visibility. Ought we not to encourage the more widespread wearing of uniform by service personnel when they are going about their business in our communities? The standard practice is for them to wear civilian clothing, but wearing the uniform, as the American services do, would also raise the profile and recognition of our armed forces.

Jamie Stone: That point is extremely well made. I might say, for the amusement of the House, that when I was a lowly private in the 2nd Battalion the 51st Highland Volunteers I used to find that one of the best ways to get home after a long camp far away in a remote part of the highlands was to wear my uniform and hitchhike—invariably, one got a lift pretty fast.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Do you still use it?

Jamie Stone: Unfortunately, that uniform has shrunk over time.

We have heard so many times in this Chamber about the difficulty our armed forces have recruiting. If we build up the good will and the knowledge of what the armed forces do and stand for, as the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, that will surely improve recruitment. That is the prize because, at the end of the day, the defence of the realm, with the enthusiastic support of the people, is paramount.

5.45 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I might be a touch over-optimistic, but I get the impression that a sea change is going on, at least in this Chamber. It was only in 2016 that we first started to debate whether 2% of gross domestic product was a sufficient investment for this country to make in defence in peacetime. At that time, it seemed fairly outlandish to suggest that we ought to be talking about 3% of GDP or even more. It is not outlandish to suggest that now. Of course, that is partly because of the shift in the strategic situation, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) outlined so comprehensively a few moments ago, but it is also partly because of the efforts of colleagues on the Government and Opposition Benches—I pay tribute to my old friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for doing this today—to bring this subject forward time and again to impress on the House and the country that we are simply not investing enough in defence.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford referred to pinstriped warriors in the civil service. I do not wish to point any fingers in any particular directions, but when the National Security Adviser appeared before the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy on 18 December and was asked whether it would be possible for him to recommend that the defence budget ought to be increased, given the fact that the security capability review that he had been conducting was supposed to be fiscally neutral, it worried me that he responded:

“When I said that the 2015 review was fiscally neutral, it was fiscally neutral within a growing envelope.”

In other words, he meant that there were certain absolute increases in the sums being spent. At a later stage, having tried to lump together the defence budget with all other moneys spent on security of one form or another to give a global figure of £56 billion, he went on to say:

“If we concluded that the total set of capabilities, optimised across that £56 billion, was insufficient to meet the threats, of course we would say that to Ministers. That is not a conclusion I expect to reach, but of course I always have the freedom to give Ministers candid advice.”

I am rather worried if our top security professionals do not feel even a twinge of doubt about the level of priority that we are giving to defence. When sometimes people stress the point, which is not without merit, that when we talk about spending 2% or 3% of GDP we are talking about inputs, not outputs in terms of capability, I say to them that of course it is true that we could spend a huge amount of money on defence, but if we spent it on all the wrong things, it would not do us a lot of good. Conversely, though, if we are simply not spending enough on defence, nothing that we can do will give us the outputs we need.

Mr Kevan Jones: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says about civil servants, but the decision to cut the defence budget by 16% between 2010 and 2015 was not a civil servant's invention. It was the political decision of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government at the time.

Dr Lewis: Yes, and I will come to the issue of how we can use the percentage of GDP to track what has been happening to defence in a moment. I hope that the hon. Gentleman—a former Defence Minister in the Labour Government, of course, and a very good one—will try to be non-partisan about this for the simple reason that successive Governments are responsible for what has happened.

What actually took place was, as has already been hinted at, something that has been going on over a very long period. Colleagues on both sides of the House have heard me recite this so often that I am afraid they might do that terrible thing and join in, singing the song with me. But I will just run through it again. In 1963, the falling graph of defence expenditure as a proportion of GDP crossed over with the rising graph of expenditure on welfare at 6%. So we were spending the same on welfare and defence—6%—in 1963. In the mid-1980s, as we have heard, we regularly spent between 4.5% and 5% of GDP on defence, and that was the period when we last had an assertive Russia combined with a major terrorist threat—the threat in Northern Ireland. We were spending at that time roughly the same amount on education and health. Nowadays we spend six times on welfare what we spend on defence, we spend four times on health what we spend on defence, and we spend two and a half times on education what we spend on defence.

We have to ask what we mean when we say that defence is the first duty of Government. If it is the first duty of Government, it is a duty that is more important than any other duty, because if we fail to discharge it everything else is put in jeopardy.

Toby Perkins: I partly take the right hon. Gentleman's point, if he is looking back to 1963 and the role of successive Governments from then to now. But it is also true that there was a substantial cut in defence spending in 2010-11, which bears no relationship to what happened in the previous 13 years. If defence spending had carried on increasing in real terms from 2009-10 to the present, £10 billion more would be being spent on defence than is spent under this Government. That is a substantial change from this Government to the previous one.

Dr Lewis: I will not defend what happened in 2010. I was a shadow Defence Minister for slightly longer than the duration of the second world war in the years up to 2010, and I was told retrospectively that the reason I never became a real Defence Minister was that it was known that I would not go along with what they were planning to do. So I am not inclined to lay down my life for the Cameron-Lib Dem coalition of those years. I did not do it then, and I will not do it now.

Having said that, it is all part of a bigger trend, and I come back to my projection of the situation. At the end of the cold war, as we have heard, we took the peace dividend. We had the reductions, which were reasonable under the circumstances. But in 1995-96—the middle of the 1990s and several years after we had taken the peace

dividend reductions—we were not spending barely 2% of GDP on defence as we do now, but we were spending fully 3% of GDP on defence. From then on it was downhill all the way—

John Spellar: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: I will give way to my good friend the deputy Chairman of the Committee in a moment.

I can remember Tony Blair on HMS Albion in 2007, looking back on his 10 years as Prime Minister and saying, “Well, I think we can say that we have kept defence spending roughly constant at 2.5% of GDP if the cost of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq are included.” But in fact the cost of operations should not have been included, because they are meant to be met from the Treasury reserve. The real figure over the Blair decade came down to 2.1% or 2.2% of GDP.

John Spellar: It is clear from the figures provided by the Library that while in most years there was an actual increase in defence expenditure during the years of that Labour Government, since 2010 it has been -1.4%, -1.4%, -4%, -3.3%, -2.4% and -2.9%, and in 2016-17 it did actually go into the positive, +1.4%. My friend should be clear that there was a step-change when the Cameron Government came in that led to year-on-year cuts, and our armed forces are feeling the effect of that.

Dr Lewis: What I am looking for today is agreement across the House that we recognise that we should not be having almost theological debates about whether we are just above or just below the 2% minimum guideline that NATO prescribes to its member states for defence expenditure, but that we have to get back to the level—at the very least—of what we considered appropriate for so long, right up until the mid-1990s, when the Labour Government came in, which was 3% of GDP.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: I will give way one more time, but I want to concentrate on the bigger picture, because frankly neither of the parties has much to be proud about on defence expenditure since the mid-1990s.

Mr Jones: The facts do not bear out what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. According to the Library, the last time defence expenditure was 3% was 1993-94. After that, there was a 7% decrease in 1995, a 1% decrease in 1996 and a 5.7% increase the following year. The Labour Government came in, following the Treasury rules laid down by the previous Government, and in 1998 increased defence spending by 5.8%. The idea that the last Labour Government were following a trend that had been set is just not the case.

Dr Lewis: It depends whether the hon. Gentleman is talking about absolute figures or percentages of GDP spent on defence. In 2016, the Defence Committee produced a unanimous report called “Shifting the Goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge”. We had the Committee staff use all available sourcing to draw up a definitive table of what had been spent on defence by Britain as a proportion of GDP over the past 50 years.

The figures for the period we are talking about are: 1990-91, 3.8%; 1991-92, 3.8%; 1992-1993, 3.7%; 1993-94, 3.5%; 1994-95, 3.3%; and 1995-96, 3%. It then dips below 3% in 1996-97 to 2.7%, and thereafter it is down and down, with little blips here and there, until it is hovering around 2.5% because the cost of operations were included.

The point about all this is that we should not be arguing about who did the most damage. We should be agreeing about what we need in the future. If we are hearing a chorus of voices from the Labour Benches—it is music to my ears—saying that we have not been spending enough on defence and we need to be spending more, that is what we should be saying loud and clear to those people who seem to be perfectly content to spend the existing inadequate sums.

I do not wish to prolong my contribution, but I do wish to speak briefly about the equipment plan that was alluded to in some detail by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough. The equipment plan of 2016 is for £178 billion over 10 years. That includes a small number—nine, which some would say was too small a number—of new P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, replacing a capability that was quite wrongly dispensed with after 2010. We are also supposed to be replacing 13 Type 23 frigates and supplying mechanised infantry vehicles out of this budget, and we are of course engaged in resurrecting carrier strike capability—another capacity that was temporarily lost after 2010.

The first report of the Defence Committee in the new Parliament was entitled, “Gambling on ‘Efficiency’: Defence Acquisition and Procurement”. The word “efficiency” was in inverted commas because we believe that the affordability of the scheme is predicated on an estimate of £7.3 billion of theoretical efficiency savings that are to be made in addition to some £7.1 billion that was previously announced. As we have heard, the National Audit Office thinks that the equipment programme is at greater risk than at any time since reporting was introduced in 2012. The truth of the matter is that we encounter black holes everywhere we look in defence. This brings me to my concluding point.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for the points he is making. We can starkly illustrate this issue. Training operations that had been committed for next year have been delayed, and we now hear that there are more. We also heard, very openly and honestly, at the Defence Committee last week not only that we going to have to cut mobile phone contracts and car hire contracts, but that—thinking about next year’s budget—£300 million has already been flexed in this year’s budget for a black hole in the Dreadnought class.

Dr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is a stalwart of the Committee. I hope that he will develop that important point if he catches your eye presently, Mr Deputy Speaker. Obviously there has to be flexibility and a means of making adjustments when adjustments have to be made to very large sums during the course of an annual budget cycle. But we are talking about an overall shortfall that is so great that we are not going to get anywhere unless we recognise reality and accept that defence should not be so far down the national scale of priorities that it has far left behind those areas of high Government expenditure with which it used to bear straight comparison.

I mentioned previously the National Security Adviser and his security and capability review. The House will know something of the difficulties that the Defence Committee has had in getting the National Security Adviser to appear before it on the grounds—he says—that defence was only one out of 12 strands in that review. The new Secretary of State for Defence has now had some success in regaining control of that one strand for the MOD. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for a very in-depth interrogation of the people who are currently charged with the overall design of our defence and security policy.

At the present time, there is a degree of complacency by people who work in these Ministries. Then, as if by magic, the scales drop from their eyes the moment that they leave. Dare I say this in relation to our most recent former Secretary of State for Defence? Throughout his tenure he played a very straight bat, constantly talking up how much more money was being spent on defence. But within a very short time of leaving his position he made an excellent speech—I believe it was on 22 January this year—in which he said not only that he feels that we need to spend more on defence, but that we ought to be spending 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of this Parliament.

In the further contributions to this debate, I look to some magic formula that will take hold of our Defence Ministers, civil servants, National Security Adviser and all the rest who seem to think that all is well with the world when, confronted with threats such as we face today, we are spending a fraction of what we used to spend in percentage terms of GDP, and who are saying, “Everything is fine and we are on course.” We are not on course. We need to change course, and the direction in which we have to go is towards a significant uplift to 3% of GDP to be spent on the defence of the United Kingdom.

6.6 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I want, first, to say something about spending and then to say a bit more about some of the points that can be made from the actual estimates. I think that that would help the defence debate. I will refer to historical defence spending but, whatever the rights and wrongs of that argument, let me say this: there is no disguising the fact that this country is not spending enough on the defence and security of the realm. I have said that before and I will say it again. That is the frank reality. That is the truth. That point has been heard—loud and clear.

My advice to the Minister is that he and the Defence Secretary use the power of this Parliament’s voice to go to the Prime Minister and tell her that we, the elected representatives, by and large do not think that we are spending enough on the defence and security of the country. As the Chair of the Defence Committee said, it is no good generals, admirals, national security people or whoever is responsible telling secret meetings that there is a real problem, and then, in three weeks’ or three months’ time, trying to tell the British public that £x million or £x billion more is needed and expecting them just to click their fingers on the basis of, “If you only knew what we knew.” It is not good enough and it is not satisfactory.

I have said at many meetings that the whole of Government need to shift their attitude and be clear what we are talking about. My hon. Friend the Member

[Vernon Coaker]

for North Durham (Mr Jones) will make this point in a different way. The tables are available from the House of Commons Library. Hon. Members can go back to when they want. One paper goes back to 1956, showing the percentage of GDP spent on defence at 6%. It is now at 2%. We can see the ups and downs within that time but, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the table is clear.

Let me give Members one stark reality. The out-turn figure for the defence budget in 2009-10 was £45 billion at 2016-17 prices. These are not my figures; they are the Library's. If the Government think that they are wrong, they should tell the Library. The 2016-17 out-turn figures, at 2016-17 prices, were just over £35 billion. There are some notes at the bottom which, quite frankly, I do not properly understand: they talk about changes in accounting practices, and counting this or counting that. However, there can be no doubt that it is a huge reduction. I totally agree with the Chair of the Defence Committee that we are now in a position where we all need to say that more should be spent and more has to be spent. The drop in the figures in that table is frankly astonishing.

Let me ask a couple of questions of the Minister that I really want answered. One of the big things that came out of the defence debate that we had a few weeks ago was that the National Security Adviser said that anything he found—it did not matter what it was—had to be fiscally neutral. The Chair of the Defence Committee said, and I agree, that the state-on-state threats are much greater and more intensified than they were. But apparently that does not matter: it has to be fiscally neutral. Can I ask the Minister a direct question? If the modernising defence programme says that the Government should be spending billions of pounds more to secure the defence of this country, is that whole programme predicated on a fiscally neutral position, or is it predicated on the Government funding what their modernising defence programme tells them?

As the Chair of the Defence Committee said, the defence threats are not reducing but intensifying. It is not acceptable to me, or, I believe, to this House, to say that as we are now facing a greater state-on-state threat because the terrorist threat is apparently not quite as big as it was, we will take some money from this budget and move it to that budget. That is not good enough, because we do not know what will happen in three, four, five or six years' time. We cannot take money from a capability that is not necessarily needed quite as much at this time in order to pay for something else. It is the methodology of madness.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman will perhaps be surprised by how much I will say in my speech that—I hope—he agrees with, as I agree with him. The capability review was fiscally neutral, and we found that unacceptable. That was the first thing that the Secretary of State dealt with, perhaps breaking the trend that my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Defence Committee suggested was the case. Let me make it very clear that the study that we are doing now is not fiscally neutral, but we do have to decide what our defence posture is and how much it will cost.

Vernon Coaker: There we go—that is the power of Parliament. That is the point I am making. We had the debate before and this was fiscally neutral. The original

review—the national security and defence capability review, or whatever it was—was not set up by accident; the Government set it up, and defence was included in it. Parliament said that that was not acceptable, and the Government responded and took it out. We then said that it was not acceptable for that review to be fiscally neutral, and now the Government are saying that it will not be. Of course no one is saying that we should buy chariots or whatever—what we have has to be relevant to the needs that we face. Before, the process was budget-driven: it was a case of having whatever it needed to be in order to meet the budget requirement.

It is going to be difficult for the Government to do this when, for example, we are told today that, even in their response to the Select Committee's report on the F-35 programme, they will not put a figure on what one F-35 is going to cost. Then the Government say, "We're buying 138 F-35s—that is the current plan—and 48 will be F-35Bs, but we're not sure what variant the other 90 are going to be." How can the Government talk about being fiscally neutral in their plans when they could not say to the Defence Committee a couple of months ago what the cost of the F-35 is and they cannot tell us in their response published today either?

Mr Kevan Jones: It is not just the F-35. Much has been said in the past few weeks about the procurement of the new Type 31e frigate. There is no line in the defence budget for that. Likewise, the P-8, which is being trumpeted as a vital need for our maritime patrol aircraft—I agree—is not capable of delivering the sonar buoys or torpedoes that are currently being used, so there is added cost there.

Vernon Coaker: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That is the point of the debate on estimates days. For the Minister to be able to say that we will have the capabilities that we need to meet the threats that we will face, we need to be able to say how much those capabilities are going to cost. My hon. Friend raised the issue of frigates; I am using the example of the F-35s. Cannot the Minister go back to the people who plan this and say, "We need some detail on these costs. Otherwise, how can we project forward what the equipment plan or any other plan is going to cost us?"

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman answers his own question in a way. He asked for, and supports, a fiscally open defence modernisation programme. That will pose the question as to whether we want A variants or B variants of the F-35s. The study needs to be done. On the individual cost, he knows from his own experience that it will vary, as the cost of prototypes does. There was not a unit cost for the F-16 because it was a prototype. It is very difficult to pinpoint the exact cost because the life cycles, the upgrades and the weapons systems that would be put on board vary. That is why we cannot provide the exact figure that he is seeking.

Vernon Coaker: I will leave it there, but the Government need to have a better idea, and make it public to the Select Committee and Parliament, of the individual costs. I say gently to the Minister that, otherwise, in a year's time or two years' time, he will find himself in exactly the same place that the Government find themselves now, where the National Audit Office is pointing to various gaps in the affordability of the equipment programme.

Let me give another example of where the Government need to be clearer with regard to their estimates. I again say this as something that the Minister and the Government should be saying to the Treasury and to the Prime Minister. The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) mentioned this point. As the Minister knows, the Government have had to bring forward £300 million to pay for some more up-front costs with regard to the deterrent programme. When they were asked where that money has been taken from, there was a very vague answer, to put it mildly. In essence, therefore, it is an IOU for future programmes. I think that between 2006 and 2007—certainly in the last few years of the Labour Government—where there was an up-front cost that perhaps needed to be taken from future programmes, the Treasury came forward with an uplift to the defence budget to pay for it. That then gave some certainty to future programmes.

Because the Treasury has not uplifted the Ministry of Defence figure by that £300 million, there is already a potential £300 million gap in the future—next year or the year after. I say this to the Government, again trying to be helpful: the Ministry of Defence should go to No. 10 and say, “We believe that where there are additional costs with regard to our deterrent programme that were unforeseen, or there was a growth in those costs, the Treasury should fund that uplift in costs, as was previous practice”—for example, the £300 million. I use that as just one example.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has given two excellent examples. There are plans for a super-garrison at Catterick. I understand that service accommodation was meant to be completed by 2020 but is now estimated at 2023, which will clearly create cost overruns. Around the CarillionAmey contract, again, we are seeing a lack of maintenance on that, which will end up costing us more. We are seeing cost overruns in not just equipment but a whole range of areas, including accommodation.

Vernon Coaker: My hon. Friend gives another good example.

I have given the Minister a couple of examples, notwithstanding all the questions. I make a plea again to him and to the Government: when we know that the Government are considering their options on amphibious ships, please do not say to Parliament that these are things they cannot talk about and that the Government do not comment on leaks. That does not help us. It does not help this Parliament in trying to support Ministers to ensure they have the resources to defend the country. We then have a situation where, three months or two years down the line, those capabilities are scrapped, and we are all left thinking, “If only we’d known a bit more.”

Let me also mention something positive that the Government should do. We should help to explain this to the British public. Tucked away in annex A of the estimates, under the “Memorandum for the Ministry of Defence Supplementary Estimates 2017-18”, the Government list the additional estimates that they have had to ask the Treasury for for operations. I do not believe the British public would know how many operations our armed forces are rightly involved with.

If we want to build support for our armed forces, we should be telling the public that there is £1 billion for operations, peacekeeping and the MOD’s share of

the conflict, stability and security fund, and that there is a further allocation of £84 million for the UK’s contribution to Afghanistan, as well as allocations for the wider Gulf, counter-Daesh activity, the EU mission to counter migrant smugglers in the Mediterranean, NATO enhanced forward presence in Estonia and Poland, enhanced intelligence and surveillance, and support to UN peacekeeping operations in Somalia and South Sudan. Those are just some examples, and the Treasury is giving money to the MOD to support all those different things.

Our country is proud of that work. Our country is proud that our armed forces are involved in defending human rights, defending democracy and doing what they can to ensure that stability exists and conflict is prevented. The Government should be shouting much more loudly about that. It should not be tucked away in an annex; it should be one of the forefront siren calls that the Minister makes in these estimates debates.

I finish with this, and it goes back to where I started. We are not spending enough money on the defence and security of the realm and the role that this country plays in promoting democracy and defending human rights across the world with our allies. All power to the MOD’s elbow when it goes to the Treasury and the Prime Minister to demand more money, but let that be done through the voice of this Parliament, where the majority of Members believe we should be spending more money and will support the Minister in trying to achieve that.

6.23 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Angus is proud of its long-standing ties to the armed forces, and it is vital for both the country’s defences and the Angus economy that the armed forces are properly funded. While I am pleased that this Government are committed to meeting the NATO target of spending 2% of GDP on defence and that the UK has been one of only three NATO members to consistently meet that target since 2010, we should be careful not to rest on our laurels. I completely agree that we should look at 2% as an absolute minimum on which we should build. It is a start, not an end point.

The world is constantly changing, both politically and technologically. It is crucial that our military capabilities are funded sufficiently to ensure that they can keep up with those changes and secure our country in any and all circumstances. At the same time, funding alone is not enough. We must ensure that the money the Ministry of Defence does receive is spent as wisely as possible, and this Government have worked hard to make defence spending more efficient. The Government took the right decision to conduct a new defence review this year, and I look forward to its completion. I hope it will lay the groundwork for a well-funded, well-equipped military that is fit for the challenges the future may hold.

I firmly believe that the RM Condor base in Angus must be part of that future. RM Condor and the Royal Marines of 45 Commando who serve there are a valued part of Angus’s community and economy. Moreover, through their skills and professionalism, they help to keep this entire country safe. I am glad therefore to have been assured on many occasions that RM Condor will remain an integral part of our defence capability.

RM Condor quite simply is good value for money, and I am pleased that this Government recognise that. Cynical scaremongering about the future of the base by

[Kirstene Hair]

some in the Scottish National party does nobody any good and serves only to cause unnecessary anxiety for service personnel and their families. It is important that 45 Commando continues to have the necessary facilities at RM Condor, and while there are ongoing discussions about the future of the base's airfield, the review must be conducted in such a way that it does not detrimentally affect work at RM Condor. Currently the airfield offers training facilities for the in-house rifle range and an incredibly impressive indoor facility for urban combat drills that they built themselves inside one of the old aircraft carrier hangars on the airfield. It would be foolish to divest so much of the airfield that 45 Commando was unable to utilise those resources and had to travel to alternative ranges for training.

This question can and must be resolved in a way that works for RM Condor and Angus as a whole. I look forward to these upcoming developments in defence spending. I hope and expect that they will deliver for Angus and the United Kingdom as a whole and demonstrate that we can trust only a Conservative Government with the armed forces.

6.27 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The scale of the cuts we have experienced in defence are genuinely endangering our ability and the Government's ability to protect our nation.

I maintain the point that I made earlier. It is tremendously disappointing that the Secretary of State is not here to respond to the debate. I take the Minister's point about the fact that the Secretary of State is meeting the Prime Minister. I am sure she is a busy woman and he is a busy man, but, given how much we read about how extensively the Secretary of State is supposed to be lobbying for defence spending, it would have been good if he had been here.

I have been in the position of being on the Front Bench and having people complain about the fact that I am the one responding. It is meant as no insult to the Minister. In my opinion, he might make a better Secretary of State than the one we have at the moment, but I do not mean to undermine his career by saying so. I would prefer it even more if my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) was the Secretary of State. I say again, it would have been good if the Secretary of State had been here.

I repeat the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon): it would be a tremendous shame if the Minister was forced into a position where he felt he had to resign because of the level of cuts to the Ministry of Defence. He would be a loss to the Government. I know how seriously he takes his position and what an agony it would be for him if he had to do so, so I hope he is not placed in that position.

The truth is that this Government have presided over the scale of cuts and over the failure of armed forces recruitment that we have seen. The Government have presided over huge cuts—[*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State's arrival shows the power of my speeches. Not only have the Government broken their 2015 manifesto pledge to retain a standing Army of 82,000, but we continue to see more people leaving the Army than joining it, and under this Government military housing is in a disgraceful state.

The Government have announced numerous unfunded spending commitments, which are estimated by the National Audit Office to have left a £21 billion black hole, and they have achieved their commitment to continue spending 2% of GDP on defence by including things that would never previously have been included. I have to say—I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who was previously on the Front Bench, would repeat this with feeling—that if any Labour Secretary of State for Defence had presided over such a record, the right-wing press would be demanding their head on a platter in a way that defied anything previously seen in the press.

The moment is arriving when the Government must decide what their story is. We are hearing that the country faces very significant new threats. The scale of the threat from Russia has grown to its greatest extent at any time since the cold war. Brexit means that a not insignificant element of our key partners' defence response will take place through an institution that we are no longer a part of. There is an urgent need to scale up our cyber and hybrid warfare capabilities. We have observed the extent of Russia's upscaling of its capabilities, and we need to take action to ensure that we are responding. We are also seeing regular incursions by Russian aircraft and submarines into UK space, and an increasingly aggressive posture by Russia and Putin. If all those things are true—I believe they are, and we have heard from credible sources that they are—it is unconscionable for defence spending to have such a low priority in the apparent strategic approach of the wider Government.

As my hon. Friend has said, the roots of the current defence spending crisis lie in the disastrous 2010 SDSR, and the Government must be held to account for their performance. The real-terms funding cut in the departmental expenditure limit since 2010 is almost £10 billion. As my colleagues have said, this is an extraordinary amount out of a budget that was about £40 billion back in 2010, and this at a time when inflation in defence equipment and skill shortages have grown substantially. It is therefore impossible to take seriously the suggestion that the Prime Minister is presiding over a Government who have our nation's future safe in their hands.

I have long feared that the announcements made in the 2015 SDSR on future defence procurement bore no relation to the budgets set for it. I thought that the 2015 SDSR was a considerable improvement on what had gone before—that may be setting a low bar, but it was an improvement—and it is important to recognise that. However, if the budgets from the Treasury for the Ministry of Defence do not bear any relationship to what is promised, it is incumbent on all of us to highlight that. The NAO figures showing a £21 billion black hole demonstrate that I was right to be suspicious.

The Government should come clean. I am absolutely calling on the Government to bring forward more money, but if they are not going to do that—if the Treasury is not willing to come up with the amount required to fill the black hole—the Government must be candid with Parliament and with the people about which of the spending commitments made in the SDSR are not going to happen.

The Government will get so far in bridging the gap by putting off decisions and allowing timescales to slide, such as with the commitment on the Type 26s. There is

now a commitment—or a theoretical commitment—on Type 31s, but I suspect the actual development of the frigate will continue to be pushed into the long grass. Each of these delays both undermines the ability of our armed forces to respond and increases the demand on the servicemen and women on the existing platforms.

I am immensely proud of the UK's commitment to the aircraft carriers. They are a piece of collateral that the whole nation should take pride in. It was a really important announcement—initially by the coalition Labour Government and subsequently by the coalition Government—to commission and then to build them. However, the scale of the current cuts calls into question the amount of resources required by the aircraft carriers. In 2009-10, when the idea was initially put in place to go forward with the aircraft carriers, the Government were spending, in today's terms, about £45 billion a year on the armed forces. With a Government who are now spending £35 billion, it is a different decision, and it has to be placed in the context of the scale of subsequent Government spending cuts to the MOD.

The Government appear to have a strategy of not going forward with more Type 26 frigates, but of having a greater number of Type 31s instead. That means we will have less capable ships, but they can be in more different places at the same time. As I have said, this calls into question the amount of resources—both financial resources and personnel—that the aircraft carriers will be consuming. Whether the Government would have commissioned two aircraft carriers if the scale of the subsequent cuts had been known about at the time is an important question.

I asked the Minister for the Armed Forces a parliamentary question about the scale of current recruitment and retention performance, and almost all the major arms of the Army lost more people last year than they recruited. The Royal Regiment of Artillery lost 170 more people than it recruited; the Royal Engineers, 130; the Royal Corps of Signals, 270; the infantry, 750; and the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, 100. There was a similar picture for the reserves, which we were told would make up some of the deficit. In the Army future reserves, the Royal Engineers lost 50 more people than it recruited; the Royal Corps of Signals, 20; the Royal Logistic Corps, 200; and REME, 160. Right across the Army, more people have left the service than have been recruited.

This reduction is to an Army that is already significantly under the numbers promised in the Conservative party manifesto of 2015. I believe I am right in saying that a standing Army of 82,000 is no longer the policy of the Government, although they have never officially come out and said that. It is very clear that a significant commitment was made in the 2015 general election—it was a very popular commitment—and they should be held to account for delivering on it.

Soldier numbers in our Army, which were stable throughout the previous Labour Government—they actually went up during the last five years of the Labour Government—have fallen from 98,340 in 2010 to 73,870 now. It is interesting that while there has been a fall of 25% in the number of soldiers, there has been a fall of only 15% in the number of officers. It is an interesting development for a Government who pride themselves—or claim to pride themselves—on defending the frontline that we have seen a bigger decrease in the ranks than in the officer numbers, and that is significant.

There is clearly a significant funding element to the fall in Army numbers, but there are also a number of other reasons why they are in such a distressing state. Morale among members of our armed forces continues to be challenged both by the demands placed on them and by issues such as pay and pensions, the quality of housing and the number of times that they have to go repeatedly on different kinds of deployments because of the shortage in numbers.

There is also real fear among our armed forces regarding this place's commitment to actually using the Army. Our 2013 debate about airstrikes in Syria, which was referred to a great deal in the response to the urgent question immediately before this debate, called into question this place's commitment to keeping an Army and being willing to use it. I get a strong sense from my responsibilities on the armed forces parliamentary scheme that there are people in our Army who think it is legitimate to question what we in this place actually see as their role and our willingness to deploy them.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) made a strong point about the outsourcing partner's performance on recruitment and demanded that it step up or ship out. He did not quite put it like that—I am paraphrasing—but he was absolutely right. As I have said in previous debates—I do not apologise for saying so again—it would be beneficial if the Government published the number of people in each constituency who are recruited to the armed forces, so that we can take pride in our constituents. That would also enable us to hold to account the outsourcing company for its performance with regard not only to the overall numbers that it recruits, but to where it is recruiting them from and the extent to which it is achieving its aims.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for introducing the debate. I say to the Minister and to the Secretary of State, who popped in but has popped out again—[*Interruption.*] I apologise: I expected him to be on the Front Bench. He has popped back, not popped out. I say to him that he can be absolutely certain that there is a real commitment among Members to strengthen his arm in his negotiations with the Treasury. We wish him every success and he can be absolutely certain that he will have our support if he is able to get from future spending reviews the resources that our armed forces need and deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Let us have the hon. and gallant Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty).

6.43 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are considering the way in which the Ministry of Defence spends its money, and I want to draw attention to an instance of the MOD spending money in a very unwise way. It is my belief that its funding of the Iraq Fatality Investigations unit is a misuse of MOD money—taxpayers' money—that allows the unit to pursue soldiers and veterans in a vexatious and spurious manner, and is having a highly detrimental effect on the bond of trust that underpins the relationship between the Government and their soldiers. I call on the MOD to bring to an end its funding of the IFI unit.

[*Leo Docherty*]

I draw attention to the experience of a serving soldier and Iraq veteran, Major Robert Campbell, a decorated and injured soldier who has faced seven separate inquiries of one form or another into an historical incident involving the unfortunate death of an Iraqi teenager some 15 years ago. Major Campbell has been cleared and exonerated by all seven inquiries, the most recent of which concluded in December 2017. The service prosecuting authority decided that no charges should be brought. Some of the inquiries he had to endure also involved the now defunct and utterly diminished Iraq Historic Allegations Team, which brought about a series of inquiries driven by the discredited lawyer, Phil Shiner, who has now quite rightly been struck off.

Given the fact that the Government rightly acted to close IHAT, it is unfortunate that it seems to have been born again in the form of the Iraq Fatality Investigations unit. Such vexatious and spurious hounding of veterans and soldiers, with the use of taxpayers' money, is entirely unacceptable and represents a betrayal of their commitment to their country.

Stephen Kerr: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for giving way; he is making a powerful speech. What effect does the persecution of those who have served our country in conflict have on the morale of our armed forces?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend asks a pertinent question. It utterly diminishes the faith that our servicemen and women have in the Government's commitment to minding soldiers' backs. Soldiers deploy with the good faith that, no matter what, as long as they act honourably, the Government will back them up. Of course, soldiers expect to be held to the highest standard with regard to the law. That is the case with Major Robert Campbell and others. He has endured an inquiry into this historical allegation seven times over, and each time he has been exonerated. By great coincidence, just a few weeks ago he was awarded the Long Service and Good Conduct medal, and then he got a call to say—can you believe it?—that an eighth inquiry was under way. This situation must end.

I call on the Minister to tell the House in his concluding remarks how much the MOD spends on the Iraq Fatality Investigations unit; how many servicemen and women are undergoing investigation at this time; how many have been previously cleared of allegations against them; and what immediate steps the Department will take to bring about the end of the use of MOD money to pursue soldiers and veterans in this way.

The military thrives because there is an absolute bond of trust between those who serve and those who govern. If that is in any way undermined, it would be a huge dereliction of the Government's duty to maintain that essential bond. I hope that the Government will act decisively, in the best interests of our soldiers, veterans, military community and our country as a whole.

6.48 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on his introduction to the debate. I agree with him that it is important to secure more such opportunities to discuss defence and how it is financed.

I do not think that anyone who follows the defence world and the way that the MOD has conducted itself over the past few years would conclude that the situation is anything other than dire. It is fair to say that the new Secretary of State realises that as well. There is also, however, a collective sense of acute amnesia, certainly among those who were Government Members in 2010, about how we arrived at this position. It is clear that the mess that the defence budget is in today is a direct result of policies taken by the coalition Government and the present Conservative Government. Seven years of ill-thought-through, rushed cuts and, on occasion, very bad decisions are now coming home to roost. The new Defence Secretary has the unfortunate task of sorting it out—a task that I do not envy, to say the least. It is therefore worth recapping how we have arrived at this position.

The Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), said that these were not political decisions. They were political decisions that led directly to the mess we have today. To ignore that is to avoid the evidence and means that we will not learn lessons for the future for how we manage our nation's defence. In 2010, the new Conservative-led coalition implemented a number of deep cuts to the armed forces. The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), the then Defence Secretary, justified them by claiming that the defence budget had a £38 billion black hole, which somehow meant that rash and direct action would have to be taken straightaway. No one knows how he arrived at £38 billion. I have asked Ministers in this House to explain it on numerous occasions. The NAO and the Defence Committee could not arrive at a £38 billion black hole either, but it was used in every debate as the reason why cuts to our defence budget had to be made.

The Government stopped using the figure after a while, when they realised they could not justify it. I think it came about from a clear misinterpretation of the 2009 NAO report on major projects started under the previous Labour Government. The report was a snapshot of cost increases in 2009 and related primarily to the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers, the A400M transport aircraft and the Astute submarine programme.

Mrs Moon: I just wish to correct a mistake by my hon. Friend: he missed out the word “deliberate” before “misinterpretation”. I am sure he did not mean to, but it was a deliberate misinterpretation.

Mr Jones: It was a deliberate strategy, in the Cameron-Osborne Conservative party, to ignore the facts and spin—“If we keep saying it long enough, people will believe it.”

The 2009 NAO report said that if the equipment budget was not increased at all over 10 years, it might be possible to arrive at a figure of £36 billion. How did they then get an extra £2 billion? I think the then Defence Secretary just added some personnel revenue costs to get to the £38 billion figure. What the report actually said, however—this point was completely ignored—was that the scenario it envisaged, of the budget remaining constant in real terms over the 10-year period, would lead to a £6 billion funding gap, which could have been managed over that 10-year period.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) is right. The impression was given to the public, and to everyone else who wanted to hear this spin, that the £38 billion had to be found in year straightaway. That was a clear fabrication. We know that, because when the current Chancellor became Defence Secretary, following the resignation of the right hon. Member for North Somerset after two years, he suddenly announced that the black hole had disappeared. I do not know whether he was auditioning for his current job as Chancellor, but the idea that it is possible to get rid of a £38 billion in-year black hole in the defence budget in just two years is complete nonsense.

The Conservative Government used that as a smokescreen to allow them to cut the defence budget, as part of the Chancellor's austerity drive, by 16%. The effect of that has been some of the decisions referred to earlier on, including the scrapping of capability such as Nimrod. Making people compulsorily redundant in our armed forces was completely inexcusable. Certainly, if the Government I was a member of had done that when I was a Defence Minister, we would have been rightly decried by the people who are always arguing for defence. Those decisions have had an impact on what is happening today. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) referred to the increased expenditure on the Trident programme. The £1.2 billion to £1.4 billion in additional costs happened because that decision was delayed. The deal done by the then Prime Minister David Cameron to get the Liberal Democrats on board in coalition delayed the programme, which built in costs.

Dr Julian Lewis *indicated assent.*

Mr Jones: The right hon. Gentleman is nodding. He and I kept raising that and asking why that decision had not been made. The costs arriving now are because of the decisions taken by the coalition Government. I accept all that has been said about increased defence expenditure, but we cannot get away from the core decisions that have led to the problems we have today.

The 2015 pre-Brexit strategic defence and security review announced an additional £24.4 billion spending on new equipment. Some of that, for example on the P-8, was to fill the gap the Government created in 2010 with a hasty decision to scrap the Nimrod. Reference was made earlier to the civil service making decisions. I am sorry, but it was not civil servants or generals making those decisions; it was Ministers making these decisions, including the right hon. Member for North Somerset and the current Chancellor, when he was Defence Secretary. They decided to reduce the size of the Army to 82,000. I asked a retired senior general, "Who came up with the figure of 82,000 for our armed forces?" He scratched his head and said, "We were just told that that was what the figure was going to be to fit the cash envelope." We then had the construct of Army 2020, which is a complete political cover, to try to give the impression that we are going to keep the Army at nearly 100,000. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend very eloquently outlined in her contribution to the debate, that is not only not producing the additional personnel required, but is actually costing more than if we had not done that in the first place.

Another point about the 2015 review is that, again, hasty decisions were taken in ordering the P-8. There is a gap, created by this Government, in maritime patrol aircraft. The P-8 was to be bought off the shelf—the

Apache contract was announced at the same time—from the United States. That was pre Brexit. The added costs in foreign currency exchange are now creating pressures on the defence budget, and that is before we look at the effect on the economic and industrial base of our country. It may seem an easy option to buy off the shelf from the United States, but that lets our own industrial base decline, and that is what is happening. I have not yet seen any meaningful commitment by the contractors, Boeing, to create real jobs in the UK. What angers me is that if it was the other way around and we were selling equipment to the United States, we would be unable to do so without a clear commitment to jobs and investment in United States industry. That is where the MOD woefully and shamefully let down the British economy.

Mrs Moon: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that during a visit to the Boeing factory in Charleston three weeks ago, I asked Boeing whether it regretted taking action against Bombardier and almost damaging and destroying the economy of Northern Ireland. Its response was, "We're American, it's what we do. It's America first, second and third." That is the sort of company that we were putting our trust in.

Mr Jones: It is. As an example, we have to look only at the sale of Airbus in the United States market. As part of that deal, it had to build a plant in Alabama, I think. We have the mindset in this country that somehow the ticket price looks cheap, but we are not thinking about the loss in tax revenue going back to the Exchequer and the fact that the defence industrial base is suffering.

Some decisions in 2015 were very strange. The Navy has been mentioned, and I accept that naval platforms are far more capable than they were 10 or 20—and certainly 50—years ago, but people are fixated on the number of hulls. The Government came up with the novel idea of having a cheap alternative through the Type 31e. This was literally just to deal with the idea that we have a certain number of hulls. I asked what the Type 31e is capable of doing. It cannot do NATO tasks and it is not clear what weaponry will go on it. Lo and behold, when I looked at the Ministry of Defence budget, I saw that there was no budget line for it at all—it has a £1.3 billion price tag on it—so again, how will it be paid for?

The Secretary of State needs to look not just at asking for more money, which the budget clearly needs, but at some of the ill-thought-out decisions. Take the P-8, for example. Buying off the shelf from the United States might look like a simple solution, but as I understand it, sonar buoys and missiles cannot be fired from the P-8 as it is configured, so we will have to redevelop the programme, adding more costs in. This is about looking at whether we have to revisit some decisions and take things out of the budget. I think that will be the case if we are to fit the budgets,

The issue of numbers is always contentious. When we were in government, I remember the hue and cry from the Conservative Front-Bench team—the right hon. Member for New Forest East was part of it—when we froze training days for the Territorial Army. The cost was £20 million. From looking at the headlines and at the way some Conservative politicians were going on, one would have thought that the world had stopped. If a Labour Government had slashed the defence budget by 16% and sacked people or made them redundant, as this Government have, they clearly would have been condemned.

[Mr Kevan Jones]

It is the same old story. I understand the point that the right hon. Member for New Forest East made about arguing for defence—I have argued consistently for it in this House—but these are political decisions. When I was in the Ministry of Defence in 2010, I did not hear Conservative politicians stand up and say, “No, we do not need extra expenditure.” We were being condemned because we were not spending enough. In 2010, I did not see a single poster or anything in the Conservative manifesto saying, “We are going to slash the defence budget by 16%,” but these are the real facts and we cannot ignore them.

Let me turn to recruitment, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend touched upon. I do not like to say, “I told you so,” but the decision on the Capita contract for recruitment was criticised at the time. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling raised complaints, asking why armed forces personnel were being taken out of recruitment centres and why such centres were being closed in some areas. The position we find ourselves in now was bound to happen. We have heard some of the stories. The recruitment process is not only taking a year, but given the rate at which people are being failed, it is no wonder the Government are not meeting the targets. It is now time to revisit the contract and put uniformed personnel back into recruitment centres. The Capita contract should be scrapped, because it is completely failing to deliver what was outlined.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend talked eloquently about reservists. It is time to rethink Army 2020. It was never going to work. It was political cover so that when the Government were cutting the Army to 82,000, they could still give the impression that they had an Army of more than 100,000. The issues my hon. Friend raised are not the only concern. I have never had an answer to the question about how we get formed units. How do we get training whereby regulars and reserves can train side by side to go on operations? I have not seen any evidence that that is happening in practice. If, in addition, it is costing what my hon. Friend says it is, it might be time to revisit it and see whether those resources can be put elsewhere. Let us come back to the suggestion that Ministers were asking advice from the Army about this. They were not; it was a political decision imposed on the Army.

Mr Francois: Before the hon. Gentleman moves on from recruitment, may I ask whether he accepts that the other main problem with Army recruitment is the very large number of people who are being failed on medical grounds, often for very minor medical ailments that date back to their childhood? For instance, in the year to February 2017, some 10,600 people—both regular and reserves—who wanted to join the Army were told, “No, you cannot join on medical grounds.” At the same time, the regular Army was 3,000 recruits short. Does he believe that the MOD should look at that area again?

Mr Jones: That situation was predictable when the system was set up. What is worse, I have heard stories about young people who have nearly got to the end of the selection process but do not get called back in, but then get a telephone call from some Capita call centre saying, “I’m sorry, you’ve failed. That is it.” I am sorry, but that is not the way to treat people who have tried to join the armed forces.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) makes a good point. When we had senior non-commissioned officers stationed in recruitment offices, they could work out how to handle the recruits and use their breadth of experience to explain what life in the armed forces is like. This situation could have been avoided. Unless something has changed radically in the last few years with injuries, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I had case in which someone had a childhood knee injury. That person had to wait six months for a decision and then the knee injury was flagged up as the reason why he could not join the armed forces. That cannot be acceptable.

Mr Sweeney: To give a personal example, I joined the Territorial Army back in 2006 with a good friend, who went on to serve in Afghanistan. He left the reserves and when he sought to rejoin, he was disqualified on medical grounds. That is someone who had actually served in Afghanistan and who did not have any obvious injuries.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend raises a very good case from personal experience. This needs to be looked at. I would scrap the contract and take it back in house. The old system perhaps needed tweaking, but it was delivering.

Mr Francois: I am sorry to hammer the nail, but this is very important, and we have the Secretary of State on the Front Bench at the moment to hear this. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that in some cases, people have been failed and prevented from joining the Army for relatively minor issues such as asthma? Paula Radcliffe and Sir Chris Hoy would have failed on the same grounds.

Mr Jones: That prompts the question, “How are the tests being done, what criteria are being used and how are they being interpreted?” The problem is partly that if we have a civilianised and, as it has been described to me, bureaucratic, tick-box process, common sense does not kick in, and perhaps common sense is what we need as well.

The problem is that we need to look at the size of our armed forces from a strategic point of view. What do we actually need? A decision was taken suddenly that the answer was 82,000—the Army was told that that is what it would get because the budget required it—but we need to look at the strategic needs of our armed forces. Members of the Royal Navy are under severe pressure in terms of deployment. With smaller numbers, there is a bigger turnover of individuals. In addition, people are doing constant back-to-back tours, which is not good for morale or family life. If that is happening, the chances of people staying long term will clearly be affected.

We need to look at our Navy. The idea that we have a Navy that cannot deploy and that we have ships that are laid up—my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling said that we are not deploying ships—is a damning indictment. The sight this week of HMS Mersey, an offshore patrol vessel, escorting three Russian vessels through the English channel summed it up in one. We need to think seriously about what we need. The hon. Member for Gainsborough said that we are a maritime nation, and that it is about not just kit, but people.

Vernon Coaker: My hon. Friend makes a good point. If we do exactly what he says, we will be in a ludicrous position. We will be saying, “To facilitate scrapping Albion and Bulwark, we will modify our aircraft carriers,” which takes us into the realms of never-never land. What does that mean? We are not going to do a beach landing from an aircraft carrier. We might have a few more helicopters or a dry dock facility, but the idea of carrying out an amphibious landing from an aircraft carrier belies the point of having amphibious craft, which is to land on beaches and lay marines off on them.

Mr Jones: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend, but that goes to the point—this was the problem back in 2010—of the Treasury being let in the door of the MOD, and being in control and in the driving seat. When I was a Minister, I chaired the finance group in the MOD when we were looking for savings and dealing with the Treasury. I know exactly what Ministers are dealing with. The Treasury does not understand the value of our armed forces and how they operate. I am glad that the Secretary of State seems to have wrestled control of that element back. If our defence policy is determined by Treasury figures, we will have very strange decisions that will not match strategic needs.

We keep hearing from the Government that they are meeting the NATO 2%. As someone who is committed to NATO and who supports it—I am a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—I can say that that is an academic argument. It is important in that we are trying to get people to spend a minimum of 2%, but it is also important to look at what our NATO partners spend that 2% on. It is clear that the Government have rejigged the figures. I am not saying that they have done something illegal or anything like that, but in 2015, they changed how defence spending was calculated. War pensions of £820 million were included; assessments of contributions to UN peacekeeping of £400 million were included; and the pensions of retired military personnel, which was another £200 million, were included. The thick end of £1 billion of that 2% is made up of things that the hardest defender of Government policy would not think were frontline defence commitments.

It is about being realistic. It would be fine if we were spending only 1.8% on defence but spending it on the right things. There is a case for increasing the defence budget—that argument was made by the right hon. Member for New Forest East and by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling—but we need to do it by setting strategic objectives that show why we need more than we are spending. There is also an onus on the MOD to ensure that what it is spending is not only efficient, but provides value for money for the taxpayer.

All hon. Members who have contributed to this debate have said that our armed forces are universally and rightly held in the highest regard. I agree, but it is not just national sentiment; it is because they are vital for our nation’s security and because they define our place in the world. I do not think for one minute that the new Secretary of State or his ministerial team lack commitment to the armed forces—they are all committed to defence and want to do the best for our armed forces, so I wish them well in the battle they will have with the Treasury—but without new money or a radical rethink about the commitments we ask our armed forces to fulfil, I fear for our forces’ future, and more importantly for Britain’s place in the world.

7.16 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on securing it in this year’s series of debates on estimates. They have long been strong champions of our armed forces and are rightly proud of Britain’s history of defence.

That pride is not misplaced. This country has the fifth-largest defence budget in the world. I have the honour of representing two military bases in my constituency—Kinloss barracks and RAF Lossiemouth. Moray has a long history of service, and the armed forces are intertwined in our local communities. In the last year alone, servicemen and women from the two bases in Moray have served in South Sudan, the Falkland Islands and Romania, and in Cyprus as part of the international efforts against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. Scotland and indeed Moray have long benefited from the UK’s defence budget, and the defence industry is one of Scotland’s great success stories.

I am delighted that, in the numbers we are discussing, we can see that investment will continue to increase. Defence spending is due to rise by 3% in real terms over the next year, which is an increase of more than £1 billion. We will feel that investment directly in Moray. The arrival of nine P-8 Poseidon aircraft at Lossiemouth will mean 400 extra jobs and investment of £400 million. There can be no doubt that the Government remain strong on their commitment to the defence of our country. I look forward to seeing the positive impact that that new capability will bring to Moray.

On Thursday, I look forward to welcoming the Secretary of State for Defence to the official turf-cutting ceremony for the new Poseidon strategic facility at RAF Lossiemouth. I also commend the work he has embarked on since taking up his position. His recently announced defence modernisation programme provides the perfect opportunity to assess our spending. I know that he will not shy away from the difficult decisions that need to be taken to safeguard the future of our world-class armed forces.

Vernon Coaker: You’ve got the job.

Douglas Ross: If there is a job going, I will take it.

I should like to touch briefly on an extremely pertinent issue currently affecting MOD personnel—serving and civilian—based in Scotland. The budget confirmed by the SNP Government last week raises taxes for anyone earning more than £33,000 in Scotland. It will also mean that someone serving in Scotland at the same rank and doing the same job as someone in England will pay more tax if they earn more than just £26,000. That is simply unfair and unacceptable. To put that in perspective, everyone above the rank of lance corporal will pay more in Scotland, as will every single Royal Navy officer. That is an attack on our hard-working service personnel and a kick in the teeth for all those who have chosen to serve our country. I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for their communications—they met my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and I to discuss the issue. I make another plea on behalf of MOD personnel in Scotland. The “Nat tax” is unfair and cannot be allowed to stand, and I call on the

[Douglas Ross]

UK Government to use the powers available to them to mitigate the worst effects of that ill-thought-through tax rise.

We are a military nation, and Scotland is proud to play its part in that. Moray is a fantastic example of what Government investment in defence looks like, and we will continue to play our part in the defence of our nation and our interests around the world. Under this Government, and with a rising defence budget next year, I have no doubt that Lossiemouth, Kinloss, and our capabilities around the globe will continue to go from strength to strength.

7.20 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate, Mr Speaker. Let me also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for their efforts in securing the debate, and for their persistent scrutiny of the Government on defence matters, which has been of long-standing note in the House.

It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), whose constituency is the home of the Royal Air Force in Scotland—although, sadly, it has been much diminished since only a few years ago, when Kinloss was home to the RAF's fleet of marine patrol aircraft. That yawning capability gap is just one of the many litanies of defence cuts that we have seen in the past few years, so I do not entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman's glowing review of the trajectory of British defence capability in recent years. That speech aside, however, I have been struck by the consistent level of shock and dismay expressed about the extent of the reduction in Britain's defence capabilities.

It is an established fact that there has been a steady decline in defence spending as a percentage of GDP. It has fallen from 2.4% in 2011 to 1.9% in 2016. Not only has it declined every year under the present Government, but it is lower than it was in any year under the last Labour Government, which rather puts paid to the mythology about Labour's defence record. Those figures, however—damning as they are of the Government's real commitment—belie the true criticality of the situation. A recently published letter from former defence chiefs described the 2% target as “an accounting deception”, and added:

“Most analysts...agree core defence expenditure for hard military power is well below 2%.”

As has already been pointed out today, the inclusion of pension liabilities and other elements that were previously excluded from core defence spending suggests that what we are truly spending is much less than 2%. I welcome the commitment by the Secretary of State to making the 2% a floor rather than a target, and I hope that we can reboot our spending to increase the percentage substantially in the longer term.

I intend to stick to some essential points to which I hope the Minister will respond. Not only is defence spending well below the 2% minimum target, but its effective purchasing power is being eroded year on year. The defence inflation rate is running well above the national rate. In 2015-16 the defence inflation rate was 3.9%,

the highest rate since 2010, while the national GDP deflator was just 0.8%. We only know that because the Ministry of Defence calculates the figures in conjunction with the Treasury, but, as the defence analyst Francis Tusa recently noted, the MOD and the Treasury stopped calculating them last year, so the visibility of the real purchasing power of defence has now been lost. We must recover that visibility as a matter of urgency, because it is the only way in which we can really scrutinise the trajectory of defence purchasing power. I hope that the Secretary of State will commit himself to discussions with the Treasury about the reinstatement of the calculation, because it is vital for us to have the information in order to plan ahead.

In recent months the Army has been cut by a fifth, wages have been frozen for a sustained period, and—as we heard from the hon. Member for Gainsborough—no Royal Navy ships were on patrol in international waters over Christmas, which is shocking and unheard of in recent history. All that can be attributed to the funding gap of £21 billion in the equipment programme, which shows how underfunded that programme is, and reveals the gap in defence spending overall.

I referred earlier to the relentless decline in defence spending in recent years. It peaked at £45 billion in real terms in 2009-10, the last year of the Labour Government. Although it has been suggested today that there is currently a £10 billion gap, I calculate that if the trajectory of an average of, say, 1.7% had been maintained rather than cut, we would have seen real-terms spending of £53 billion by 2020 rather than the £37 billion that has been projected. According to my calculation, the real funding gap is £16 billion rather than £10 billion. Members may feel free to correct me, but I believe that if we extrapolate the trend of defence spending before the cuts started in 2010, we see substantially more defence spending. Perhaps that shows just how critical the situation is, and demonstrates the reality of the root cause of the cuts.

The present position is both absurd and depressing. We know what the solutions are, and addressing them is a matter of political will. The key themes of the debate have concerned the chronic underfunding of defence, and the failure to recognise the uniqueness of defence industrial capability and understand how we can get the most out of it. The hon. Member for Gainsborough asked whether we were getting the bang for our buck that we ought to be getting, and what capability we received per pound in comparison with our peer countries around the world. That is a critical question, and I think that we, as a country, should investigate it. How can we secure maximum capability? I suggest that we can largely blame the way in which defence is financed.

When I was in the shipbuilding industry, we designed and built complex warships such as Type 26 frigates. We were massively constrained by the arbitrary limits placed on capital expenditure. Like many other Members, I take issue with that. When a programme of that kind is being commissioned—possibly the most complex and the largest-scale defence equipment programme, indeed the largest-scale engineering programme, undertaken anywhere in the world—imposing of arbitrary annual limits on spending is ridiculous. We ought to finance such programmes in the same way as we finance other critical national infrastructure programmes, such as HS2, Crossrail and the Olympic games.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that when equipment such as ships is being ordered, the payback to the Exchequer in tax should be taken into account and the jobs should not be exported?

Mr Sweeney: Absolutely. My hon. Friend has made an excellent and salient point. He and I are both members of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair, which is currently undertaking a study of that issue. According to another study, conducted by the Fraser of Allander Institute at the University of Strathclyde, the overall benefit to the UK economy per annum from the shipbuilding industry on the Clyde alone is £366 million a year, in purely multiplier effects. As for the idea that we can competitively tender programmes overseas, we are losing the opportunity of industrial benefit as well. We are not just talking about the loss of core capabilities; we are talking about the loss of revenue and economic potential for our country.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I know that the hon. Gentleman has no intention of being churlish or unhelpful. He will, I am sure, acknowledge that having a shipbuilding strategy, together with a maritime growth strategy, is a particular feature of this Government, which marks them out from their predecessors of all political persuasions.

Mr Sweeney: I do not accept that point. It was a Labour Government who, in 2005, introduced the first defence industrial strategy, which defined a far more robust way of delivering shipbuilding capability in the UK. It defined key industrial capabilities, and that is sorely lacking from the Government's current shipbuilding strategy. I hope that there will be some improvement as a result of the ongoing discussions on the matter.

Mr Hayes: I cannot believe that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood me. Perhaps I did not explain myself carefully enough. I commissioned the maritime growth study, and it was the first for donkeys' years, so I am not quite sure what the hon. Gentleman means.

Mr Sweeney: That may have been a discrete maritime growth strategy, but the overall defence industrial strategy encompassed maritime aspects. However, I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's efforts in that regard, and I hope that we can work constructively to improve the strategy in the manner that I suggested.

The funding of large-scale equipment programmes must be revisited as a matter of urgency, because it is not sustainable. The annual limits on key programmes that are multi-generational cannot be allowed to continue. When we were looking at the programme for the construction of the Type 26, we wanted to invest potentially half a billion pounds in reinvigorating the infrastructure that would support it, but because of the arbitrary in-year spending profile we could not invest in the infrastructure and facilities that would have benefited the programme throughout its life cycle, and we therefore lost that long-term benefit. For the sake of short-term savings, we are losing long-term efficiency in the generation of defence capability. That may be an answer to the question from the hon. Member for Gainsborough about whether we were receiving the maximum benefit. Perhaps if we sow the seeds of the maximum capability at the start of programmes, we will reap the benefits of efficiencies through the manufactures that result from those highly complex programmes.

Defence inflation and the need to pump-prime programmes at the start to ensure that they meet world-class standards are just a couple of the issues that we need to challenge if we are to get the most out of our industrial capability. I hope that the Secretary of State will take those comments on board.

7.30 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): During this debate, the subject of how much we should spend on defence and what we should be spending on has taken up a lot of the time, as is only right in an estimates day debate. I want to take this opportunity to put on record my agreement with the sentiments expressed by, among others, my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), my right hon. Friends the Members for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), and the hon. Members for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney). Simply put, I agree that more needs to be spent on the defence of our nation, and that the continued speculation about cuts to capability and manpower not only weakens us in the eyes of our allies, but does untold grievous damage to the morale of our men and women serving today. I also want to mention something that has not been touched on this afternoon. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and others for their tireless campaign to get more help and investment into mental health support for serving personnel, and to the MOD for the announcement this weekend of the creation of the new helpline operated by Combat Stress.

Today, however, I want to raise something different, which I estimate would cost the UK Government very little money at all. All Members are aware of the current problems in recruitment to the armed forces. I know that a great deal of time and effort is going into revamping and modernising the recruitment process and the new recruitment campaign. However, there is one group of people that, apart from in the rarest of circumstances, is very unlikely to be found in the ranks of the Army, the Navy or the Air Force: subjects from the British overseas territories. These territories are British by choice and their residents are British subjects. However, despite being loyal citizens and holders of a British passport, and being fit and able and willing, individuals are still ineligible to serve in the armed forces of this country unless they have resided on the British mainland for five whole years.

Let us put that into perspective. That means that an 18-year-old Falklander or Gibraltarian who wanted, like his compatriots on these islands, to have a rewarding career in the armed forces would be forced to move to the UK mainland and live, and presumably work, here until the age of 23 before being eligible to join up. Some might argue that, for example, the Royal Gibraltar Regiment and the Falklands Island Defence Force give the chance for rewarding careers in the armed forces for citizens of overseas territories, but if they wanted to join the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the Air Force or any regiment in the regular British Army they would be prevented from doing so for five whole years simply by virtue of not residing in these islands long enough. I put it to the House that that is not only daft, but is

[Andrew Bowie]

borderline discriminatory, and it is doing our loyal subjects in our overseas territories a huge disservice, and denying our armed forces willing volunteers at a time when we are struggling to fill the books.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying, and I have no problem with it, but it was his own Government when they came into office in 2010 who turned off the pipeline of recruits from the Commonwealth. If he wants to increase the numbers and “fill the books”, as he said, there is an easy option in terms of Commonwealth recruits.

Andrew Bowie: I agree. That was a decision of my party and the previous coalition Government, and I am taking action on it with the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard); he asked me to join him in attempting to change the situation, and I was only too keen to assist.

This is simply an unfair situation, so in late November the hon. Gentleman and I wrote to the Home Secretary expressing our hope that something might be done to arrest this wrong. We received a reply from the MOD, which was welcome of course, saying it could not do anything as this was a Home Office policy. We knew that, which is why we sent the letter to the Home Office. It obviously feels it has enough on its plate to be dealing with just now, which is understandable, but the fact is that this is not a tricky issue to solve; it requires a minor tweak, and it has precedent. Until 2006, citizens of British overseas territories had to pay “overseas” fees at British universities. In 2007, however, due to the fact that overseas territories do not have their own higher education institutions, the Government brought in legislation equalising the levels of tuition fees, so that now at British higher education institutions a student from Stanley will pay no more than a student from Southampton.

Surely it is possible to do something similar for those young people who want to serve their country in the finest armed forces in the world. In this 100th anniversary of the end of the first world war, a conflict that saw thousands of young men from across the then empire volunteer to fight for this country—76 from the Falkland Islands alone—we should do honour to those who fought under our flag by righting this wrong.

We have heard many times this year that Britain is charting a new course in the world, re-establishing relations with allies old and friends new. What better signal to send to the outside world that this truly is a “global Britain” than granting citizens of our overseas territories the same rights as citizens living on these islands? What better way of honouring the commitment to this country of citizens of our overseas territories throughout the years than by removing this residency requirement and allowing British subjects, wherever in our global family they reside, to serve without restriction in the armed forces of this country?

7.35 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) and to congratulate the Members who have brought this debate forward. I find myself in the happy position of agreeing with much of what I have heard.

The armed forces of our country have been engaged in continuous operations for the last couple of decades, yet at the same time—particularly in the last seven to eight years—we have been dealing with a sustained programme of deficit reduction. That has not been mentioned in this debate in connection with the financing of our armed forces. The stress and strain that this has placed on our military is manifest as we ask them not only to do more in the world, but to do a more varied set of tasks while managing with fewer resources. This asks a lot of the men and women who wear the Queen’s uniform, but they wear it with commitment and pride, which is worthy of our respect. They put themselves on a path of service that puts them in harm’s way—sometimes in deadly harm’s way—on our behalf, and we should not forget that.

However, we should have gratitude not only to the men and women of our armed forces, but to those who support them in the supply chain. I am proud to have visited, and spent time with, the men and women who work at the Babcock military vehicle and armament repair facility at Forthside in Stirling. They told me their stories of deployment alongside our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. They are, in their way, as heroic and dedicated to the cause of defending our United Kingdom as the enlisted men and women, and their sacrifice and work is worthy of our celebration. These contractors and suppliers who support our military in theatre are a vital cog in the machine of our defences. It is one of our jobs in this Parliament to ensure that our military is well served by these contractors. The MOD would do well to remember its role as the customer and better leverage its authority as a customer with these contractors. I believe that there is room for improvement in that area in terms of value of money.

At present, there is a threat hanging over the future of vehicle and armament repairs in Scotland. I hope that Ministers will take the opportunity provided by this debate to confirm that the MOD expects such repairs to be carried out in Scotland in future. I very much regret that as things stand I appear to have failed to convince the MOD to exercise its voice of customer with Babcock and to site the mobile defence support group unit for Scotland in my constituency. That is a wrong decision, especially given the calibre of the highly skilled and extremely loyal workforce, whose support of our armed forces included, as I have said, regular and repeated tours of duty in war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. These workers are my constituents and I believe they deserve better from the MOD.

We cannot go on asking our armed forces to have the level and reach of the operational commitments we lay on them and expect of them while continuing to cut back on the resources available to them. I have a simple but effective slogan to summarise my position and that of a great many other Members across the House: no more cuts.

I turn to other matters. We should be very wary of Russia. I have a strong feeling for Russia, as you might know, Mr Deputy Speaker, because my son Luke, who is a constituent of yours, served two years in Novosibirsk in Siberia as a voluntary representative of our church. Over the two years he was there, he became very fluent in Russian and became a great lover of all things Russian, in particular the people of Russia. He has shared his enthusiasm for Russia with all his family, including me,

and I have had the opportunity to experience the warmth and hospitality of the Russian people myself. However, the issue of Russian nationalism is a different story, as it is with the nationalism that has emerged all around the world. Nationalism is a destructive force that divides people and pits ethnicities and national identities against one another. Fundamentally, it is a poisonous ideology wherever it is found, and although it is often disguised in modern times, it is still a threat to our way of life and to the security and peace of the world. We must be ready to meet nationalism head on, to challenge it and to defend its victims.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Given what the hon. Gentleman has just said, does he support ending the Olympics, which are a competition between nations? There is a bit of nationalism there. End the Olympics!

Stephen Kerr: There is a great difference between nationalism and patriotism, which is far more wholesome. It is no mistake that the leader of the Scottish National party herself has said that she very much regrets the fact that the word “national” is to be found in the SNP’s party name. But I am not here to talk about the SNP, disappointed though its Members will be to hear that. I urge Ministers across Government to take seriously the direct warning by General Sir Nick Carter that Russia poses a major threat that the UK would struggle to confront without an increase in defence spending.

I also want to mention recruitment. I believe that subcontracting recruitment to a civilian business was not a good decision. Such recruitment cannot be determined by someone working with a spreadsheet, and I seriously doubt that any private company has what it takes to function as an adequate recruitment agent for the British armed forces.

Housing for our armed forces is also an issue. Some of the anecdotal stories shared with me about living conditions for service families are, quite frankly, nothing less than shameful. However, that is too broad an issue to be covered in the time available tonight.

We also need to be sure that our troops have the right equipment at the right time. There is a black hole in the budget, as has been admitted. We have laid orders for equipment that we do not have the money to pay for. If we are not careful—I say this as a member of the Select Committee investigating Carillion—we will find ourselves in a situation of robbing Peter to pay Paul that will become a vicious circle, and we all know where that will lead to.

Vernon Coaker: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the difficulties that we can get into when we rob Peter to pay Paul. The Defence Secretary recently told the Defence Committee, in discussing the £300 million needed to support the development of the at-sea nuclear deterrent and the critically important Dreadnought programme:

“We have had to make sacrifices elsewhere in order to ensure that the programme keeps going”.

That is what this debate has been all about, and the hon. Gentleman is right to make that point.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my colleague on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, for making that point.

In regard to capabilities, I very much regret the fact that the Royal Navy does not have the number of surface vessels that it requires to send both our aircraft carriers to sea at the same time with the prerequisite level of air and submarine protection. I lay that before the House as an example of the capability issues that we face. We further need to be sure that we are meeting the needs of modern warfare, as has been mentioned several times. The UK is vulnerable to cyber-attack, which presents a clear and present danger in terms of the peer-to-peer threat that we are living under.

Addressing these issues will require resources and a new range of skills for defence and for counter-attack. That is why I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement a few weeks ago of the defence modernisation programme review. It seems to me that this review came about because he was faced with a choice between two sets of unpalatable cuts. Our armed forces are not only an emblem of our national pride that symbolises our national values; they are also a vital tool to project British values across the world. I believe, as a Conservative Member of Parliament, that no Conservative Secretary of State for Defence should contemplate undermining our defences further with more cuts. We must give our armed forces the reassurance and the resources that they need to do the job, and an increase in the defence budget should be forthcoming.

7.45 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It normally falls to the Scottish National party to break the consensual mood of these debates, but I fear that the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has somewhat jumped our gun in that respect. Some of what he had to say was useful, but I will take no lectures on patriotism from a party that is presiding over the housing crisis that he describes, the recruitment crisis that he describes, or indeed the morale crisis that has been adumbrated by so many Members tonight. It takes a bit more than jumping on a tank with a Union Jack to be taken seriously on these issues.

Returning to the consensual points, however, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and congratulate him on bringing forward this estimates debate. He eloquently highlighted the miasma of despair that hangs over the finances in the Ministry of Defence, just as we have done fairly frequently in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall. I half-joked with the Government Whip earlier that the speech I am about to make was the same one I have been making for the past five months—[*Interruption.*] I have no intention of sitting down! I mean no disrespect to the colleagues who also take part in these debates, but much of what has been said this afternoon and this evening has been said before. And no doubt the response will be the same. We will be told that we have to wait for the review of the new defence modernisation programme, and that is something that we look forward to engaging in.

In one of my sadder moments, one night when I was suffering from insomnia, I was looking for something to listen to on Radio 4 when I came across a programme from 2011 featuring an interview with the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who was the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee at the time. It was a programme on defence procurement.

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

Anyone listening to that programme tonight—I am sure that many Members will want to go and do just that when they leave the Chamber—would be forgiven for thinking that that interview was conducted last week. So dreadful is the state and condition of defence financing that we are repeating the same problems over and over again. I genuinely want to make a contribution that offers an alternative to the way in which the financing is done, so that we can avoid the shambles that the National Audit Office pointed out only a couple of weeks ago. I will return to that in a moment.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes a good point. Other hon. Members have raised the point—I think it is worth repeating, and I know that Ministers will hear it with some sympathy—that when it comes to defence spending, the housing that is provided for service personnel and particularly for their families is of critical importance. A number of my constituents have approached me about the housing conditions in Leuchars, and I hope that my hon. Friend will urge the Minister to look into this to ensure that military bases are as family-friendly as possible.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am quite confident that the Minister has heard my hon. Friend's point, and that he will do just that. I shall go on to talk about the equipment plan report, but I think another National Audit Office report came out the day before that one, which covered the Annington deal on military housing. Admittedly, that does not affect Scotland, but the report states that if that deal had not been signed by the Conservative Government in, I think, 1996, the taxpayer could have saved some £4 billion. We could undoubtedly have had better military housing as a result.

I want to offer an alternative to the financing model, to which I have alluded in the past. The model that is used in Sweden and Denmark involves longer projections for funding and reaching defence agreements that last more than just 12 months. The Danish model, which admittedly is imperfect, has a defence agreement that involves all the political parties. The heat of the politics is taken out of the agreement, allowing the Government to sign up to a funding model lasting somewhere between five and six years, so that even when there is a change of Government, the model can still be adhered to. Obviously, there are caveats, such as that if the Parliament chooses to diverge from the plan, it ultimately has the power to do so, but it means that the Government are not constantly chasing their tail. I would encourage hon. Members who regularly attend these debates to consider that model, which we are certainly keen to see the Government explore.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes a prescient point. At the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy today, the experts were recommending the Danish model as something that the UK should follow, and I am sure that the Ministers are listening to that point.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I would hope that such a model could avoid some of the incredibly alarming passages in the NAO report, which have been highlighted by many right hon. and hon. Members. There is a funding hole in

the equipment plan of up to £20 billion. To make that clear, that means that we cannot afford to buy the equipment we say we need in order to keep us safe.

I give all the weight I can to the Ministry of Defence in trying to get it the money that it needs—if not just to stand still, then certainly to move forward—but I do have some criticisms of how the Department has managed to get into this position. Why were the exchange rate projections so badly out—by up to a quarter in some cases?

Mr Kevan Jones: Brexit.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I understand that that was what caused it, but how did the MOD manage to get the calculations so badly wrong? When there is a funding hole of £20 billion just in the MOD's equipment spending—before we get to estates, personnel and all the rest of it—why is no one being hauled over the coals? I cannot think of another Minister or Department that would be allowed to get away with that, but it is due to a fundamental problem in how this Government, this Parliament and Governments over many years have decided to fund defence. It needs radical change. Even if the solution that we think might be helpful is not the perfect solution, something has to give, because the situation is unsustainable. The NAO is clear that the result is that projects must be cancelled, delayed or scaled back. I therefore ask the Minister to make it clear to the House which projects are to be cancelled, delayed or scaled back. Can we have a guarantee that not a single project in Scotland will be cancelled, delayed or scaled back, because that is the road that the NAO says the UK Government is heading down?

The situation adumbrates the need for a new SDSR—one that takes account of the change in currency fluctuations and of the fact that Britain will no longer be in the European Union. Our current security policy is based on our being members of the EU, so we need a new one that takes account of the fact that we are coming out, because that undermines operational capability.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about the impact on real defence spending of things such as currency fluctuations. We are talking about the need for stability in the defence budget and for it to be fiscally neutral, which I think was the term used by the Secretary of State, so should the Treasury not give special dispensation to the MOD so that it is pegged to a certain real level of spending, which would be an automatic stabiliser that rises and falls automatically with changing valuations or with defence inflation rates?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: There is nothing that I could add to make that point any better. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

Vernon Coaker: The hon. Gentleman poses an interesting question. There was an SDSR in 2015, and the modernising defence programme, which will presumably have consequences, is going to be announced in the next few months. Just to be clear about what he is saying, is his argument that there should be another SDSR at the end of the five-year period in 2020 or before that?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I rather suspect that I cannot get the Government not to go ahead with its modernising defence programme. My preference would

be for a proper SDSR, rather than this mini review, but we are where we are. Despite the supposed lifting of the fiscally neutral element, I fear that we are heading in the same direction. The hon. Gentleman will remember the statement: three of the four announcements were cuts. Let us not dress that up in any other language; they were cuts. I fully expect that to happen again when the announcement comes later in the year.

Setting aside our views on whether we should have the nuclear deterrent, the other alarming aspect of the NAO report is its rising cost. All of a sudden, it has gone up by £1 billion—overnight, it seems. It has gone up by so much that the MOD's director general nuclear is having to review the costings, so I would welcome some information on when that review will happen, when an announcement will be made and when Parliament can expect to get the information.

I want to end on a note of consensus, so my final point is that the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) made the very good point, with which I can find no reason to disagree, about making it easier for people from the British overseas territories to join up, instead of making them wait five years, which would be eminently sensible given the existing recruitment problems. Those problems have been well documented in the House, not least by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois)—I have just learned that I have been mispronouncing his constituency the entire time, but he is such a gent that he has not even told me.

This has been an important and informed debate, as it always is, and the House is better informed as a result. We look forward to the results of the mini defence review and to engaging with it. As the Secretary of State knows, the Scottish National party hopes that there will be a particular focus on the activity, or lack of it, in the high north. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in his winding-up speech.

7.56 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to debate the MOD budget, and I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for his part in securing it and for his excellent opening speech. We have heard a number of thoughtful contributions this afternoon, and I hope that Members will forgive me if I do not mention them all individually owing to the lack of time.

It is clear that there is deep dissatisfaction at the state of the defence budget on both sides of the House and a real desire for proper investment in our armed forces and our nation's defences. We are all used to hearing from Ministers that the defence budget is growing, and I am sure that there will be more of that this evening, but the truth is that years of deep cuts by the coalition and Conservative Governments mean that the defence budget is now worth far less than it was when Labour left office.

Defence spending has been cut by nearly £10 billion in real terms between 2010 and 2017, and the defence budget will fall in real terms next year according to the Government's own figures. Our purchasing power has been cut dramatically due to the sharp fall in the value of the pound, and then there is the gaping hole in the Department's defence equipment plan. It was truly shocking to read the National Audit Office's recent report which concluded that the plan is simply not

affordable and that the funding gap may be as large as £20.8 billion. That conclusion was not particularly surprising since the affordability of the plan has been in doubt for some time, but that should not detract from the seriousness of the situation. The plan represents the £180 billion of equipment and associated costs that are required by our armed forces over the next 10 years in order to keep this country safe, yet it is clear that the MOD does not know how on earth it is going to pay for it.

That is the disastrous legacy of the decision to make deep cuts to the defence budget in the 2010 SDSR, and the belated attempt to row back five years later without having the necessary funding in place. It also serves as a warning about how difficult and costly it is to replace a capability once it has been cut, as we are now seeing with the maritime patrol aircraft. The result is a plan that, in the words of the NAO,

"does not provide a realistic forecast of the costs the Department will have to meet over the next 10 years".

That would be unacceptable for any Government programme on such a scale, but it is deeply worrying in the context of the many pressures already facing the defence budget. Notably, the plan does not even include the cost of the Type 31e frigates, nor does it address concerns about the cost and affordability of the F-35 programme—concerns that have grown as Ministers have repeatedly been unable to supply adequate cost estimates for the F-35s, something which the Defence Committee described as "wholly unsatisfactory". I would be grateful if the Minister set out the Department's response to the NAO's conclusions and outlined what urgent steps will be taken to address the issue of affordability at the earliest opportunity.

The equipment plan is also heavily reliant on billions of pounds of efficiency savings. We all want value for money for the taxpayer, but Ministers have been keen to make assumptions about savings without sufficient evidence that those savings are achievable. The Select Committee concluded in respect of last year's plan that

"it is extremely doubtful that the MoD can generate efficiencies on the scale required...or detail how it would proceed to do so".

Sadly we seem to have exactly the same issues with this year's plan, because the NAO again finds

"a lack of transparency on the full amount of savings included in the Plan and the Department does not have evidence to support all the savings it has claimed to date."

We all agree that every effort should be made to maximise efficiency savings, but the Government's consistent over-reliance on projected savings to fund key programmes—savings that they are patently failing to achieve—suggests either a shocking naivety or a poor attempt to disguise yet more cuts.

That is also one of the biggest risks facing the modernising defence programme, as three of the four work strands focus so clearly on generating efficiencies through reforming the management of the MOD. As I have said previously, the Minister and his colleagues will have support from both sides of the House if the review results in proper investment for our defences and our armed forces, but there will be deep disquiet if it merely results in yet more cuts of the kind that have been widely briefed in the press in recent months.

That brings me to the potential cuts to our amphibious capabilities. I was in Plymouth with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport

[Nia Griffith]

(Luke Pollard) on Saturday, and there is real concern in that city about the fate of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. Ministers, including the Defence Secretary just last week, have repeatedly failed to address speculation that those ships will be taken out of service earlier than planned as a way of generating short-sighted savings.

Although I appreciate that the defence review is ongoing and will not report until the summer, the Minister is not precluded from stating categorically that the review will not result in cuts to our amphibious capabilities—cuts that will leave us with significant gaps—and I sincerely urge him to say something this evening.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for visiting Plymouth at the weekend. Does she agree that we not only need to provide certainty for the crews of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, and for the Royal Marines, but we also need to recognise that the sale of HMS Ocean to Brazil has hit morale in the city and is damaging retention in our armed forces?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

It is clear that the work strands of the review will look in detail at the way in which industry does business with the MOD, which is an area where progress can and should be made. It is apparent from responses to the consultation on the defence industrial policy refresh that there is a desire for the MOD to be more flexible and collaborative in setting requirements, as well as in engaging with industry at an earlier stage in the procurement process.

Opposition Members would also like the definition of “good value” to be expanded to include wider employment, industrial or economic factors when making procurement decisions and awarding contracts. There have been a few nods in that direction from Ministers, and we welcome the reference to it in the national shipbuilding strategy, but the defence industrial policy refresh is extremely disappointing, in that it fails to make any such changes.

The Select Committee also called for a broader definition of “value for money”. This call has received the support of the trade body ADS, as well as defence trade unions such as Unite and Prospect, so I would be grateful if the Minister could explain why the MOD has decided not to pursue such changes.

There is also strong support within industry for fair and open competition, wherever possible, when making procurement decisions. The Secretary of State reflected that in general terms before the Select Committee recently, but there has been no firm commitment that the contract for the new mechanised infantry vehicles will be subject to open competition. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm this evening that this really will be the case.

The MOD budget has also taken a substantial hit due to the sharp fall in the value of sterling following the EU referendum. The Department faces a real challenge given that so much of the equipment plan is denominated in foreign currencies. That is made worse by the fact that the MOD has, for some reason, used exchange rates that do not reflect current market rates—something that the NAO identifies as a risk to the plan.

Of course, one reason for the collapse in the value of the pound is a clear lack of investor confidence because of how this Government are handling the Brexit negotiations. The Opposition firmly believe that a clear commitment to negotiating a customs union with the European Union would provide the certainty that industry and investors need that they will not be hit by burdensome and unnecessary tariff barriers when Britain leaves the EU.

That is particularly important for defence companies, which depend on pan-European supply chains and simply cannot afford to see barriers to trade imposed between Britain and our European partners. But the Government have recklessly decided, point blank, to rule out a customs union, in a move that seems clearly designed to appease the hard right of the Conservative party rather than reflect the interests of our economy and workers in the defence industry.

Finally, as well as the severe challenges to the MOD budget in the here and now, there is also the spectre of massive potential costs coming down the line for forces accommodation. As the NAO’s recent report highlights, the Conservatives’ decision to privatise the housing of service personnel and their families in 1996 has been a disaster from start to finish.

The Conservatives ignored repeated warnings at the time, including from my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), that this sell-off of public assets would not deliver value for money, and now we learn that the deal may have cost the taxpayer up to £4.2 billion. That has left us in a ridiculous position whereby the Government now rent back the same accommodation at increased cost. The MOD will be held over a barrel if the company demands costly rent rises when the lease is up for renewal in 2021. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out exactly how the Government plan to manage the lease renewal process in a way that does not simply result in further unnecessary costs to the taxpayer.

There is support on both sides of the House for real investment in our national security and for an end to the short-sighted and painful cuts that have marred the last seven years. We cannot do security on the cheap. It is time for this Government to deliver the proper investment in defence that the British public expect.

8.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate. As others have done, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for securing the debate. I believe the Procedure Committee and the Liaison Committee were both involved in setting this new precedent for discussing estimates.

It is interesting that this debate was preceded by an urgent question on the situation in Syria. A number of options, ideas and proposals were put forward by Members on both sides of the House, and we should remind ourselves that we are able to make such proposals only because we have the hard power that allows us to stand up in this world. There is a question as to whether we use that hard power, but it does allow us to affect the world around us as a force for good.

In praising our armed forces, it is important that we pay tribute not only to those in uniform but to those who support them: the wives, the partners, the husbands, the children and the entire armed forces community. We, Parliament and the nation, pride ourselves on their incredible professionalism and sense of duty. They are among the best in the world—disciplined, reliable, committed, brave and very well equipped and trained—and we thank them for their incredible service.

The majority of people come out of the armed forces better for it, and our nation is certainly better for their service and for what they do in civilian life once their work is complete. It has been mentioned that we perhaps do not pay tribute to or acknowledge the work that is done across the world. Operations are taking place not just in the obvious—Iraq and Syria—but in Afghanistan and Africa. We are helping to stabilise nations, and we are helping those nations to become strong so that they can make a mark on their own future.

As we have heard today, the MOD budget sits at about £36 billion this year, and it will increase by 0.5% above inflation each year. We have the largest defence budget in Europe and the second largest in NATO, and we should remind ourselves that not all NATO countries are meeting the target. Fifteen out of 29 NATO members spend only 1.5% of their GDP on defence.

Toby Perkins: The Minister is right in what he says, so what pressure is the UK putting on those other NATO nations, both diplomatically and publicly, to get them up to the 2%? I would like to see a lot more done, when the Prime Minister is stood with other leaders, to put pressure on them to achieve that.

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased the Defence Secretary is in his place, because this is very much of concern to him, as it is to all of us in the House, and it gets raised regularly. The last time he was in Brussels he raised it, and our allies in the United States are concerned about it too. The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Let us be honest: we know that, for varying reasons, the financial year has been tough. We are grateful to the Treasury for recognising the fiscal pressures the MOD is under and providing an extra £200 million window to allow us to close the books on the financial year 2017-18. I make it clear that this is new money; it is different from the £300 million that has been brought forward to assist with the continuous at-sea deterrence programme.

Looking ahead, there continues to be a lot of debate, as has been expressed today, about the pressures on and size of the armed forces, their annual budget and the 10-year spending plan. I thought it would be helpful to place things into context following the defence and security capability review and the defence modernisation programme, and to flag up some realities that are not for this budget, but which are coming around the corner. The Defence Secretary has spoken of the need to look at outputs, rather than inputs. We must not just set out the number of tanks, ships or personnel that we need; we must first ask ourselves what we actually want to achieve. That leads us to determine the size of our armed forces and the defence posture we wish to show. This should reflect our duties, both domestic and overseas; our ambitions as a force for good; and our international responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and lead member of NATO.

We also need to adapt to the changing circumstances, as the threats we face become complex and intertwined. We must recognise that the world has become more dangerous since the publication of the 2015 SDSR. The risks and threats we face are intensifying and diversifying faster than expected, hence the purpose of the defence modernisation programme. It will allow more time to carefully consider how defence works, as well as what defence needs; it will aim to improve how defence operates; and it will focus on achievable efficiency and create different arrangements with suppliers. This modernisation will allow us to take the necessary long-term decisions about our military capability.

For clarity, let me say that the defence modernisation programme consists of four workstreams: the delivery of a robust MOD operating model, creating a leaner and more efficient MOD; a clear plan for efficiencies and business modernisation; a study of how we improve our commercial and industrial strategy, building on, for example, the shipbuilding strategy and the recently announced combat air strategy; and a focus on our defence policy outputs and our military capability—arguably the most important of the four.

John Spellar: That is all well and good, and all long term. Given that, why are the Government not sorting out the Capita contract on recruitment, which is clearly, visibly, obviously and lamentably failing the country, our armed forces and the recruits?

Mr Ellwood: The right hon. Gentleman touches on something that I am not going to disagree with, but it is pertinent to and included in the workstreams I have just mentioned; we will be seeking more efficiencies and business modernisation. That means looking at our relationship with the contractors we work with, in order to improve the service we need to provide for our service personnel.

The work I have described will be led by the MOD, working closely with the National Security Secretariat and the Treasury, and engaging widely with Parliament, think-tanks, academics, defence experts, international allies, the media, devolved Administrations, the defence industry and, of course, the public.

John Spellar: Having all of those other worthy people involved does not get to grips with the problem of the here and now; it is pushing everything off to the right and over the horizon—again. Why will the Department not get a grip of just this programme and sort it out, because it is crippling to our armed forces?

Mr Ellwood: We have a programme—it is not fiscally neutral, as the last study was. This will allow us to make the changes and the recommendations that we need to take forward. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be able to get behind that, in order to make sure we can provide the service and the changes that we need to make, and which our armed forces deserve.

Vernon Coaker: What the Minister has just said is very important. Will he confirm what he just said: this modernisation of defence programme is not fiscally neutral?

Mr Ellwood: I can say it again and I think I am going to say it a bit later, because it is in my speech: I am happy to confirm that it is not fiscally neutral. That is exactly why we are doing this. I am not saying this just because the Defence Secretary is in his place, but the

[Mr Ellwood]

first thing he recognised was the fact that the capability review was fiscally neutral and it was prohibiting us. We saw a lot of the stuff that came out in the media and so forth. The challenges that that would have imposed on our armed forces were exactly why there was a requirement to look in more detail at what our armed forces are doing. We now have that opportunity and we have to make the case as to what changes we need, what our defence posture is and how we move forward—

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I am not going to give way again. If I may, I will make some progress.

Let me make it clear that this approach will allow us to deliver a better understanding of the implications of the new threats. It will confirm what conventional capability is critical and it will place the MOD on a more sustainable, affordable long-term footing, optimising our relationships with the private sector.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I am not giving way at the moment. As I have said, as has the Defence Secretary, the programme is not fiscally neutral. It allows us to expand and propose changes. It will assess the capabilities and the force structure we need to deal with the threats the UK faces. We will then consider the implications for funding.

When the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary met in December to confirm a way forward on the national security capability review and the defence modernisation programme, it was agreed that no changes would be made to our capability until the modernising defence programme was complete. With one eye on next year's 2018-19 budget, I very much hope that that is still the case. The requirement for the defence modernisation programme is making sure that we understand the financial pressures affecting defence and looking into the future. If it is not the case, there would be no requirement for a defence modernisation programme. As the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for Military Capability told the Defence Committee last week, we are, unfortunately, seeing cuts to training exercises and

“a general suppression of some force generation across...frontline commands”

I stress that this is being managed without affecting prioritised units which are heading on operations, but if units are not training, it builds up a backlog of diminished capability.

Another issue raised in the Defence Committee last week related to the National Audit Office report on equipment, which cited a £20 billion deficit over the next 10 years. I make it clear that that makes some significant assumptions of risk, many of which will not be realised, and does not factor in the efficiency recommendations that the defence modernisation programme might make. Nevertheless—

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not listen to what I am saying, because it is important and pertinent. Perhaps he can hold on to his seat for a second and allow me to finish this important point about the NAO report. Is that okay with him?

The NAO report does not factor in the efficiency recommendations, but nevertheless we must acknowledge the financial pressure on our equipment programme. As has been mentioned, there are also new and emerging factors, such as cyber, space and complex weapons upgrades. We must respond to them all, which of course adds to the bill.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman for the last time.

Mr Jones: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He says that this is fiscally neutral. He knows what the problem is now—[*Interruption.*] What was agreed in 2015 was fiscally neutral. It was unachievable because the efficiencies were unachievable and the land sales were unachievable. That is not my opinion; that is what the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), said. If we know that, we know that in reality the only way that we can fix this is with more cash.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman should refer back to *Hansard* to understand what I have actually said. I shall make some progress.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: Let me finish this part of my speech, then I shall come back to the hon. Gentleman. I am surprised by the way interventions are being made, because I am going through a series of acknowledgements of where things have gone wrong, another example of which is the challenge of flexing—the spending of future defence budgets today—which should be the exception, not the norm. CASD is a £31 billion programme and it has been necessary to bring forward some of that spending, which is why the budget has been increased by £300 million this year.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On the equipment plan, the Minister is right to say that the £20 billion black hole is the upper end of the estimate. He talked about taking that seriously, so what will it be this time next year?

Mr Ellwood: We have only just completed the budget for 2017-18, and I should be clear that we have yet to embark on the annual spending round for next year. Perhaps this differs from other Departments because we have an opportunity to make a case for additional spending. We have the opportunity to make the case for a defence posture and to say what is appropriate for Britain. I cannot answer the hon. Gentleman's point at the moment, but the purpose of this entire process is for us, hopefully with the House's support, to make the case to the Treasury and to the Prime Minister. That is what the modernisation programme is all about.

Dr Julian Lewis: I fully understand the direction of my right hon. Friend's argument and I realise that it has been a great success for him and the new Secretary of State to regain control of the process for the MOD. If, as a result of the MOD's examinations, the minimum recommendations on what the country needs to be able to deter threats and defend itself successfully require a significant increase in the defence budget—frankly, that is the assumption that has underlain many of today's

speeches—can we rely on the whole ministerial team to stand together as one and say to the Prime Minister, “We simply must spend more on defence”? That is what is required.

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend hypothesises, but it is absolutely the case that we stand together to put forward a programme that will allow for the defence posture that we believe the country absolutely deserves. It is not just about asking for more money, which is obviously simple to do, and we will be lining up with other Departments doing exactly the same thing; we should also recognise that there are efficiencies to be found in the MOD itself. Indeed, as outlined in the 2015 SDSR, we are realising £7 billion of efficiency savings and moving to a more commercial footing, seeking to sell more of our world-class military equipment.

The most important reason for doing this now rather than waiting for the next SDSR in 2020 is that the world around us is changing fast. That raises important questions—arguably more so for Britain than for other countries—about exactly what role we aspire to play as a nation. The outcomes and recommendations of the defence modernisation programme will provide the evidence for how to answer the big questions. We are experiencing a chapter in which the conduct of war is changing at a furious pace. As the world gets more complex and unpredictable, ever fewer countries have the means, aspiration and, indeed, authority to help to shape it for the better.

As the Prime Minister said in her Mansion House speech last year, we are seeing resurgent nations ripping up the international rules-based order. Left unchecked, the growing threats could damage the free markets and open economies that have fuelled global growth for a generation, at the very time, post-Brexit, when we are seeking new trade deals around the globe. The task of a global Britain is clear: to defend that rules-based international order against irresponsible states; to support our partners in unstable regions by repelling the threats that they face; and to back visions for societies and economies that will prosper and help the world.

My concern, which I think is shared in all parts of the House, is that there is a tragic collective naivety about the durability of the relative peace that we enjoy today. That point has been repeated again and again in the debate. Our country, economy and values are vulnerable to a range of growing dangers, both state and non-state, that have no respect for our borders, including the rise of so-called sharp power—the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes and the manipulation of ideas, political perceptions and electoral processes. It is a model that is not new, but because of the speed and the low cost, which come thanks to the internet and so forth, it is far easier to procure.

My belief, which I hope is echoed around the Chamber, is that it has always been in our nation’s DNA to step forward when other nations might hesitate and to help to shape the world around us. However, to continue to

do so will require investment, so I end by repeating my thanks to the Treasury for its support. It has to endure all Departments seeking to increase their budgets. We often say that it is only with a strong economy that we can consider any increase in any budget, but I politely add that without a strong defence, a strong economy cannot be guaranteed.

Last week, the Secretary of State spoke of 2% of GDP being spent on defence as a floor, not a ceiling. The message has to be clear: if we want to continue to play an influential role on the international stage, with full-spectrum capability; if we want to provide the critical security that post-Brexit trade deals will demand; and if we want to remain a leading contributor in the fight against extremism in the middle east and elsewhere, we cannot continue to do all that on a defence budget of just 2% of GDP. Two per cent. is just not enough. This is a question not just for the Government and parliamentarians, but for Britain: what status, role and responsibility do we aspire to have as we seek to trade more widely in a world that is becoming more dangerous?

8.28 pm

Sir Edward Leigh: This has been an historic debate. For the first time in nearly 60 years, the House of Commons has discussed estimates on estimates day. I have been campaigning for this for 10 years, and the quality of this debate has vindicated the decision to discuss money on estimates day. I am so pleased that I persuaded my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Defence Committee to make the Ministry of Defence the subject of this first estimates day debate on money.

Everybody has spoken with one voice. This has not been a party-political debate in that sense. Whether from New Forest East, Gedling, Moray, Aberdeenshire, Glasgow, Aldershot or Rayleigh, everyone has made the point—and the Minister has just echoed it, one of the first times that I have heard it from the Front Bench—that spending 2% on defence is simply not enough.

In the spirit of consensus, I echo what the Opposition spokesman said—that we cannot get security on the cheap. I also echo what the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said, and I tell the Secretary of State to go back to the Treasury and No. 10 Downing Street and say that every single Member, from the SNP, the Conservatives and Labour has made this point—*[Interruption.]* And the Liberal Democrats. How could I forget the great speech about the contribution of the local regiments in Caithness? Members spoke with one voice. The Secretary of State can go back and say, “This is not like the 1930s. This is not like the Fulham by-election when we were worried about public opinion on disarmament. We have the support of the whole House.” He should go back, get the money and make sure that we defend our country.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

Department for Exiting the European Union

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Department for Exiting the European Union:

(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £22,093,000 as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £650,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £24,303,000.—(*Mr Baker.*)

8.31 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I extend my thanks to colleagues across the House who have backed this debate this evening. This is an important debate. The Department for Exiting the European Union is obviously a relatively new Department, but it is not an insignificant spending Department, as we have seen recently.

We have some sympathy for the Government of the day—the House will not hear me say that very often—given that they are trying to find a solution for leaving the European Union on the back of a leave campaign that told us precious little about what leaving the European Union would actually mean. There was no White Paper and no manifesto. Two years on from the EU referendum, however, the excuses are wearing a little thin. The Government increasingly seem to have not much of a clue and any analysis they conduct—at the taxpayers' expense—is hidden from view, in spite of what this place says and others might argue.

What is clear is that the Government are taking each and every part of the United Kingdom down the road to ruin. Tomorrow we will vote on the estimates, a vote that will take place before we even know what the UK Government's plan is for leaving the EU. The Government tell us that this is a big negotiating strategy—not to tell anybody anything. But even Baldrick could tell us that simply not having a plan, cunning or otherwise, is not much of a strategy. I fear that, just as the EU referendum was held to try and keep the Conservative party together—and then we had a general election for the same reason—so too is every announcement on the subject. It is the Government's *raison d'être*—if I may be forgiven for using French in this debate. This is clearly a failing Government when the risks are so high for us all.

The situation is having an impact on public services. If GDP decreases, obviously less cash will be available for public services, unless taxes are increased or further cuts are made. We are all mindful of that. We have just had an excellent debate about the 2% GDP commitment for defence spending. But if GDP is not what we think it will be in 2030, that will mean less money for defence, in the same way as the red bus pledge seems to get further and further away from the £350 million a week that was promised for the NHS. The Government's own leaked analysis shows that GDP will fall as will investment in public services.

The Chancellor has set aside £3 billion for Brexit preparations—greater than his additional cash allocation for the NHS in England. That is spending even before we take into account the devastating impact of the loss of EU nationals on the NHS and other public services—and, frankly, on our society in general.

The overwhelming departmental spend shows an increase. Jon Thompson, the chief executive of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, said in November that he would need an extra £450 million a year for personnel and infrastructure—spending money to throw up barriers, rather than to take them down. That money could otherwise be put towards frontline public services. As well as this expenditure that we do not need at the moment, we saw in July 2017 that the Department for Exiting the European Union is spending money on legal costs, including litigation, to stop this place having a say. Again, that is money taken away from frontline public services, and another way in which Brexit is costing each and every one of us. The expenditure for DExEU and the Government's plans will be absolutely brutal. I have a message for the Government. In spite of what they might believe, there is no magic money tree. It does not exist and it has never existed. Every penny spent on leaving the EU—including the eye-watering bill of reportedly £40 billion just to leave—is cash that we will not have to spend on other services.

If I may say so for a moment, the issue goes beyond finances. This Government are so hell-bent on keeping themselves together and somehow trying to find a way a through the morass that they have created for themselves that other policy areas are being left behind. In normal times, we should be looking at the future of our NHS, and working with our European partners to tackle issues such as climate change and the ongoing conflicts that have been debated in this House that affect many of Europe's neighbours.

As I saw just this morning, higher education is one area that will deeply be affected by the UK leaving the European Union. Yes, it will be affected in terms of funding, but it will also be affected when it comes to personnel. This morning I spoke to academics who have gone on strike over their pensions at the University of St Andrews. Believe me, it is a cold time of the year to be striking; it is pretty chilly out there. Those academics want to see a Government who are committed to securing an end to this crisis. This is just one of many difficult issues, yet at a time when that area should be a priority we are having to debate these Government plans that suck cash out of our frontline services. Instead of tackling the issues that matter such as higher education funding and the strikes in that sector, we are trying to clear up a mess of the Government's own making.

The UK Government should take the advice of almost all economic experts, businesses, and the Scottish and Welsh Governments who incidentally—unlike DExEU—have actually published their analysis. Staying in the single market and customs union would protect the economy and give the Government consistency in trade policy. While we are talking about how much money we are spending on these areas, it would remiss of me not to mention the official Opposition. It was welcome to see some movement from the Labour party after almost 20 years of glacial movement, but there is still a long way to go. When the Labour party talks about a “jobs first” Brexit, it is perhaps mindful of the Government's analysis showing that staying in the single market is a better option, but still the least worst option.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman not feel an annoyance that the Labour party has ignored its Labour base, especially in the north-east, and that it has tried to move forward with an acceptance

of the customs union that people do not want? Does he not accept that we will get £8 billion back from the EU that we will then be able to use for everything else? Where is his argument on that?

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, as usual, but every economic analysis that we have seen, including the one from the Scottish Government, shows the devastation that would be wrought on GDP. That means billions of pounds disappearing out of the public purse. That means billions less in Scotland and the rest of the UK. It means billions less in Northern Ireland, which is why I am not surprised that the people of Northern Ireland voted so overwhelmingly to remain part of the European Union.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Speaking as a St Andrews graduate, may I point out to the hon. Gentleman that when we leave the European Union, the University of St Andrews will no longer have to give free fees to people from the European Union, which currently results in discrimination against people from England?

Stephen Gethins: If only the good people of England would vote for a Government who believed in getting rid of tuition fees. What an argument by the hon. Gentleman! The University of St Andrews is a fine educational establishment, despite his best efforts to prove otherwise. Twenty-five per cent. of its funding comes from funding for research on issues like kids who have learning difficulties or treating dementia. It does this because it pools its resources with other European universities and with some of the finest EU nationals who have made St Andrews their home—if this Government gave them certainty, they could continue to call it their home. The hon. Gentleman's argument is one of the weakest I have heard in this place, given the huge amounts of benefits that the University of St Andrews, like the entire education sector in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, derives from our being part of the European Union.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Apart from the financial implications, and regardless of having tuition fees or not, there is a cultural element. We could be facing damage to educational quality throughout the United Kingdom if we lose the students who bring that cultural element from other parts of the EU and provide us with the ability to learn from other cultures. When I went to university, the word “university” meant “universal”. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are in danger of losing that?

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. I benefited personally from our membership of the European Union through being able to study at the University of Antwerp. The educational experience is the richer for having students who come from elsewhere, as well as the opportunity that students have to go elsewhere. I urge Ministers to look at this, because the cost of these programmes is not that much, especially given the benefits that they bring. Building on her point, I think we should all be ashamed of the fact that right now, as things stand, this Parliament will be one of the first that we do not leave with young people having more opportunities than at its start. That is something we should reflect on and that is quite shameful.

Going back to DExEU, the Public Accounts Committee's recent report on exiting the EU said:

“DExEU has identified 313 areas of work, or work streams, that departments need to complete as a consequence of the UK leaving the EU...However, we are concerned that DExEU has been too slow to turn its attention to how departments will put those plans into practice and that the plans may not be sufficiently developed to enable implementation to start quickly.”

Despite the cash, the Department is being held back because of the Government's lack of plans. I hope that the Minister will touch on that. In January, the National Audit Office released a verdict that the International Trade Department is struggling to meet deadlines, recruit enough specialist staff or retrain its existing workforce as we start from scratch after losing all the trade relationships that we have built up as a part of the European Union. That means jobs, investment, and cash for Departments to spend in the future.

None of this has stopped the Chancellor giving the Department an increase of almost £30 million for preparations. And there is more: the number of times that the Chancellor will have to spend out money. The UK Government will have to spend out money as we lose the European Medicines Agency from here in London. The Government have allocated £250 million of spending for Departments to prepare for a Brexit with no deal. As I said, they have spent £1 million fighting the case to stop this place from having a say, after the Brexiteers told us how much they wanted democracy to return to the House of Commons. Is it right that this Government are blowing money on stopping Parliament from having a say? They are preventing us from analysing and publishing their own statistics, and the extra money they are having to spend will hit public services. This shows how little confidence this Government have in their own plans, and rightly so.

8.44 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Brexit is an area where it is quite hard to estimate. Brexit has been mis-served by the media. It has been played out in a soap opera of personalities, parliamentary arithmetic and party political advantage, when in fact it should be played out under the lens of trade, the economy and what it will mean. When the Prime Minister says that our best days are in front of us, that is a news story, but if vets say that there will be 325% more checks at borders because of this, that is not a news story. This is a costly step that is going to be taken, over and above anything else we might need at ports in years to come. Clearly, to even a very untrained eye, Brexit is going to be costly, and anybody who does not think that is in severe denial.

Maybe the best comment that I have heard about this was not made by Peston, Marr, Andrew Neil or any of our so-called professional media. It came from “The Mash Report”, a current affairs comedy programme, and said that Brexiteers have to tell us now what Brexit is, not what it is not, because they are very strong at telling us what Brexit is not.

At least we know one thing that Brexit will be. We have to be grateful for the efforts of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and his civil servants

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

for this: we know that Brexit will not be a “Mad Max” dystopia. It may be a dystopia, but it certainly will not be a “Mad Max” dystopia.

We know, because it was leaked from the UK Government and has been verified and cross-checked by the Scottish Government and the Irish Government, that staying in the customs union and single market is a 2% hit to the UK economy. That is a strong estimate of the hit. A free trade agreement is a 5% hit, and WTO rules is an 8% hit.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Maybe the hon. Gentleman has not had the opportunity to see the report, but it is quite clear that none of these figures should be treated as forecasts or quoted in isolation. The report is full of caveats showing that many things influence those figures, and therefore they are really rough guides to compare one situation with another but should never be used as forecasts.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman makes a case for all reports, but the report is the best estimate we have to go with. The report was kept secret for a long time, but it seems that it chimed with more than one person when it had to be leaked in the end.

It has emerged that the UK Government have decided on the middle road. They are looking for a free trade agreement, which is the option of a 5% to 6% hit on GDP—those are the Government’s own estimates—although some of the Tory party would go for the 8% hit of WTO rules. They have made political choices with severe economic consequences that they probably will not personally have to face. In a funny, humorous and ironic twist, they expect the European Union not to respond in kind. They expect the European Union to react with complete economic rationale, even though their politics are ones of irrational economic actions.

As we know, the EU and the UK have already taken actions based on principles, for a higher purpose, and that was in Crimea because of Russia’s annexation of it. The EU’s principle of the four freedoms means that it will take a smaller hit than the UK and a smaller hit than they all took with Crimea, or about the same. The point is that, in the bigger picture, the European Union is going to lose effectively about a toenail here, while the UK debates how many bullets are to go through its feet. That is the difference in the damage that will be done.

From the principal parties, we have had slogans. The slogan from the ruling Conservative party has been the illuminating “Brexit means Brexit”, as well as “It’s going to be a Brexit for Britain” and “It’s going to be the best trade deal possible”. We can look at this as an analogy. The Government have crashed their Rolls-Royce and are going down the second-hand car shop looking for the best second-hand car possible. Will it be a second-hand car that is 2% less good, 5% less good or 8% less good than the one they currently have?

On the other hand, we have the principal Opposition party, Labour, talking about a Brexit for jobs and a Brexit for the people. Labour—or at least its leader—has thrown another variable into the works: it want a customs union. I do not see an estimate for that either. What does that mean? If hon. Members are familiar with national newspapers that run fantasy football activities for statheads

and football fans, they will know that readers can pick and choose players from a variety of teams and compose their own team based on that fantasy—perhaps called Team Corbyn; I do not know—but it is notable that this need not bear any relation to the reality of football other than the statistics, and even the players do not need to know that they are in somebody’s fantasy football team. Similarly, what is now emerging is a fantasy customs union—it bears no relation to the views of the 27 other partner countries—and they can pick and choose elements from the newspapers to their heart’s content.

The estimates in the leaked statistics show that this option—it is not the customs union or the single market—will lead to a hit of between 2% and 5% to 6% to the UK economy. The current Labour leadership should be very clear about that.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I have listened to the very pessimistic overview taken from the part reports. I read them today in the reading room, which was awfully secure, rather bizarrely, I thought. The reports make it clear that they are not finished estimates, but crystal-ball gazing. I take it that the hon. Gentleman has no desire to respect the people by way of referendums. He has never really got to grips with the referendum in 2014 and I am hearing tonight that he has not really got to grips with the referendum of 2017. Does his party disrespect the people and referendums?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The other referendum was actually in 2016, but in both referendums—of 2014 and 2016—the Scottish people voted clearly to remain in the European Union, so, yes, I do respect the two referendums. I want that opinion to be checked again in the further referendum on Scottish independence within the European Union that, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is coming down the tracks in jig time.

A customs union, as currently suggested by the principal Opposition, can have myriad or infinite permutations. Have no estimates at all been made for that? All in all, this is one of the areas where the estimates are huge, the variabilities are massive and it is very unclear where the chips will fall.

The overall message that should be going out is that when boardrooms and when the people of Scotland look at the two parties in this Chamber—the Government and the principal Opposition—they have to start thinking and, particularly in the boardrooms, they have to start speaking. They do not have to enter into political debate, but they have to start to become very strident indeed in what they are saying. I meet too many of those from companies who come to me with their fears and their estimates of what might happen. In reality, they have to start saying what they want, because otherwise it will be too late.

I am reminded of the book, “On the Psychology of Military Incompetence”. In a number of military events that occurred, whether in Crimea—the charge of the Light Brigade was in Crimea of course—with the Boers in South Africa, in Mesopotamia or in Afghanistan, the common theme running through them all was the fact that the rank and file could not believe their commanders could get it so utterly wrong, and it was only when hot lead ripped through bare flesh that people then understood. There are companies that are too afraid to move and that, for one reason or another, will not say a word, but when

they are taken down by the 2%, 5% or the 8% damage of Brexit, I tell those companies now that it will be too late to do anything about it then, so speak now.

Recently, my Committee went to the USA and Canada to look at the possibility of trade deals. The farmers lobby asked us why. Ford said a UK-US deal would be incremental, but that a UK-EU one would be existential. Certainly, when I saw the border with other Committee members, it was not as fast as the border at the moment between Ireland and Northern Ireland or as the border between France and Spain. These are some of the realities that are coming our way.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am very glad to give way to one of the Select Committees colleagues who were with me. I predicted at the border that some people would see what they wanted to see, so let us see what happens.

Mr Fysh: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we saw the border between the US and Canada. The US and Canada have different regulatory and customs systems, yet they have a just-in-time, integrated supply chain that works perfectly well, so it is possible. The forecasts that he referred to earlier take no account of the possibility of such just-in-time supply chains continuing to work in a free trade agreement scenario.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: We were told that the average wait time was 15 minutes and just-in-time takes cognisance of that. If two minutes at Dover becomes four minutes, that will result in a 17-mile tailback. And, of course, no embarkation of ships takes place on the US-Canadian border after they have passed, or just before, the border point.

In summary, this Government exercise is costing about £250 million a year. It will cost the Scottish economy, which concerns me most, between £3.6 billion and £12 billion a year by 2030, and the way in which the two main parties are going at it means that the figure will probably be closer to £12 billion than to £3.6 billion. It really is time that the UK took a short, sharp look at itself. I predict that Brexit will probably collapse on itself. The economic reality will hit the rhetoric head first, and when it does so the rhetoric will just vanish into a pile of dust and be trampled by the economic reality, which is that the people want their jobs and they want the economy running, not the ideological purity of some Members of this House.

8.56 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): May I begin by saying that I welcome the fact that the House now has the opportunity to debate estimates? Like many Members who previously served in local government, I was astonished when I first arrived that the House of Commons appeared to spend no time at all discussing the Government's expenditure, when many of us would have sat through many hours of committee meetings poring line by line over the expenditure plans of the local authorities of which we were members. I doubt that this debate—this is already evident—will feature the kind of consensus we saw in the last debate on the need for more expenditure. I have to confess that this is one area of Government

spending where, to be frank, I wish we were not spending anything at all, but we are where we are following the referendum result.

I will, however, just pick up on one point made by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), whom I congratulate on having secured this debate. Perhaps if the Government had not wasted so much time repeating the mantra, “No deal is better than a bad deal,” we would not be spending so much money on preparing for no deal, which would be clearly disastrous for the British economy and, frankly, I say to the Minister, would never get through this House of Commons. That is a consequence of choices that the Government have made.

It is fair to say, and not to be argued with, that relatively little preparation had been made in government for a leave result in the referendum, but clearly the establishment of DExEU was a logical and necessary consequence. I have to say, however, that the civil servants and, indeed, the Ministers who work in the Department face a really substantial and highly complex task, because for 45 years our trade, laws, relationships, rules and standards have been inextricably intertwined with those of our European friends and neighbours. The task we now face is the process of pulling out the plug of that relationship while trying to fashion a new plug in the course of negotiation, and everyone is wondering, when we stick it in the socket and press the switch, what will still work and what will not. The honest answer is that, as things stand, we just do not know.

The Department, of course, has been established from scratch and has recruited very able people from all across Whitehall. Lots of civil servants wanted to work in DExEU because of the nature of the challenge, which is a once in a generation—probably a once in a civil service career—opportunity. The Department has been set the task of both understanding the implications of Brexit and of advising Ministers on the choices that might be made in how to handle it.

On the first of those tasks, drawing on my experience as Chair of the Select Committee, I know that, in truth, the more we look, the more we encounter questions that currently have no answer. On the second, it was clearly sensible of DExEU to, in effect, subcontract to other Government Departments the task of talking at the start of the process to stakeholders about the important issues that Brexit raises, but I have to say that, when it comes to development of policy, I have a great deal of sympathy with civil servants. Unusually, they are not suffering from a lack of money; they are suffering from a lack of clarity from the people who head the Department, Ministers, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet about what the UK Government want.

In my experience, if you give direction to the civil service, it will get on and do the task using all the expertise, energy and ability for which it is highly regarded in this country and around the world. However, all those qualities cannot make up for a lack of leadership, let us be frank, caused by the divisions—open secret—in the Cabinet on what the right thing to do is. It is not surprising that the Prime Minister sought to move Olly Robins, who was the permanent secretary in the Department for Exiting the European Union, across to the Cabinet Office to work directly to her rather than remain in his role as permanent secretary.

[Hilary Benn]

Looking at the scrutiny that has taken place thus far of DExEU—reference has been made in part to some of it—the National Audit Office said in July last year that the Government had failed to take a unified approach to talks with the EU. The Comptroller and Auditor General commented, in a rather unusually colourful way, that the Minister had left hopes of a successful Brexit at risk of falling apart “like a chocolate orange”. I suspect that when the history of Brexit comes to be written there will be a special footnote for chocolate oranges, “Mad Max” and this week’s favourite phrase, snake oil. Frankly, they could remain in the dustbin of those footnotes as far as I am concerned.

In November, the NAO reported on DExEU and the Government’s preparations for Brexit. It said, as we heard from the hon. Member for North East Fife who opened the debate, that 310 work streams had been identified. Some mid-sized Departments, in particular the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs but also the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, have a lot of issues they need to grapple with. Not surprisingly, there is a lot of work to be done. They have to formulate policy, draft legislation, consult with the devolved Administrations and, in some cases, new systems and processes have to be invented. One task facing the Home Office is how to document 3 million European citizens when, because of the system of free movement we have operated, we do not know who some of them are. The Treasury always starts by saying to Departments that they will have to do all that within their existing budgets, but we know that last summer and autumn it had to review and agree bids for additional funding for 2017-18.

There is a very complex structure across Whitehall for dealing with Brexit, but the Public Accounts Committee suggested:

“No one in the civil service is clearly responsible for making sure that arrangements overall are fit-for-purpose for Brexit.”

In its report of 7 February, the PAC concluded that

“Government Departments have got to face up to some very hard choices”

and that

“the Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU) and the Cabinet Office do not have a robust enough plan to identify and recruit the people and skills needed quickly.”

I note the high turnover in staff in DExEU. It said there was a need for

“much greater transparency from DExEU, HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office on formally setting out who is responsible for what and on the progress that is being made.”

It said that accountability was unclear and that that

“risked undermining speedy decision-making”.

I will come back to that point. It also said that there was a

“paucity of information in the public domain”.

On that last point, it is frankly extraordinary that so many decisions have been made about the kind of Brexit the Government wish to pursue in the absence of any estimate, any evidence or any analysis whatever. When the Secretary of State admitted to me, in testimony to the Select Committee, that when the Cabinet decided to leave the customs union it had done so without having before it any assessment whatever of the economic impact,

that said it all. Having given Parliament the impression that detailed impact analysis was being done on different sectors of the economy, we were—I think the whole House was—astonished to discover that this was not the case. It was not a lack of money in the estimates that caused that; it was a lack of policy and an apparent lack of interest.

We have before us the exit analysis, which the latest Humble Address instructed the Government to pass over to the Select Committee and which has been shared in confidence with all Members of this House and the other place. We have had the chance to see it, and the public have had a chance to read part of what it says, courtesy of BuzzFeed and the *Financial Times*. We know that for the first time it has attempted to look at some costs of the different choices when it comes to our future economic relationship with the European Union, although Ministers have said from the Dispatch Box—indeed, they were at pains to point it out when we debated the Humble Address—that it does not include the Government’s preferred option. I presume the reason is that those who were doing the modelling did not know what the Government’s preferred option was at the time they undertook that work.

The Brexit Committee has decided that it is minded to publish the Government’s EU exit analysis, but it has asked the Secretary of State whether he would wish any specific details to be redacted on the basis that they would either be sensitive to the negotiations, market sensitive or commercially confidential. As a Committee, we have always argued in favour of as much transparency as possible in the process, without damaging our negotiating position. If we are going to be able to do that, we need as much information as possible.

If the press reports of what the exit analysis has to say are correct, it is clear that the economy will be less big and less strong than it would otherwise have been, because of Brexit. Incidentally, that assessment is shared by many other organisations that have done their own economic impact assessment.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I will, to my fellow Select Committee member.

Peter Grant: It is now in the public domain, I think for the first time, that the Committee intends to publish as much of these documents as possible. Does the right hon. Gentleman see the contradiction in the two claims that have been made by those who oppose publication? On the one hand, the documents contain information that would be very useful to our negotiating partners or opponents in the Brexit negotiations, but on the other, they are so unreliable that they are no good to anybody. Does he accept that there is a blatant contradiction that the Government have to address?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman anticipates exactly the point that I was going to make. I should point out that the information about the Committee taking that decision last week came into the public domain when our minutes went up on our website, so it is available for everybody to see.

I was just about to say that the assessments of the economic impact of some policy choices that the Government face have been hotly contested by some.

Civil servants have been accused of producing figures to support views that they already hold, rather than undertaking an objective examination of the evidence. I have to say that to attack civil servants and Government economists in this way is both wrong and unfair. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who is also a member of the Select Committee, was absolutely right to make the point that the analysis is, rightly, heavily caveated. That is important, because trying to forecast what the future holds is a difficult business, as we all know, and there is a strong argument for saying that if the information is going to be in the public domain, the nature of the caveats should be too.

Mr Fysh: Does the right hon. Gentleman think that there is enough information in the impact analyses to judge whether the impact assessments are objective?

Hilary Benn: I made the point a moment ago that Government economists and the Treasury are not the only people who are trying to look at the economic impact of leaving the European Union and what the alternative models might produce. I presume that all the other ones have already been published; they all show the same picture. Indeed, the best indication we have had since the referendum result of what the world thought of the British economy's future value came the day after, when the pound fell. The world looked at the United Kingdom and said, "You're not going to be as well off as you were. The economy is still going to grow"—let us not get that wrong—"but it will grow less than it would have done had you not left."

All I am arguing is that we should make the effort to try to understand. Having been a Cabinet Minister and having looked at many impact assessments when legislation was coming forward, I know that we do this for all sorts of things that are really quite minor by comparison with this absolutely fundamental change that the country is facing. That is why, for me, it is inexplicable that so little work has been undertaken by the Government in an attempt to assess the situation so people can then look at it. The other point I would make is that if that assessment had shown that the British economy would be better off, the report would not only have been published yonks ago, but would already be gathering dust on our bookshelves.

Mr Fysh: I have looked at forecasts for many years as a professional. I share the right hon. Gentleman's concerns about these impact forecasts, but perhaps for different reasons. They have absolutely no value as a decision-making tool. Frankly, I am shocked at how poor and poorly constructed they are. I encourage all hon. Members to read them in detail and see exactly that.

Hilary Benn: Different Members will draw different conclusions from what they read. It sounds to me that the hon. Gentleman is making an argument in favour of openness, so that everybody can make a judgment. In the circumstances, that would be a very wise thing to do.

My last point is that the argument we are currently having in the political world about membership of the customs union as opposed to leaving it, which is the Government's policy, is all about what is in the best economic interests of the United Kingdom, our businesses, and the jobs and communities that depend on them. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington

(Jenny Chapman), who occupies a position as shadow Brexit Minister, that I unreservedly welcome the fact that there is now a growing consensus in the House in favour of remaining in a customs union with the European Union after the transition period. As hon. Members will know, I have been arguing for that for a very long time. It is supported by, among others, the CBI; it would remove any risks of a return to tariffs and help to ease concerns about supply chains; it would be an essential first step, but not the complete answer, to ensuring a free and open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic without infrastructure; and it would also save money—the hon. Member for North East Fife made the point that, if we are in a customs union, we will not need to recruit a load of new customs officers.

The House will face that choice in due course, however long the Government delay the Trade Bill. To the two SNP Members who have spoken, I should say that, despite their slightly ungenerous characterisation of the policy position announced by the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Brexit Secretary over the last two days, I trust that, when the vote comes, the SNP will be in the Division Lobby with Labour Members and others.

Angus Brendan MacNeil *rose*—

Hilary Benn: I am looking forward to confirmation of that now.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The confirmation I would need is this: what is the difference between "a customs union" and "the customs union"? I said that there are many other possibilities—an infinite number—but I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows exactly what it means.

Hilary Benn: I hope that that is not a caveated expression of support. My interpretation of "a customs union", as opposed to "the customs union", is that it would bring all the same benefits—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: They are the same thing.

Hilary Benn: Indeed. There is a legal argument about whether one can remain a member of the customs union if we are not a member of the European Union. But SNP Members need to be careful: if we go through the Division Lobby and discover that they are sitting on their hands when we have the chance to say to the Government with one voice—we should not weaken—that the view of those who think that staying in a customs union is right—

Angus Brendan MacNeil *rose*—

Stephen Gethins *rose*—

Hilary Benn: I will give way to the hon. Member for North East Fife.

Stephen Gethins: As usual, the right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point and is making an excellent speech. I agree with much of what he has said and look forward to defeating the Government in due course. However, one challenge we have is this. The Government are on the ropes; will he gently nudge Labour Front Benchers to get behind the single market as well as the customs union?

Hilary Benn: I take that as an endorsement of the development of our policy announced by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Brexit Secretary over the past two days. I notice the slightly different approaches of the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I want us to continue to develop our policy. I have always said openly that the single market issue is more complicated because of free movement, but where we can find common ground with some Conservative Members, we need to maximise that unity of purpose and strength. In the end, if the Government are forced to realise that they cannot get policies through the House of Commons, they will have to change their mind. As I said in my last speech in the House, if the Government will not do their job, the House will have to do it for them.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: Other Members want to speak. I have given way already, and I am about to bring my remarks to a close.

It seems to me that the estimates we should really be discussing are our best estimates of the economic impact of Brexit. We are now running out of time. It is 19 months since the referendum, and there are nine months to go in the negotiation, but, crucially, there is one month until the European Union draws up its negotiating guidelines for the new economic relationship. If we do not get a move on, we run the risk that options that the House—or, heaven knows, the Government, if they change their view—might want to pursue are closed off by the EU in the negotiating guidelines for want of clarity about what the United Kingdom is seeking.

Bill Grant: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I will, but then I must end my speech.

Bill Grant: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I am standing up without holding on to the ropes at the moment.

I am thoroughly enjoying the right hon. Gentleman's balanced and informative speech, but should he not consider the possible thoughts of, for example, the Dutch flower growers, the Italian Prosecco producers, the Italian winemakers and the German car manufacturers? I am sure he agrees that they will wish to do business with the United Kingdom, because we are a good country to do business with.

Hilary Benn: The Prosecco and BMW car analysis of our future economic relationship with the European Union—we heard a lot of it during the referendum—simply fails to understand the sheer complexity of the task that we now face. The customs union, in one sense, is the easy bit. When it comes to our future relationship with the internal market and the whole question of divergence, which we may hear more about from the Prime Minister when she speaks on Friday, I can tell the House, following our discussions in Brussels a week ago with the Select Committee—colleagues who were there can confirm this—that the moment the Government start to talk about divergence, two things happen with the European Union.

First, the EU asks, “Divergence where? How? What will it mean? How will we manage the process?” It has experience of the Swiss-type deal, which is basically 60 deals, which it loathes because of the complexity of the task and the need to continue to negotiate and, in effect, renegotiate with Switzerland how the relationship will work. The second issue that the EU raises is this: it is afraid that we will use freedom to gain the competitive advantage of being able to sail through the door that the Government are asking it to leave open for us when it comes to trading goods and services.

We are now learning that after the simplistic promises—“You can have your cake and eat it”, “There will be a deep and special partnership”, and all that sort of stuff—we have come to the end of that approach to Brexit. Now is the time for choices. The Government will make their choice, and we will have to live with the consequences, but it will be very apparent to Ministers—not least, I am sure, from the exchange of views around that room in Chequers—that there are trade-offs to be made, depending on what it is that we want.

I have argued passionately for remaining in a customs union not only because I think that it is in the best interests of British business, but because of the question of Northern Ireland. Believe you me, if we are to meet the very high bar that the Government have rightly set for maintaining an open border—the Select Committee made this point in its report at the end of last year—I do not see how that can be reconciled with the Government's current policy of leaving the customs union and the single market. What we need now are clarity and certainty, and we need them with speed. Above all, however, we need the right policies for the economic future of the United Kingdom.

9.19 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I hope to respond in a minute to some of the points that he made about the customs union. However, before I start to talk about DExEU and Brexit, I want to make some general observations about the process in which we are engaged during our two days of debate on the estimates.

When I, and most of my colleagues, came to the House in 2015, we were quite shocked by the lack of financial scrutiny of the Executive in the Chamber. Since we became the third party, we have pressed for change in the way in which the estimates are considered. I therefore welcome the baby steps taken this year, in that we are at least able to focus on a set of figures that relate to a Government Department and what it is doing, rather than discuss random topics that may or may not be related to budgetary matters. However, we still have a long way to go in holding the Executive to account financially and in terms of their policies.

I firmly believe that if we were the board of a large charitable organisation, the charity regulators would find us wanting in terms of our procedures for financial scrutiny and accountability. I also believe that if we were the board of a large corporation, our shareholders would be demanding action to improve our processes. I therefore hope that the steps we have taken this year are the beginning of a process, and we might one day get to a situation where the Government are required to produce a programme plan charting their future policies and

their effects, and then each Department has to produce a programme plan, which each Select Committee can scrutinise along with the budget that goes with it. That is the process that the Scottish Government are engaged in, in terms of how they govern the responsibilities under their remit, and it is one that we could learn from and try to develop here in the years ahead.

What happens when we combine a rudimentary process of programme planning and financial planning with the complete absence of a set of policy objectives in the first place? The answer is DExEU, because here we have combined an absolute lack of planning and a financial mess. DExEU was set up in the summer of 2016 by a shell-shocked Government who frankly did not know what to do in implementing a referendum result that they did not expect. In a desperate desire to be seen to be doing something, they set up a brand, spanking new Department, with lots of new letterheads and people to write memos to each other, and lots of people employed to research and analyse something, the only problem being that there was no plan to be implemented.

In the absence of a plan to be implemented, we have gone from one chaos to another, and I share the Minister's embarrassment. This must be the only Department in history that underspends its budget not by a couple of percentage points, but by 50% in its first year, and it has had to go to the Treasury to scale down its estimates of spending in the next financial year.

That is a phenomenal metaphor for the Government's Brexit policy, because they do not know quite what they are doing. In the absence of their being able to play a co-ordination role in planning for Brexit, individual Departments have had to be allowed to do their own thing and try to deal with the consequences as best they can. That is why 90% of the amount of money being spent on Brexit preparations, or the lack of them, is not to be found in the Department supposedly responsible for co-ordinating preparations for Brexit. That is a ridiculous situation.

This, of course, is from a Government who have said not only that they will set up a brand new Department, but that money is no object for that Department. This is a Government who cannot find the money for our health service; a Government who are determined to squeeze down wages by pay restraint in the public sector and reduced living standards; a Government who have, for heaven's sake, taken £30 a week of employment and support allowance from the most vulnerable people in our community—yet they can find £4 billion over the next few years to spend on preparing for Brexit. The problem is that the plans are so incomplete, and they do not know what they are doing, so they are even unable to spend the money.

Bill Grant *rose*—

Tommy Sheppard: I will certainly give way, and hopefully we will hear what the plan is.

Bill Grant: I remind you, in case you have forgotten, that this Government created and increased the living wage and took millions of people out of tax, and your Government in Scotland asked that the wages cap be lifted in the public sector simply so you could tax people more.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is becoming a bit of a habit that there are exchanges across the House with Members saying “You” and “you” and “you”. We must observe the courtesies of the House; one goes through the Chair.

Tommy Sheppard: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was going to point out that the hon. Gentleman's intervention had a tenuous link to the subject of debate and no connection whatever to what I was saying, but he has none the less made his point for the record.

What does this lack of preparation mean for financial planning? I shall give the House two quick examples. The first is the customs union—or the customs arrangements, as the Government will call them. I might be wrong, but it seems overwhelmingly logical for our global trade that if we are leaving the European Union, we should first immediately try to seek an arrangement with those countries that are nearest to us and with which we have the greatest trading links. That ought not to be a matter of controversy. The only reason that it is controversial is the existence of an unreasonable number of people on the Government Benches who are so Europhobic that they will not countenance anything that looks like a cut-down relationship with the European Union. The idea of having a customs union should not be controversial, however, and I very much welcome the fact that Her Majesty's Opposition now seem to be on a course towards coming round to that point of view.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: At one stage, the Labour party was against “the customs union”. Now it is for “a customs union”. The Conservatives are clearly against the customs union, and the Opposition are rallying around it, but we now have a third option from Labour, apparently dividing the Opposition, in favour of a customs union that it cannot fully explain. Does my hon. Friend see a difficulty in what Labour is proposing?

Tommy Sheppard: I am going to be uncharacteristically kind to the Labour party and take the right hon. Member for Leeds Central at his word. He seemed to be suggesting that we were moving towards a situation in which the difference between “a customs union” and “the customs union” might not be that great. In fact, I think he said that he viewed “a customs union” as having to replicate the procedures of “the customs union”.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): This is becoming one of the most pointless, tedious and repetitive conversations. May I help the hon. Gentleman out? There is not really any difference; it is all about how it is embedded in the treaty. We cannot be part of “the customs union” because it is part of the treaty that we are leaving, so we will need a new one. Therefore it will be “a customs union”. There is, in essence, no difference.

Tommy Sheppard: Well, if there is no difference, welcome to the party! It is good to have the hon. Lady on board, and we look forward to her walking through the Lobby with us next time this comes to a decision.

The debate about customs arrangements is relevant to the budget because the clock is ticking and we are now only just over a year away from Brexit day. We still do not know what customs arrangements we are going to have with the EU27, yet the Department for International

[Tommy Sheppard]

Trade is allowed to run round the world meeting everyone and talking about all manner of global trading arrangements, even though everyone knows that if there is a set of legacy arrangements involving the European Union that will probably place conditions on or compromise any arrangements we can make with anyone else. What a waste of money it is to engage in the process of pretending that we are going to have unfettered global trading arrangements with the rest of the world while at the same time discussing the need for preferential trading arrangements with the European Union.

Let me just take one more minute to talk about the second aspect of Brexit and DExEU that illustrates the lack of co-ordination and the financial waste involved in this process—namely, clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Unless that clause is corrected, it will drive a coach and horses through the principle of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, yet at the 11th hour we still do not have the amendments that the Government admitted in debates in this Chamber were necessary to make the Bill work.

The question is this: who is at fault for that? Is it the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister? Someone needs to tell us why they could not achieve the simple thing of preparing legislation that would allow a coherent withdrawal Bill to be presented to the House. That is not something that we can blame on Brussels. Michel Barnier does not really care what clause 11 of our European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is or what the post-Brexit arrangements for devolution are. This problem is self-made and self-inflicted, because the Government are so incoherent and unable to plan. I hope that in the months and years to come we will have rather more coherence in Government policy and therefore rather better financial coherence as a result.

9.30 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Unlike most contributors to this debate, I do not believe that we are spending the money in these estimates to take the United Kingdom into some dismal future. Rather, it is essential that this money is spent in order to ensure that this country has a bright future. I do not want to debate the reports about our future economic prospects, other than to say that 15-year economic reports do not mean a great deal. We can dispense fairly quickly with 15-year economic reports that are full of caveats that highly uncertain figures should not be used as forecasts or given any weight as single-point estimates. None of the reports made to date have come to fruition. In fact, all the gloomy forecasts have been totally dispelled in the short run.

The money that we are spending in these estimates to exit the EU is money well spent. It will release billions of pounds in the future from our EU contributions. It will open new horizons to do trade deals with the parts of the world economy where 90% of future growth will happen. It will enable us to stop the imposition of the red tape from Europe that stifles innovation and new industries in the United Kingdom. Indeed, it is the established industries that most hanker after the directives, because they influence the regulations from Europe in

order to cut out competition, so that should indicate that we are going in the right direction. The money is essential to open up a bright future.

It is important that we are prepared. People have commented on the unpreparedness and the fact that we have a lot of work to do in the negotiations. Yes, the establishment and the elite may well have found the referendum result unexpected, but that was because they were all so cosy in their little arrangement. However, the people voted in a certain way and now the Government must act, which is why we have the Department for Exiting the European Union, and it is important that we prepare for all the different scenarios, including for no deal.

When we look at how European bureaucrats and negotiators are treating the situation, they still do not believe that the views that people expressed in the referendum will actually be implemented. We therefore get the kind of nonsense that we have had from Michel Barnier over the last couple of weeks. He has threatened us with things like, “If you do not behave, you will be punished,” and now that has to be put into legal language that will almost tie us to an option that keeps us in the single market and the customs union. It is important not only that the Government send out a signal, but that they are prepared to walk away on WTO rules if there is no good deal for the United Kingdom. That should be used as the basis to negotiate a future free trade arrangement.

Mr Fysh: One of the concerns I have is that we might have a political agreement on a transition or implementation period in the next six or nine months, but if that falls over at the last minute, it will be essential that we have made the preparations now. I am concerned that we are not getting on with appropriate speed with some of the infrastructure that could alleviate the potential trade issues at the border.

Sammy Wilson: Not only are these preparations needed in case there is no deal; many of these preparations will be essential whether or not there is a deal. Of course we have to spend money on registering EU citizens who already live in the United Kingdom, as the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), mentioned. The Home Office needs to spend money on the borders as it prepares for our exit. Whether we have a deal or no deal—or whatever scenario there is—IT infrastructure or surveillance infrastructure, or whatever, will be needed to monitor the trade that goes back and forth. It is essential that we spend that money.

Reference has been made to an underspend. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said that the underspend is a metaphor for Brexit, and maybe it is. Yes, we will save an awful lot of money when we leave the European Union. We will save our contributions to the EU budget. If the underspend is a metaphor for Brexit, it is simply due to efficiency. That is well and good.

The Department is entering uncharted waters. Given the work streams that need to be done, do the underspend last year and the reduction this year reflect the true resources that the Department needs? Given the nature of the people, as was explained to us at the start of the debate, have there been difficulties in getting the needed expertise? If so, what plans does the Department have to ensure that we have sufficient resources to do the

important work we have talked about? The Minister has made an assessment of future needs; is he convinced that other Departments have sufficient money? Finally, £365,000 has been spent on legal fees in Northern Ireland. Have those costs arisen as a result of action taken by the known fraudster in Northern Ireland who is now a serial litigant?

9.37 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to sum up this debate. Given that we are short on time, I will keep my remarks brief.

There has been interest in this debate from everyone but Tory Back Benchers—it is noticeable that none of them wanted to speak—so I hope we might have even more time next time around. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said that this is the first time we have had anything like a proper chance to examine Government estimates. Who knows? Maybe by the time this Parliament is 321 years old we will have financial scrutiny procedures as inclusive and as thorough as those that the Scottish Parliament put in place before it was one year old, assuming this Parliament ever gets to 321 years old—I would not bet on it.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I cannot take interventions from Members who chose not to put in to speak. There is limited time for the three Front-Bench speeches, and I want to give the Minister time to answer the questions that have been asked.

When it comes to Brexit, DEXEU is practically the only Department that has not seen its budget increased during the year. The Home Office needs more money to cope with an immigration system that will do who knows what because we do not know what immigration will look like. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs needs money for a customs system to deal with who knows what customs arrangements we have after Brexit.

It was interesting that we heard from the Labour Front Bencher that being in a customs union with the customs union is no different from being in the customs union except that it is not enshrined in the treaties. Given that that distinction first appeared in the Tory party's White Paper shortly after the Brexit referendum, I hope the Minister will be able to confirm tonight whether that is the Government's understanding: being in a customs union with the customs union is not any different in practice from being in the customs union. Good news it is, partly because it simplifies things and partly because it saves Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs about £400 million of unnecessary expenditure.

Interestingly, despite all the other expenditure we have seen in relation to Brexit, a proper analysis has not yet been done as to the likely impacts of all the different scenarios we could be faced with. We keep getting told that the few pages that have been done are so full of caveats that they are not particularly worth while. What does that say about a Government who committed themselves to a hard Brexit—to leaving the customs union and the single market—without a single paragraph of analysis about what the economic impact would be? That is especially the case as we see now that the economic impact is a 5%, 10% or 15% fall in economic

growth over the next few years, with billions of pounds wiped out of the economy. The Government have committed themselves to that without even stopping to think about the impact. If that is not complacency and incompetence to an almost criminal degree, I genuinely do not know what is.

The most optimistic noise that the Brexit Secretary has been able to make recently has been to tell us that leaving the European Union will not be quite as bad as “Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome”. Previously, the Foreign Secretary predicted that it would be as successful as “Titanic”. That has prompted a bit of a Twitter storm, with people trying to suggest what disaster movies would best describe the process of leaving the European Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) tried to broaden the description by talking about soap operas. I do not know whether it should be “That's when good neighbours stop being good friends” or perhaps “Home and Away”, because the Prime Minister tells one story when she is at home here and a very different story when she is away in Brussels trying to woo the European Union.

Rather than talking about a blockbuster disaster movie, it may surprise Members if I say that the Government are actually heading for a real blockbuster of a Brexit. On 1 January 1973, the UK officially joined the Common Market, as it was then known. Wee Jimmy Osmond was at the top of the charts, but a few weeks later he was displaced by those immortal glam rockers “The Sweet”. Those of us lucky enough to be growing up in those times, which were an epitome of a combination of the best possible taste in music, fashion and television, will never forget the lyrics of that immortal song, the only No. 1 they ever had. Its chorus reads like a press statement coming out at the end of a Brexit Cabinet meeting:

“Does anyone know the way?

There's got to be a way...

We just haven't got a clue what to do.”

Or, as a constituent more pithily said to me a few days ago about Brexit:

“They couldnae make a bigger bahookie of it if they tried”.

I should explain that that guid Scots word does not mean “elbow”, although given the Government's performance to date I am not sure they would know the difference.

The only question to be asked on the Brexit estimates today is: if this is how much we have to take away—hundreds of millions of pounds—from our health service, from desperately needed investment in social housing, from our welfare system and from our understaffed and under-equipped armed forces, and spend to create a machinery for a failed Brexit, can we imagine how much we would have to spend to make it work? No Government could make it work, and this Government certainly cannot. They have to change. They have got to get back around the negotiating table and get us away from a cliff edge of a hard Brexit. Otherwise, the amounts of money that have been included in the expenditure estimates for the Brexit Department will be a drop in the ocean compared with the overall cost to the people of these islands.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) mentioned at the opening of his remarks that there had been no

[Douglas Ross]

Conservative Back-Bench speakers and he criticised Conservative Members for that. May I ask, through you, whether he would agree that that would therefore be a criticism of the Scottish National party, which in a four-hour defence debate immediately preceding this one could not muster one Back-Bench speaker?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation. He has made his own point in his own way, with his usual force and alacrity. It is on the record.

9.44 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Today, Parliament is asked to consider an underspend by the Department for Exiting the European Union. We might as well, as it is far from clear what we have been getting for our money anyway. The Government wasted £1.4 million on fighting Parliament's right to vote on the decision to trigger article 50. Around 75% of the cost derived from the Supreme Court appeal that Labour opposed at the time as a waste of money.

It gets worse. The Government decided that, for show, it would look good if Sir Tim Barrow could be photographed hand-delivering the article 50 letter from the Prime Minister to the European Council. The two business-premier class return tickets cost around £1,000. Apparently, it took two people to deliver the letter, which is surprising given how understaffed the Department is.

Will the Minister comment on the Department's unusually large staff churn? The National Audit Office recently found that churn at the Department is running at 9% per quarter. The civil service average is 9% per year. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said in his, as ever, excellent speech, the Institute for Government thinks that that degree of churn in the Department at the forefront of co-ordinating the complicated task of leaving the EU should cause concern both within and outside the Department. It certainly causes me concerns.

Perhaps the Department is not so much at the centre of co-ordinating this complicated task after all. In December 2017, Oliver Robbins left his role as permanent secretary at the Department to focus on his role as the Prime Minister's European adviser. Robbins was joined at the Cabinet Office by his own team and a unit of around 30 staff. An answer to a Labour written question revealed that Robbins' new unit includes five deputy directors, on up to £118,000 each; six Cabinet Office band As, on up to £60,500 each; and seven Cabinet Office band Bs, on up to £38,500 each.

In December, we found out that one in four DExEU posts was unfilled, including 81 policy roles, and that 44% of DExEU staff plan to leave within the next year. Jill Rutter, programme director at the Institute for Government, put it like this:

"They've been losing people at a higher rate than any civil service department. It obviously makes your task harder of filling up that bucket, it's like filling up a bucket with a bit of a leak".

Can the Minister explain how much of the Department's underspend is because of an inability to recruit and retain staff? Why is it that the Department struggles to find and keep hold of good staff? What is it about the Department that is so off-putting to talented civil servants?

Perhaps it is because there is a Whitehall turf war over Brexit, leaving the Department effectively neutered and paralysed by the division in government.

With such excess resources available, how is it that the Department made such a pathetic job of pretending that it had conducted sectoral analyses of Brexit's impact on the economy? When they were finally made available, they were an embarrassing copy-and-paste waste of paper. I will not go over the whole shoddy tale again, but it proved just how disorganised and under-powered the Government's Brexit operation is. It is chaotic.

The worst part of all of this is that amid the chaos, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has turned his face away from one of the most important issues that his Government faces: the impact of Brexit on the border in Northern Ireland. I have visited Northern Ireland on three occasions in the past three months, because the impact of the reintroduction of a hard border would be a catastrophe for all communities in Northern Ireland. I agree with the Government's assertion that Northern Ireland should be treated the same as the rest of the UK, but Labour will never support a Brexit deal that results in any customs infrastructure whatsoever on the Northern Ireland border.

The Secretary of State has not visited Northern Ireland once since September 2016, and I do not think he has ever visited the border. That is neglectful. He ought to go there so that he can correct the Tory former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), when he says that the Good Friday agreement has outlived its use. Such outrageous, casual ignorance is frightening. Will the Minister assure the House that there is no circumstance in which the Government would countenance establishing any infrastructure on the Northern Ireland border?

Can the Minister identify for the House a single example of an open border between two countries operating different customs regimes? Anywhere—Norway and Sweden, or the USA and Canada? It cannot be done. Therefore, because there are no credible alternatives that would safeguard the Good Friday agreement, and because of the need to support manufacturers throughout the UK, the Labour party has said that it would seek to negotiate a new customs union with the EU.

The Government are failing in so many of their responsibilities, and the excuse that is so often given is that they are focused on Brexit. Maybe if Brexit was going well, if the Department was not so unstable, if there was clarity of position or a sense of energy and purpose, or if the Prime Minister could articulate with any certainty where the country is heading, Ministers might be forgiven for their lack of progress on so many issues. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) spoke of metaphors, but sadly an apt metaphor for the entire Government can be found in the Department's rapid decline into chaos, division, irrelevance and incompetence.

Mr Speaker: We are joined this evening by the Prime Minister of Kosovo, who is supported by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). We are most grateful to the Prime Minister for his attendance at the House of Commons and we wish him and his country all the best.

9.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) on opening the debate and I thank the hon. Members who have contributed. I am proud to serve in and represent the Department for Exiting the European Union, which—despite having been established for only two years—has achieved a great deal.

As the House knows, the Department was set up in response to the referendum, one of the biggest democratic exercises in British history. Turnout was high at 72%, with more than 33 million people having their say. Turnout was higher than in any general election since 1992, and it was the second highest popular vote of any form in our long and distinguished democratic history. More than 1 million more people voted leave than voted remain.

The Department was established at pace from a standing start. It has grown considerably to more than 600 staff today, plus more than 150 people based in Brussels at our permanent representation to the EU. DExEU staff are drawn from more than 40 Departments and public bodies, and 180 staff have joined us from outside government to ensure that we have the range of expertise to deliver our objectives. If time allows, I will respond specifically to the Chair of the Select Committee, but I join him in paying tribute to the quality of our staff, and I was glad to hear him do so. I am extremely proud to work with them.

As many hon. Members observed in the debate, and as many others have done here and in the Lords, the scale of the Department's task is immense, but its objectives are clear. One of DExEU's primary objectives is to lead and co-ordinate cross-Government work to seize the opportunities of Brexit and to ensure a smooth process as we leave, including the required domestic legislation, on the best possible terms.

Delivering EU exit is, of course, a cross-Government effort. Our work in DExEU means that we come together with the devolved Administrations, Parliament, EU member states and institutions, and a wide range of other interested parties. The Department is small and agile in Whitehall terms, with just over 600 people. We are focused on co-ordinating activities towards our EU exit in Brussels, in Whitehall and beyond across the UK.

For 2017-18, our original budget for the year was £106.1 million. Following a supplementary estimate, we have reduced this budget to £80.6 million. The Department transferred £1 million to the Cabinet Office in relation to supporting the transfer of the role of the Europe adviser to the Cabinet Office, and a further £0.8 million to other Departments to support activities directly related to our exit from the European Union. A further £20 million of the original budget was returned to the Treasury to be transferred to and used by other Departments for critical work relating to Brexit. Our Department has sufficient funding in current and future years to deliver its objectives.

We have achieved a tremendous amount already. We have put in place a major legislative programme to make sure our statute book continues to function smoothly as we exit the European Union, and to cater for the full range of negotiated and non-negotiated outcomes.

DExEU has set out the Government's future vision in 14 position papers, supporting the keynote speeches delivered by the Prime Minister at Lancaster House and in Florence. Officials from my Department have engaged in negotiations and supported the Secretary of State in the Brussels negotiations, which ran from June to December. That culminated in our publication, with the EU, of a joint report on 8 December last year, setting out the significant agreements that we had reached on the three key areas of citizens' rights, the budget and Northern Ireland.

A fair deal on citizens' rights is one that will allow for the UK and EU citizens to get on with their lives broadly as they do now in the country where they live. The financial settlement honours the commitments that we undertook as members of the EU, as we said it would. It is a fair delivery of our obligations in the light of the spirit of our future partnership and it is one based on reasonable assumptions. The settlement is estimated to stand at between £35 billion and £39 billion in current terms, which is the equivalent of around four years of our current budget contribution, around two of which we expect to be covered by the implementation period. It is far removed from the figure that some had suggested of £60 billion.

We have an agreement in relation to Northern Ireland that commits us to maintain the common travel area with Ireland, to uphold the Belfast agreement in full and to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland while upholding the constitutional and economic integrity of the whole United Kingdom. On that point, the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) asked about visits to Northern Ireland. I checked just moments before I rose to speak. The answer is that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who is responsible for engaging with Northern Ireland, has made three visits and has another planned.

We want to honour the agreements set out in the joint report. The important thing now is for talks to move forward so that we can agree the terms of our future relationship with the EU in order to provide vital certainty to businesses and citizens. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) asked what signals we wanted to send. Although I agree with him that a responsible Government should prepare for all scenarios, the signal that this Government wish to send is that which I have just set out: we wish to fulfil the withdrawal agreement; we wish to agree an implementation period; we wish to agree a co-operation on security and defence because our commitment to peace and security in Europe is unconditional; and, of course, we want to move forward to agree a future economic partnership that is in all our mutual interests.

Negotiations have been continuing at pace in the last two months to ensure that we secure a deal on the time-limited implementation period that both we and the Commission want to agree by the March European Council. The Prime Minister has advocated this implementation period from the start, and first mentioned it in her Lancaster House speech. The implementation period will provide greater certainty for individuals and businesses, meaning they will only have to plan for one set of changes in the relationship between the UK and the EU. The business community has been clear on the

[Mr Steve Baker]

importance of this to its planning, and the period will ensure a smooth exit and transition to our future partnership after the UK leaves the European Union in March 2019. We have of course published a legal text on the arrangements for the implementation period and we look forward to taking further significant steps.

As I have said, a key part of DExEU's role is to lead and co-ordinate work across Government. We have been working with Whitehall Departments to help them to plan for all scenarios, sharing assumptions and scenarios and making sure we have the right legal and administrative systems in place. The Department returned £20 million of original Budget allocation to the Treasury to help to fund other Departments, with an additional £2 million being transferred to other Government Departments as a result of a transfer of responsibilities. In terms of wider financial support for EU exit, over £250 million has been approved by the Treasury as needed in 2017-18 to prepare for EU exit work across a range of Departments. The Chancellor announced at the 2017 autumn statement that a further £3 billion will be available to Departments.

Time has run short in this debate. I will just pick up one or two of the points raised by the hon. Member for Darlington regarding the Prime Minister's Europe adviser. The departmental and ministerial responsibilities are set out clearly on gov.uk. The Europe unit supports Olly Robbins in his role as the Prime Minister's EU sherpa. As such, it supports him as the lead official and the Department is glad to work with him.

As time has run so short, I will finish by simply saying that I have listened extremely carefully to the debate, in particular to the points on the customs union, but the Government's position remains as stated.

9.59 pm

Stephen Gethins: I thank all Members for their contributions. This is a big undertaking, and it is incredibly important that Members have the opportunity to analyse as much information as possible. I note the remarks by the Chairman of the Brexit Committee. I also note the remarks of the Minister acknowledging the work of civil servants. I hope that he will shine a light, as far as possible, on their economic analysis and what it means.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54(4)).

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 28 February—

(1) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy not later than three hours after their commencement; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(2) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), the Private Business set down by the Chairman of Ways and Means shall be entered upon at the conclusion of proceedings on the motion relating to Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy (whether before, at or after four o'clock) and may then be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, after which the Speaker shall interrupt the business; and the business may be entered upon after the moment of interruption.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

Diabetes

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Paul Maynard.)

10 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about this very important health issue. I should first declare an interest as an active member of the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes, ably chaired and led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz).

We have come a long way with the treatment of diabetes since 1921, when Banting and Best isolated insulin from dog pancreases, and then, working with Scottish physiologist J. J. R. MacLeod, purified a form of insulin that was suitable for human treatment from cows' pancreases. This was at the time, and remains, a major scientific and Nobel-prize winning breakthrough. Before insulin therapy was discovered, diabetes was a deadly illness. The first medical success was with a boy with type 1 diabetes—14-year-old Leonard Thompson, who was successfully treated in 1922. Close to death before treatment, Leonard bounced back to life when treated with insulin.

Now, almost 100 years later, we understand a lot more about diabetes. We are able to explain the difference between type 1, an autoimmune disorder that is treatable by insulin; and type 2, insulin resistance or insufficiency, much more influenced by other health factors such as obesity and physical inactivity. We also know that a diagnosis of diabetes is no longer a death sentence. Nevertheless, diabetes remains a serious illness that affects 4.5 million people in the UK.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the excellent work she does as vice-chair of the all-party group on diabetes. She mentioned those who have diabetes, but there are still about half a million people who have type 2, as I do, but do not know that they have it. Does she agree that prevention is the most important thing that we can do to try to help those who have type 2 but are not aware that they have it?

Liz McInnes: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I think he must have read my speech, because I will be talking about the prevention of type 2 diabetes, and how important it is that we are aware of that and also make the population aware of the measures they can take.

There are more people living with diabetes in the UK than with any other serious health condition—more than dementia and cancer combined. The complications of diabetes are many. They include eye, foot and skin complications; anxiety and depression; hearing loss; gum disease; neuropathy; infections; slow wound healing; strokes; heart failure; heart attacks; lower limb amputations; renal problems; and early death.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The diabetes crisis is one of the fastest growing health crises of our time. As the hon. Lady says, the physical consequences are well known, but recent research by Diabetes Scotland has shown that the stress, isolation and trauma of managing an invisible but life-threatening condition can have serious implications for a person's emotional wellbeing. Does she feel that we need to look at offering support and increased provision of psychological support for diabetes sufferers?

Liz McInnes: I absolutely agree. The hon. Lady makes an excellent point, and I will cover that later in my speech.

As the hon. Lady says, the number of people living with diabetes is rising fast. Every day, around 700 people are diagnosed—that is one person every two minutes. It is estimated that by 2025, 5.2 million people will be living with diabetes. With 10% of the total NHS budget being spent on diabetes every year, it is important that we talk about treatment, prevention and the future of diabetes care, particularly as 80% of these costs are spent on the complications of diabetes, many of which are avoidable through better care.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. I declare an interest, as a type 2 diabetic, like the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). There are some 100,000 people with diabetes in Northern Ireland at present, and we have the largest number of type 1 child diabetics in the whole of the United Kingdom. The issues in Northern Ireland are very acute. Does she agree that the NHS should widely fund not only insulin pumps for children with type 1 diabetes, but training, to ensure that children can use those pumps, to make their lives better? I think it is important that we do so.

Liz McInnes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I will talk about the technologies that are available for the treatment of diabetes and about education and information, so I hope I will answer his question later in my speech.

The hon. Gentleman emphasises the point that I was going to make, which is that it is really important that we listen to the voices of those living with diabetes. The charity Diabetes UK recently published a report entitled "The Future of Diabetes", based on a consultation with more than 9,000 affected people. Those people said that, as well as a need for a better understanding and awareness of diabetes, there are a number of ways in which diabetes care can be improved.

In 2016 the Care Quality Commission produced a report entitled "My diabetes, my care", based on a survey of a smaller number of people, but it came to very much the same conclusions. People living with diabetes want more support for their emotional and psychological health. The effect of varying blood sugar levels on mood and the relentless need to manage the condition can affect mental health.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; she has been very generous. Is she aware that some young type 1 diabetics manipulate their insulin to get rapid weight loss, and that they struggle to get treatment because on the one hand, they need psychological support, and on the other, they need advice from diabetologists? Does she agree that, if we started to bring all those different support services under one roof, it would make the route to dealing with young people who have that problem much easier?

Liz McInnes: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. In the APPG on diabetes, we have discussed the issue of young diabetics self-medicating with insulin to keep their weight down. That emphasises the point I was going to make, which is that all healthcare professionals should receive training so that they can routinely support emotional and mental health and, importantly, know when to refer to specialist support.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Young people find it incredibly difficult to do glucose testing. The FreeStyle Libre device is a mechanism through which young people can have regular testing without that fear. However, they have to go through an individual funding request to access that. Should that not be available on the NHS?

Liz McInnes: I completely agree, and I will discuss FreeStyle Libre patches later on. I am beginning to feel like everybody here has had sight of my speech before I have even delivered it.

The next point arising from the survey is that people living with diabetes want better access to healthcare professionals who understand diabetes. Many respondents said that they felt they were being treated as a condition and a set of symptoms rather than as a human being.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I feel I want to ask a question just to participate. Given that lifestyle choices play a big part in type 2 diabetes, what value does the hon. Lady put on the information courses that are made available to people to help them to manage such lifestyle choices?

Liz McInnes: The information and education courses are really important in helping to manage the condition. I will come on to talk about that very subject later in my speech.

To go back to the role of specialists, I know from my involvement with the all-party group on diabetes that the role of the diabetes specialist nurse is valued by many. Evidence shows that diabetes specialist nurses are cost-effective, improve clinical outcomes and reduce the length of stay in hospital. With rising numbers of diagnoses of diabetes, I ask the Minister to encourage employers to respond to this with appropriate workforce planning.

The third point from the survey is that people want better access to technology and treatments. Diabetes treatment is ever evolving and advancing, but 28% of those who took part in the survey reported problems in getting the medication or equipment they needed to manage their diabetes. The Minister may recall that last year the Prime Minister was seen at an event wearing a FreeStyle Libre glucose monitoring device, which has already been mentioned. It is this type of non-invasive device that makes life so much easier and more manageable for those living with diabetes, and it is a great example of the technological advances taking place today. This device is designed to liberate patients from the hassles of routine finger prick testing. However, so far, only one third of CCGs and health boards have placed FreeStyle Libre on the formulary, demonstrating the problem faced by many in obtaining access to new technology.

The fourth point is that there is also a need for education and information to be widely available. No one should be given a diagnosis of diabetes without also being informed of where to go for information and support. People's ability to self-manage is essential for the successful management of diabetes. Self-management reduces the risk of complications and demand on health and care services.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that children with type 1 diabetes require particular understanding from the teachers in their school if they

are to stay safe, and a proper dispensation to eat when they need to eat and to do blood tests when they need to do so? Will she join me in urging the Department for Education to make the guidance to schools on type 1 diabetes more prescriptive?

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is actually the fifth point of the survey—support and understanding at work and school—and I will go on to talk about that. He explained the whole point very well, and I totally agree with him.

To go back to the education programmes, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends that people should be offered a course around the time of diagnosis of type 2 diabetes, and six to 12 months after diagnosis for people with type 1 diabetes, with annual reinforcement and review. The Care Quality Commission survey found that, in general, people who had attended structured education courses were very positive about their experiences. The majority of people said that it was helpful in improving their knowledge and ability to self-manage. People identified benefits, including improved understanding and knowledge about their condition; improved self-control and management, such as diet and exercise; and the opportunity to discuss concerns and share information with other people. However, there was a clear theme of people saying that, although the courses were helpful, they wanted more opportunities to attend refresher sessions.

The fifth point is that people living with diabetes want more support and understanding at work and school. Good care at school is vital and all schools should have an effective care plan in place. For those in work, an understanding and informed employer can make the difference between that person being able to continue in productive work, and being forced to leave because of difficulties in managing their condition while at work.

Finally and most importantly of all, people living with diabetes want hope for the future. Once diagnosed, people live with diabetes for the rest of their lives. They want to know what is being done to work towards a world where diabetes can be prevented and cured. It is for that reason that I asked for this debate—so that we can discuss research, funding, awareness, treatment, support, information and education for those living with diabetes.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that groups such as the Bristol South Diabetes Support Group are really important in bringing together volunteers to support people across the country? Does she support those volunteers, who not only supplement the work of the NHS but give people the confidence to manage their work?

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is up to healthcare professionals to encourage those voluntary groups to get together, to enable people to give each other support. That was one of the findings of the Diabetes UK survey: people wanted to come together to offer each other support.

Jim Shannon: Further to that point, this morning's news reported on the millennium child and an increase in diabetes as a result of diet. Does that not underline exactly what the hon. Lady has argued today, which is

that we need to do something now? If the millennium child—the adult of tomorrow—is going to have high levels of obesity and diabetes, there is a real need for a strategy right now.

Liz McInnes: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's very important point. I was struck by that item on the news first thing this morning. It is coincidental that it was announced today and I will refer to it in my concluding remarks.

For type 1 diabetes, research priorities include reducing hypoglycaemic episodes, exploring the effectiveness of different insulins and technologies, and research into the artificial pancreas, which monitors blood sugar levels and automatically injects the right amount of insulin.

For type 2 diabetes, people want to know whether their diabetes can be cured, for example through surgery or very low calorie diets. Encouraging work is being done on low calorie diets, and a trial funded by Diabetes UK—the diabetes remission clinical trial—showed that almost half of type 2 diabetics who took part were in remission after 12 months.

We need to help people to reduce their risk of developing type 2 diabetes, and that means tackling the reasons for the increasing rates of obesity, particularly childhood obesity. The PREVIEW project—prevention of diabetes through lifestyle, intervention and population studies in Europe and around the world—showed that a weight loss of 10% of baseline weight can decrease insulin resistance, which is a causative factor in diabetes, and this is expected to reduce by 85% the three-year risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

In conclusion, I have two requests for the Minister. The first is that we build on progress being made through the NHS diabetes programme and commit to sustained transformation funding at current levels of £44 million a year until at least 2021. The NHS diabetes programme sets out to improve the treatment and care for people with diabetes. Investing now will allow us to reap substantial financial and social benefits in the future.

My second request is that we strengthen the childhood obesity plan, including measures on labelling and junk food marketing. Just this morning, Cancer Research UK called for the same action. I am sure that the Minister will appreciate that taking steps to tackle childhood obesity will improve the health of the nation and have an impact on all obesity-related illnesses, not just diabetes. We want mandatory traffic-light labelling on all processed foods and mandatory calorie labelling in the out-of-home sector. We also want a commitment to introduce a ban on the marketing of junk food on TV before the 9 pm watershed.

The childhood obesity plan is key in helping us realise a world where fewer people live with diabetes and where it is easier to live a life with a low risk of developing type 2 diabetes. However, as we heard on the news just this morning, the millennial generation are predicted to be the most obese yet, and it is vital that the Government act now to avoid a diabetes health crisis in the future.

10.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I thank the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), whom I know well and

have worked with already on this in my time as a Minister, for giving us the opportunity to debate such an important issue. The turnout for this Adjournment debate suggests that it is of great interest to the House. It is normally just me, the Member introducing the debate, my Parliamentary Private Secretary and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Tonight's turnout has been a revelation. In November, I remember the hon. Lady introducing me and leading the event in the Terrace pavilion for the launch of the "Future of Diabetes" report by Diabetes UK, which is the biggest study of its kind. I promised then that I would respond to the report by recommendation to the report, which I believe I have done. The offer I gave then is the offer I repeat now, which is to work with the all-party group and the charity on each and every one of those recommendations. I hope she knows I am sincere in saying that.

I would like to use this opportunity to pay tribute to Diabetes UK—led by the excellent Chris Askew, whom I have known for many years wearing other hats when he used to lead the breast cancer charity Breakthrough—which continues to work both with us in government and independently to improve the lives of so many people who are at risk of this increasingly common condition.

Diabetes is one of the biggest health challenges facing the country, and the figures are truly sobering. There are currently 3.5 million people in the UK who have been diagnosed with diabetes. If nothing changes, by 2025 more than 5 million people will have the condition. That is a significant public health challenge. Type 1 diabetes affects 400,000 people in the UK and its incidence is increasing by about 4% a year. It is not preventable, so the emphasis is on improving the lives of people with type 1 diabetes and helping them to manage their condition. During half-term recess, I paid a visit to a brilliant charity in your constituency, Mr Speaker, called Medical Detection Dogs. I met a brilliant dog who looks after a lady with diabetes. As if on cue, when I walked into the room to meet her he sat and put his paw on her knee, which was him assessing her levels and indicating that she needed to take action. It was incredible to watch. If Members are not familiar with Medical Detection Dogs, please do look it up.

Type 2 diabetes, as we have heard, is much more common. It is a leading cause of preventable sight loss in people of working age and a major contributor to kidney failure, heart attacks and strokes, among the many other conditions the hon. Lady read out in her cheery list. Diabetic foot disease, including lower limb amputations and foot ulcers, accounts for more days in hospital than all other diabetes complications put together. According to Diabetes UK, 11.9 million people in the UK are at high risk of developing type 2 diabetes, which is largely preventable.

Aside from the human impact on people's lives, the financial cost of diabetes and its complications is huge. It already costs the NHS in England over £5.5 billion a year and that figure continues to rise. Managing the growing impact of diabetes is one of the major clinical challenges for us in the 21st century. That is why, as the hon. Lady and the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) who chairs the all-party group so well rightly say, preventing type 2 diabetes and promoting the best possible care for all people with it is a key priority for the Government.

[*Steve Brine*]

The hon. Lady mentioned the child obesity plan. She was absolutely right to do so. She knows I am passionate about delivering part 1 of the plan. We always said that it was the start of a conversation and that it was called part 1 for a reason. I am absolutely committed to taking further action if necessary, particularly across marketing, reducing portion sizes and price promotions, to help young people and to make healthy choices become the easiest choice of all. I think she knows me well enough to know I mean what I say and I say what I mean. If we need to take further action we will do so and she should watch this space.

Karin Smyth: I just inform the House that this morning, Committee D of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, of which I am vice-chair, had a session in Portcullis House on childhood obesity with Members from all parts of the islands. We produced a report recently and are doing further work. If I may be so bold, I will make sure that the Minister has a copy of that report. He will be interested in some of the reflections that we are bringing together from across the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and they might help to inform that work.

Steve Brine: That would be very interesting—if the hon. Lady did that, I would be grateful. We are working hard to improve diabetes services. The Government are strongly committed to taking action to prevent diabetes and to treat it more effectively. The Government's mandate to NHS England for 2017-18 includes an objective for NHS England to

“lead a step change in the NHS in preventing ill health and supporting people to live healthier lives.”

Mr Howarth: The Minister will be aware that an algorithm exists whereby it is possible to create an artificial pancreas, and that the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation is heavily involved in research at the University of Cambridge to bring that concept to a workable proposition. Will he give a commitment that the Government will fully support that work so that we can end up with something that will help type 1 diabetics to monitor their condition?

Steve Brine: I will not give a commitment at the Dispatch Box, but I know the JDRF well. I have supported it in my constituency through various events, including the Alresford music festival, which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is familiar with. I will take a look at what he said and if he wants to chat to me offline about that, I would be very happy to do so.

The diabetes prevention programme has been mentioned. Wherever possible, the aim is to prevent type 2 diabetes from developing in those most at risk. I am proud to say that NHS England, Public Health England, for which I am responsible, and Diabetes UK have had some success working on the NHS diabetes prevention programme—the first such programme that we have delivered at scale nationwide. I know that a lot of other countries are looking at what we are doing.

The programme is putting in place support for behavioural change in people who have been identified by their GP, or through the NHS health check, as being

at high risk of developing diabetes. Individuals can then get tailored, personalised help to reduce their risk of developing the condition, including bespoke exercise programmes and education on healthy eating and lifestyle. It is incredibly positive.

I am aware of the time, so I will move on to treatment and care programmes. After successfully securing significant new investment in diabetes through the spending review, NHS England has developed a diabetes treatment and care programme, which is aimed at reducing variation and improving outcomes for people living with diabetes. As part of that, NHS England will invest £42 million in proposals from individual CCGs, collaborations and sustainability and transformation partnerships to improve the treatment and care of people with diabetes.

Christine Jardine *rose*—

Steve Brine: I will not take another intervention, because I will conclude in just a second. The spending review made provision for significant transformation funding through to 2020-21, and I expect that to be spent in line with the priorities set out in NHS England's mandate, including for diabetes.

We have talked about the childhood obesity programme and the national diabetes prevention programme. I am responsible for other public health initiatives, such as Change4Life and the One You programme. People like me with young children will see the Change4Life branding coming through in book bags for them. It has been an incredibly successful campaign. The programmes are crucial in both encouraging a healthy lifestyle and promoting exercise among young people, as are such things as the Golden Mile, which is almost universal in primary schools across England. The benefits of such programmes should be acknowledged in reducing not only the incidence of diabetes, but other debilitating and life-threatening conditions such as cancer and heart disease, in which I also have a great interest.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Yes, but then I might not be able to conclude.

Rachael Maskell: Very quickly on the issue of exercise, children are now reduced to just one hour of PE. Will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Department for Education about increasing that?

Steve Brine: I am not responsible for the Department for Education, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that I talk to it. I was in the Department with the Secretary of State and a Minister just last week talking about what further action we need to take on school food standards and the Golden Mile, because I want children to be more active. It is not just about what happens in school, though: the exercise through the Golden Mile in schools should be mirrored in out-of-school activity. There is so much more that we can and should be doing to help to prevent diabetes.

In conclusion, diabetes is emblematic of many challenges that the health and care system and my desk face. Prevention is critical, as is working in partnership with people in a way that tailors support and intervention. I, this Government and this Prime Minister are committed to improving outcomes not only for the millions of

people in this country who are living with diabetes, but for the many more who are at real risk of developing the condition. We need to help both.

Question put and agreed to.

10.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 26 February 2018

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

Leaving the EU: Live Farm Animal Exports

4.30 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 200205 relating to ending the export of live farm animals after the UK leaves the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I thank everyone who signed the petition, and especially its proposer, Janet Darlison, who for many years has shown a tireless devotion to pursuing the issues around live animal exports and to calling for those exports to be ended. Through her consistent efforts, and together with her husband, supporters and many others, she has raised public awareness about the issue, which is one of the reasons why the petition received such support.

I am leading the debate as a member of the Petitions Committee. The petition did not quite meet the threshold of 100,000 signatures that would usually trigger a debate, but the Committee felt that it was such an important issue and that there is such public awareness about it that it was right and appropriate to call a debate on it.

It is clear that exporting live animals is a complex and emotive issue. There is a variety of views about it, some of which are held very strongly. As I considered this debate and looked at the many representations and documents that were sent to me about it, which expressed a variety of views, one clear theme emerged: anything we debate today is at the moment covered by EU regulations and law, and any changes we choose to make will have to wait until we actually leave the European Union. That brings the situation that we face into sharp focus.

We all understand and agree that Britain is a nation of animal lovers, and has a proud history on animal welfare. I am sure that all hon. Members would testify to the sheer volume of correspondence we receive whenever an issue relating to animal welfare arises, whether it be about bees, puppies or live farm animals being exported. As a nation, we care deeply about our animals.

Sadly, for far too long, the animal welfare regulations that we have been forced to apply, particularly with regard to farm animals, have been determined by the EU. In many cases, they do not reflect the widely held views and values of the British people. We hope to change that. This issue is one of many good reasons for the UK to free itself from overburdening EU regulation and bureaucracy. It is worth noting that the UK's animal welfare standards are among the highest in the world. From farm to fork, our farmers care deeply about the animals that they rear, as do the vast majority of people.

Last year, the Conservative party manifesto made the commitment to take early steps, as we leave the European Union, to control the export of live farm

animals for slaughter. I absolutely support that position, and we should seek to take those steps soon after leaving the European Union.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to be clear that when animals are ready to be killed, they should not travel to be slaughtered, or be taken anywhere? They should be slaughtered right next to where they were reared. However, we do not want to get muddled: animals can be transported for further fattening, if they are transported in the right vehicles—with the right air conditioning and in the right type of vehicle for that species. We need to differentiate the two.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend pre-empts a point that I will make later. We need to differentiate animals that are exported and slaughtered shortly after they arrive—I see no point in that—and those that are exported for other reasons, such as for breeding stock or for fattening on. We need to consider those two different categories.

With the Conservative party manifesto commitment, the amount of support that this petition received, and the ten-minute rule Bill that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) has proposed, it is clear that this is a timely debate and an opportune moment for us to consider these issues—not least because of the awareness and concern among the general public.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) said, many people accept that there are differences between exporting animals for slaughter and for other reasons. At times, there are many good reasons to export animals, such as for breeding stock or for rearing on, but there seems to be no good reason to export an animal that is simply destined to be slaughtered soon after it reaches its destination. I can find no good or valid reason for that type of export to continue.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): We may not be able to legislate before we leave the European Union, but we could certainly suggest a good code of practice, to be followed with immediate effect.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and we should certainly consider that. If, for any reason, our opportunity to make those changes is delayed longer than we would like, some intervention along the way might be appropriate.

Many people agree with the reasonable proposition that animals should be slaughtered as close as possible to where they are raised, and that the carcasses should then be exported. We should seek to apply that; it is not only far more efficient, but clearly better for the animals. If we were to do that, there would also be an opportunity to up-sell and to create more jobs in the UK, rather than exporting the value-added part of the process with the live animals. A ban may have an impact on some trade, and we need to accept that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): If the hon. Gentleman accepts, as I think he does, that transporting live animals for long periods in poor conditions is wrong and not good from the point of view of animal

[*Kerry McCarthy*]

welfare standards, what difference does it make whether they are slaughtered at the end, or going for fattening? Surely it is the transit that we ought to look at, regardless of what happens to the animals in the end.

Steve Double: From researching the issue and speaking to many people in the industry about it, I think the reality is that when animals are exported for breeding stock or for fattening, they are usually far more cared for, and are transported in far better conditions, because there is a higher value on them, than if they are being exported to be slaughtered. The market, for want of a better word, takes care of that issue. The problem is acute when animals are exported long distances to be slaughtered, because they tend to suffer the worst conditions. I do not think that applies when a higher value is put on the animal being exported.

As I was saying, a ban may have an impact on trade. For instance, our trade in sheep, as opposed to lamb, relies on exports because there is a very limited market for mutton in the UK; some may think that we should look into changing that, but that is the situation. Mutton sheep fetch £70 to £80 a head when sold in the UK, but up to £200 a head when exported live to parts of the EU with higher demand. Even in that example, however, we need to consider whether that additional profit is right, or whether we should do the right thing for the animal, despite the impact on the market. We need to do everything we can to stop the unnecessary suffering of exported animals.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the matter is currently regulated by EC Regulation No. 1/2005. Is he saying that that regulation does not ensure the necessary levels of animal welfare? I have to say that my experience, and that of farmers in my constituency and elsewhere, says otherwise.

Steve Double: There are genuine concerns. A lot of documented and anecdotal evidence suggests that the existing EU regulations are not always adhered to, and that animals sometimes suffer unnecessarily in transit, despite the current regulatory framework.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Surely it is not just about the conditions—grim though they may be—in which animals are transported; it is also that the conditions at their destination are likely to be of a lower standard than we would expect in this country. Our animal welfare standards are generally higher, and given all the noises coming from the Government over the last few months, they are likely to rise, not fall, which will make the issue even more critical. It is not just about the transport, but about the conditions that animals live in.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The petition calls for a ban on the export of live animals, but wider animal welfare considerations are also relevant. We have very high standards, and many of us want them improved once we leave the European Union. We should expect those higher standards to be adhered to, because we should be setting an example in this country. That is what many of us want.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has made it clear that he understands the desire to look into the issue as we leave the European Union, and that he is committed to restricting this trade. The Government are preparing proposals on live exports for consultation, and are looking very seriously at a ban in the near future. Even within the current restrictions, we have seen some progress, as the records show: as recently as 2000, more than 750,000 live animals were exported for slaughter or fattening, but by 2016 that figure had fallen to 43,000. The direction of travel is already changing, but many of us agree that we want the trade to end altogether.

Tougher regulations and public awareness have led to a switch to exporting carcasses rather than live animals. However, there is still a busy trade in live animals between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and I see no reason why that should not continue, post Brexit. Dairy cattle are routinely sent to the Republic, and the milk they produce is sent back to Northern Ireland. Calves cross the border for fattening, too. Concerns have been raised that to circumvent a ban, a trade might develop whereby live exports are shipped to Northern Ireland, then sent on to the Republic, and then sent on from there. Apart from that being hugely expensive, and thus unlikely, there is already legislation on onward journey times, conditions and the need for approved and posted journey plans. Limiting journey times further might address the issue and prevent any chicanery aimed at circumventing a future ban. There are clearly far wider issues and decisions to be agreed on with regard to the Irish border, but I certainly do not intend to get into them today. With regard to animal movements, I believe we should leave Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to continue as they are, without fear of creating loopholes, post Brexit.

I have taken into account and looked carefully at a range of proposals and concerns from several groups, including the National Farmers Union. There are concerns about tariffs being imposed on carcasses, post Brexit. I accept that point of view, but we have yet to see how such matters will be settled, and furthermore there will be new and bigger markets for us to pursue, post Brexit. British food has worldwide acclamation. We can and will do better with our food exports, post Brexit. The outcome of the tariff issue is still unknown, but it cannot be a deal breaker when we take our decision on the animal welfare standards that are to apply. It could be argued that tariffs might apply to live exports as opposed to carcass trade, but I see no value in speculating on that. There is no substitute for doing the right thing, on either animal welfare or leaving the EU. There might be choppy waters ahead, but I would rather face that interim phase than be hamstrung forever by the regulations that we are currently subject to.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): My hon. Friend's mention of choppy waters brings me to my feet. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and I are both well aware that cattle are moved from Shetland and the Orkneys in purpose-built equipment on purpose-built vessels, with water and in very safe and good conditions. The cattle and sheep moved from Shetland are shipped for 12 hours on board a purpose-built vessel. I would not want this debate to hide the fact that exporting animals can be—and is—done properly. It is paramount, particularly for islands

off Scotland, that we do not get it into our heads that exporting over water is somehow a significant or major problem.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the local situation in the UK, which has a very well developed market for food. Within the UK, we can ensure that standards are adhered to, that animals are moved about in the best possible conditions, and that their welfare is paramount. Unfortunately, once animals leave the UK, we lose the ability to ensure that those standards are adhered to. His point highlights one of the problems: we can make our regulations as stringent as we like, post Brexit, but even the current rules are all too often flouted because we cannot enforce them beyond our own shores.

The creator of the petition has recorded serious animal welfare shortcomings, in breach of current regulations, as lorries arrive at UK ports ahead of an onward journey. As I said, there is documented evidence that the further animals travel from British shores, the more they suffer in transit. That is not only because of distance and travel time, more alarmingly, they are more likely to suffer heat, a lack of food, water and rest, stress, injury, and even death. There is an unacceptable disparity between the conditions and circumstances of slaughter at their final location, and the high and monitored standards that we adhere to in the UK.

There are arguments in favour of allowing the export of high-value breeding stock to continue post Brexit—a point that has been well made. These prized animals have always fared far better in transit than those destined for immediate slaughter. The live export of animals for slaughter has dwindled dramatically in recent years. It has already been banned for many years in New Zealand, which has had no significant detriment to its meat export market. That should encourage us that achieving a ban is possible.

The UK has never been frightened of doing the right and decent thing, particularly when it comes to animals, and I believe that we can take great encouragement from that, and can be confident that this Government will act. We have already seen clear, positive action taken on animal welfare. For example, there has been a tenfold increase in the minimum sentence for animal cruelty, the banning of the ivory trade, action being taken on puppy farming, and clear action to protect our marine environment from plastic waste. That gives us confidence that this Government are determined to address this issue and make sure that action is taken.

We can be proud of our record, but there is more that we can do when it comes to animal welfare. The new freedoms afforded by Brexit will reinstate our sovereignty over these matters. We can once again do what is right and proper for our nation, our people and our animals, and we can fulfil a manifesto promise regarding live animal exports. Once again, I thank all those who signed the petition. We look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say at the end of the debate.

4.51 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Wilson. I thank the Petitions Committee for allowing today's debate. As has been said, the petition did not quite reach 100,000 signatures—I think there are about 93,000 at the moment, which is a really good effort—but I am very glad that we

decided to have the debate anyway. Like the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), I pay tribute to Janet Darlison, the creator of the petition, for all her work in promoting it and for creating the momentum that has brought us here today.

When the Minister comes to speak, I hope that we will have a little more clarity on what exactly the Government's position is, because at the moment that is lacking. I am certainly none the wiser having heard the introductory speech, but it is up to the Minister to say where he wants to take us. In 2012 I spoke about a ban on live exports, and just last year I supported the ten-minute rule Bill in favour of such a ban, so I am glad that we now seem to be a little closer to a ban becoming a reality. However, I feel that there has been some rowing back on some of the pronouncements that were made during the European Union referendum campaign.

For example, the current Foreign Secretary went down to Ramsgate and I thought that he announced in no uncertain terms that there would be a ban on live exports if we left the EU. I know from the emails I have received that there are people who were persuaded to vote leave simply because of that issue. Perhaps those are the sorts of emails I tend to get from people involved in the animal welfare movement. I tried my best to outline some of the reasons why I thought animal welfare might not benefit from Brexit, particularly if we consider the animal welfare and food safety standards that we might be forced to relinquish as part of a trade deal with the United States. However, many people were adamant and were convinced that a live export ban would be delivered almost overnight if we voted to leave.

It is now being said that such a ban is being considered as one of several options as we leave the EU. As the Minister is here today, I will point out that I asked a similar question about foie gras. At the moment, the production of foie gras is banned in this country, on the grounds that we believe it to be cruel, unnatural and something that we should not tolerate here. The line has always been that imports of foie gras cannot be prohibited, because the dastardly EU would not let us ban them. So one might think that, given we have already established our own moral position on this issue here in the UK, once we are free from the clutches of the EU a ban on imports would be the next step. However, the answer I have just received to my written parliamentary question is:

“Leaving the EU and the single market therefore provides an opportunity to consider whether the UK can adopt a different approach in future”.

To me, that sounds like equivocation taken to the nth degree, and I fear that the same might apply to live exports.

It is also somewhat disingenuous to suggest that such a ban on live exports was always on the Government's wish list and that it just was not possible to achieve until we left the EU. Ministers who argued during the EU referendum campaign that we would get a live exports ban once we left the EU are members of a party and a Government who in 2012 were instrumental in stopping action at EU level—I think it was being led by Germany—that would have limited the journey time for live animals to below eight hours. In most cases that would have been tantamount to a ban on live exports from the UK. However, the UK went along to those discussions and argued against attempts to limit the hours.

[*Kerry McCarthy*]

I have raised this issue in a number of debates, including the recent debates on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, as it seems to me to be representative of the verbal and policy gymnastics that the Government have undertaken since the EU referendum, and nobody has come back to me and said that the UK did not take that stance. So let nobody be under the false illusion that we could not have taken significant action to limit—perhaps not ban, but limit—live transit times.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I believe that in 1992 it was a Conservative Government who sought to impose import restrictions, but they were challenged and overturned in the European Court of Justice, so this is something that a Conservative Government have tried to tackle in the past.

Kerry McCarthy: I am talking about 2012, which is far more recent than that, and as I said the Government went along to the negotiations and were not prepared to take the side of those who were arguing for an eight-hour limit.

It is important that the Government are held to account on what I see as a promise to end the practice of live animal exports that was made during the referendum campaign. That is because—as the petition rightly states, although I do not think we have heard quite enough about it this afternoon—the transport of live animals, no matter what the end result is, whether they are going for slaughter or for fattening up overseas, causes a huge amount of unnecessary suffering.

It is important not to forget the tragedy that jump-started the long-running campaign for a ban, which happened many years ago. In 1996 nearly 70,000 sheep were left to die either from heatstroke, suffocation, burning or drowning, after the ship that was carrying them caught fire in the middle of the Indian ocean. Although, thankfully, an incident on that scale has not happened again, countless animals continue to endure gruelling journeys every year.

In 2012, 40 sheep had to be euthanised after being crammed into a truck, and just last August it was reported that 500 sheep spent four days without any access to food or water while they were being transported to Turkey. Also, many people here will have seen today's story in *The Times* about how every year more than 5,000 calves—unweaned and discarded by the dairy industry—are sent on journeys of more than 135 hours from Scotland to Spain. That number had doubled from the previous year; I think the 5,000 figure is from 2016.

Zac Goldsmith: The hon. Lady is making a very good speech and I just want to add one more point. I believe that in the past two years 20,000 calves have been sent to Spain. In Spain there is a requirement that a calf should be given bedding for only the first two weeks of its life and not beyond that, whereas a British calf has the right—if I can put it that way—to have bedding for six months. So the standards in Spain are dramatically lower than those in the UK, which is another reason why this issue is about not only whether an animal is going to be slaughtered, but the conditions in which it is living when it reaches its destination.

Kerry McCarthy: As is often the case—perhaps not on the wider Brexit issue, but on this specific issue—I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. Actually, that was a point I was going to make later in my speech: there is a big discrepancy between two weeks' worth of bedding and six months' worth of bedding. It is certainly something that we have to take into account.

As I was saying, I hope that the Minister can provide some clarity as to whether Scotland would be exempt from any ban on live exports that was introduced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I understand that that is the case. Fergus Ewing, the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity, said this month that Scotland would not participate in such a ban, so I would also be interested to hear from the Scottish National party spokesperson whether the SNP will allow the export of veal calves to continue.

Although the number of live animals exported each year has fallen from millions to tens of thousands, tens of thousands of animals are potentially still enduring cruel, long and painful journeys. Even during routine trips, animals are often exposed to freezing or extremely hot temperatures, with a lack of adequate sustenance, dangerous overcrowding and injuries being common.

One particularly harrowing investigation found that thousands of cattle were being transported via ship, and the unweaned calves were simply being tossed overboard if they became too sickly or died. As was mentioned in *The Times* story about the veal calves today, with their 135-hour journeys, although there are rules about rest periods, for example on long journeys, that can simply mean that the trucks stop in laybys and the animals continue to be held in very hot and crowded conditions for another hour or so, which for them is really no rest period at all.

The Government continue to proclaim their global leadership in animal welfare and even talk about legislating for higher standards but, as has been touched on, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce standards effectively when it comes to the current live transit. Even the EU, in its 2011 review, admitted that effective enforcement is near impossible. Whenever animals continue to be exported live, there will continue to be suffering and violations of welfare. Unfortunately, the EU review did not come up with any changes to the standards. It seemed almost to accept that cutting corners to save space and money will always be attractive for companies that transport live animals, which will always be to the detriment of the animals involved.

It has been mentioned, not least by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), that when animals are transported beyond the UK they move beyond the Government's reach, into countries with much lower standards than ours, and not just far-flung countries but our closest neighbours, including Spain and France, as we have heard. Many UK sheep are sent to France, and a 2016 French National Assembly report concluded that there were serious and widespread welfare problems in French abattoirs. Members might have seen from recent parliamentary questions that I and others have tabled, or from *The Guardian's* excellent "Animals farmed" series, that conditions in our own slaughterhouses and food production lines are not always as we might desire, but there is certainly widespread concern about overseas conditions also—we have already mentioned the situation

in Spain. The problems are exacerbated by many animals being re-exported even further away, meaning that their re-packing is covered only by the standards of the country acting as the middleman, not by ours. It goes without saying that we cannot assume that after the animals have endured the awful journeys they will be killed quickly or humanely.

If the Government are serious about being known as a world leader in animal welfare, they must put their money where their mouth is and announce their clear commitment to banning the export of live animals, for slaughter or for further fattening. The Labour party has called for that in its recently published animal welfare plan, and for the Government to ensure an exemption for livestock crossing the border on the island of Ireland, with which I think everyone would agree.

Colin Clark: I have spoken about livestock moving the significant distances between the islands, from Orkney and Shetland and the islands on the west coast of Scotland. Does the hon. Lady accept that that transport reaches a standard with which she would be comfortable?

Kerry McCarthy: I cannot comment on the standard, as I have never looked into it, but I am happy to take the hon. Gentleman's assurances—he is a fellow member of the Environmental Audit Committee. I was talking about exceptions outside the UK. We accept that live transit would continue to be allowed within the UK, but we also need to ensure that decent standards and proper monitoring are in place. The one exception would be across the land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland; I do not think anyone would argue that that should be subject to an export ban.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Once we leave the EU, we will completely lose control over the welfare standards of any animals that go from the UK into southern Ireland. Does the hon. Lady accept that those animals could continue their journey on to Spain or France?

Kerry McCarthy: If the hon. Gentleman wants to argue for not having live exports across the border from the north of Ireland to the Republic of Ireland, he is welcome to do so. This goes to a much wider issue that the Government have not yet managed to address: what do we do about the border between the north and the south once we leave the EU? Many people want it to continue in its current form, but the practicalities of leaving should mean that a hard border is established. That is one for the Government and perhaps not one that we in Westminster Hall can grapple with today, but the fact that we need to address the issue of animals being transported between the north and the south ought not to be used as an excuse for not addressing an export ban outside the British Isles.

Mr Carmichael: The difficulty with the hon. Lady's argument is that we either ban exports or we do not. A ban is a ban, and she is arguing for a ban that is not a ban. As the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) says, once animals are in southern Ireland they can be exported anywhere.

Kerry McCarthy: If the right hon. Gentleman is arguing that we need a hard border with Ireland, which will then prevent us from implementing anything else we would desire to see in the relationship between the north and the south, he may do so, but I think we must consider that relationship a special case. We need to look at how many animals would go on in transit. The Minister perhaps can enlighten us on that, but I suspect that it is not a significant number.

I conclude by talking about something the Minister needs to advise us on, and that is World Trade Organisation agreements. Colleagues will be aware that under WTO agreements countries cannot, under normal circumstances, discriminate between trading partners. The principle is known as most favoured nation treatment, and in practice it means that the UK could not allow for the live export of animals to the Republic of Ireland while excluding the rest of the EU. Therefore, it is wholly possible that a ban on live animal exports could contravene WTO rules—a view shared by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, among others. Any WTO member can challenge another member on its trade policy, which could then be ruled as breaching the organisation's rules.

However, as a member of the EU, the UK is already party to several trade bans that have never been challenged at the WTO, including the import ban on cosmetics tested on animals and the ban on fur produced from cats and dogs. When the Government consider their future options, they can look at the 2009 EU seal import ban as an example of how to pass the WTO test. I hope that the Minister can explain how he feels we will pass that test if we introduce at least a partial ban on exports.

Finally, I understand that the Command Paper for the Agriculture Bill might be published tomorrow—the Minister might like to enlighten us on that. It presents a perfect opportunity to introduce proposals to ensure that a ban comes into force as soon as possible after the UK leaves the EU. Both before and after leaving, the Government should push the European institutions and member states to strive for greater co-operation. I do not want us just to walk away from the problem. It is one thing to say, "When we leave the EU we can make our own rules; we can have standards that are truly excellent—gold-plated." I do not want us to walk away from the EU, full stop. I would like us to remain a member and be able to influence animal welfare standards across the continent, but even if we cannot, we still need to use what influence we have and what trade discussions we are having to try to ensure that those standards that are not what we would like to see, in France and Spain and further afield, are improved.

We have an opportunity to improve animal welfare. I said at the start of my speech that Brexit offers very few opportunities, but if we are to leave the EU I hope that the Minister seizes this one and does something to ensure the better welfare of animals for years to come.

5.7 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on his introduction to the debate.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) has a wonderful record in animal welfare measures, but I have to say immediately that I am absolutely delighted

[*Sir David Amess*]

we are leaving the European Union, as are my constituents, and one of the biggest beneficiaries will be the animal kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and I, for 35 years, have consistently championed animal welfare measures in this place. For a while, it seemed that we were rather few in numbers on our side of the House, which could have been because many Conservative Members represented farming communities. When I was Member of Parliament for Basildon I had 28 farms in my constituency; now I am the Member for Southend West I have no farms, so there are no farmers lobbying me. I understand that if a Member from any party has a farming community in their constituency this is possibly not an easy issue to consider, but as far as I am concerned, we can judge life generally on the way in which we treat animals. Mrs Lorraine Platt and others, through the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, have absolutely transformed the way in which colleagues—certainly Conservative Members—see these matters.

From 1997 to 2010, a number of animal welfare organisations supported the Labour party with their money, but as far as I am concerned the only good thing that Tony Blair did was ban foxhunting. On all other animal welfare measures, he let the British people down badly. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the marvellous reception he gave in the Jubilee Room a short while ago celebrating pasties, and I am delighted that we have a Minister who is doing a splendid job on animal welfare. His boss, the Secretary of State—he was an outstanding Secretary of State for Education, too—is saying everything that I and my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet have wanted to hear for so many years. I hope that more and more colleagues who are joining the campaign will support the Minister and the Secretary of State in their mission.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, in 2012 we took part in a debate on animal welfare exports. At the time, live animal export numbers were dwindling, and I held out hope that a future debate on the subject would not be necessary. It is obvious that the industry has grown again since then. I associate myself with the views of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I know the RSPCA has had a number of internal difficulties, but as long as Lady Stockton remains one of the trustees, I have great faith in that organisation, and I hope it will continue to promote sensible animal welfare measures.

The RSPCA is concerned that, as the hon. Member for Bristol East mentioned, millions of farm animals transported around Europe for fattening and slaughter are suffering from stress, exhaustion, thirst and rough handling. I cannot believe that these animals enjoy the way they are transported.

Bob Stewart: I have always understood it that if animals are worried or hugely concerned, it has a direct impact on the quality of the product after they are dead. It would be much more sensible to move them quickly before they get too concerned.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend, as ever, has hit the nail on the head. He is absolutely right. Government figures show that 20,000 calves were exported from

Northern Ireland to Spain in both 2016 and 2017. Those young calves are being packed into lorries and sent on journeys lasting up to 135 hours. A review of the scientific literature concluded:

“Scientific evidence indicates that young calves are not well adapted to cope with transport.”

Frankly, I do not think human beings would cope with being transported for a tiny fraction of that time. It continues:

“Their immune systems are not fully developed, and they are not able to control their body temperature well, thus they are susceptible to both heat and cold stress.”

It concludes that

“transport should be avoided where possible”.

Compassion in World Farming—at one point it was not very popular on the Conservative Benches, but I think that has changed, and I admire that organisation—believes that a large number of calves do not survive the journey and that the remainder are likely to spend the rest of their short lives in barren pens. Such cases exemplify why the RSPCA is rightly calling for an end to the long-distance transport of live animals in favour of a carcass-only trade.

It is such a shame that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, has left his place, because there are some things that concern me slightly.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I completely agree with my hon. Friend that it is preferable to move all meat on the hook rather than on the hoof. There are long journeys up and down the backbone of the United Kingdom—it is not just about the distance involved with exports into Europe. There is a serious problem with the geographical spread of abattoirs not only in England, but in the devolved regions. We need to get a better spread of abattoirs, bringing them closer to the markets and thereby allowing us to shorten journeys.

Sir David Amess: I understand what my hon. Friend is saying. There are a number of Scottish Members here. I am not an expert in abattoirs, and I need to reflect on precisely how he thinks we should deal with that matter, but I understand. He represents constituents, however, who would feel that the issue is not so straightforward.

Mr Jack: I am on my hon. Friend's side.

Sir David Amess: Yes. The RSPCA is lobbying for a maximum journey time of eight hours for all animals travelling for slaughter or further fattening across the European Union. I am sure that many like-minded colleagues will join me in supporting that initiative.

Another reason why it is right to pursue the end of live exports is that even if we manage to transport live animals effectively and safely, we cannot ensure that the countries animals arrive in live up to our high standards. We have wonderful standards in this country—I challenge anyone to find better in the EU. Of the 28 members of the European Union, it is this great country of ours that has the highest standards possible. That is why, when we leave the wretched European Union next March, we will improve standards even further.

Bill Wiggin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about leaving the EU, but he is not right about our standards. Listening to the anecdotal evidence of the people who watch the lorries going from Ramsgate, they complain that inspections are not rigorous enough. We can do a lot more here.

Sir David Amess: I am not going to fall out with my hon. Friend on this issue, particularly as he is a tropical fish fancier, but the Minister will have heard what he said. When the Minister sums up the debate, he will put my hon. Friend right on his criticism of how these things are managed.

The fundamental problem with the current EU regulations is a lack of political willpower in member states to enforce them. That does not just relate to animal welfare; that lack of willpower applies to so many other dealings with the EU. In November 2016, Sweden, with the support of Denmark, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, presented a paper to the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council highlighting numerous examples of infringements and a general lack of enforcement. For example, Compassion in World Farming has found that we export approximately 40,000 live sheep for slaughter to the continent each year. France takes a considerable number of those, yet it was only in 2016 that an inquiry by a committee of the French National Assembly found there to be serious concerns about welfare standards in French abattoirs. Is that something that our nation of animal lovers would be proud to be associated with? I think not.

More locally, veterinary costs are of concern to many constituents. Goodness me, vet bills seem to grow weekly. There are a lot of senior citizens in the area I represent—we have the most centenarians in the country, and I hope to be one of them one day. Animals are their lives. They are everything to elderly people who are on their own, and we should not trivialise the importance of animals to such people. Veterinary bills can be high, and the taxpayer foots the bill for veterinary checks in live transportation. If that cost was shifted to those involved in the industry, not only would the taxpayer save money during these hard times, but the industry would be incentivised to look after its animals well, as the cost of veterinary bills could be high.

I hope I have convinced the House about the issue of the live export of animals. Some 94,000 people signed the petition. What is particularly exciting is that unlike in 2012, the change I want is no longer an impossible dream. When we investigated a ban before, it was found that because of freedom of movement within the European Union—my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who was a Member of the European Parliament, knows far better than I do how our hands were tied behind our back—it would be unlawful to stop the practice. Once we leave the European Union, that will no longer be the case. As the Minister said in 2017,

“there will be nothing standing in our way of placing an ethical ban on the export of live animals.”

I believe him.

I was further encouraged by something in the Conservative manifesto last year—one of the few things I was encouraged by, but the least said about that the better. My party committed the Government to continuing to improve animal welfare and specifically mentioned

taking steps to control the export of animals for slaughter. The Secretary of State has also made positive noises about that inside and outside the House.

In summary, I want us to address the suffering of animals. The public are overwhelmingly with us—we have only to think of the Prime Minister’s little aside on foxhunting during the dreadful general election campaign and all the damage that that did. We are a nation of animal lovers, and political parties and Members of Parliament should get real on that, because animals are by and large grateful for everything we do for them, and they are not quite as moody as human beings can be.

We must look after animals to the best of our ability. We should enforce maximum journey times, end long-distance travel for slaughter, ensure that British animals are treated according to British standards, which I believe are high despite what my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire said, and prevent the public purse from paying for veterinary costs. Let us make this issue one of the first great steps as Britain takes back control from the European Union. As Gandhi once said:

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

As we leave the European Union next year, not only I and many of my constituents but the whole of the animal kingdom will be celebrating.

5.22 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who I think is wrong about rural as opposed to urban communities. We have only to listen to the RSPCA to hear about unspeakable acts of vicious cruelty that take place against domestic animals in our urban areas to know that cruelty is not divided by region, people or nations, but by wickedness in individuals. It is absolutely the road to hell to ban things because we do not like the proper process that should be followed. I am particularly passionate about this because my amendment to the Animal Welfare Act 2006 would have seen the sentence for cruelty increased, but it was voted down by the Labour Government who took the credit for the Bill.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West for revealing my fondness for tropical fish, although I am not sure that they are completely relevant in this debate as they tend to be flown in from Singapore on very long journeys. However, the problem with a ban is that we are all here because we want to see less bad treatment and better treatment of animals in transit, irrespective of where they are coming from or going to and irrespective of whether they are for slaughter or for breeding stock.

I had to pass exams to be allowed to transport my animals. It is wrong to say that there are not rules on what we are allowed to do. There is an eight-hour limit. We have to have tests and we can drive our animals only within 65 km of where we live without any regulation whatsoever. So what the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said is wrong. She should look it up on the DEFRA website

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Gentleman has just said that I said there were not any rules, but I said nothing of the sort. I accepted that there are rules in place, but I

[*Kerry McCarthy*]

said that they are not being adhered to. For example, calves being held in a truck in a lay-by technically counts as a rest period, but most of us would agree that is not much of a relief for them. I did not say that there were not any rules.

Bill Wiggin: I thought the hon. Lady said that we tried to object to the eight-hour limit in the European Union.

Kerry McCarthy: That is an overall limit.

Bill Wiggin: I have given the matter a great deal of thought and it occurs to me that we should not ban live exports. If we do that, we will lose control through the Irish border and the animals whose welfare we seek to improve could end up travelling from southern Ireland to Spain or France on journeys that are considerably longer than they need to be. We need to improve the standards of transport within the United Kingdom, and when they arrive in Kent ready to cross the channel they must be properly inspected by vets. That means there needs to be lairage and unloading of the animals, and they need to be checked. Then they should be loaded into approved-only transporters. There are penalties for any suffering that happens on the journeys, but at the moment there is not an owner.

The lorry driver is not the owner of the animals in the back, so if a sheep's leg is sticking out of the back of the truck, nobody suffers financially for that. If one of the animals is found to be suffering when they are unloaded, it gets put down and then there is a penalty, because that life is lost and that animal is no longer fit for human consumption. The whole purpose of its export has been taken away. That is the penalty that hangs over all livestock producers all the time. If someone is found to have put the wrong medicines in their animal, it is condemned. That is how we deal with and enforce rules.

If we have proper policing all the way along the transport route, it is perfectly reasonable to continue to send animals 22 miles over the seas as opposed to thousands of miles around the edge.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I think my hon. Friend has missed the entire point of the debate. The point is not that animals should be transported under good conditions, but whether they should be slaughtered, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) said in opening the debate, as close to the point of production as possible and exported on the hook and not on the hoof. In that context, it is immaterial how they travel within the United Kingdom. There are 135 hours between the Scottish islands and Spain, and that is unacceptable under any circumstances. It is the principle that we object to, not the quality of the export.

Bill Wiggin: I hate to disagree with my hon. Friend, but if he reads the petition, he will see that it states:

"The transport of live animals exported from the UK causes immense suffering."

So he is wrong. It is not about whether we kill the animals near to where they are born. We all agree on that: of course we should slaughter and export on the hook.

If we cannot, or if something else is going on, such as fattening, we have to be careful, because large numbers of animals will be put in lorries for breeding purposes and they will arrive in France and be slaughtered, and there is nothing we can do. So we ought to correct where the suffering occurs and not try to blame foreign people for standards that they may or may not be more passionate about than some of our people.

It is much more important that the Government focus on removing any suffering on the journeys that we can control.

Zac Goldsmith: Does my hon. Friend think it is possible to transport in a civilised manner very young calves from the Scottish isles to Spain, for example? Obviously anything is possible in a world of fantasy, but in the real world does he believe that is a possibility?

Bill Wiggin: At the moment we have got the worst possible case where the roll-on/roll-off ferries will not take live exports because of the protests, so the animals end up going on slower ferries. Can we export and travel safely? Yes, we can. We fly racehorses around the world to appear in horseraces. We do all sorts of things with animals, but the purpose of the Animal Welfare Act was to name the five freedoms so that we would have basic frameworks for animal welfare, and breaking those is against the law. It is vital that we enforce the laws that we all like and support, rather than allow exporters an excuse. So can we transport calves abroad? Yes, we can.

Zac Goldsmith: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. Surely if one were even to come close to applying the standards applied to racehorses, or to extremely valuable breeding stock, to animals that are transported for slaughter or fattening, the whole economic dynamic would change to such an extent that it would never make sense to transport animals on a large scale for those purposes? The standards for animals transported for slaughter or fattening will always necessarily be far lower than those in the example that he provided.

Bill Wiggin: It is far better to achieve a ban by making it economically difficult because the standards are so high than to apply a legal ban, which people get around by sending their animals to Northern Ireland, southern Ireland and to Spain. Let us get what we really want, which is a reduction in cruelty, rather than an export ban.

Theresa Villiers: In my ten-minute rule Bill, I proposed an exemption for north-south exports on the island of Ireland, so long as there was no onward transport overseas. My hon. Friend sees this as a great flaw in the proposal of a ban, but there is a technical solution that deals with the flaw that he has identified.

Bill Wiggin: It did not stop horsemeat getting into our supermarkets either, and that is the problem. Once we lose control, because the animal is in another sovereign nation, it is out of our hands. Therefore, let us get right the bit that we can. At the moment, a ban would fail. We would get illegal activity and, in the end, promote and improve the lot of the worst people—not the most caring people, such as those who are prepared to be hauliers who are properly policed, have proper veterinary inspections and will lose their licence to be an approved

haulier if there is any case of abuse. That is how we can achieve what we really want, which is better animal welfare. I hope that if we can do that, the roll-on/roll-off ordinary ferries will allow proper, speedy channel crossings, rather than the slow boats that animals currently have to take. However, that cannot happen without better enforcement by British veterinary inspectors, and they cannot achieve that in Ramsgate because there is no lairage. If the animals are not taken off the trucks, they cannot be inspected properly. If they cannot be seen, they cannot be given the proper veterinary inspections, and if we do not do that, we will not get the improvements that we all want.

Sir Roger Gale: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; he is being very generous. He just said that once the animals leave these shores we have no control over them. He is absolutely right, and that is precisely why we do not want them transported halfway across Europe alive.

Bill Wiggin: Unfortunately for my hon. Friend, that will not be possible, because we are not proposing an export ban on all animals, but just on those that are for slaughter—and how will anyone know whether they are for slaughter? Who can tell what will happen to a sheep after it has arrived in France? It may be breeding stock that is downgraded to fattening, and then downgraded to immediate slaughter. Once it is out of our sphere of influence, it has gone. Equally, when animals come into the UK, they fall into our sphere of influence, and we must ensure that we have properly resourced policing, and the standards that we hope to achieve in this well-intentioned but, I think, slightly vulnerable petition.

5.33 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I would hazard a guess that, unusually, this afternoon's petition is probably supported by the vast majority of UK citizens. I noted that one of the areas with the greatest density of replies, as we can see from the information published by the House, was South Thanet, and for good reason. Part of South Thanet has been mentioned in the debate: the very small commercial port of Ramsgate, which is part of my constituency. It has the very dubious honour, which I want to get rid of as soon as possible, of being the only UK port through which lamb and sheep are transported across an international sea border for slaughter abroad.

If the inappropriate means of transport across the channel—up to three hours on a small, ageing Russian tank transporter called the *Joline*, which plied the Volga river in a previous incarnation and is now Latvian-flagged—is not bad enough, we should also be concerned about the long journey times within the UK. The sheep and lambs are often from Cumbria, meaning an eight to 10 hour trip to Kent. The onward journey, after three hours travelling across the channel, could be to somewhere as far as Germany, which would take another eight hours or more, after which they are slaughtered. We are talking about a transport time—without mentioning the problems that we have already heard about regarding veal—for lambs of 24 hours in total. Although exports through Ramsgate can be at any time of year—in winter cold or summer heat—peaks are often seen to coincide with religious festivals, notably Eid, following the end of Ramadan.

The issue of animal exports out of Ramsgate gained national focus because of a truly appalling fiasco on 12 September 2012, as has been mentioned this afternoon. A single lorry carrying more than 500 sheep was declared unfit to travel. Temporary holding pens were set up, as no official lairage was available at the port. Some 43 sheep had to be euthanised due to injury, six fell into the water, and two drowned. Breaches of animal welfare regulations were found, and appropriate fines and a suspended prison sentence were levied against the director of the transport company. Thereafter, Thanet District Council unilaterally suspended the trade through the municipally owned and run port. However, following an injunction by the shippers, the trade was forced to resume again the next month, in late October 2012.

A petition was presented to Parliament in January 2013 by the then MP Laura Sandys, calling for the permanent suspension of live exports through the port. Things then became truly weird, with protracted legal action by the shippers—action that concluded in February 2014, resulting in a claim of more than £4 million in compensation against the local council. It is a small council, so local taxpayers had to bear that cost. Live animal exports could not be prevented in what was a very telling judgment for two reasons. First, section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 allows, in simple terms, free access to goods traffic from any UK port—an historical law that was more appropriate, I would argue, in the age of sail and steam, when navigation was more hazardous. For that reason, I sought to introduce a fairly simple amendment to the old Act via a ten-minute rule Bill in May 2016. My Bill would have allowed municipally owned and controlled ports the discretion to ban the trade. In Ramsgate, it is certainly not a trade that people want through the port, which they own.

In some ways, that Bill was a little bit of devilment, because even if it had passed at that time, it would have been deemed not in accordance with single market rules on the functioning of the EU. That was clearly highlighted in the second part of the High Court judgment, which stated that in any event, notwithstanding the 1847 Act, EU law governing the function of the single market would prevent restrictions of animal exports. I note what the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, but the EU interprets animals as mere “goods”. EU rules still allow the production of foie gras, the existence of veal crates, bullfighting and everything else. I do not think that EU standards are the gold plate that many people see them as.

It was encouraging to see, a couple of weeks ago—and somewhat late in the day, I might add—the Labour party publish its proposals for animal welfare. I warmly welcomed them, but they largely mirrored what we on the Conservative Benches are doing and have been talking about for some time. The Leader of the Opposition spoke today about maintaining membership of “a” or “the” customs union, and maintaining rules and standards very much in alignment with those of the EU, so that we end up in some perpetual membership of the single market. I am afraid that that was where the credibility of Labour's position on animal welfare somewhat fell to bits in my mind. An independent country would be able to introduce the welfare standards it feels are right, but single market rules have thus far failed us on animal and farming standards.

[*Craig Mackinlay*]

Just a month ago, I held an event on the parliamentary estate—just next door—with representatives of key animal welfare groups, many of whom are here, and a diverse range of celebrities, including Joanna Lumley, Frederick Forsyth, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Selina Scott and Jan Leeming. I was pleased to be supported by Conservative colleagues, but there was also support from Members of the Scottish National party—I was grateful that they were at the event. Sadly, not one Labour Member came, and I am somewhat intrigued about that. I am also somewhat intrigued about the fact that the Labour Benches are virtually devoid this afternoon.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Craig Mackinlay: Of course—I am surprised that the hon. Lady has waited so long.

Kerry McCarthy: I did get an invite to that event—I think I was actually speaking at something else that afternoon—but I thought I had been sent it accidentally, because I thought it was Conservative animal welfare event, especially given some of the names that were mentioned. I did not go because I thought I had somehow accidentally got on to the hon. Gentleman’s mailing list, but he should not assume from that any lack of support for the cause.

Craig Mackinlay: I am sorry if there was anything in the invitation that put the hon. Lady off, but it was very much open to all, and some other parties took up the offer.

We live in changed times. We voted to leave the European Union, which means leaving the customs union and the single market and no longer being bound by the EU’s *acquis* in areas where we wish to diverge. That gives me great hope. We have the opportunity to advance new international trade deals, and for the first time in a generation we are free once more to do what is right and what the people of this country demand. That very much comes under the banner of taking back control, which means taking back control of animal welfare and farming standards.

I and other Members have mentioned the encouraging words in the Conservative party manifesto by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other agriculture Ministers. I fully supported the Live Animal Exports (Prohibitions) Bill proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and I pay tribute to the 94,000 people across the country who signed this petition. I feel that they will share my view that, post Brexit, we can have a renaissance of animal welfare standards, alongside our commitments to introduce CCTV in abattoirs and increase sentences for those who abuse animals.

I fully appreciate farmers’ concerns about the potential for increased costs, which were ably set out by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin). He must feel like he is in “12 Angry Men”—one of my favourite films—but I am not sure he is going to win today. The increased costs resulting from the application of the standards that my hon. Friend ably set out may stop this trade in its tracks. The profit from the difference between the farm-gate cost and the price that the farmer receives when the animals are delivered to the market abroad will no longer be realised.

Bill Wiggin: Economic pressure is a far better way of achieving what my hon. Friend wants than legislative pressure. If it does not make economic sense, that is absolutely fine. What is wrong is that, without that potential outlet, supermarkets will simply screw down the price in the UK, and there will be nothing anybody can do. That is where the frustration comes from.

Craig Mackinlay: My hon. Friend made his points very well during his speech, and I was very pleased to hear them.

Let me put the size of the export market in context. Some 14.5 million sheep and lambs are slaughtered in this country each year, and a mere 40,000 are transported across the international sea border through ports such as Ramsgate in my constituency. It is a minor trade and alternatives are available. I have no intention—I say this now, but I suppose things change—of stopping my consumption of meat. I can think of nothing better than a decent Welsh or Kent salt marsh lamb, but the slaughter must be undertaken as close to where the animals are raised as possible. That means, post Brexit, having a national rethink about localising slaughterhouses. We need the Animal and Plant Health Agency to up its game on monitoring, particularly for long-distance transports within the UK. The rule that we should all be aiming for is that our meat should be provided on the hook, not on the hoof.

5.44 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

Animal cruelty always raises passions. I have been involved in farming my entire life, and I have grown up with animal husbandry since I was a little boy. My earliest memories are of inspecting livestock in fields and buildings, no matter the snow or rain. Many farm children help raise cattle or sheep as a project to get them involved in farming. Rural schools in Scotland used to raise funds for the school through family farms, which raised livestock from calves or lambs to be sold at the auction mart.

Rural children grow up surrounded by livestock—farm visits were not contrived, and are still an everyday activity—but society has become disconnected from livestock farming. Fewer and fewer children and adults have a connection to the land and the livestock industry. Growing up in the countryside, I was well aware of where the bacon, eggs, chicken or beef on my plate came from, but I am afraid to say that the vast majority of young adults do not realise where their burgers come from. My young sons are six and two and a half, and they know only too well that their sausages come from pigs, that their burgers come from fat cattle in the fields, and that the chicken in their night-time books are the roast chicken at the weekend. This debate should not be about the morality of eating meat. I respect the opinions of vegetarians, but I resent it if they peddle a myth that eating meat is cruel or unhealthy. This debate should not be about that.

Let us be clear: husbandry, the feeding of livestock, the use of veterinary drugs and the transport of animals are regulated. The care of commercial livestock is paramount to farmers and breeders. We must not confuse this issue with the incidence of neglect, wanton cruelty

or, in the case of transport, law-breaking. If we disagree with transporting livestock, it must be for reasons that all of society can agree on, and not simply because of minority beliefs.

NFU Scotland recognises that the standards of transport and slaughter in the EU are equivalent to our standards. Livestock are regularly shipped, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) knows, from the islands to mainland Scotland—to Aberdeen on the east coast from Orkney and Shetland. Several years ago, specialist roll on/roll off containers were manufactured by Stewart Trailers, which happens to be based in my constituency of Gordon. They were designed specifically for long journeys, and they had water and were well ventilated. They were designed to be stable if the crossing is choppy—as the right hon. Gentleman knows, the crossing from Shetland and Orkney can be very choppy.

There is a lairage yard at Aberdeen for safe onward transportation to farms in the fertile countryside of north-east Scotland, where I farm. That is best practice, and anyone visiting the facilities and the cattle and sheep auctions would be reassured that it can be done properly. There was a tremendous TV programme, which can still be found, called “The Mart”. Hon. Members may need subtitles, as it was in Doric, which those of us in the north-east can speak. It was about a mart called Thainstone, and it was a wonderful example of livestock husbandry. Anybody watching it would be hard pressed to say that people who look after livestock are not passionate about it; they are therefore concerned about this debate.

If somebody simply does not agree with shipping livestock or eating meat, this proposal will not be good enough. The NFUS is very concerned that any attempt to prevent live export will set a dangerous precedent. Livestock production is the key to farming on Scotland’s islands. There are no processing facilities on the islands—they are long gone—so livestock must be transported safely and effectively to the mainland. Any attempt to restrict those crossings would be catastrophic for the islands, because they cannot grow wheat, broccoli or the fine fruit and vegetables grown in the Kent constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay).

The NFUS said:

“If a precedent is set against permitting animals to undergo ferry journeys based on sentiment, not science, island crossings could be easily targeted...despite the absence of welfare problems on these crossings”.

It is important for us to separate the issues, and I am grateful to the Labour hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who said that she respected the fact that there are higher standards in the UK.

This is the nub of the matter: can exporting over the sea be done properly? Yes, it can. Can it be done with no suffering to animals, given the correct equipment and facilities? Yes, it can. Should concern be shown for higher temperatures in the summer and the length of transportation? Yes, it should. Should this be stopped because of poor practice in the past or internationally? No.

Time after time, we witness on our television programmes the other issue on livestock for slaughter in the EU, and many other Members have mentioned it: illegal slaughter techniques, cruelty and in many cases simple criminality—facilities that should not be allowed and personnel who

enjoy being cruel to animals. Abattoirs in the EU where that happens should simply not be operating. Several Members have mentioned that, and I am passionate about it, but it should not be confused with what the debate is about. The industry has to think again about this.

At the weekend, I was delighted to speak at the 53rd dinner of the Institute of Auctioneers and Appraisers in Scotland. The institute kindly gave me a tie, which I agreed to wear to this debate; I will register it as a gift as soon as I leave the Chamber. It is a venerable organisation that is immersed in the livestock industry and has stepped up during times of national animal health crisis, such as in the foot and mouth outbreak, when it undertook a task that was essential but few could stomach. Auctioneers are tasked with looking after livestock while keeping the market flowing, in a trade that goes back millennia. After all, as Members know, Rob Roy MacGregor was a drover, although he apparently took ownership by other means as well—but I do not wish to cast any slur on his character. The auctioneers are also responsible for being aware of legislation and ensuring that all those who use their facilities comply with the veterinary drug use, husbandry and transport regulations. They are very much the gatekeepers.

I believe that as many people are concerned about where livestock are processed on the continent as are worried about the transportation. On that point I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said. The whole industry must satisfy the public’s concern about where livestock is destined for. The industry cannot simply load the livestock and forget about them; Members have mentioned that. In the UK, we are broadly satisfied with Government inspectorates and officials inspecting our facilities, and the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs recently announced that abattoirs—in England, at least—will have cameras, but I suggest that the livestock industry consider a code of practice, or an addition to its industry standards, on being aware of the destination of livestock that are exported live.

Livestock and valuable horses are very tightly regulated, and the destination of valuable breeding stock is known, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said. Lower value livestock can end up being passed from pillar to post, but that should not be the case, and this is where auctioneers could shed a great deal of light. Horses and ponies sent to the continent for processing should be an area of shame for horse lovers. Surplus horses have to be dealt with humanely, even in a country where we do not consume horse meat. With recent royal support, it has been advocated that facilities should be provided in the UK, rather than horses being transported to the continent. I absolutely agree with that. If the industry were to produce its own code of practice on the destination of exported livestock, and facilities were verified as suitable, I personally would be a lot more comfortable.

The Minister should look to best practice, and he is very welcome to visit farms in the north of Scotland and the facilities at Aberdeen docks. I am sure that the Member for the islands, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, would invite the Minister as well, although I recommend that he takes a plane and not the ferry; the crossing is very choppy.

[Colin Clark]

I recognise the passion of those who signed the petition, but I doubt they wanted it to be the thin end of a wedge undermining UK farming, which at the moment has the highest welfare standards in the EU.

5.54 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to take part in a debate on such an important issue.

The export of live farm animals can cause great suffering in many cases, as was outlined by a number of right hon. and hon. Members, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess), and the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). Last year I proposed a ten-minute rule Bill to implement a ban on the export of live animals for slaughter or for fattening, because I believe it to be unethical to export animals to countries where they can be subjected to treatment that would be unlawful in the United Kingdom.

I am concerned, as are many others who have spoken this afternoon, that the rules regulating the transport and slaughter of animals that are supposed to apply across every EU member state are not always effectively enforced in every part of the European Union once animals leave this country. Many of the sheep exported from the UK are sent to France, but there is clear evidence of inhumane and illegal slaughter practices in a number of places there—a problem acknowledged in a 2016 report by a committee of inquiry in the French Parliament. In my view, that of the people who signed the petition, and that of many of my constituents, it is not acceptable for the UK to send animals to die in such horrendous conditions.

We have had extensive discussion about calves that are exported from Scotland to Spain, and are subjected to a 20-hour sea journey to northern France, and then a drive all the way to Spain. The total journey time can be as much as 135 hours. Morbidity and mortality following transport can be high, and those that survive to reach their destination in Spain can, under the law prevailing there, be kept in barren pens, without bedding, which would be illegal in this country.

Over the years, there have been repeated calls for this harsh trade to be brought to an end. Public concern on the issue dates back nearly 100 years. The 1990s saw mass protests by thousands of dedicated campaigners seeking an end to live exports, but attempts to implement a ban have been blocked by the European Court of Justice as being in contravention of EU law and single market rules on the free movement of goods.

Now that the UK has voted to leave the European Union, we have the opportunity to reopen the question and to decide in this House whether to implement a ban. Although export bans are constrained by World Trade Organisation rules, the WTO appellate body has ruled that animal welfare matters are capable of falling within the “public morals” exception. There are reasonable grounds to believe that the UK would be able to defend a WTO challenge by showing an export ban to be a proportionate response to long-standing, deeply held concerns of the public in the United Kingdom, as illustrated by those many thousands of people who took the time to sign the petition we are debating.

The WTO is not the only potential barrier to delivering an end to live exports, as called for by those who signed the petition. We will only be able to end them if we leave the single market; if we do not, a ban will continue to be beyond this country’s reach, as it has been for so many years. That is another important reason to respect the result of the referendum and leave the single market, replacing it with a new partnership with our European neighbours.

I understand from my discussions with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, for which I am very grateful, that the Government intend to consult soon on how implement the Conservative manifesto promise that we will

“take early steps to control the export of live farm animals for slaughter”.

I appeal to the Minister to publish that consultation, and to ensure that the options considered include a ban on export for slaughter or for fattening. Like the hon. Member for Bristol East and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, I think that if we are to tackle the welfare concerns highlighted by hon. Members, the ban needs to include exports for fattening as well.

I believe, as others do, that there is a case for allowing exports to continue from north to south, from Northern Ireland. That is essentially local traffic, and I do not think that it raises the same animal welfare concerns. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), if we genuinely want an end to live exports, we are justified in stating that the exemption for north-south exports should not allow onward transportation to destinations outside the Republic of Ireland.

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

I would be very interested to hear from the Minister about the status of an export ban in the United Kingdom as a whole. There have been reports in recent days that the devolved institutions in different parts of the United Kingdom would make their own decisions on this matter, but one would have thought that as a trade matter it would be reserved to the UK Government. It would be useful to have the Minister’s view on that. I am also concerned that there are reports that the Minister for rural affairs in the Scottish Government, Minister Ewing, has indicated that he would not support a ban of this sort. I hope that that view may change.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady accept that that is a matter for the devolved Scottish Government, and not for Members in this House?

Theresa Villiers: Actually, the question I am posing to the Minister is about whether it is a reserved matter. Whether it is a matter for the Scottish Government or the UK Government, I want to see an end to live exports, because of the suffering that they cause.

It would be very helpful to hear from the Minister when he expects the consultation to be published. I very much hope that it will come out in time for the outcome potentially to be included in the forthcoming Bill on farming, to which the Government are committed. I accept that it is probably too late for a provision on live exports to be in the Bill when it is first presented to

Parliament, but I hope it is not too late for the outcome of the consultation on restricting live exports possibly to be added to the Bill through amendment at a later stage. I appeal to the Minister to move forward with the consultation, with a view to ensuring that it is published and completed in time to enable the Government, if they so choose, to add provisions banning live exports to the agriculture Bill before it finishes its passage through Parliament.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I have listened to the debate intensely, but I still have not got an answer on the issue of a trade deal between Northern Ireland and the Republic, to which live animals can be exported, and which is a member of the European Union. How do we control where animals go from there? We have absolutely no jurisdiction over that. We have to be consistent if we want to bring in something, and it is not consistent to say, “Once it goes to the Republic of Ireland, it is not our business.”

Theresa Villiers: There are still risks that the rules we put in place will not be enforced, but that is a reason to make sure that we do everything we can to ensure that they are enforced properly. If we bring in the ban that is advocated in my ten-minute rule Bill, exporting from north to south in Northern Ireland with a view to onward export to other jurisdictions would be unlawful. Obviously, it would be very important to seek to ensure that that aspect of the new legislation was enforced. Just because there are potential difficulties in enforcing some aspects of a ban does not mean that we should throw up our hands and say, “It’s impossible—we can’t do this.” The case has been strongly made for a ban, and we need to look very carefully at how we can make sure that we enforce it as effectively as possible.

Bill Wiggin: My concern is that if the price of sheep went up significantly in France, anybody who wanted to capitalise on that would send their sheep through southern Ireland; at that point, our ban would have made the situation worse for those sheep.

Theresa Villiers: I do not accept that that would be a consequence. It is possible to put together a legal formulation that contains an exemption from the ban for north-south exports within the island of Ireland. Enforcement would not necessarily be easy, but even if there were risks of the ban being evaded, that is not an excuse for inaction.

That is why I support an end to live exports. The case for a ban has been made clear by many campaigning organisations, such as Compassion in World Farming, the RSPCA, the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and World Horse Welfare. The time has come to put an end to this trade that causes so much suffering. We should put a prohibition on live export in statute now, so that it comes into effect on exit day, when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

6.5 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on introducing the debate. I want to touch on a number of issues very briefly, and to deal with a couple of the points raised by my hon. Friend the

Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin). I normally agree with him, but on this occasion there is clearly a little difference between us.

Let us tackle the fundamental difference between live animals for slaughter, live animals for fattening and live animals for breeding stock. We all understand what “live animals for slaughter” means—that is what the petition is about. My understanding is that “live animals for fattening” is a euphemism for exporting livestock from the United Kingdom to France, Spain, Italy or Greece, where they spend a couple of days in a field and are then slaughtered and branded as local meat, be that French, Spanish, Greek or Italian. Effectively, those animals are live animals for slaughter. My view is that any control exercise should embrace those animals, as well as those that are openly and honestly—if that is the right word—exported for slaughter.

Breeding stock is different. Rather like the racehorses that were referred to earlier, they are high-value animals, they are well looked after and they are transported with great care. That is not the case with animals that are exported for other purposes. The standards in the United Kingdom may occasionally be not too bad, but the standards in mainland Europe are unenforced and unenforceable. In theory they are supposed to be high, but in practice, as we all know, they are not. I am not satisfied that even a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce travelling with one animal, particularly a veal calf, from a Scottish island to the Scottish mainland for eight hours—if that is how long it takes—would be satisfactory.

The issue of veal calves, which has been referred to on a number of occasions, sadly arises from a pyrrhic victory that some of us thought we had won: the banning of veal crates in the United Kingdom. That simply proves that we do not solve a problem by moving it from A to B. That is as true of the testing of cosmetics on live animals as it is of this issue of veal calves. The British market has singularly failed to promote and sell rose veal, as it is known. Veal calves that were raised in the United Kingdom are being shipped under appalling conditions, for very many hours, from Scotland or wherever to mainland Europe, where they are reared in the dark and fed on milk under infinitely worse conditions than they ever had in the United Kingdom. [*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire says that we have made it worse, and he is absolutely right—I said it was a pyrrhic victory. That has to be addressed, but not by shipping those animals to Europe to have them raised in sheds in Belgium, Holland, France or wherever, to produce white veal for Wiener schnitzel or whatever. We must consider that matter.

The crux of this issue—as it happens, this was highlighted on the BBC’s “Countryfile” yesterday—is the shortage of abattoir facilities, which arose way back when we shut half our abattoirs and slaughterhouses because we tried to gold-plate European regulations. We have heard that some facilities are no longer available, and that is absolutely right: we have taken away a lot of facilities, particularly in the Scottish islands. The answer, which I would like the Minister to address, is first to preserve local facilities where they still exist.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am a crofter who sells lambs every autumn because I run out of grazing. We have a slaughterhouse on the island, but slaughtering lambs at their different weights and then selling them on is beyond me—it is beyond

[*Angus Brendan MacNeil*]

all crofters—because some are too small to be slaughtered. About half need to go away for further fattening. Even if we had more slaughterhouses, it still would not work. Lambs would still have to be exported off the island, or else there would be a bigger welfare problem: lack of food.

Sir Roger Gale: The hon. Gentleman has greater expertise in this narrow field than me, particularly since he farms. I accept that point, but I do not accept that it is necessary to send those animals to the south of England, which is an eight, 10 or 12-hour journey once they hit the mainland—and he first ships them from the island to the mainland United Kingdom. Even the journey to the south of Britain is very long, but if they are shipped across the channel and then halfway across Europe to Spain, which is what happens, the journey is infinitely longer. I do not accept that that is a necessity. I might accept that there is a case for moving them to the Scottish lowlands for fattening if that is what the economics of the trade demand.

I accept again that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and that the local abattoir might not work for everyone all the time. However, we have beset our slaughterhouses not with animal welfare regulations, which I support, but with all manner of other red tape, which is putting them out of business. The Minister needs to address that. Frankly, they are on the borderline of not being able to make a living. Far from closing those local facilities, we need to reinstate them and provide more local facilities so that, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay said, animals can be slaughtered as close to the point of production as possible. That is the key. That is why I do not accept the argument put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire that this is just a matter of raising transport standards and ensuring that everything is gold-plated in the United Kingdom. As he said himself—I made this point during his speech—the moment an animal leaves these shores, it is out of our control. I see no justification in this day and age for transporting animals alive rather than on the hook.

The Minister will know that people have said, “Ah yes, but the French have a different way of butchering meat.” That is absolutely true, but it is not beyond the wit of man—before we leave the European Union, at least—to hire a French butcher or someone else who can butcher for the French. In fact, it is already done. The idea that something can be shipped across the channel, spend a couple of days in a French field and be whacked off down to the Rungis meat market and sold as French beef, lamb or whatever is a nonsense.

I see no justification whatsoever for the transport of live animals for slaughter. I see every reason why we should take the opportunity, upon leaving the European Union, to ban the transport of live animals—that includes horses, by the way—for purposes other than breeding. I applaud the measures that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has trailed, and I hope very much that we will introduce them as soon as possible.

6.14 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Chair, Mr Hollobone. May I place on the record my gratitude to the Petitions Committee for bringing this debate to the Chamber?

Despite our differences, there has been a large measure of agreement among Members. People have spoken about the need for abattoirs close to the source of production, and I have no problem agreeing with that. The abattoir in Orkney recently failed yet again, so that subject is near to my heart and, Orkney being an agricultural community, to those of my constituents. It also illustrates, though, how insisting on having a facility for slaughter near the point of production leaves people in island communities or even remote rural communities on the mainland open to unintended consequences.

Whatever position we have taken in the debate, I think we are all motivated by a desire to see the highest possible animal welfare standards. No one wants animals to suffer unnecessarily. The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said a few things with which I do not necessarily agree. He said that animals are not moody like people. I can only assume that he has never kept a cat. He also said that this is not an easy debate for those of us who represent agricultural communities, suggesting that we are not in a position to put animal welfare standards at the top of the agenda. I passionately disagree. I speak as a farmer’s son who represents an agricultural community. In fact, I should declare an interest given what he said about veterinary fees: my wife is a partner in a local veterinary practice in Orkney and regularly does pre-export checks for animals that go from Orkney to the continent. That does not happen often—the economics are such that live export for purposes other than slaughter, such as breeding, is not straightforward—but it does happen, and the cost of that is met by the exporter, not the taxpayer.

The assertion that farmers care less than other people about animal welfare has to be challenged. It simply is not the case. I invite the hon. Gentleman to cast his mind back to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001, when he will have seen on his television set pictures of farmers who had had their entire herds slaughtered. Those were not people who did not care about the fate of the animals they had just seen destroyed; many of them suffer a measure of trauma to this day, and they are by no means untypical of farmers. In fact, although there are exceptions to every rule, they are typical. Farmers care about animal welfare. They invest a lot, not just financially but emotionally, in rearing beasts that they then send off for slaughter. That is a commercial activity, but it is by no means cold-hearted.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) explained the shipping of livestock from Orkney and Shetland to Aberdeen and spoke about the cassette system that is used to transport animals. I was first elected shortly before that system was put in place, and I recall that the construction and design of those cassettes was led by the farmers’ unions and farmers themselves, as well as by the State Veterinary Service and the animal welfare authorities. As he said, the system is the gold standard in animal transportation. If anyone feels, as the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) suggested, that transportation cannot be done humanely and with due regard for animal welfare, I invite them to come and inspect it. It is subject to the most rigorous standards and regulation, not just in its construction but in its operation.

As has been said, animal welfare export standards are currently subject to EC regulation 1/2005, which governs loading, unloading, journey length, vehicle standards,

temperature, and available food and water. Of course, those rules, like any, get broken from time to time—that is self-evident. That is why we have proper enforcement. If hon. Members are keen on seeing better enforcement, I look forward to their support when I next make a call for better resourcing and governance within the state veterinary service, because that has been allowed to wither on the vine for many years. If we are serious about animal welfare, that is somewhere we should put our money.

Sir Roger Gale: If I accept the idea of cruise liner facilities being offered for cattle shipped from the islands to the Scottish mainland—for the purpose of this argument, I do—will the right hon. Gentleman explain why it is then necessary to permit those animals to be transported to mainland Europe in conditions over which we have no control at all, for hundreds of miles and dozens of hours?

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman's question prompts another question: what control is there to be within our domestic boundaries? It is still possible to transport animals for a very long time within the UK. He is right: there is a need for better enforcement across the whole European Union. Part of my unease about some of the arguments that he and others advance is that their attitude is almost, "Well, we'll be fine—we'll take the moral high ground and have the best possible standards of animal welfare." That will not see the end of veal farming in France. That production will go on, but we somehow seem to think we can draw a line on the map and say, "We're not going to be part of that."

That also goes to the point I made earlier to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), to which we have not yet had an answer. A ban that does not ban movement across the Irish border is not a ban at all; it is a ban with a most obvious loophole. No matter what terms we may wish to write in about onward transmission, once the livestock has been moved from the north of Ireland to the south of Ireland we have lost control of it. As was said earlier—it might have been by the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin)—when market conditions dictate that a significantly better price is to be had for a product in France, that is where it will go. If there is even only one route to that market, that is the one route that will be taken.

Bill Wiggin: There is one other alternative. In that scenario, if we allowed live exports to continue, any animals coming from southern Ireland to France would cross through the United Kingdom, where our inspectors could significantly improve the quality of the transport.

Mr Carmichael: If the objection is to sea transportation, it strikes me as slightly ironic that one possible consequence for animals from Northern Ireland would be that, instead of crossing of a few miles across the border to the south, they would end up being put on boats to go across either the north channel or the Irish sea. Again, I fear the law of unintended consequences is at work here.

What is important? What should we be looking for as we seek to regulate this whole area better? I say to the Minister that in looking at this issue, which will constantly be under scrutiny, and rightly so, there is plenty of

evidence and research. It is that evidence and research—not sentiment—that should ultimately govern the decisions that we make.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We come to the Front-Bench speeches, after which Steve Double will have a few minutes to sum up the debate. I call David Linden, for the Scottish National party.

6.25 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I commend the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. Before I move to the substance of my speech and the Scottish National party's position, I will sum up the comments made by the right hon. and hon. Members who took part in the debate.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who is a passionate campaigner in this area, mentioned the Foreign Secretary's visit to Ramsgate and the promise he made during the EU referendum campaign. I dare say that if it was not put on the side of a bus, it probably did not mean much.

During my time in this place the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) has spent an awful lot of time talking about Southend West. Last week I had the fortune—I was going to say misfortune—of having my flight to London diverted to Southend, and as we flew across I saw one or two of its farms. I am conscious that, as the Member for Glasgow East, I am probably the most urban MP taking part in the debate—I have a total of one farm in my constituency—but I was grateful for his contribution to the debate.

The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) is of course an experienced cattle farmer. There was little in the course of his speech that I could disagree with. As I listened to the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), I was further concerned: as a Scottish nationalist Member, it is unusual to find myself in agreement with Conservatives, but he made an excellent speech, nothing of which I could disagree with. I absolutely agree on the importance of teaching our children where food comes from. Like him, I have a son who is two and a half years old, and at the weekend I explained to him the benefits of us having both pig and cow in our pie. As children grow up, it is important that they understand where the food on our plate comes from. Alongside the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), he made a passionate defence of island communities. I was slightly disappointed that, over the course of the debate, island communities were not recognised elsewhere.

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who is a passionate campaigner in this area, spoke of the experience in Ramsgate in 2012. I am afraid that we will probably disagree today. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) has introduced a ten-minute rule Bill. She discussed some of the challenges that could flow from World Trade Organisation rules and spoke about reasonable grounds. That does not give me the certainty I would need to give that support.

We also heard speeches from the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, who made a powerful

[David Linden]

point about farmers and crofters. I am well aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who is in his place, is a crofter. During the foot and mouth crisis in 2001, it was the farmers and crofters who had the biggest investment here.

I thank the 36 constituents in Glasgow East who signed the petition. In future, it would be helpful if MPs who take part in petitions debates had the opportunity to interact with those constituents. It is deeply disappointing that although Parliament will send us a heat map showing who signed the petition, we do not have the opportunity to follow up with those people who have lobbied us as parliamentarians to come and take part in a debate. That is a point for the Petitions Committee.

It is indeed a pleasure to speak from the Front Bench on behalf of the Scottish National party. I want to outline our position on live animal exports. We are committed to the welfare of all animals during transport within and outwith the UK. I am afraid we cannot support any moves that create further challenges or disadvantages for our livestock sector, or indeed for Scottish agriculture. We feel that current EU legislation is sufficient. Many good measures that protect animals are already in place, including journey logs and, if appropriate, resting at control posts.

In addition, the current regulations make provision for feeding and watering frequencies for livestock in transit. It is important to note, particularly from the Scottish perspective, that very few animals, if any, are exported from Scotland directly for slaughter. Export is largely done for other reasons, namely breeding and production. Long-distance transport of livestock is an important and traditional part of commercial Scottish agriculture. Indeed, the value of exporting is estimated by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs at £50 million in 2015 alone.

I want to make sure that the voice of stakeholders is heard during the debate. Quality Meat Scotland states that the Scottish industry

"benefits from being able to import live animals with quality genetics to improve blood lines".

The National Farmers Union of Scotland has been quoted several times tonight, between the speeches of the hon. Member for Gordon and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. I too am grateful for the briefing. NFU Scotland is fairly clear about there being no scientific evidence to suggest that animals being transported in current conditions are caused any unnecessary suffering. I acknowledge the previous horror stories, which were outlined by the hon. Member for South Thanet. Those controversies highlight the need for better and more consistent enforcement, rather than a major change in the law. The Government need to appreciate that live exports provide much needed competition within the marketplace, especially at times of peak production or when cheaper imports are placing pressure on domestic prices and demand.

As I have said, livestock production is key to Scotland's island communities. Without processing facilities on an island, the only option is to transport animals across to the mainland by ferry. In some cases there is a need for animals to leave the island for better forage or winter accommodation, or for finishing purposes. Any attempt to restrict those crossings would be catastrophic to

island communities and farmers, and where there is a major supply chain. NFU Scotland's views on moves to ban live exports for slaughter are quite right and justifiable.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I also want to echo the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland: there is a welfare issue. Animals cannot be kept all year round on some of the islands and so have to move; it is for the good of the animals. Crofters and farmers are often worried about that, and spend a lot of time almost varnishing their nails—that is the level of work people put in when they have livestock. That must be considered. Any ban would endanger animals' health.

David Linden: It may benefit the House to know that my wife is from Na h-Eileanan an Iar—perhaps the second best constituency in Scotland. I visit the Western Isles fairly regularly and am aware that, in the context of the deer cull, forage is an issue. My hon. Friend makes the point well.

A proposed UK framework cannot be another power grab from devolved Governments during the Brexit process. That is the point I was trying to make to the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet. The Scottish Government reserve the right to follow Scotland's interests. That should not mean surrendering control of a devolved competence to Her Majesty's Government.

I have already touched on the subject of the WTO. Ministers have not ruled out a ban on live animal exports, and I shall be interested to see what kind of language the Minister uses when he closes the debate. Before deciding what path to take, they should be clear about the economic consequences of implementing the policy. That means not the devolved consequences, but the economic consequences for the farming industry. Conservative Members talk an awful lot about the opportunities to come from Brexit, for animal welfare and farming. I hope that policy development will extend to all strands of agriculture, including the staff who work in abattoirs.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: One of the potential consequences of a ban, if Her Majesty's Scottish Government do not invoke such a ban, has just occurred to me. Scottish farmers might be in an advantageous position. I am sure that it is not the perverse aim of English Members to disadvantage farmers in England. I should be happy with higher ram prices, I have to say.

David Linden: Without straying into the territory of ram prices, which is not something we routinely discuss in Glasgow East, I think my hon. Friend makes a good point. I do not know whether the Minister has considered that issue—perhaps it is why he is reaching for pen and paper.

I was saying that I want policy development to extend to abattoir staff. The Scottish National party, like most parties, takes the view that most animals should be slaughtered as close to the farm as possible. That is why it is important that abattoirs can continue to function properly post Brexit. A staggering 95% of the official veterinarians who work in our abattoirs are EU nationals, so the greatest practical matter that we should consider is ensuring that those EU nationals, many of whom are from Spain, can continue living and working here, staffing the abattoirs.

On today of all days, and given that this is essentially another Brexit debate, it would be remiss of me not to make reference to the importance of staying in the single market and in “the” customs union—not “a” customs union. Failure to do so will result in queues of lorries, backed up with prime Scotch lamb and beef. The Scottish red meat sector already faces enough challenges down the tracks as we are dragged off the hard Brexit cliff edge. It is for that reason that the SNP cannot and will not support any move that creates further challenges or difficulty for our livestock sector, or for Scottish agriculture.

6.35 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, as I was to serve under that of Mr Wilson earlier. I congratulate the petition organiser and the many signatories. I shall not go over ground that has already been covered, as that is unnecessary, but we have explored some different approaches to the issue, so I shall start with some direct questions to the Minister, allowing him plenty of time to answer them.

I want to give an immediate answer to the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who is not paying attention at the moment, about some things that the Labour Government did. There are not many Labour Members present; there are three of us now. Perhaps Labour could be criticised for not introducing a ban on live exports previously, but we are united: we will introduce a ban on live exports. Obviously we shall have to consult about how we do it, but it is our clear intention. The previous Labour Government made progress on animal welfare, with the fur farming ban, the Animal Welfare Act 2006—I am pleased the Government intend to update that, and we shall support them where appropriate—and the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007. That is aside from what we did on the foxhunting issue. There are two Conservative Members here who strongly supported the ban—the hon. Members for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who were staunch in their support—but unfortunately many did not. It took rather too long to get the measure through, and we make no apologies for saying that we will look again at some of the implications of the ban.

To begin my questions to the Minister, I want to hear categorically that, in line with the manifesto commitment and the Live Animal Exports (Prohibition) Bill promoted by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), he intends to bring forward legislation to ban live exports. I want to hear, with no ifs or buts, that the Government will be committed to that, notwithstanding some of the nuances—if not major differences—on how it can be done. It is important that we should hear how it will be done—whether by an amendment to the forthcoming agriculture Bill, or through an animal welfare Bill. We do not mind, and we will support it, but it would be good to know the timescale and mechanism. We obviously have some differences to sort out, not least with the territorial Administrations. It is interesting that we are not on the same page as the Scottish National party, or perhaps the Liberal Democrats, but we will do what we think is right and fair.

Secondly, I ask the Minister directly whether the issue is a deal breaker. Will we say now that we will not agree to any trade deal that does not prioritise animal welfare

in exports? It is no good just saying that we will ban exports to the EU if we do not ban exports in every other potential trade deal. I know it is less likely that we will be bringing live animals from Australasia, but it would be pretty stupid to ban live exports to the EU if we do not state categorically up front that we will not do a trade deal unless a ban is in the fine print. It would be good to hear what the Minister has to say about that.

Thirdly, although I thought the Conservative party was fairly clear on the ban, it is not very clear in its relationship with the National Farmers Union, which is less than sure that the Government intend to pursue their manifesto commitment. If the NFU will be pushing for caveats and exemptions—it is entirely clear that that is also the case for the territorial farming organisations—it would be good to know quite early on what exemptions could be considered. Maybe the Minister will want to take that point away.

We know about the problems with the Irish border, which will be considerable whether or not we are in a customs union or a single market. We in the Labour party are fairly clear about where we are on those things—eventually. The situation will not be easy if the NFU believes that it really has nothing to worry about, because there are certainly some issues that it does need to worry about if it wants to maintain this trade.

Fourthly—this is a slight tangent, but nevertheless important—it is all well and good talking about banning live exports, but we are not completely on top of some of the things that happen in this country. Some hon. Members will have seen the headlines in *The Guardian* over the weekend about some of the problems in our meat trade. We know about the scandal over horsemeat, which of course came from the Republic of Ireland. If we are going to do the decent thing and kill animals in abattoirs here, we need some pretty clear guarantees. I agree entirely that we need more local abattoirs, but the problem is that we are shutting even more at the moment. We shut a lot in the new Labour era, but that has not stopped. It continues.

Through foot and mouth, we learned of some of the mad ways in which our meat trade operates. We move animals up and down the country for a few pence on a sheep, largely depending on which abattoir the supermarkets want to send them to. It would be quite sensible to look at the regulation of that as well as the live export ban. We have to be clear that we have something substantially different in place. I say clearly to the Minister that the Russell Hume collapse has brought it to our attention that there are things going on out there that we should be much better at, regardless of where we kill the animals. It is all well and good saying that we have very high welfare standards, but we have to prove that, and sometimes we are not able to do that because of some of the things that are going on.

My last point is, dare I say it, the usual one: it would be great if this was all happening along with an improvement in the quality of inspection and, where necessary, of prosecution. Sadly, there have been major cuts in that area. The Animal and Plant Health Agency is now a much reduced body, and does anyone really think that our trading standards departments are in a stronger position than they were seven, 10 or 15 years ago? They have been cut to ribbons. That is where the cuts have taken place in local authorities.

[Dr David Drew]

The idea that there is a lot of inspection going on out there is sadly a myth. There is stuff that goes on out of sight and out of mind. That has an impact both on local government, through trading standards departments, and on the meat trade through the Food Standards Agency, which has also been cut back. If we are serious about this issue, we cannot pretend that we have to do anything other than make sure that those cuts are reversed. It is no good passing new legislation unless we put the resources in place to ensure that we are doing things properly.

I want to look quickly at some of the issues that have perhaps not been highlighted as much as they could have been. The documentation from the Library, produced by Elena Ares, is very useful. For one thing, following up on a parliamentary question that I asked, it shows the variability in the number of animals going for export. The variation is quite dramatic year on year. I do not know what causes that, and whether it is because of domestic price changes, but we are talking about hundreds of thousands more animals going one year than the previous year. There are some peculiarities in the trade that need to be highlighted.

If we are consistent in wanting to improve on and enhancing what the EU does, we need to go back to European Commission regulation 1200/2005, which effectively reinforces the allowing of live exports. It sets down standards such as the 65 km rules and the eight-hour rule, which have been talked about today. We have to ensure that we improve on those rules. It is no good just transposing them into British legislation without genuinely improving on them. I ask the Minister, as an aside, what guarantees he will give that we will enhance the existing situation.

There are a number of ways in which the EU already accepts that there are infringements. It does not do a very good job of regulation, and there has been a European Court of Justice ruling on live exports showing that there are inadequacies in inspection and prosecution across the whole EU. That goes back to the issue of trade; the Opposition want to be sure that WTO rules can be amended in such a way that they will not be a hurdle. It is no good leaving the customs union and single market if we cannot be clear that we can deal with WTO rules. That is an easy one for the Minister, because I am sure he will say that we will be able to do that, but we need to be absolutely up front about it. Finally, while the EU and its trade strategy and treaties have regard for animal welfare on one level, we need to be clear that our new regulations will be better than those already in existence.

I have asked questions of the Minister, and we have had an interesting debate. We have heard from the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who introduced the debate, the right hon. Members for Chipping Barnet and for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), and the hon. Members for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), for South Thanet, for Gordon (Colin Clark) and for North Thanet. We also heard from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for the SNP—maybe we need to sit down and work out where the opposition to the ban is coming from. There were other interesting and helpful interventions.

The onus is now on the Government to say what they will do. The legislation needs to come forward; we will support it if it comes forward quickly, although we may choose to amend bits of it—if anything, we may try to toughen it. We need clarity on what the Irish border situation really means. I saw one of the Democratic Unionist party spokespeople here earlier, and the DUP will have strong opinions on how that is going to work.

If we are serious about animal welfare, this is an issue that cannot be ducked any longer. We all saw some of the horrific pictures from Ramsgate, Dover and so on. To some extent, we have got rid of the worst aspects of that, but it has not gone away. Unless we legislate, and have the resources to ensure that we can enforce the legislation we introduce, it will be but a pyrrhic victory—but a victory, nevertheless, whose time has come. I hope we can get on and do that properly in due course, and that the Minister will assure me that that is what the Government are going to do.

6.48 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on opening the debate, and thank him for giving us such a comprehensive introduction to an issue that is important to the public. As he says, more than 93,000 people have signed the petition. I too congratulate Janet Darlison and others, who put the petition together and secured the debate.

It is unsurprising that a petition calling for legislation to ban the export of live farm animals in favour of a carcase-only trade has received nearly 93,000 signatures. This issue has been the subject of a long-standing campaign by animal welfare organisations, but as most people who have followed the issue know, and as my hon. Friend acknowledged, European Union free trade rules have prevented the Government from taking meaningful action on this over the past 30 years. However, once we leave the European Union, we will be able to take action on what for many people is an iconic animal welfare issue.

While EU trade rules might have prevented Governments from banning the live export trade, we have still seen a dramatic change in the numbers of live animals exported, particularly those destined for slaughter. Some 25 years ago, around 2 million animals were exported each and every year. The peak of live exports going from the UK for slaughter was in 1992, when a total of around 400,000 cattle, 300,000 pigs and nearly 1.5 million sheep were exported from the UK directly for slaughter.

As a result of the high number of animals being exported, live export became extremely controversial, with widespread demonstrations against it at the main ports during the 1990s. Port authorities and shipping companies were put under considerable pressure to end the trade, which led to nearly all the main ferry operators refusing to take animals destined for slaughter.

In 2017, about 21,000 farm animals were exported for fattening and production, and a further 5,000 were transported directly for slaughter from Great Britain. That was a decrease on the 2016 export figures, when about 50,000 farm animals were exported for fattening and production, and around 5,200 were transported directly for slaughter from Great Britain. To put that in the context of our national production, approximately 14 million sheep were slaughtered in the UK in the

same period. The reality is that the live export for slaughter of sheep, in particular, is today a very small part of the overall UK sheep trade.

Some of those exported animals will have been transported on the MV Joline, which has sailed between Ramsgate and Calais since 2010, carrying vehicles that mostly transport sheep to Europe for slaughter or further fattening. Those sheep, after travelling to Ramsgate, spend up to six hours at sea on the MV Joline. That is followed by a further journey, often of around eight hours, before reaching their destination in France, the Netherlands, Belgium or Germany. Many people find putting animals through such long journeys, only for them to be slaughtered at the destination, indefensible.

The Government would prefer to see animals slaughtered as near as possible to their point of production, as a trade in meat on the hook is preferable to a trade based on the transport of live animals, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) pointed out. The Government are committed to improving the welfare of all animals, and share both British farmers' and the British public's high regard for animal welfare. We are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, and have continued to lead the way in raising the bar on welfare standards. For example, as a number of hon. Members pointed out, we recently introduced legislation to make CCTV mandatory in all slaughterhouses.

As we move forwards to a new relationship with Europe and the rest of the world, we have a unique opportunity to shape future animal welfare policy and ensure the highest standards in every area, including the welfare of animals in transport. To that end, we committed in our manifesto to taking early steps to control the export of live farm animals for slaughter as we leave the EU. We are considering all the options on how best to achieve that commitment, and today's debate has been helpful in demonstrating the various issues that any new policy will need to take into account.

Over the years, various scientific and veterinary reports have been written on the needs of animals during transport. A 2011 report by the European Food Safety Authority, EFSA, made certain recommendations to improve the welfare of animals in transport—recommendations that have not been adopted by the European Union. It is clear from reading the EFSA opinion that the requirements of different species before and during transport are significantly different. For example, studies confirm that heat stress can present a major threat to cattle welfare, while scientific evidence shows that if adult cattle are transported on journeys longer than 29 hours, fatigue and aggressiveness increase, and that cattle should be offered water during rest periods during journeys. There has also been some evidence that sheep and goats can suffer seasickness.

That 2011 report made a number of recommendations, including that the maximum journey time for horses be 12 hours, that journey times for calves be reduced and that pigs be transported in familiar groups, since they are social animals. In 2016, the UK supported Sweden in calling on the European Commission to look again at the regulations governing welfare in transport. It is disappointing that no progress has been made on this in Europe beyond the publication of good practice guides.

We are aware that there is also a significant amount of evidence and scientific research into the welfare of animals during transport, some of which was published

after the current legislation came into force. We have therefore commissioned the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh to carry out a research project to look at the existing evidence base, and to highlight the key research that we need to be aware of, to ensure that any future measures we consider are based on the most up-to-date evidence.

I turn to the contributions from other hon. Members. I am very much aware that there were a number of contributions by hon. Members who have been long-standing campaigners on this issue, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who recently presented a ten-minute rule Bill on the issue, and my hon. Friends the Members for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) and for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale).

I will address an issue raised by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). We recognise that particular island communities may have special circumstances that we must take into account; at the other end of the country, where I come from, a similar issue pertains to the Isles of Scilly. I had the honour of visiting the right hon. Gentleman's constituency some years ago; in fact, I visited what I think is Shetland's one and only abattoir. It prided itself on its attention to detail when it came to animal welfare. I think I am right in saying that there is no similar facility on Orkney, and that most of the animals there are transported. That is something that we are aware of and must obviously take account of.

I completely accept that the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is sincere on this issue; she has a long-standing track record of campaigning on many issues. However, she sought to suggest that there might be a lack of commitment from the Government, or that we were backsliding. Let me be very clear: people like me who campaigned to leave the EU explained that EU law prevented us from taking action in this area. That is true. I went down to Ramsgate and met people and explained that EU law is the obstacle. After the referendum result, the Conservative party put in its manifesto a commitment to control the export of animals for slaughter when the UK leaves the European Union. As I have just pointed out, we are now giving consideration to how we will take that forward. We have been consistent throughout.

The hon. Lady should look at her party's position on this. A few weeks ago, the Opposition introduced—with great fanfare—a package of measures on animal welfare, but just a week later adopted a position on the European single market and European customs union that would basically make many of the things they set out in that welfare manifesto unlawful under EU law.

Kerry McCarthy: I am grateful that the Minister has allowed me to intervene, because that point was also made earlier. I think he is referring to the Leader of the Opposition's speech today. It set out our position on remaining in the customs union. It does not say the same thing about the single market. Hon. Members who spoke earlier rather conflated the two. They are very different positions.

George Eustice: We hear of all sorts of different positions on this issue from the Opposition at the moment. I simply say that EU free movement rules, which enshrine an open ports policy, govern this. Whether it is because of the customs union or single market

[George Eustice]

legislation, the hon. Lady will find that taking action in this area will not be possible if the kind of approach that her party would like is adopted.

The hon. Lady made a legitimate point about WTO rules, but as she pointed out, there is clear WTO case law that enables Governments to ban certain trades on ethical grounds—including in a case on seal furs—as she highlighted. That issue was also looked at quite extensively in the judgment in the case of *Barco de Vapor v. Thanet District Council*, in relation to the contentious issue that my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet pointed out. That judgment made it clear that were it not for EU regulation and EU laws in this area on trade, it would be possible for a UK Government to amend the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 to introduce an ethical ban, should they want to. EU law is the obstacle to taking action in this space.

The hon. Member for Bristol East talked about the forthcoming Command Paper on agriculture and speculated about the timing of that. I will not get into speculation about timing, except to say that we have been working very hard on these issues. I have also been very clear—I have championed this since becoming the Minister responsible for farming—that I want there to be a strong animal welfare dimension to that agriculture paper. It will look predominantly at the type of framework that we would put in place to replace the common agricultural policy, but we have already been clear that we want to look at the idea of incentives to support high animal welfare systems of production.

The hon. Lady mentioned Scotland. We are working with the devolved Administrations to try to put forward a UK approach to this issue. As she highlighted and as we heard today, there is some scepticism from the Scottish Government and Scottish industry, which we recognise. To answer the specific question, it is possible—because this is essentially trade regulation—to put in place UK-wide regulations, but under the Sewel convention, there is an expectation that we will consult the devolved Administrations, and that is what we are doing.

I turn to some of the other contributions made by hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, as I said, has been a long-standing and passionate advocate on this issue. I welcome all his positive comments about the steps that we have been taking in this regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) introduced into the debate some very important notes of caution. The Government are clear about our position: we want to control the export of live animals for slaughter. It is sometimes very difficult in contentious debates such as this for people such as him to come in and take a contrarian position when there is a lot of emotion around. I understand that, but I think it very important, if we want to get the legislation right, that we take account of some of those complications.

My hon. Friend pointed out that there are already a lot of inspections of transport operators. That is true. We do not inspect at the point of entry at the port, or the point of departure at the port. Basically, we do not universally inspect; we do not inspect every consignment, and there is good reason for that. The terrible and unfortunate episode that took place in Ramsgate in 2012 showed the difficulties and dangers of trying to unload sheep in a port situation and trying to correct a

position there. That is why, in the case of sheep destined for the MV Joline, we do have 100% inspections, on every consignment, at the point of loading, but not at the port; we do risk surveillance at the port. For other operators, we tend to have a risk-based approach, but there is 100% inspection, at the point of loading, for the MV Joline.

Bill Wiggin: Surely that is one of the low-hanging fruit, and something that we could look into improving in order to get more control over this industry. We should either use ports where lairage is available, which is probably cheaper than trying to create our own, or ensure that we are inspecting, particularly as things are leaving our shores, so that the pride that we have in animal welfare is reflected when the animals arrive at the other end.

George Eustice: Enforcement is an important issue, but I would say that in that case we do have, as I said, 100% inspection at the point of loading.

My hon. Friend suggested that there is no difference between transport at sea and transport by road or land. I think that there is a bit of a difference: if someone encounters a complication or difficulty and they are on the road, they can pull over somewhere quiet and perhaps find a helpful farmer who will let them unload the animals in the yard and sort it out, but it is much harder to do that on a sea crossing; sheep cannot be unloaded in the middle of a sea crossing.

I think that there is also a difference when it comes to transport for slaughter. The reason for that is that we go to great lengths to try to reduce the stress on animals in slaughterhouses and lairage facilities. That is one reason why our CCTV proposal for abattoirs will include cameras in lairage areas. We want to do the maximum to try to reduce the stress of those animals, and having a long, stressful journey before they get to the abattoir cannot be conducive to that.

My hon. Friend asked this important question: do we know whether the animals are actually going for slaughter or for fattening? The answer is that if they are going for slaughter, that requires a different type of declaration to be made on the export certificate, so we do have that information, although there is a moot point: how long does rearing and fattening take? People could say that, and it might be two weeks or two months; it would be difficult to record that information.

For all the reasons that I have set out, our manifesto commitment focuses on the export of animals for slaughter. We are having to look at considerations that have not been raised in today's debate. For instance, we export some laying hens—chicken—for egg production in European countries. We have the highest standards of animal welfare in our hatcheries. We do not use practices such as maceration when it comes to hatcheries for laying hens. Other European countries do not take that approach, and if we were to displace that trade to other European countries, we would not have done a clever day's work. There are legitimate issues that we need to take into account.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet, as I said, is a long-standing campaigner on this issue. I visited his constituency during the referendum campaign. I know that it was very galling for Thanet District Council to try to take action on something that mattered

to the public and to find that, under EU law, it was unable to do so. My hon. Friend correctly pointed out that EU law is the only impediment to our taking action in this space.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) highlighted very important issues in relation to NFU Scotland, and some of the concerns that it has raised. Like him, I grew up on a farm. We raised livestock. I am not squeamish about these things, but as a farmer, I am also passionate about high standards of animal welfare. I very much concur with his view that we should be doing more to educate schoolchildren about where their food comes from and the realities of farming.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, as I said, also been a long-standing campaigner on this issue. She introduced a Bill on it recently. Like others, she speculated that the Government may be considering a consultation, or that a consultation may be imminent. She will understand that today my point is that we are considering how best to take forward our manifesto commitment, but I hope that I have been able, with the detail that I have been able to outline, at least to reassure her that we are looking very closely at all these details. I commend her for the work that she has done with her Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet raised the issue, as a number of others did, about small abattoirs. There is an opportunity to look at that issue again, but I am very clear that we should not water down our standards of animal welfare in abattoirs. It is sometimes the case that small abattoirs can do this well—I saw that, for instance, when I visited Shetland—but equally, we want to ensure that we have proper regulation, and that they can afford to have an official veterinarian on site, monitoring activities. We need to ensure that we do not go backwards when it comes to animal welfare, and I know that he would agree with that.

My hon. Friend also made an important point about rose veal. If we could develop more of a market for rose veal, rather than ending up having to sell calves for white veal, that would be a tremendous step forward for animal welfare, but sadly, because people often confuse the two, we are stuck with the position that we have now.

I come to the points made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). He asked me to clarify the Government's intentions. I hope that I have just done that. We have a clear manifesto commitment and are considering this matter very closely. He asked whether any such provision would apply just to the EU or to other countries, and I can confirm that it would apply to all countries. We would have a consistent approach. We are not in the business of singling out the EU for different or special treatment with any such provisions that we would put in place. However, I refer back to the position of his party, which I think would compromise our ability to act in this area. He also asked whether there would be any exemptions. As I said, we are considering that. There is a specific issue when it

comes to certain island communities, so of course there are certain areas that we need to look at. Also, as I made clear, we have asked the Roslin Institute to do a very thorough review of all the evidence, because we believe that different circumstances pertain for different species.

Finally, on the issue of enforcement, as I have said, we have a 100% inspection rate in the case of the MV Joline. I also point out that in all our abattoirs, we have a full-time official veterinarian working for the Food Standards Agency, who is there to enforce and maintain animal welfare standards. We also have thorough checking at the ports. There is surveillance as regards all these issues, and there must be accompanying documentation.

We have had a detailed and comprehensive debate, covering many issues. The Government are absolutely aware of the importance of this issue to the public. That is why we included it in our manifesto. I hope that the points that I have made have reassured hon. Members that we are addressing this issue.

7.10 pm

Steve Double: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this lively and informative debate. As the Minister said, it was important to raise central issues as the Government consider the way forward. I am grateful to the Minister for confirming the Government's position within the current restraints on him. I am sure we are encouraged by the clear statement that the Government's desire is for animals to be slaughtered as close to where they are produced as possible—we can all take great comfort from that—while they still understand the particular challenges faced by rural, particularly island, communities, and in no way want to damage the situation there. I am grateful to him for mentioning the Isles of Scilly; my in-laws will be delighted about that.

I thank all those who signed the e-petition, enabling us to have this debate. It is clearly a subject that many people in our country care passionately about. Clearly, we all have a deep desire to have the highest possible welfare standards for our farm animals. No one is suggesting anything other than that. We all want to ensure that we take any opportunities Brexit provides to improve the standards of animal welfare in our country. No one is saying anything other than that we hope to maintain and, where possible, improve those standards. I look forward to continuing to help and support the Government as they seek to do that in the months and years ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 200205 relating to ending the export of live farm animals after the UK leaves the EU.

7.12 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 26 February 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): We will today introduce the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill to this House.

We are taking this action because the energy market is not working for all customers. The Competition and Markets Authority 2016 investigation into the energy market highlighted that domestic customers of the Big 6 energy companies pay on average £1.4 billion a year more than they would in a truly competitive market.

We believe that competition is the best way to drive value and service for customers. Where this is not happening, the Government have a duty to act by ensuring regulation is effective and companies have the right incentives to provide value.

The energy market is not working for all consumers.

There is, in effect, a two-tier market in operation whereby active customers save money by switching suppliers, but those who cannot or do not switch remain on poor value tariffs. It is of particular concern that customers who do not switch typically tend to be more vulnerable than those who are getting the best deals. The difference between the cheapest available tariff and the average standard variable tariff (SVT) of a Big 6 supplier is around £300.

Earlier this month, 1 million more vulnerable consumers who receive the Warm Home Discount were protected from higher bills with the extension of Ofgem's safeguard tariff cap. There are now 5 million households protected by this cap which was introduced in 2017.

The Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill will, subject to parliamentary approval, put in place a requirement on the independent regulator, Ofgem, to cap domestic energy tariffs until at least 2020. Currently, some consumers are paying up to £300 more than they need to—this cap will help bring this overcharging under control. It will require Ofgem to set an absolute cap on standard variable and default tariffs, protecting the 11 million households in England, Wales and Scotland who currently buy their energy on this basis and who are not protected by existing price caps.

The Bill is part of a package of measures being introduced by the Government to increase competition in the retail energy market and lower prices for consumers. These include support for more and faster switching, initiatives to improve engagement and the roll-out of smart meters. We believe all of these measures will help create the conditions for more effective competition.

In setting the cap, Ofgem must protect existing and future domestic customers, but must do so in a way that creates incentives for suppliers to improve efficiency, sets the cap at a level that enables suppliers to compete effectively for supply contracts, maintains incentives for

customers to switch and ensures that efficient suppliers are able to finance their businesses. The Government intend Ofgem to be able to set the temporary price cap by the end of this year so that it is in place by next winter.

The cap will apply until the end of 2020 when Ofgem will recommend to Government whether it should be extended on an annual basis up to 2023.

The introduction of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill comes after the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee scrutinised the draft Bill as part of the Government's work to ensure the Bill would be effective and would meet its objectives. This pre-legislative scrutiny took written and oral evidence from a wide range of stakeholders. The Committee made a number of recommendations about the Bill, which the Government have accepted in full, including the Committee's recommendation that Ofgem reviews the level at which the cap is set at least every six months, and the recommendation to add in safeguards so that where consumers make an active choice to opt for green SVT or default tariffs, Ofgem is able to protect these customers but not stifle investment in green energy. Ofgem will also be required to consult on a potential exemption for green tariffs.

This Bill will give the regulator the powers to protect those consumers who are overpaying for energy, while ensuring that other initiatives such as switching, smart meter roll-out and consumer education continue to contribute to a more competitive market.

[HCWS484]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council: 27 February

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I will attend the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 27 February 2018 to represent the UK's interests. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:

Presentation of the priorities of the Bulgarian presidency

The Bulgarian presidency is expected to present its four priorities during its six month tenure. These are: the future of Europe and young people, the Western Balkans, security and stability and the digital economy.

Annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 22-23 March 2018

Ministers will discuss the draft agenda for March European Council. This includes: migration; jobs, growth and competitiveness; the Western Balkans; and tax and the digital economy. Other relevant foreign policy issues will be added to the agenda in the run up to the European Council.

Rule of law in Poland/Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Commission will present a summary of its "Reasoned Proposal" which, in accordance with Article 7(1), proposes a Council determination on the rule of law in Poland. The Commission will also update Ministers on the ongoing dialogue with the Polish Government.

[HCWS485]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Policy

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): On 7 November I told the House that I was minded to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, the locally-led proposal I had received for improving local government in Dorset, and I invited representations before I took my final decision.

Having carefully considered all the representations I have received and all the relevant information available to me, I am today announcing that I have decided to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, that locally-led proposal to replace the existing nine councils across Dorset—two small unitary councils of Bournemouth and Poole, and the two tier structure of Dorset County Council and the district councils of Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset, and Weymouth and Portland with two new councils.

These new councils are a single unitary council for the areas of Bournemouth, Poole and that part of the county of Dorset currently comprising the Borough of Christchurch, and a single unitary council for the rest of the current county area.

I am satisfied that these new councils are likely to improve local government and service delivery in their areas, generating savings, increasing financial resilience, facilitating a more strategic and holistic approach to

planning and housing challenges, and sustaining good local services. I am also satisfied that across Dorset as a whole there is a good deal of local support for these new councils, and that the area of each council is a credible geography.

In my statement of 7 November I noted that the nine councils were already working together in joint committees on planning possible implementation of the proposal, and that further steps were needed to secure local consent. I am clear that further steps have been taken, and that the nine councils are continuing to work constructively together on planning implementation.

I now intend to prepare and lay before Parliament drafts of the necessary secondary legislation to give effect to my decision. My intention is that if Parliament approves this legislation the new councils will be established on 1 April 2019 with the first elections to the councils held on 2 May 2019. I also now intend to make and lay before Parliament an order to delay for one year, as requested by the Borough Council, the May 2018 local elections in Weymouth and Portland so as to avoid members being elected for only one year if Parliament approves the legislation establishing the new councils.

Finally, in my 7 November statement I said that once I had made my final decision on the Dorset proposal, I would decide whether to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, Dorset councils' proposal for a combined authority. As a first step I intend now to ask the leaders of the Dorset councils how they would like to proceed with their combined authority proposal in the light of my decision on the proposal.

[HCWS486]

Petition

Monday 26 February 2018

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Public sector workers

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that public sector services such as the NHS are running out of people resources and good will; further that the years of frozen pay, followed by a 1% pay

rise-reluctantly given by this Government three years ago and initially tied with restrictions, is an insult; further that there is a rise of public sector workers having to turn to foodbanks due to the Government's policies; and further that many are leaving their jobs as they cannot afford to live on their pay.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to recognise the worth of public sector workers and recognise the financial losses that have been incurred.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sandy Martin.]

[P002115]

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Monday 26 February 2018

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**not later than
Monday 5 March 2018**

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