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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 1 March 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Regional Expenditure

1. **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the equity of levels of transport spending by region. [904101]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We do not allocate transport funding on a per head of population basis; our decisions are based on a rigorous and fair appraisal process that ensures that spending goes where it is most needed and where it delivers the greatest value for money. Recent analysis by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority shows that planned central Government transport investment over the next four years is evenly balanced, with £1,039 per head of population in the north, compared with £1,029 in the south.

Paula Sherriff: May I first take this opportunity to thank all those involved in keeping our transport systems going in this inclement weather? I am sure that fellow Yorkshire MPs will have shared my surprise at the Secretary of State's recent article in *The Yorkshire Post*, in which he claimed that spending in the north was somehow greater than that in the south—if, through a rather imaginative calculation, we ignore London. Does he agree that simply spinning figures will not fix our archaic northern railway systems or get northern commuters to work on time?

Chris Grayling: I echo the hon. Lady's comments about those who are working hard to keep the transport system open today; we are very grateful to them all. In a week when the Labour party has already had issues with its use of statistics, she should look up the official statistics from the independent Infrastructure and Projects Authority, which show that planned central Government spending is higher in the north than it is in the south.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am sure that we could spend more Government money on transport in the east midlands, particularly in Northamptonshire, and especially in Kettering. The new franchise for the midland main line is currently being negotiated. Will the

Secretary of State ensure that Kettering's rail services are better after the franchise is awarded than they are now?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend, who is a strong champion of Kettering, will be delighted to know that the expansion in capacity to Corby means that there will be a much better commuter service in the mornings and evenings through Corby down to Kettering, and to Wellingborough and beyond. That is one of the benefits of the biggest investment in the midland main line since the 1870s.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Just to give the Secretary of State an example of unequal treatment, is it true that for the new east midlands rail franchise in 2020 the current HST—high-speed trains—carriages will be scrapped, because they are disability non-compliant, and the power cars will then be matched with second-hand, cast-off carriages from the east coast main line? Instead of the brand new, hybrid hydrogen trains that we were promised, we will be getting hybrid trains composed of 30-year-old power cars and 30-year-old discarded carriages from another line.

Chris Grayling: I do not know what stories the Labour party has been listening to. The midland main line will have brand new, bi-mode trains delivered as soon as possible—

Mr Betts: When?

Chris Grayling: In the early 2020s, which is years ahead of what would otherwise have been the case under the original scheme.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Within the context of equity of spending, I wonder whether, after this snow event is over, my right hon. Friend will ask some serious questions about, or even have a review of, why we still seem to be in no way prepared for such events. For example, I discovered yesterday that Heathrow is busy offloading flights because it cannot cope, whereas—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Is this about regional flights?

Mr Duncan Smith: Yes, regional flights. What I am saying is that, given all of that, airports such as Gatwick and others are able to cope. Does my right hon. Friend not think that it is ridiculous that some airports are simply unable to cope while others across the UK can?

Chris Grayling: I know that a number of Members are here today because their flights to regional airports have not been able to take off. I hope and expect that we will be able to sort that out as quickly as possible today, although it is really important that the transport system is run safely. Of course, one of the benefits of the expansion of Heathrow is that the airport would become more resilient to such difficult situations, and connections to regional airports would be more reliable.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to those transport workers who are keeping the system going at this difficult time. The Secretary of State said in his first answer that the

allocation of funding is a rigorous and fair process, so can he explain why the Government have ignored the Office of Rail Regulation's recommendations by underfunding Scotland by £600 million? Since then his Department has been able to cope with a £240 million loss of revenue as a result of the situation with Southern rail and found £245 million for High Speed 2. The Government have been ignoring the Scottish Government since last July, so will they now meet the Scottish Government, or are these just weasel words about equity of funding?

Chris Grayling: Once again, the Scottish National party is arguing against the use of the Barnett formula. SNP Members love the Barnett formula when they think it is advantageous to them, but when they do not like the Barnett formula, they want to get rid of it. I simply say to them that this Government have followed the principles of the Barnett formula, and actually the Treasury has given Scotland a bit more money above that. I wish the SNP would stop complaining. The reality is that Scotland is now better represented, with a group of Conservative MPs who are much more effective than the SNP ever was in getting this Government to do that bit extra for Scotland.

Reading-Basingstoke Line: Electrification

2. **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the timescale required for the electrification of the Reading to Basingstoke line. [904102]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The Secretary of State's acceptance of the Hendy review in 2016 recognised the necessity of changes to the scope of Great Western electrification. Following completion of a feasibility assessment of the line between Reading and Basingstoke, it has been identified that electrification of that section is not required to deliver improvements to passengers.

Mr Jayawardena: Given my hon. Friend's commendable plan to scrap all diesel-only trains from our tracks by 2040, would he consider extending Crossrail from Reading to Basingstoke, as an alternative to Great Western, to improve capacity into London from north Hampshire?

Joseph Johnson: The Department always welcomes suggestions from my hon. Friend. There are no current plans to extend the Crossrail route, and no assessment has yet been made of the amount or availability of any such scheme.

Emissions

3. **Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce transport emissions. [904103]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): We have very ambitious plans to reduce transport emissions, including by ending the sale of new conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans, and by ending the use of diesel-only trains by 2040. Clean growth strategy actions will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the UK plan for reducing nitrogen dioxide

concentrations sets out action to tackle hotspots of air pollution. We will shortly be launching our new zero-emissions transport paper, and the House can review that, too.

Vernon Coaker: The Minister will know that 24% of all emissions are transport related. He will know there are hotspots across the country, including in my constituency, and thousands of people die prematurely as a result of poor air quality, including 61 people in my Gedling constituency. How does he intend to accelerate the progress and policy development he has outlined to us today?

Jesse Norman: We absolutely recognise the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises. He will know that we work very closely on this issue, through the joint air quality unit, with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Our specific plans on transport emissions will be released in our report later this month.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Can the Minister assure the House that, as far as the Department for Transport is concerned, "emissions" refers both to carbon and to air quality emissions, such as nitrogen oxide and small particulate matter, and that they are fully addressed together within the Department?

Jesse Norman: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Of course, DEFRA is the lead agency within Government on emissions. Only on Monday we put the renewable transport fuel obligation on the statute book. The obligation specifically balances the two sides of that equation.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Oxford is proud to call itself a cycling city, yet last week it was identified in the High Court ruling on air pollution as one of the 45 cities that the Government need to do more to help. Will any more money be coming to Oxford to help us make that modal shift?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will be aware that substantial amounts of money have already been put aside to help local authorities that have been affected by air quality problems, and it is up to Oxford to see if it can apply for that money when it becomes available.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I drive an electric car, but many people do not. Northern powerhouse rail will take many cars off the road. The all-party parliamentary group on the northern powerhouse is calling for the northern powerhouse rail project to be brought forward to coincide with the completion of High Speed 2 in 2032. Will the Minister support that proposal?

Jesse Norman: I am always grateful for invitations to support proposals. I think I will leave that proposal to the specific Ministers concerned, but my hon. Friend will be aware it is a manifesto commitment.

Virgin Trains East Coast

4. **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise. [904105]

8. **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise. [904110]

15. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise on (a) passengers and (b) rail services. [904118]

17. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise. [904120]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I am not sure I see any merit in the early termination of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise. That is not something I would wish to happen, but we have to deal with the world as it is, rather than as how we would like it to be.

My priority is to ensure the continued smooth running of the east coast franchise for its passengers and employees, and to make sure that the trains run and deliver the service that people need. As I told the House on 5 February 2018, a new arrangement to operate the railway prior to the new east coast partnership in 2020 needs to be put in place. We are currently conducting a full appraisal of the options, and I will return to the House in due course.

Ian Mearns: I am afraid to say that service standards have deteriorated on the east coast line since Virgin-Stagecoach took the franchise—I am a regular customer on that line—despite the best efforts of the excellent staff on board trains and at stations. Those staff face having their sixth employer in a decade and a half. Will the Secretary of State meet me and some of those staff, so that they can express their concerns about the way in which the franchise has been conducted? Will he give the House an undertaking that there is a genuine public sector operator ready to take over should that be required—or has Directly Operated Railways been outsourced already?

Chris Grayling: On the last point, I can give an absolute guarantee that that is the case; we have been making preparations for different eventualities for some time and there is a genuine alternative, if that is deemed to be best for the passenger and best value for the taxpayer. My ministerial colleagues and I are happy to talk to staff, but I would correct the hon. Gentleman on one point: the reality is that the independent assessments have shown a higher level of passenger satisfaction on that route since the change of franchise, not a lower one.

Karen Lee: I, too, wish to say a huge thank you to the staff who have been involved in keeping the trains running. As has been said, the current Virgin Trains east coast line franchise agreement will end three years early, making it the third franchise failure in about a decade. As someone who uses the line, I do not agree with the Secretary of State's assessment of it. But will he recognise that there is a problem and see this as the perfect opportunity to bring the contracts back in house?

Chris Grayling: As I have said in this House before, I need to do what is best for passengers and for the taxpayer. The reality is that since the transition, regardless of the fact that Stagecoach clearly got its numbers wrong, passenger satisfaction has risen, more people are being employed by this railway and it is delivering more money to the taxpayer. [Interruption.] That is the reality. Labour Members can say it is not true, but it is; it is a fact that they just have to deal with.

Liz Twist: I assure the Secretary of State that after three failed franchises and the experiences of a directly operated railway my constituents would much prefer a directly operated railway. Will he commit to providing a directly operated railway service, in the public interest?

Chris Grayling: As I have said, I am going to do what is best for the passenger and for the taxpayer. I am sorry that the Labour party does not seem to get this, but the reality is that passenger satisfaction levels are higher today than they were three years ago—that is what the independent research shows. Labour Members may not like it, but it is true.

Imran Hussain: Next year, Bradford would have seen a marked increase in the number of much-needed direct inter-city trains serving the city, but the chaos with the east coast line has put that in serious doubt. These extra trains are vital to improving Bradford's connection to the rest of the country, so will the Minister commit to ensuring that, whatever happens to the east coast franchise, Bradford will see an increase in the number of direct trains?

Chris Grayling: This is an important point, so let us be clear: it is my intention that, whatever arrangements are put in place for the next few years, the service improvements that have been promised will be delivered. We face an issue on infrastructure and additional capacities on the northern part of the route, which will have to be resolved and may mean some amendments to the timetable for new services, but that will not stop us delivering those new services. In Bradford's case, I am expecting to be able to fulfil the commitments that were made.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend that there are no merits in the early termination of the franchise, but there are opportunities from the new partnership. My constituency has 10 railway stations, none of which have a direct rail service to London. Does he agree that this is an opportunity to look at providing services to those towns not currently served?

Chris Grayling: As I know, my hon. Friend has been a regular advocate for direct services, and I would like to see those happen. I am looking to see whether we can maximise the capacity on the east coast main line to make additional services possible. Of course the arrival of HS2 will allow many services that cannot be run now because of capacity constraints to happen, because of the additional capacity it will create on routes to the north and Scotland.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am not entirely sure what the impact of the Virgin Trains East Coast franchise is on Horsham, but doubtless the hon. Gentleman is about to explain to us with the lucidity for which he is renowned in all parts of the House.

Jeremy Quin: I am absolutely going to. In respect of the proposed alternatives to the current east coast franchise, has the Secretary of State seen President Macron's recent remarks about the nationalised French railways, and has he any remarks to make on them?

Chris Grayling: Wisdom sometimes comes from our allies across the channel. I did see those remarks, and they are a timely reminder that a nationalised railway is not the panacea that some believe it is.

Mr Speaker: It was not the Horsham perspective, but the international perspective. Why would I expect anything less from someone so illustrious as a man who served as my constituency chairman for three years, for which he deserved a medal?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State says that Stagecoach got its sums wrong, but clearly his Department got its sums wrong, too, when it awarded the franchise to Stagecoach. Surely one merit of this situation should be that failing franchise holders should not be allowed to bid for future franchises. Does the Secretary of State agree that this gives us the opportunity to put the franchise into the public sector, allow further public sector involvement across all franchises, and review and improve the franchise tender process?

Chris Grayling: We certainly keep the franchise process under continual review to work to improve it but, as I said a moment ago, a public railway is not the panacea that everyone on the Opposition Benches claims it is. I intend to do two things: to take the right decisions for the taxpayer and the travelling public on that route, which is really important, and to act within the law, which is also important.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On Monday, the chief executive of Stagecoach said that he knew there was a problem with the east coast franchise's finances just weeks after taking over the contract in March 2015, and that he had been talking to the Department about it for two years. Given that the Department was in dialogue with the operator about the difficulties, why did the Secretary of State not put together a contingency plan for the route? The Secretary of State has had two years to sort out this mess; is it not simply incredible that he still does not know what to do?

Chris Grayling: The shadow Secretary of State clearly cannot do his sums, because I have not been Secretary of State for two years. We have been planning—

Andy McDonald: From 2016 to 2018.

Chris Grayling: I have been Secretary of State for 18 months; the shadow Secretary of State cannot do his sums. Since I became aware that there was a problem on the east coast route, we have been doing careful contingency planning, so we have a long-term plan and short-term options for the route. We cannot put those short-term

options into place until the appropriate moment arises at which they are necessary. We are prepared for when that moment arises and will deliver the alternatives.

Andy McDonald: Given that the taxpayer has already lost out on more than £2 billion of premium payments, can the Secretary of State advise the House as to whether the financial ramifications of the termination of the franchise are now completely known and concluded? If not, what sums of money are earmarked to settle any further system-gaming demands from Messrs Branson and Souter through litigation or arbitration?

Chris Grayling: Again, the Labour party cannot do its sums. We have no more written off £2 billion than Labour wrote off £1.4 billion when National Express collapsed. The reality is that the east coast is and always has been in recent times a profitable railway. Whatever happens, it will continue to generate a substantial return for the taxpayer. It is about time that Labour did its sums properly, rather than misrepresenting the reality.

HS2: Construction

5. **Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the need to mitigate the effects of congestion resulting from the construction of HS2 phase 2a. [904106]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I know that my hon. Friend is concerned about the impact of traffic in his constituency; indeed, we discussed it when he came to the Department just last week. HS2 Ltd is already working with Highways England and local highways authorities to mitigate the effects of construction traffic, and will continue to do so as the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill progresses. The planning regime established under the Bill includes powers for local planning authorities to approve final construction routes for large goods vehicles. We will work closely with local authorities to make sure that impacts on local communities and traffic are appropriate.

Jack Brereton: Will the Minister update the House on the measures that will be put in place to tackle and mitigate the impact of traffic, and particularly its effect on junction 15 of the M6, resulting from the construction of phase 2a?

Ms Ghani: Indeed, we recognise the need to keep traffic moving on local roads during construction, primarily for the benefit of residents and businesses. Under current plans, junction 15 of the M6 is an important access route for HS2 construction traffic. We recognise that it also provides an important access route to the Stoke-on-Trent area. HS2 Ltd is working closely with Highways England to minimise the impact on the M6 and consider any opportunities for co-ordinated delivery with a smart motorway.

Bus Journeys

6. **Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of bus journeys in England. [904107]

12. **Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of bus journeys in England. [904115]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Bus Services Act 2017 presents local authorities with new powers to bring about change and unlock the potential for the bus service industry to increase passenger numbers. Since 1982, bus usage has fallen, but it is variable across the country. Passenger journeys on local bus services in England have decreased by 4% since 2009-10, to 4.44 billion in 2016-17.

Mike Amesbury: Does the Minister believe that there is a link between her Government's 33% cut to the bus budgets and bus patronage falling to a decade low? What action has the Secretary of State taken over the past 18 months to rectify that?

Ms Ghani: Bus patronage is actually increasing for people who go to work—3 million people choose to travel to work on a bus—and 60% of people who use public transport use the bus. Increasing bus patronage is at the forefront of the Government's bus agenda. It is vital to combating congestion and reducing emissions. Government provide about £1 billion of funding for concessionary travel every year, and around £250 million will be paid this year to support bus services in England via the bus service operators' grant.

Margaret Greenwood: Recent devolution deals have seen the power to re-regulate buses, via London-style franchising, devolved to areas such as my own that have a metro mayor. Can the Minister tell me how the Government plan to support those metro mayors who make the local democratic choice to franchise their bus networks so that local passengers can get the routes that they need?

Ms Ghani: Mayors have the freedom to do that. It is absolutely right that these decisions are taken locally, whether by the local authority or the mayor. We therefore encourage all local authorities and mayors to consider how they can use enhanced partnership and franchising powers to make improvements for passengers and to increase bus patronage.

Lorry Parking

7. **Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to identify emergency parking sites for lorries when travel across the channel is disrupted. [904108]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As my right hon. Friend knows, I have asked Highways England to progress plans to promote a lorry holding area through the normal planning process as a potential permanent solution to Operation Stack. Highways England intends to undertake an initial public consultation on this in the spring, which will consider the scope, scale and function of the lorry area. As he knows, I am frustrated that we have not been able to do this sooner, but the commitment to it is strong.

Damian Green: The Secretary of State is, I know, aware of the extreme urgency of finding a solution to this matter. Even if we assume a full implementation

period after Brexit, we could be less than two years away from new customs arrangements at Dover, and problems there could be disastrous not just for roads across Kent, but for the national road haulage industry. Can he assure us that, by the time of Brexit, sufficient off-road parking spaces will be available to avoid a recurrence of Operation Stack?

Chris Grayling: There are two points that I should make. First, on the border, it is absolutely the intent of this Government to maintain a free-flowing border; that is of paramount importance. The other point, be absolutely clear, is that we will have a solution in place for next March which keeps the M20 flowing in both directions and provides a solution if there is congestion at the ports; and that we intend to move beyond that and deliver a long-term solution, which will not only deal with the issue of trouble at the ports, but provide some respite to Kent residents, who I know are fed up with having lorries simply parking on their local roads.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Eighty per cent. of the road freight to and from the UK goes through Dover. There is surely no realistic chance of all those lorries being checked from March next year. Is not the reality that, if we leave the EU without a deal, utter chaos on the road network within miles of Dover is completely unavoidable?

Chris Grayling: No, I do not think that at all. It is for this country to decide how we manage our borders and what checks we put in place. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that there is a free-flowing border at Dover, and we will deliver that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is it the Department's policy that a new fixed link across the channel would help to ease disruption?

Chris Grayling: We should have some big, bold visions for the future. That is the way that we plan properly in transport terms. Our big, bold visions for the country right now are HS2, the potential expansion of Heathrow airport, the lower Thames crossing, the trans-Pennine tunnel, the A303 dualling and the Stonehenge tunnel. This Government have and are delivering lots of big visions for Britain.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The chairman of Maritime UK has said that, if a deal is not reached on Brexit, lorry drivers could be stuck on the main roads to Dover for up to two days. Even if a deal is reached, with a hard border at vital ferry ports, the industry is warning that customs and port health checks will cause massive disruptions. What concrete assurances can the Secretary of State give us that that will not be the case?

Chris Grayling: As I have said before, I have regular dialogue with the haulage industry and the ports sector. I have been very clear to them, as I am being clear in this House today and as the Prime Minister has made clear, that we do not intend to impose a fixed border. We want a free-flowing border and that is what we will deliver.

Rail Franchising

9. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Whether his Department can prevent a rail operating company from bidding to retain its franchise as a result of that company's performance. [904111]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): All franchise operators are required to obtain a pre-qualification passport. The Department may suspend or withdraw a passport in the event that the passport holder triggers certain requirements within the passport application. This would place restrictions on or remove the passport holder from bidding for franchise competitions.

Clive Efford: I take it from that answer that it is possible for the Secretary of State to deny an existing franchise holder the right to rebid in a new tendering process. Govia, which has had the south eastern franchise for a long time, has consistently been a poor performer, so can he remove Govia from the service? If it were to get the franchise, what guarantees can he give to my constituents that they will get the improved service that they deserve?

Chris Grayling: In the case of the south eastern franchise, we will accept the bid that is going to deliver the best possible outcome for the hon. Gentleman's constituents, with longer trains and better services. This is a competitive process. I will not hesitate to remove a passport from a firm when that is required. I also have to operate within European procurement law—something that the Labour party is still very keen on—and that requires me to take a proportionate approach. I will always seek to do that and I will always seek to operate within the law.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Last year, no fewer than 67 million rail journeys were cancelled or severely curtailed. I raised this matter with the Prime Minister yesterday. Most of the compensation paid by Network Rail was trousered by the train operating companies. When they bid to renew their franchises, will the way in which they have treated their passengers with compensation be a key consideration, as it should be?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to ensure that passengers get the compensation payments to which they are entitled. Of course, the compensation structure is much more complex and there are far more issues than those that have been highlighted in the media in recent days. I am very clear that the move that we are going through this year to provide digital ticketing across the whole network will make it much more straightforward to give passengers the compensation that they deserve and need, and enable them to do so simply, without having to fill out long, complicated forms.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The estimates report was very revealing, showing how hundreds of millions of pounds have been spent on compensation, underwriting failure and bail-outs. In control period 4 alone, a staggering £339.4 million of public money—our constituents' money—was handed over to private operators, while passengers were forced to pay over the odds to travel. How much more public money will the Secretary of State pass to these failed rail operators?

Chris Grayling: The Opposition keep talking about the huge amounts that are paid, but they fail to understand that less than £3 in every £100 that is spent on the railways remains with the companies. The rest is going into the biggest infrastructure investment programme, better services and newer trains—the kind of improvements that people could only dream of in 13 years of Labour Government, but which they are getting under a Conservative Government.

Rachael Maskell: That is certainly no apology to our constituents. The Secretary of State's lack of due diligence has caused chief exec David Brown, of embattled Southern rail fame, to announce that he has done a—expletive deleted—good job, and that he will bid again for the next franchise contracts. Virgin and Stagecoach will do the same. These companies are on a huge gravy train at the expense of taxpayers, so why is the Secretary of State being held to ransom and why he is even prepared to consider rewarding their failure?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady talks about a privatised gravy train. I would encourage her to look at the conversation that the French Prime Minister had about a state railway, where he said:

“The dilapidated network, delays, abysmal debt... The situation is alarming, not to say untenable. The French, whether they take the train or not, pay more and more for a public service that works less and less well”.

I would say to her constituents that I am delighted that over the next 12 to 18 months the people of York are going to see every single train, pretty much, that serves their station replaced as new, or brand new trains—trains that they have not seen for decades.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): During the franchise process, business cases get a lot of focus. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) mentioned the Virgin Trains east coast contract and the franchise holder criticising some of the figures he had been passed. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee who was present at that hearing, I can say that the franchise holder actually said that, although the figures were not what he was expecting, they were not an insurmountable barrier to the franchise working. He quoted the Scottish referendum and Brexit, and a declining trend in passenger figures, as the real reason why the franchise failed. When franchises across the companies are being bid for, will my right hon. Friend encourage those companies to have a broader range of dynamic scenario planning so that they get accurate figures?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We are now migrating the franchise system to being much more focused on quality. The quality of service is going to drive revenues as much as anything else. People will see a very different approach where we do not necessarily take the highest bid, we look for high quality in the bids, and we look to be prudent about the risk-sharing mechanisms so that hopefully this does not happen again.

Road Safety

10. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): When he plans to meet representatives of the road safety sector to discuss road safety policy. [R] [904113]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Since becoming road safety Minister, I have met the hon. Gentleman several times, as well as a broad range of road safety organisations and others with an interest in road safety, to discuss many different issues. Those institutions include RoadPeace, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, the RAC, the AA and many others.

Mr Sheerman: I congratulate the Minister on his keen interest in this subject; I have been impressed by him so far. However, is it not the case that there are still 1,720 knocks on the door by a policeman or a policewoman who says that your daughter, your son, your mum, your dad, your grandmother or your grandfather are dead? That is the truth, so we cannot be complacent. Can we now look to having a national investigatory body to investigate every death on the road? Will the Minister also talk to his overseas development colleagues, given that 1.3 million people worldwide die in road accidents every year? Is it not time that we did something to help them?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are very closely involved in supporting nations around the world to raise road safety standards; he has been involved in that himself. With regard to a national body, we have looked at that. I am sure that he will take some comfort from the fact that only today we are laying regulations that allow driving instructors to undertake motorway driving with learners. That is part of a much wider pushback to improve driving quality and reduce fatalities.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The previous Transport Committee's June 2016 inquiry into all-lane running concluded that 8% non-compliance with red X signals was unacceptable. In their response, the Government agreed, promising to tackle it through a combination of education and enforcement. In January this year, the chief executive of Highways England wrote to me with an update, stating that

"we have reduced levels of non-compliance with red-x signals to 8%".

How can it be acceptable for the Government to be continuing to roll out all-lane running when it appears to have made zero progress on reducing these dangerous driving offences?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will be aware, a study has been done on all-lane running showing that, if anything, it may be safer than the previous arrangements, and that is to be welcomed. We will be making an announcement on red X signals fairly imminently.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Does the Minister not recognise the correlation between his Government's decision to scrap road safety targets, introduced by Labour, and their failure to reduce the number of those seriously injured or killed on our roads?

Jesse Norman: I am a little reluctant to get into the statistics game with the hon. Gentleman. He will be aware, however, that for the year ending September 2017 road fatalities fell by 4% and overall road injuries fell by 5%, compared with the previous year. The picture is mixed and generally heading in the right direction.

11. **Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to reduce road injuries and deaths. [904114]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): In December 2015 the Department for Transport published the road safety statement "Working Together to Build a Safer Road System", and we are making excellent progress in delivering its objectives. I am pleased to announce today that the Department has, at our third attempt, commissioned an objective scientific study to understand the relationship between tyre degradation, the passage of time and the effect on tyre safety. Two earlier attempts to commission that research were unavailing. The guidance given has been very effective in this area, but that marks a further move towards better road safety.

Jessica Morden: My constituents Julian and Gill Smith, who tragically lost their daughter Rhiannon nearly a year ago in a car collision, are now campaigning for better preventive action. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and ask that the Minister looks seriously at calls by campaign groups such as Brake to establish a UK road collision investigation branch, so that we can have more crash data and evidence to prevent deaths and injuries on our roads.

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady says, that is a tragic incident for the family concerned, and one's heart goes out to them. As I said to the hon. Member for Huddersfield, we continue to look closely at the possibility of setting up such a national body.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In the last 15 years, there have been 340 casualties on the notorious A417 near the Air Balloon pub. There have been 148 accidents in the last five years alone. Will my hon. Friend join me in warmly welcoming the landmark of reaching the consultation stage on the shortlisted new roads scheme? Does he agree that, by backing that project, this Government are committed to saving lives on Gloucestershire's roads?

Jesse Norman: Of course I welcome that. As my hon. Friend will be aware, it has been the product of a great deal of hard work by local campaigners and the Department over a considerable period.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Would the Minister consider reducing the drink-drive limit? The reduction in Northern Ireland and Scotland has led to fewer deaths and injuries on the road and less work for the police. It is surely the most obvious thing to do.

Jesse Norman: We continue to keep the situation under review. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, there have been moves in that direction in Scotland. As that policy works its way through, we will continue to look closely at the issue.

Road Improvements

13. **Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to improve the condition of local roads. [904116]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Department published its latest statistics on road conditions in England in January 2018, which show that local classified roads are improving, with fewer local roads to be considered for maintenance. There is still much to do, which is why the Government have committed record levels of investment, including more than £6 billion to highways maintenance up to 2020-21, as well as having an action fund to combat potholes totalling £296 million in this Parliament, which colleagues across the House will warmly welcome.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. He will be aware that Shropshire Council has submitted a very effective business case, supported by our local enterprise partnership, for the funding of the north-west relief road in Shrewsbury, which is the final bit of the circular around our town. What steps is he taking to ensure that the scheme is looked upon favourably?

Jesse Norman: I am absolutely aware of that. My hon. Friend has been a tireless campaigner for that road over the years. I reassure him that we recognise the concern that he indicates. The Department has received the funding bid for the Shrewsbury north-west relief road, and it is being actively and currently considered.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Government are intending to close the driving test centre in Pontypridd and move it to Llantrisant, which will make it far more inconvenient for people in the Rhondda—one of the poorest constituencies in the land—and probably more difficult for people cost-effectively to learn how to drive safely. It will also put the driving test centre in a place that does not have suitable roads for people to do the test properly. Will the Minister look again at closing the Pontypridd driving test centre?

Mr Speaker: That is what is called the art of shoehorning in the tangential.

Chris Bryant: I did it nicely.

Mr Speaker: He did do it nicely. We congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his ingenuity.

Jesse Norman: One wonders if style is everything in these matters or whether content should have a place at some point. The answer to that question is that of course we will continue to look at it, but I doubt the answer will change.

Community Transport

14. **Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support community transport operators. [904117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): In the 2016-17 financial year, the Department spent almost £3.5 million on supporting the community transport sector through the bus services operators' grant, and since January 2013 it has devolved approximately £2.9 million of that grant to support local councils' community transport services. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Department is currently

consulting on changes to the law and guidance on the use of section 19 and section 22 permits. The consultation closes on 4 May.

Nigel Mills: The Minister will know that the changes on which he is consulting pose a real threat to the future of some operators. What more can he do to protect the existing use of permits rather than require what are generally small local charities to move to the full commercial status of the operator licence?

Jesse Norman: As colleagues will know, I have spent a lot of time working with the bodies responsible for the sector and visiting local community transport organisations. I take my hat off to them for the astonishing work that they do, which is, in a way, a form of social care as much as a form of transport, if not more so. Our consultation document, which I am sure my hon. Friend will have read, lays out three potential exemptions: derogations from commercial operators in favour of community transport operators, showing that there is in fact no competition in specific cases; a potential distance exemption of 15 miles from a particular hub; and the separation of commercial and non-commercial activities. We expect them to receive a lot of comments. I am not aware of a direct threat to any operators in particular, but we very much seek their feedback.

Mr Speaker: Notwithstanding what the Minister said about the hat—he talked about taking his hat off—I would not have thought he would want to do so in the present weather, as a protective function.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Many community transport operators use diesel vehicles, so what representations have the UK Government made to the German Government to hold Volkswagen to account for its emissions scandal?

Jesse Norman: It is the Rhondda valley by proxy. We continue to press the German Government hard on the issue and regard the behaviour of Volkswagen as unacceptable. We are greatly improving the emissions regime, toughening up the testing regime and taking active steps to penalise the use of defeat devices.

Infrastructure: Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire

16. **Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con):** What estimate his Department has made of the amount that will be invested in transport infrastructure in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire between 2010 and 2020. [904119]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): In the east midlands, almost £7 billion has been spent on transport since 2010, improving connectivity, shortening journey times, reducing congestion and transporting people, ideas and goods. In Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, that has included £371 million from Government for extensions to the Nottingham tram system, and £4.5 million for the new station at Ilkeston.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Indeed, the Government have a proud record on transport infrastructure. More transport infrastructure has been planned in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire over these 10 years than ever before. I welcome the proposals for the A38 and smart

motorways, and for the Derby and Nottingham stations. May I suggest to my hon. Friend that we also consider smaller projects, which will make vast improvements, and may I put in a bid for the Ashbourne bypass?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has been a great advocate of transport locally and is obviously an expert in the field, as a previous Minister in the Department. He is absolutely right that we are investing in the biggest upgrade of the midland main line since it was completed in 1870. It is, however, for Derbyshire County Council to assess the need for that particular project in Ashbourne, and to decide whether to work on plans to deliver it. If the council applies for appropriate Government funding, we would be pleased to consider its bid.

Mr Speaker: I know that the hon. Lady will accept that he was not merely a Minister in the Department but the Secretary of State and a right hon. Gentleman of notable industry and distinction.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): The previous speaker said a lot of things about the possibility of getting extra money spent in Derbyshire. What he failed to do—this is very important—is say that when the electrification of the midland main line was put forward in this House, it was decided that it would go only as far as Kettering and Corby. Should not the question now be about the wholesale electrification of the midland main line, which would result in people in Derbyshire being better off?

Ms Ghani: I apologise to my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) for my earlier mistake.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Resign!

Ms Ghani: Perhaps not right now, but I will consider it in future. I was expecting a question on High Speed 2.

Mr Skinner: I'm saving that.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman is saving it—that is wonderful. Perhaps he will even acknowledge the great jobs that will be coming along the line. On electrification, Labour's 2007 rail strategy stated that

“it would not be prudent to commit now to ‘all-or-nothing’ projects, such as network-wide electrification...for which the longer-term benefits are currently uncertain and which could delay tackling the current strategic priorities such as capacity.”

The Government believe that it is vital to deliver for passengers and for the taxpayer.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Between 2016 and 2021 the east midlands will receive just 3.2% of all transport investment, and that is exacerbated by the cancellation of the electrification of the Midland main line. That electrification is wanted by business and communities, and it is better value, better for the environment, and has a brilliant business case. Why are Ministers in the Department for Transport the only ones who do not understand that?

Ms Ghani: We have not yet fully announced what we will be doing on electrification, and at times some of the information shared is not entirely accurate. The Government have supported the midlands with HS2, and by investing £1.8 billion in the region's motorways and trunk roads, and £1.7 billion in the local growth fund. We are also investing £25 million to develop and progress a transformational strategy across the midlands with Midlands Connect.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Members for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) who missed out on substantive questions can seek to catch my eye during topical questions.

Topical Questions

T1. [904126] **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Briefly, let me inform the House that the Space Bill has completed its passage through Parliament, and I extend my thanks to all Members involved in the debate. That debate was conducted in good humour by Members from across the House, and we all share the aspiration for this Bill to pave the way for a thriving commercial space sector in the United Kingdom.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Is the Secretary of State aware that Network Rail and Govia Thameslink have committed to ensuring that eight-carriage trains are introduced between Cambridge and King's Lynn by the end of the year, which is vital to relieving unacceptable levels of congestion? Will he help to ensure that that commitment is honoured?

Chris Grayling: I will certainly do that, and I also recommit to the improvements needed in Ely, which are essential over the next control period to unlocking those capacity improvements that are needed for the growth and development of those parts of Cambridgeshire.

T2. [904127] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Since 1979 the distinctive yellow and green minibuses of Ealing Community Transport have provided a vital lifeline for the disabled and elderly of the borough, but changed Government guidance now threatens the existence of that award-winning social enterprise. A delegation of volunteer drivers came to see me nearly in tears. They are mostly pensioners and they do not have the time, resources or inclination to retrain for the passenger carrying vehicle licence that is now demanded. Will the Minister think again?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): As the hon. Lady is aware, the matter is currently out to consultation, although it does not cover the certificate of professional competence, which will be handled separately. As I have indicated, there are many workarounds for this issue, and there is no reason for any community transport company to be adversely worried. There is a misalignment between EU law and UK law, and there may be some players who, unfortunately,

are operating in a commercial way. That is how the matter rests, and we will do everything we can to protect community transport operators that are doing a good job.

T3. [904128] **Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is wonderful that so many new technologically superior trains are being introduced on Britain's railways, but many passengers are complaining that some of them have cramped and uncomfortable seats. We do not want to have Ryanair on the tracks. Will the Minister do all he can to ensure that the specifications for those new trains have passenger comfort at their heart?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): Train seating is required to address the comfort of passengers and to conform to relevant design standards, including on fire safety and crashworthiness. We do not want passengers to feel that they need to bring in their own inflatable cushions, and my hon. Friend will take comfort in the fact that seats normally become more comfortable over time through use.

T4. [904129] **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is now over 800 days since the Government promised to research a new law on pavement parking. Will the Minister or the Secretary of State give me an update on what progress has been made?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I am grateful for the question. We will be making an announcement later in spring.

T7. [904132] **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): Last weekend, and so completely unrelated to the current weather, Southern rail passengers at Redhill suffered the most appalling, shambolic and potentially dangerous scenes. I appreciate that underlying that situation might be the extremely good investment programme, but what assurances has the Minister received that these awful scenes will not be repeated?

Chris Grayling: Let me say very clearly and unequivocally that what took place last Sunday was unacceptable. On behalf of the Government, I apologise for it and the company has already done so. We have made our views known to the company in the strongest possible terms. It was unacceptable and lessons have to be learned. The company is putting in place arrangements to make sure people receive appropriate financial compensation. It must not happen again.

T5. [904130] **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Last Friday, I arranged a site meeting between Network Rail and the YMCA for south London to talk about an abandoned strip of land owned by Network Rail on Rialto road in Mitcham, close to Eastfields station, in the hope that they can together provide some great prefab housing for young people. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can encourage Network Rail to use all its scraps of land to the benefit of everyone?

Joseph Johnson: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this issue. It is really important that we make the most of all such opportunities for Network

Rail to put scraps of land to good use, whether for housing, strips of walkway, or other pedestrian or cycling purposes. I am happy to meet her to discuss that.

T8. [904133] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What is the Department doing to help more people to cycle safely, as happens in such cities as Amsterdam and Copenhagen, especially given the startling revelation to the joint air quality Committee by Professor Stephen Holgate that drivers and passengers are inhaling up to 10 times more poor quality air than cyclists and pedestrians on the street?

Jesse Norman: The answer to that question is a great deal, with more to come. I was very pleased to be able to go to the meeting of the all-party group on air pollution, of which my hon. Friend is a member, with Chris Boardman. That is an excellent example of how an individual initiative in Manchester can be used to drive great change. The cycle safety review is coming up shortly and will look at a very wide range of issues relating to cycling, including recent information on some of the impacts on air quality. As he says, cycling is remarkably good for the body and soul of the people who do it.

T6. [904131] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Cheshire Oaks in my constituency is a great success story, with increased investment leading to another 300 jobs. However, it is very difficult for those living in Neston in the other part of the constituency to access those jobs because there are no bus services in the evening and Cheshire Oaks is open until 8 o'clock at night. Is that not a sorry state of affairs and can we not do more to help people to get into work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Bus services, what journeys they take and how frequently they are run, are down to the local authority. I therefore urge the hon. Gentleman to discuss this matter with his local authority, which can take it forward with local bus service providers.

T10. [904135] **Jack Breerton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State for visiting my constituency recently. On that occasion, I was pleased to give him the Stoke-on-Trent HS2 masterplan. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on his plans to make Stoke-on-Trent HS2-ready?

Chris Grayling: First, I want to put on the record again my commitment to making sure that Stoke is in receipt of an HS2 service when the route opens. The local authority's plans for Stoke station are very exciting and I want to work on them with my hon. Friend and the local authority.

T9. [904134] **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): The western side of the M60, in the process of the upgrading to the smart motorway system, has seen congestion, gridlock and horror for commuting traffic on a daily basis. Even now, the 50 mph limit remains in place. When will we see progress?

Chris Grayling: I know that these works have taken longer than intended. I have spoken to Highways England and we want to get this situation resolved as quickly as

possible. It is certainly the case—I speak as somebody who travels from time to time to Old Trafford—that the area is surrounded by roadworks on the motorway and the work on the new extension to the Metrolink. I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge, however, that this is a sign that the Government are making sure there is investment in, and resource provided to, Manchester, where transport investment on this scale has not happened for a long time.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know from our many previous conversations that the people of Plymouth have waited too long to see improvements on their rail link, so I am grateful for his Department's response yesterday, but when can they expect to see something delivered—some work completed—on Dawlish, which I know is his No. 1 responsibility?

Joseph Johnson: Protecting the line at Dawlish is a national priority of utmost importance and we are determined to find a permanent solution for this vital connection. Some £15 million of funding has been provided to Network Rail to take this forward and planning and development work is well under way. There will be no unnecessary delay, and we will complete this work as soon as we can within the law.

Mr Speaker: It is very good to see the hon. Member for Hove back in his place. I call Mr Peter Kyle.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Thank you so much, Mr Speaker. There is one set of tracks and one franchise operator between London and Brighton, but there are three separate pricing structures. I urge the Secretary of State and the Rail Minister to think about implementing the Gibb recommendation to lower the pricing to the lowest possible one—the Thameslink one—for a two-year period. That could be done with no technical changes whatever, and it would have a transformative impact on passengers who have suffered so much in the last few years.

Chris Grayling: We are working our way through the recommendations of the Gibb report, and we are working our way through the automation of ticketing, which I think is a prerequisite of the broader fares reform that is necessary. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the keyGo card has just launched across the Govia Thameslink Railway network, and that smart ticketing is progressing. That will provide the opportunity for fares reform in a way that has not been there previously.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): During the recent appalling weather, Worcestershire County Council has been sharing information about where the nearest grit bin can be found, and getting the gritters out on the road. Will the Secretary of State join me in praising them for helping residents to prepare for the recent appalling conditions?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely praise them, and I am delighted that we have ample stocks on hand to deal with the current inconveniences. I put my hat squarely back on my head to deal with that on a personal level. Not least of the joys of this particular scheme and

approach is that they open the way to Herefordshire, a place that I know the House will wish to visit on regular occasions.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that no money was spent in control period 5 on supporting enhancements to the rail infrastructure in north Wales. Having seen the unanimity in north Wales and in north-west England on Monday this week, does he not accept that our time has come for cross-border rail investment?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I went to that event and made a commitment. I praise my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) for bringing the event together and thank all the Members from north Wales who attended. I gave a clear indication of the Government's sympathy with the need for the Crewe hub. I talked about the re-signalling on parts of the route, which will improve performance on the line. The hon. Gentleman will be aware, as the Member of Parliament for Wrexham, that we are now carrying out the study on how we deliver a proper service on the Wrexham to Bidston line. Under this Government, the time has certainly come for transport improvements.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): BACT—Beccles and Bungay area community transport—plays a key strategic role in north Suffolk in serving remote rural areas and many vulnerable people. Will the Minister assure me that in assessing the feedback from his current consultation, his No. 1 objective will be to put the future of organisations such as BACT on a sustainable, long-term financial footing?

Jesse Norman: I can absolutely assure him that the Department's goal has always been to manage this process with as little impact as possible and ultimately to the benefit of the community transport sector, if we possibly can.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Minister and his predecessor have been supportive of my trailer safety campaign and #towsafe4freddie, following Freddie Hussey's tragic death in 2014. Does he agree with me that the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill, which is currently going through the Lords, offers a fantastic opportunity to further highlight the importance of trailer safety?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely recognise the campaign that the hon. Lady fought, and I think it is very worthwhile. I slightly doubt whether what she suggests is in fact the case, but attempts can of course be made within the rules. This is a very narrowly defined piece of legislation that focuses very specifically on permitting and on trailer registration, so there may not be scope to add other things, but I continue to be delighted to talk to her about the campaign that she is waging.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): From the need for a final fix to the A40 to urgent upgrades to the Cotswold line, the need for a boost to west Oxfordshire's transport is now acute. Will Ministers agree to work with me to make it happen?

Chris Grayling: The A40 is one of the roads that could benefit from the creation of the major roads network. It is precisely designed to deal with those second-tier roads that were detrunked by the last Labour Government and tend to fall through the cracks between decision making in local communities and the national work done on the strategic road network. My expectation is that my hon. Friend and his local authority will be beating a path to my door when that funding is first released. However, I would say that his railway line is getting new trains much sooner than that, which I hope will be a benefit to his constituents.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Ministers say that they want to reduce roadside emissions. The road leading from the port of Liverpool has some of the biggest air quality problems in the country. Will the Secretary of State listen to calls for investment in rail freight as an answer to the problem?

Chris Grayling: This is precisely why I am so pleased to have started feasibility work on the reopening of the Skipton to Colne railway line, a route that could provide an important link across the Pennines. It is no doubt a matter of real frustration that it takes eight to nine hours for a freight train to travel from the port of Liverpool to the power station at Drax, and it is clear to me that we need additional transpennine capacity. This is one route that could deliver it. I look forward to seeing the conclusions from that study at the end of the year, which I think is the likely timetable.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This week of all weeks, rail passengers want up-to-date information about delays and cancellations, but Southeastern's website has failed to provide any live-time updates in any single rush hour this week, today included. Will Ministers bear that in mind when the franchise comes up for renewal?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is a powerful champion of his constituents, and he is right to expect Southeastern to provide prompt, accurate and timely information so that passengers can have journeys of the quality that they deserve.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Jim Irvine, who was active all his life, now suffers from motor neurone disease, and, like many other people, relies on his mobility scooter for independence. Scooters are currently banned from the Tyne and Wear metro. What will the Secretary of State do to remedy the situation, and will he give assurances that our promised new rolling stock will include provision for mobility scooters?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Lady says, it is time that we had new rolling stock on the Newcastle-upon-Tyne metro. I expect to see updated, modern rolling stock that can provide proper accessibility for people with disabilities. The decision about the configuration will of course be made locally, but I certainly expect the money that is available to be spent on disability-compliant rolling stock.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give us an update on the progress of the negotiations on air connections with the European Union after we leave in March next year?

Chris Grayling: The European Commission has published its negotiating position on aviation links. There have been a lot of scare stories around over the last few months, but the Commission has said that in all circumstances—whether or not we have a trade deal, and whether or not we have an implementation period—there must be an aviation agreement. There is a recognition on the Commission's side that the flights need to continue, and there is an absolute commitment on our side. I met my Spanish counterpart yesterday, and we agreed that it was essential for flights to continue. We will all work to ensure that there is absolutely no interruption in services.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State understand the severe disappointment and anger in the far south-west about the sham of a south-west rail strategy that was published yesterday? Will he now do the right thing, and, instead of re-spinning the £50 million that has already been announced, match Labour's £2.5 billion rail investment plan for the south-west?

Chris Grayling: I will take no lessons from the party that did nothing for transport in the south-west over a long period. This Government are doing things that Labour never did—dualling the A303, providing brand-new trains, and resignalling in Cornwall to increase the number of rail services. The hon. Gentleman should be embarrassed about his party's record.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are very short of time. In fact, we have run out of time. We have had some very comprehensive answers, for which we are grateful, but I will take only two more questions, if the questions and answers are very short.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the Minister please look into the concerns that a flyover and tunnel at Stonehenge will damage the valuable archaeological site at Blick Mead?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will be interested to know that I sent a message of welcome to the team from the International Council on Monuments and Sites that is currently considering the issue of Stonehenge. Of course we will look into my hon. Friend's concerns, and he is welcome to write to me with further details.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When will the Government catch up with the rest of the world and take advantage of a quick, easy, cost-effective way of reducing transport emissions by introducing E10 fuel?

Jesse Norman: We are reviewing that option at the moment. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it would require legislation, but we are already giving considerable support to the ethanol industry, and we are continuing to look into it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but now we really must move on.

Leveson Inquiry

10.39 am

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the Leveson inquiry and its implementation, and the freedom of the press.

Over many centuries in Britain, our press has held the powerful to account and been free to report and investigate without fear or favour. These principles underpin our democracy and are integral to our freedom as a nation. Today, in a world of the internet and clickbait, our press face critical challenges that threaten their livelihood and sustainability, with declining circulations and a changing media landscape. It is in this context that we approach the Leveson inquiry, which was set up seven years ago in 2011 and reported six years ago in 2012 in response to events over a decade ago.

The Leveson inquiry was a diligent and thorough examination of the culture, practices and ethics of our press in response to illegal and improper press intrusion. There were far too many cases of terrible behaviour, and, having met some of the victims, I understand the impact this had.

From the start, I want to thank Sir Brian for his work. The inquiry lasted over a year and heard evidence from more than 300 people, including journalists, editors and victims. Three major police investigations examined a wide range of offences, and more than 40 people were convicted. The inquiry and investigations were comprehensive, and since it was set up the terms of reference for a part 2 of the inquiry have largely been met. There have also been extensive reforms to policing practices and significant changes to press self-regulation.

The Independent Press Standards Organisation has been established and now regulates 95% of national newspapers by circulation. It has taken significant steps to demonstrate its independence as a regulator, and in 2016 Sir Joseph Pilling concluded that IPSO had largely complied with Leveson's recommendations. There have been further improvements since, and I hope there will be more to come. In November last year, for instance, IPSO introduced a new system of low-cost arbitration. It has processed more than 40,000 complaints in its first three years of operation, and it has ordered multiple front-page corrections or clarifications. Newspapers have also made improvements to their governance frameworks to improve internal controls, standards and compliance, and one regulator, IMPRESS, has been recognised under the royal charter. Extensive reforms to policing practices have been made, too: the College of Policing has published a code of ethics and developed national guidance for police officers on how to engage with the press, and we have legislated in the Policing and Crime Act 2017 to strengthen protections for police whistleblowers.

It is clear that we have seen significant progress from publications, from the police and from the new regulator, and the media landscape today is markedly different from that which Sir Brian looked at in 2011. The way in which we consume news has changed dramatically. Newspaper circulation has fallen by about 30% since the conclusions of the Leveson inquiry, and, although digital circulation is rising, publishers are finding it

much harder to generate revenue online. In 2015, for every £100 newspapers lost in print revenue, they gained only £3 in digital revenue.

Our local papers in particular are under severe pressure. Local papers help to bring together local voices and shine a light on important local issues—in communities, in courtrooms, in council chambers—and as we devolve power further to local communities they will become even more important, yet over 200 local newspapers have closed since 2005, including two in my constituency. These are the new challenges.

There are also challenges that were only in their infancy back in 2011. We have seen a dramatic and continued rise in social media, which is largely unregulated, and issues such as clickbait, fake news, malicious disinformation and online abuse threaten high-quality journalism.

The foundation of any successful democracy is a sound basis for democratic discourse. That is under threat from these new forces, and that requires urgent attention. These are today's challenges and this is where we need to focus, especially as more than £48 million was spent on the police investigations and the inquiry.

During the consultation, 12% of direct respondents were in favour of reopening the Leveson inquiry, with 66% against. We agree and this is the position we set out in the Conservative party manifesto. Sir Brian, whom I thank for his service, agrees that the inquiry should not proceed under the current terms of reference but believes that it should continue in an amended form. We do not believe that reopening this costly and time consuming public inquiry is the right way forward, so considering all the factors that I have outlined to the House today, I have informed Sir Brian that we are formally closing the inquiry. But we will take action to safeguard the lifeblood of our democratic discourse and tackle the challenges that our media face—today, not a decade ago.

During the consultation, we also found serious concerns that section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 would exacerbate the problems the press faces rather than solve them. Respondents were worried that it would impose further financial burdens, especially on the local press. As one high profile figure put it very clearly:

“Newspapers...are already operating in a tough environment. These proposals will make it tougher and add to the risk of self-censorship...The threat of having to pay both sides' costs—no matter what the challenge—would have the effect of leaving journalists questioning every report that named an individual or included the most innocuous data about them.”

He went on to say that section 40 risks

“damaging the future of a paper that you love”

and that the impact will be to

“make it much more difficult for papers...to survive”.

These are not my words, Mr Speaker, but those of Alastair Campbell talking about the chilling threat of section 40—and if anyone knows about threats to the press it is Alastair Campbell.

Only 7% of direct respondents favoured full commencement of section 40. By contrast, 79% favoured full repeal. We have therefore decided not to commence section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 and to seek repeal at the earliest opportunity. Action is needed, based not on what might have been needed years ago but on what is needed to address today's problems. Our new digital charter sets out the overarching programme

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of work to agree norms and rules for the online world and put them into practice. Under the charter, our internet safety strategy is looking at online behaviour and we will firmly tackle the problems of online abuse. Our review of the sustainability of high-quality journalism will address concerns about the impact of the internet on our news and media. It will do this in a forward-looking way, so we can respond to the challenges of today, not the challenges of yesterday.

The future of a vibrant press matters to us all. There has been a huge public response to our consultation and I want to thank every one of the 174,000 respondents as well as all those who signed petitions. We have carefully considered all the evidence we received. We have consulted widely, with regulators, publications and victims of press intrusion. The world has changed since the Leveson inquiry was established in 2011. Since then, we have seen a seismic change in the media landscape. The work of the inquiry and the reforms since have had a huge impact on public life. We thank Sir Brian for lending his dedication and expertise to the undertaking of this inquiry.

At national and local levels, a press that can hold the powerful to account remains an essential component of our democracy. We need high-quality journalism to thrive in the new digital world. We seek a press and a media that are robust and independently regulated and that report without fear or favour. The steps I have set out today will help give Britain a vibrant, independent and free press that holds the powerful to account and rises to the challenges of our times. I commend the statement to the House.

10.49 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): As I have said through you before, Mr Speaker, timing is everything in politics. If I am looking a little breathless and fatigued this morning, it is because I have been carrying a heavy load in the past hour, lifting weights in the gym and visualising Paul Dacre. For the increasing number of colleagues who do not read the *Daily Mail* any more, I refer them to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I shall take the Mosley issue head on. If I had thought for one moment that he held the views contained in that leaflet of 57 years ago, I would not have given him the time of day. He is, however, a man who, in the face of great family tragedy and overwhelming media intimidation, chose to use his limited resources to support the weak against the strong.

On this issue, I would like to thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement, not just in the last half hour but over and over again, year after year. This announcement, conveniently timed to be buried under a flurry of snow, is a disappointment, a breach of trust and a bitter blow to the victims of press intrusion, but it is not in any way a surprise. We now know for certain what we have suspected all the time. When a Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, joined the other party leaders to say that he would keep his promises to the victims of phone hacking, he and his party were acting not out of conviction but out of

weakness. For a brief period of time, and for the first time ever, our political parties had more to gain politically by standing up to the tabloid media than by bowing down to them. When every Conservative MP who was then in Parliament backed this policy, including the current Prime Minister and the present Secretary of State, they did not really mean it. They were waiting for the wind to change and for the fuss to die down. They were waiting for a time when they could, as quietly as possible, break their promises, and today that time has finally come.

We already knew what the Conservatives really thought, when successive Secretaries of State refused to implement section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, the part of the Leveson system that would provide access to justice for ordinary citizens while offering protection to journalists and newspapers that signed up to any Leveson-compliant self-regulatory body. The papers, absurdly, caricatured it as state regulation, and pointed instead to the independence of their alternative, non-Leveson-compliant regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation. The Government were too scared to make the case for their own policy, and finally, today, they are formally capitulating.

The Government are also capitulating on the question of whether to complete the investigation into how phone hacking happened and what is happening now. Underlying the phone hacking scandal, we saw one of the biggest corporate scandals and one of the biggest corporate governance failures of modern times. The Secretary of State says that the terms of reference of Leveson 2 have largely been met, but I do not agree. Here are some of the things that Leveson 2 was supposed to investigate: to inquire into the extent of illegality at News International; to inquire into the way the police investigated allegations relating to News International and other newspaper groups; to inquire into whether the police received corrupt payments and were complicit in suppressing the proper investigation of complaints; and to inquire into the extent of corporate governance and management failures at News International and other organisations. None of those questions has been answered, and by betraying the victims of phone hacking in this statement today, the Secretary of State is trying to ensure that they never will be. I ask him this question: if it is revealed that the criminality that took place at the *News of the World* extended to other newspapers, will he reconsider his position?

The last thing the Murdoch empire, the Rothermere empire, the Barclay brothers' empire or the Mirror Group wanted was an inquiry into their dirty laundry, with powers under the Inquiries Act 2005 to obtain documents and compel witnesses to appear in public. The last thing any of the newspapers wanted was more attention being paid to their methods at a time when it may well be revealed very soon that other papers, not necessarily the ones at the centre of the scandal in 2011, were also involved in criminality. They have been lobbying hard for today's outcome. They will give the Secretary of State—a man who enjoys favourable headlines—plaudits in tomorrow's leader columns. We already know that Paul Dacre, Rupert Murdoch and the Barclay brothers approve of his statement—after all, they helped to write it. The Secretary of State could have chosen to do the right thing, but instead he chose not to stand up to the

tabloid-style newspapers that are propping up the Prime Minister and this Government, and that could pull the rug from under them whenever they choose.

Let me close with the words of the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, to the Leveson inquiry in June 2012:

“I will never forget meeting with the Dowler family in Downing Street to run through the terms of this Inquiry with them and to hear what they had been through and how it had redoubled, trebled the pain and agony they’d been through over losing Milly. I’ll never forget that, and that’s the test of all this. It’s not ‘do the politicians or the press feel happy with what we get?’ It’s ‘are we really protecting people who have been caught up and absolutely thrown to the wolves by this process?’ That’s what the test is.”

The Secretary of State will prosper politically from his statement today, but he has failed that test.

Matt Hancock: The case of the victims of press intrusion is, of course, an incredibly important consideration when making these judgments, but I make the judgments on the basis not of the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, but of the national interest. The issues faced by the victims have been looked into, in the inquiry and in the three police investigations. The issues for the future of our media include this, but are much broader than it.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) stands at the Dispatch Box and talks about the future of our media, but the Opposition’s proposals would lead to a press that is fettered and not free. We do not love every story that is written about us in the press, but the idea that the solution lies in shackling our free press with the punitive costs of any complainant is completely wrong. We all know where he is coming from on the issue of press freedom, because he is tied up with its opponents. Democratic countries face huge challenges in making sure that we have robust but fair discussions in our public life, and the approach proposed by the Opposition would make that even harder.

The hon. Gentleman talks about keeping promises. We are keeping promises that were made to our constituents, who elected us on a manifesto commitment to support a free press. He talks about the need to look into the past, but there have been investigations and inquiries costing many millions of pounds. My judgment is that it would be neither proportionate nor in the national interest to follow that with millions of pounds more.

The message should go out loud and clear from this House that we support every single local newspaper in this country, and that we support these publications, big or small. That is why we are proposing real and meaningful solutions for a vibrant, free and independent press, and we will face up to the challenges that we see before us today. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his party will come around to supporting us in that to ensure that we have a strong, democratic discourse over the years and decades to come.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): The Secretary of State’s predecessor promised the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee that we would receive a full response to our submission to the Government’s consultation on press regulation, but we have yet to receive it. Can he give me an assurance that we will receive a full response in good time for his appearance before us on 14 March?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Not only have I made this statement today, but I will also be publishing a full response to the consultation, with full details—I will place a copy in the Library. I look forward to coming before the Select Committee to discuss this question narrowly, and also to discuss the wider actions we are taking, in which my hon. Friend is playing an important part, to make sure that we have a sound basis for political discourse in this country.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for prior sight of his statement. I wrote to him on 22 February seeking an update on progress with the inquiry and asking if and when it would be implemented. I am pleased he has come to the Dispatch Box today at least to clarify that.

The Secretary of State will also be aware that the Scottish National party is absolutely committed to ensuring that the practices that led to Leveson in the first place do not happen again. Our position has always been that, should a UK-wide part 2 of Leveson go ahead, it must take into account the distinct legal context in Scotland.

We firmly believe that all individuals should have a right to redress when they feel that they have been a victim of malpractice. However, the Scottish Government have absolutely no plans to introduce statutory incentives for the press in Scotland to sign up to a state-approved regulator. Press regulation and the operation of the civil courts are areas that are clearly within the devolved competence of the Scottish Parliament, so can the Secretary of State assure us that he will respect the devolution settlement and the independence of the Scottish legal system? Does he agree that, by not doing so, he would set a dangerous precedent in determining the ability of the Scottish Parliament to take decisions in devolved areas?

Matt Hancock: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. It is, of course, part of the devolution settlement that these issues are dealt with in Scotland. I of course respect the separate and distinct legal system in this area. He asks whether we will respect that in future, and he knows as well as I do that amendments have been made to the Data Protection Bill in the other place—that Bill will have its Second Reading in this House on Monday—that, with respect to data protection only, require a Leveson 2-type inquiry and the commencement of section 40 on a UK-wide basis. I look forward to discussing with the hon. Gentleman how we can make sure that we have the respect we need for the devolution settlement and for the Scottish press. The single best way that we can deal with the problem he rightly raises is by disposing of those amendments in their entirety.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Does he agree that, now more than ever, newspapers play a vital role in holding both the Government and the Opposition to account? He is absolutely right that, rather than looking backwards at the events of 10 years ago and adding to the costs of local newspapers, we should be supporting newspapers in meeting the challenges of the internet giants.

Matt Hancock: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend, not least because, as he points out, one of the jobs of a Secretary of State is to look forward and consider how to solve the problems of today. The problems of local newspapers are not a marginal or side issue. More than 200 local papers have closed in the past decade and a bit, including local papers in my patch. I do not want to see that accelerated by the actions of this House, and that is what would happen if we do not take the course of action I have proposed today.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Having spent many hours with the Dowler family, Christopher Jefferies and many others, may I say on behalf of all the victims that many of us will feel that the Secretary of State has shoved another little knife in our heart? In all honesty, we had hoped that the promises were real promises that we would get to the truth—not just the bits and pieces that were able to be dealt with, as Sir Brian said, but the elements that were expressly excluded from the original investigation, particularly the Metropolitan police's collusion with the press, which could not be looked at all.

I find it inconceivable that the Secretary of State talks only about the freedom of the press—of course the freedom of the press is important—because to many of us, it is also important that politicians should be able to speak without fear or favour. That means we should no longer be cowed by press barons; we should be able to do what is right for society. I simply ask the Secretary of State why on earth, if everything he has said today is true, did the Government make all those promises in the past, and why did he vote for the legislation?

Matt Hancock: The world has changed since 2011. The truth is that the rise of the internet means that some of the issues the hon. Gentleman rightly raises about making sure the debate we have is a reasonable one, not one based on abuse and bullying, are much broader. Tackling the problems of today is our task now. Of course there were abuses that were looked into during the inquiry, and they have been looked into by the police in three investigations, with over 40 criminal convictions since. The judgment we have to make is: what is the best thing to do for the future of this country, when the way in which we debate politics and make decisions is under challenge, because of new technology, in a way it has not been for decades if not centuries? Getting those solutions right is mission-critical to our future as a liberal democracy, and that is what we are putting our attention to.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's response to the consultation and to the concerns raised about section 40. Will he outline further its potential impact on the viability of local newspapers and press, such as the *Long Eaton and District Chronicle*, the *Ilkeston Advertiser* and *Ilkeston Life* in my constituency?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend mentions three of her local papers. Given the nature of section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, anybody making a complaint will see the costs assigned to the newspaper and not to the complainant if that newspaper is not a member of a royal charter-approved regulator. That means anybody

making any complaint would effectively be able to stop a journalist pursuing a story, as was set out eloquently by Alastair Campbell.

The situation has changed since 2011; nobody then imagined that a self-regulator, IPSO, would come to the fore. It now covers 95% of national newspapers, has a low-cost arbitration system and can require corrections to be put in place. IPSO is not perfect, and I hope it makes further progress, but nobody imagined that it would be there at all. We have a better system than was in place, and it allows for redress and for local newspapers to thrive as much as possible.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statements because I believe that although newspapers often make the life of an elite intolerable, they make complacency impossible. I worry about local newspapers, and I welcome what he said about section 40, because we used to have three newspapers and we now have one, the *Harlow Star*. We also have the good newspaper internet site "Your Harlow". What other measures will he put in place to strengthen local newspapers?

Matt Hancock: This is an important question and we are working hard on what we can do, through this review of the sustainability of the press, with which I hope my right hon. Friend, the *Harlow Star* and "Your Harlow" will engage, to ensure that we have not just support from the big organisations—whether that is the BBC or some of the big internet giants—but commercial models that work effectively to deliver news, locally and nationally.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I am very disappointed with the Secretary of State's statement and feel personally let down by his answers to some of the questions. What is in this for the victims of phone hacking and press abuse? What does he say to the Dowler family, the Hillsborough families and the other countless victims of appalling press abuse? There is nothing in this. We had the promises made to them by a Conservative Prime Minister and the legislation that was voted on by the Secretary of State. Times have not changed for the victims, and there is nothing in this for them. What will he say to them?

Matt Hancock: What I have said and will say to them is that we have to make sure that the UK media and news industry can hold the powerful to account and respond to today's challenges. That means facing the country as it is now, which includes the stronger press self-regulation that we have, and making sure that we take into account the wider context, which is that there is an undermining of the ability to have an objective and positive political discussion because of the technology that is available. In that context, the proposals that were set out more than five or six years ago would make the challenges harder and worse, rather than better.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome the statement. Does my right hon. Friend agree that as the press, both local and national, has a critical role in holding politicians and the powerful to account, any form of state regulation is highly undesirable in a democratic society?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do. To be frank, I am concerned by the statements coming out of some parts of our political system that seem to think that state control over newspapers is a good idea.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As a former journalist, I am utterly dismayed by the Secretary of State's statement. I value the freedom of the press, but does he not see the sad irony in talking about how the press has held the powerful to account and then closing the door on our opportunity to hold the powerful voices of the press to account on behalf of the victims? Those victims were promised the sort of legislation in section 40 that the Secretary of State is now turning away from. The problems faced by local newspapers and the newspaper industry in general are nothing to do with Leveson; they are to do with modern technology. Will the Secretary of State please reconsider thinking about the victims and giving them a chance to raise legitimate concerns under section 40?

Matt Hancock: I agree with the hon. Lady that there has been a big change because of modern technology. I want to make sure that we have high-quality journalism in future and that that cannot be undermined by any complainant having costs assigned to the newspaper for any complaint. That is no way to organise a system of press regulation. Instead, we have to make sure that we have sustainable business models for high-quality journalists so that, just as the hon. Lady had the opportunity to be a journalist in the past, people have that sort of opportunity in future.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State's statement, particularly what he said about section 40. I also agree with what he said about the local press, which are the lifeblood of our communities. Is he aware that Iliffe Media Publishing Ltd has recently bought Lynn News in my constituency? It is bucking the national trend by investing in a new building and in its staff, and it is confident about the future.

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely delighted to hear that. It is not the national norm to hear that about the local press, but that shows that sustainable business models can be found. I am absolutely delighted about that and want to do everything I can to make sure that there are sustainable business models for high-quality journalism, which includes not adding extra costs on to the local press.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Rebekah Brooks and Andy Coulson came before a Committee of this House and admitted to committing crimes by bribing police officers—such was the scale of their arrogance; they felt that they were so powerful that they could take on Parliament and they had the Metropolitan police in their pockets. That shows the scale of the position we had reached when the Secretary of State voted in favour of the legislation that he is now trying to repeal. Has he forgotten what happened to the victims? Our duty is to give a voice in this House to people who are weak and vulnerable. As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to stand up for them. The Secretary of State has failed to do that today.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely powerful case for just how much the Leveson inquiry looked into everything in this area, and it was followed by three police investigations. My central point is this. We looked into these things as a society. We had a comprehensive Leveson inquiry. We spent £48 million of taxpayers' money doing so. As he said, there were criminal convictions as a result and some people were jailed. My job now as Secretary of State is to look at what the country needs for the future.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Can the Secretary of State reassure me that the new regulatory framework is working well for victims and is much cheaper and easier than those regulations that were in force at the time of Leveson?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. I can tell the House, first, that we have a new independent self-regulator, IPSO; secondly, that it has introduced a low-cost arbitration scheme; thirdly, that it requires corrections, including multiple front-page corrections; and that we would like to see further action in strengthening it. What matters to this House in terms of having a free and robust press, whether we like every story or not—frankly, I do not like some of the stories about me, but I still want people to be able to write them—is that people have to write to hold the powerful to account. That means scrutinising this place in the robust way that the press does.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): How many of the victims' families have called for a change of Government policy?

Matt Hancock: We have considered the evidence from right across the board. We have had 174 responses to the consultation and we will be publishing all those details in full. We have taken into account the considerations raised by the victims and the considerations raised by everybody else responding to the consultation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): When journalists are investigating cases, it is vital that they check their facts and do not publish before they have checked their facts. What action will my right hon. Friend take to ensure that redress is available for those people who have been unfairly pilloried? Can he also explain to the House why he is not taking forward Sir Brian's recommendation to further the investigation, albeit on amended terms?

Matt Hancock: Of course, accuracy is part of the code against which complaints are considered and, therefore, corrections and apologies can be required by an IPSO-regulated newspaper. On the first point, which is very important, accuracy is core to the redress system. It is critical that we have a regulatory system for the press. It is also critical that it is not a regulatory system that is put in place by politicians, but one that is put in place by the press itself.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Many years ago, I was libelled by a newspaper and took it to court and won. That was the most stressful time in my whole career as a Member of Parliament because you suddenly wake up to the power of the great newspaper, with all its resources and its ability to mount costs and

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

bring pressure on you. That was for a Member of Parliament. Please think, in your liberal democracy, Minister, about what it means for an ordinary person—one of our constituents—to be taken on by something like the *Daily Mail*—their life traduced and their family ruined, with so little ability to stand up for themselves and their family. Will he think again on this? As far as I can see, if he reads the *Daily Mail* this week, he will see that not much has happened to change it.

Matt Hancock: The libel laws are of course a critical guardian in this space, but the low-cost arbitration scheme brought in by IPSO is designed precisely to address that question, and making sure that that works is very important.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I agree with the Minister about section 40 because I have seen the impact that that would have on local papers such as the *New Shopper* in my constituency. However, I do not agree with some of the personalised attacks upon him. May I bring him back to the second part of the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about the amended terms of Leveson? Sir Brian Leveson is probably the most distinguished and experienced judge in criminal matters in this country. He identified in detail the issue of criminal collusion between corrupt police officers and corrupt journalists. Anyone who knows the criminal justice system knows that that has not gone away and continues. Absent of Leveson 2 on revised terms, what will the Government do to expose and deal with that?

Matt Hancock: Of course there have been changes to policing—not least the code of ethics, the national guidance for police officers and the changes in the Policing and Crime Act 2017. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that I did not address the second part of his question. We are taking forward the need to look at and to ensure that this country has high-quality journalism, but we have to look at that in the full round. Yes, that includes the press, but it also includes online, where a huge amount of news is now consumed. I am happy to talk to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) about what he thinks needs to be done, but I want to ensure that we address the problems that we still face.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Democratic Unionist party is listening, but we remain concerned that Northern Ireland newsrooms and papers seem to have got off scot-free in the first inquiry. Will the Secretary of State tell us just how the landscape has changed since Sir Brian initiated the report? In the light of our concerns, where does he think we are now?

Matt Hancock: There has been a change, not only in the wider media landscape that we have discussed, but in the means of redress available. Self-regulation is much tougher, with the introduction of IPSO and the ability for people to go to arbitration. We now have the means of redress to address problems in the press, and I hope that they will be strengthened.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): While we are right to celebrate a free press within our democracy, are we not also right to demand a responsible press? With freedom comes responsibility. On the subject of responsibility, may I invite the Secretary of State to share his thoughts as to whether, in order to ensure a free and open democracy, the responsible thing to do would be for Members to hand back racially tainted money?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend's second point raises a very important question. I am sure the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) will be thinking very hard about that now that he has admitted that it was a mistake to take this money. On my hon. Friend's first point, it is critical that the press and online publications act responsibly and accurately in their reporting.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State agree to meet the Dowler family, Christopher Jefferies and the McCanns to explain to them why this Conservative Government are breaking the promise given by a Conservative Prime Minister?

Matt Hancock: As I said, I have already met some of the victims. I have also already extended an invitation to meet victims and Hacked Off in order to discuss today's statement and what we are doing.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In my 15 years at *The Daily Telegraph*, I had a thankfully limited amount to do with the Press Complaints Commission. I reassure the Secretary of State that IPSO is genuinely a profoundly different regulator with far greater powers and far more teeth. Section 40 would have a chilling effect not just on our valued local papers, but on our national papers. The issue that faces local papers today is social media and the changes in technology that I saw the beginnings of over those 15 years. May I say that what the Secretary of State has done today has done more for the freedom of the press in this country and our accountability than the alternative course of action that the Opposition would like to see?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority on this matter because not only was he a journalist, but he was a journalist of technology, so he understands the impact of technology on journalism in a very personal way. I agree entirely with what he said on the importance of having a press that can report without fear or favour, and that can hold the powerful to account. We sometimes talk in a glib way about holding the powerful to account, but accountability is critical to good decision making. It is only when we have full accountability for our decisions that our feet are held to the fire and we think extremely hard about all the different courses of action available to us.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Sir Brian believes that the inquiry should continue, albeit in a different form. The victims, who were promised as much in person by David Cameron, believed that the inquiry would continue. Those victims have been betrayed today. Will the Secretary of State enlighten us—when was the last time that a Government overruled the wishes of a judge chairing an inquiry?

Matt Hancock: I do not know the answer to the last point, because I am only looking at this inquiry. What I have to do, and what I have done today, is make a judgment about what the national interest is. I entirely understand the concerns of the victims in this issue. As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, there have been significant changes. The inquiry was a significant undertaking that led to a year-long look at all these issues and the concerns of the victims, and then there were three police investigations and over 40 convictions. It is not as if this has not been looked into—it has been looked into to the tune of 48 million quid. I therefore have to take the decision today on what is in the national interest of the country as a whole, and that is exactly what I have done.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I welcome the statement on section 40, which would jeopardise the viability of fantastic local papers such as *Barrhead News* in my constituency. I also associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara). Can the Secretary of State confirm my understanding that Labour's proposal to enact section 40 now would have serious implications for the relationship between Scotland's two Governments in a devolved area?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The amendments that will come before the House in coming months would have very complicated impacts on the devolution settlement that I do not want to go into. I am very happy with the devolution settlement in this area. It is a good settlement, and I look forward to trying to ensure that it is maintained through the passage of the Bill.

Simon Hoare: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order now because I think that it appertains to current exchanges.

Simon Hoare: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that passions run high in this debate, but the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), probably inadvertently, accused Government Members—certainly Ministers, I believe—of taking the Murdoch shilling. That is quite a serious allegation of bribery and corruption, I would suggest. May I ask for your guidance on whether it is in order and how the hon. Gentleman might correct it?

Mr Speaker: A number of interventions are made from a sedentary position that are not always heard by everybody, but if the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) heard that said, and if it was said, the short answer is that it is not in order. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) can respond.

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am obviously absolutely happy to make it clear that I make no insinuation about bribery or corruption of any hon. Member of this House. All hon. Members are honourable Members. I also bear in mind that when we prayed earlier this morning we said that we should always speak without fear or favour. I am absolutely sure that that is what we would all want to do.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman has said. I think he did err in the heat of the moment, but I accept what he said, and its spirit, and I am sure that the Secretary of State does too. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Dorset, who I trust will be content to leave the matter there.

Business of the House

11.28 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 5 MARCH—Second Reading of the Data Protection Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 6 MARCH—Second Reading of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 7 MARCH—Opposition day (un-allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of Plaid Cymru followed by a debate on a motion in the name of the Democratic Unionist Party. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 8 MARCH—General debate on Vote 100 and International Women's Day.

FRIDAY 9 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The business for the week commencing 12 March will include:

MONDAY 12 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [*Lords*].

May I wish all Members *dydd gŵyl Dewi Sant* hapus? I am told that that is “Happy St David’s day”, for all the non-Welsh speakers among us. I think that is right, but someone will no doubt put me right if it is not. This House has some great and talented Welsh MPs, and I wish them all a very happy St David’s day.

I can see plenty of daffodil pins in the Chamber, which today represent not only St David’s day but Marie Curie’s great daffodil appeal. As Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month begins, we are all incredibly grateful for the work of palliative care nurses, who do so much to support people suffering from such dreadful diseases. Our knowledge of the symptoms of ovarian cancer has improved over recent years, but we have a long way to go to improve early diagnosis, and this awareness month will support that.

Lastly, today is World Book Day. Much like in “The Chronicles of Narnia”, Members will be aware that today is very much winter outside but not Christmas. From “Alice in Wonderland” and “Little Women” to “The Tiger Who Came to Tea”, long may we all share our love of reading and continue to encourage children of all ages to share their pleasures in a good book.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I am really worried about parliamentary sovereignty. I note that the Leader of the House has not announced business beyond 12 March, but let me help her and the Government. I understand that the spring statement will be on 13 March, which was announced by the Treasury in a fancy infographic. I am sorry that the Leader of the House could not even announce the spring statement.

There was also no announcement of whether the Prime Minister is coming to the House to make a statement after her very important speech on Brexit. She chooses to make her speech in another location and not here, to us. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Prime Minister will make a statement here? Can she confirm whether the speech will be in Aberdeen or somewhere else?

I see the Government may have a new policy, called “pure illusion”—it sounds like a new perfume or a paint shade. European Council President Donald Tusk knows about it, and that is even before we have debated it.

While we welcome him to the UK, I am sure he will want to remind the Government again that it is cherry blossom time coming up, not cherry-picking time. What about the U-turn on transition rights that was whispered about yesterday? Is someone—anyone—coming to the House to explain it, so that we can ask questions about it?

A written statement was made yesterday by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on behalf of the House of Commons Commission about restoration and renewal. He said that the sponsor body and the delivery authority need primary legislation to be introduced. Can the Leader of the House say when that legislation is likely to come before the House? Will it be next year, the year after or the year after that?

Last week, I raised two statutory instruments that had been prayed against on the eligibility for free school meals of those on universal credit and abolishing nursing bursaries for postgraduate nursing students. We are now rapidly eating into the 40 days. Could the Leader of the House make time for those to be debated? The shadow Education Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), has prayed against three more statutory instruments: No. 120 and No. 146 on childcare vouchers, and the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2018, on the national funding formula.

What about our next Opposition day? We have not had sight of that, and no one seems to be talking to us about when we are likely to have it. What are the Government scared of? It is the same with the Report stage of the Trade Bill and the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill. I know that Members are so keen to debate new clause 5, because the country wants to know what the position is on their jobs and living standards. There goes the sovereignty of Parliament, tossed aside again.

The same day that Ministers were at Chequers, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) said:

“Discipline has completely broken down in the parliamentary party, so no one tells anyone off.”—

that may be a surprise to some Members at the back—
“because there’s no power anywhere.”

When the Conservative party does have power, it does not want to use it against money launderers. In a point of order yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) asked for guidance on the handling of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill in Committee. The Programming Sub-Committee decided that it wanted clause 1 to be taken after clause 18, but when the Committee got to clause 18, debate was stopped immediately, after 25 minutes. Could the Leader of the House ensure that there will be adequate time to debate the 40 amendments and clause 1, which is the Magnitsky clause and will strengthen our sanctions regime?

Private Members’ Bills are now backing up. The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), the Stalking Protection Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), and the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) are all supported by the Government but have not been given a date for Committee stage.

Today the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse—a very important matter—publishes its first report on serious child abuse. Thousands of British children were deported by their own Government to the other side of the world and they suffered horrific sexual abuse. The inquiry will not hold a press conference on its findings, but it will publish the significant report online, and there is a written statement today. Given the scale and significance of this injustice, and the hurt suffered by so many, will the Government commit to making time for a statement at the earliest opportunity?

At Prime Minister's questions last week, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who voted to cut police budgets—the west midlands has had to face a cut of £145 million since 2010—said that £10 million was being spent on “back-office staff”. The West Midlands police and crime commissioner has confirmed to me that the staff are in fact police support staff and are upset at the use of that pejorative term. They answer emergency 999 calls, investigate child abuse cases and carry out forensics. I hope that the Leader of the House will ensure that an appropriate apology will be made by the hon. Gentleman and perhaps schedule a debate on what police support staff actually do.

We welcome back the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire). He and the Prime Minister both agreed that early referral to a tertiary consultant was extremely important to save lives. The shadow Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), made a point of order yesterday requesting an urgent statement on why clinical commissioning groups are paying GPs not to make referrals. The Health Secretary needs to explain that policy and stop that alarming practice immediately.

I join the Leader of the House in saying that this is the 21st World Book Day. Walsall South has lost three libraries. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) will host the World Book Day celebrations in the Attlee suite between 10 am and 3 pm, when we can all go and read a book or recite a poem.

I, too, want to try my Welsh—I apologise to every Welsh person here—and say *dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus*. Happy St David's day.

Andrea Leadsom: Excellent! I am glad that the hon. Lady and I are both determined to practise our Welsh today. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who is sitting next to me, is a Welsh speaker and says that we both did okay. I thank him for that.

The hon. Lady mentioned parliamentary sovereignty. I say genuinely that, as Leader of the House of Commons, I have always made it clear I am absolutely, fully respectful of the sovereignty of Parliament. My role is that of Government spokesman here in the Chamber and of Parliament spokesman in Government. I always take very seriously the questions asked and requests made by the hon. Lady on behalf of Opposition parties. I must say to her, however, that it has been made very clear that there will be one Budget statement and one spring statement a year, so the upcoming statement is a statement, not a Budget or a debate. Statements are announced in the usual way, not during a business statement on the

future business of the House. Likewise, she asked whether the Prime Minister would make a statement, but such business measures are announced in the usual way.

The hon. Lady asked about an Opposition day. I have just announced Opposition day debates for Plaid and the Democratic Unionist party. Is she really saying that their opportunity to debate matters that are of interest to them is not valid? She needs to recognise that there are many different aspects to this Chamber, all of which are valid, and we want to share out with fairness the opportunity to suggest new measures.

The hon. Lady asked about the customs Bill. As with the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the Human Rights Act and many constitutional Bills in the past, there can be periods of time between Second Reading and Committee stage and between Committee and Report. She will recognise that such periods are not delays, but opportunities to consider amendments, Government policy and improving legislation. The hon. Lady is just wrong to portray this as a delay, and each of those Bills will come forward in good time. Given my role in seeing through legislation, I am committed to ensuring that all our Brexit legislation comes through in good time.

The hon. Lady mentioned the point of order that was raised by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). As the Minister for Europe and the Americas said in Committee, a motion was brought forward for the Committee to adjourn so that it could debate a significant amendment in a full session. That Committee meeting started 10 minutes ago, and they are indeed discussing that detailed amendment right now. I hope that the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) is reassured by that.

A number of private Members' Bills have been promoted by Opposition and Government Members. We are delighted to support them and there are no delays. They are not stacking up; they are going through their Committee stages when they receive the support of the House in the usual way. I am afraid I just do not accept the hon. Lady's concerns about parliamentary sovereignty. We are listening, and we continue to bring forward all legislation and consideration of Opposition days in the usual way.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the removal of diesel particulate filters from vehicles without replacing them? It appears there is a legal loophole whereby vehicles can be modified to improve their performance, with absolutely no regard for the damage done to people's health.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. The impact of diesel particulates on air quality and people's health is a crucial issue, and we are determined to improve air quality. The Department for Transport takes my hon. Friend's point seriously, and has published guidance on modifying a vehicle's emissions system. Modifying a vehicle in the way suggested is not in line with current legislation, and the Department has recently instructed officials to investigate the creation of a specific offence for the removal of particulate filters.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business. Here is my go: *dydd gŵyl Dewi Sant*

[Pete Wishart]

hapus—I hope I have impressed the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) with that. I also note all the daffodils in the Chamber today. Looking outside, I think that is more in hope than experience as we face one of the worst snow storms that we have had for a number of years.

There are only two real items of business this week: the “beast from the east”, and the Foreign Secretary. One is a whiteout, delivering havoc and chaos wherever it goes and whatever it touches, and the other is the “beast from the east”. To help out the Foreign Secretary, perhaps we could have a debate about congestion charges, and we could gently explain to him how congestion charge zones are just a little bit different from international borders. It is now 24 hours since the Foreign Secretary said that he would publish his letter on an Irish hard border, so when can we expect to see it? Surely the Foreign Office One should be liberated, and allowed to continue to confound and baffle the country.

We now have red or amber warnings over nearly all of Scotland and large swathes of the rest of the UK, and the advice is not to travel—hence SNP Members are here in such numbers this morning. However, I am quite surprised that there are no plans for a Government statement as the nation grinds to a partial halt, particularly when National Grid has issued a “gas deficit warning” over fears that supplies could run out. Before we all leave for the day—well, at least some of us—will someone from the Government make a statement in the House about what provisions and contingency plans are in place, particularly if we experience difficulties over the weekend?

Finally, we are facing an increasing constitutional cliff edge as our devolution settlement remains under threat. Can we have a statement on what progress is being made in resolving those issues? Critically, what is being done to ensure that democracy is respected in every nation of this United Kingdom?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has clarified that so many of his hon. Friends are in the Chamber today because of inclement weather, because I thought they were here to wind me up about the Calcutta cup. What I would like to say through gritted teeth is that I have not seen Scotland play so well since the Hastings brothers, which is a very long time ago. Scotland played superbly. I am delighted that Scotland is, in part, a member of the home team, being part of the great United Kingdom. I would much rather see Scotland beat us than France, if I am allowed to say that in this place, Mr Speaker.

On the hon. Gentleman’s thoughts about Boris, I have a different perspective. I think he often says things as they are, and he says things in an amusing way. He makes a very good point that it is absolutely clear that we will not have a hard border in Northern Ireland. That is absolutely the case. We are committed to that, the Republic of Ireland is committed to that and the European Union is committed to that.

The hon. Gentleman talks about contingency plans for severe weather. This is a very serious issue on which I hope I can reassure him. I know a number of hon. Members raised it in Transport questions earlier. The Department for Transport, the Department for

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, schools and the NHS all have very carefully laid severe weather plans. I pay tribute to all those who are out there in this terrible weather trying to dig people out of snowdrifts and so on, and those in the NHS who are dealing with people who have slipped on the ice and so on. There are very good plans, which are available. If he has specific issues about his constituency, or the constituencies of any of his hon. Friends, I am very happy to raise them on his behalf, or he can raise them directly with Ministers.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): May we have a statement on the actions of the West Essex clinical commissioning group? Osler House GP surgery in my constituency has been closed with little warning or consultation with me or other stakeholders, causing misery for nearly 3,000 patients, many of them elderly. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Health Minister to write to West Essex CCG to get it to restore this vital service to residents?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a point that is incredibly important to all of us. The issue of GP surgeries in our constituencies is vital. Having looked into this matter, I am told that the Department of Health and Social Care does not have a record of my right hon. Friend’s letter. It apologises if that is due to any error on its part and it will certainly be writing to him. We recognise the importance of primary care. We are investing in it to expand access and recruit an additional 5,000 GPs. As he knows, we would expect consultation and engagement if NHS England or a CCG were to decide on changes that involved a substantial service reconfiguration.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The “beast from the east” has claimed a number of victims—there are currently no trains crossing the border, on either the east coast main line or the west coast main line, to Scotland—and I am afraid to say that when the “beast from the east” meets “stormageddon Emma” there will be further victims. One of those victims is the business of the House. At the request of Welsh Members, the scheduled St David’s Day debate on Welsh affairs for this afternoon has been cancelled so that they can travel home safely. I apologise to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, but I think it is understandable given the conditions across the country.

Currently, the Backbench Business Committee has only six members—we are two down from the Government side. Given that the Committee has a quorum of four, that makes life extremely difficult for us. May I therefore ask that the Government appoint their replacement members as soon as possible, so that the Committee can carry on operating?

Finally, I thank and congratulate staff from my own local authority, Gateshead Council. Bin collections were curtailed yesterday as all staff were out gritting and snow ploughing across the whole borough in really adverse conditions. I put on record my thanks to all of them.

Andrea Leadsom: First of all, I am sorry to hear that this afternoon’s business will be disturbed. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), is slightly devastated because this was his chance to shine. The cancellation of the

debate is completely understandable, as the situation is very difficult for people who have travel arrangements. I join the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) in congratulating all the people out there gritting and trying to clear away snow. Quite a number of schoolchildren are also out in villages and other communities, clearing people's steps for them. That is a fantastic thing to see. I will take on board his point about replacing the Government members of his Backbench Business Committee. I will certainly see that we act on it.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Could we have a debate on the non-levy apprenticeship tender? Unfortunately, some very good colleges, such as Stafford, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Shrewsbury and others across the country, were not successful in the tender, and I have some grave concerns about the operation of it.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear that, and I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise those specific points directly with Ministers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Shw'mae, Mr Speaker—I am not Welsh, but I have two children born in Wales, so happy St David's Day, and may I congratulate the Leader of the House in passing on mentioning cancer charities today? I will be walking in the Marsden March on Sunday, snow permitting, raising money for the Royal Marsden cancer hospital.

Could we have a statement on how we treat visitors to this House? We are in danger of getting to the stage where wealthy, well-connected people can come here without a Member and book rooms and tables in our restaurants. Yesterday, I had a large party who struggled down on a coach, campaigning to keep Huddersfield Royal Infirmary open. You will appreciate this, Mr Speaker—they had blue-and-white sweatshirts, the colours of the Huddersfield strip. The sweatshirts said, "Hands Off HRI," and they were told by the police here to take them off or cover them, because they were party political, before they were allowed up into the Committee room area. If there is going to be one rule for ordinary people to come here and another for wealthy people, we should look at this very seriously.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but it is not for the Leader to decide what people do or do not wear in the House, and I know that she would not think it so—

Mr Sheerman: But it is a debate on who comes here—

Mr Speaker: Yes, and I was just being advised procedurally on the matter by the Clerk. The hon. Gentleman made his point with considerable force, but at a length that should not be imitated by other hon. and right hon. Members today.

Andrea Leadsom: I do not know where to go with this. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me, I will certainly take this up with the Administration Committee. However, I would say that there have been great steps. I know from the House Commission—the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) might also recall this—that we discussed the need to speed up the queues, for example, for people to get into this place.

Some lengths have been gone to to ensure that people's ease of access to this place is as good as it can be. On the specific point about what they were wearing, I was not aware of that, so if he wants to write to me, I will look into it.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Last Monday, the Government approved the go-ahead for Christchurch Council to be amalgamated with other Dorset councils. There was a referendum. I am not getting that in my constituency, which wants a referendum to decide the future of its council. We are being ignored. Democracy is being ignored. Could we please have a debate in this place on the protection of democracy in local councils?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue about local democracy. I am not aware of the specific concern that he has about his local council, but I am sure that if he wanted to take it up with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers, they would be able to address it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Country sports and shooting sports produce game worth £114 million in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland each year. The nourishment and taste value of it is substantial. There is a need to introduce it to a wider circle and customer base. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this issue and on how best to deliver good food that is every bit as good as chicken, and every bit as cheap?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman that game is delicious, very good for you and just as cheap. I encourage him to raise that at Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions on Thursday 8 March, when he can ask Ministers there exactly what we are doing to expand the retail use.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Very shortly, the Government will hopefully be announcing the recipients of money from the northern cultural regeneration fund. Perhaps the Leader of the House might find time for a debate on this subject so that we can all, I hope, explain why the Odeon in Bradford would be such a worthy recipient of that funding, which would do a massive amount to regenerate the city of Bradford. If she cannot find time for a debate, perhaps she will shorten the approach and go and tell the relevant Minister just to give the money to the Odeon in Bradford, and let us be done with it.

Andrea Leadsom: If only I had such influence! My hon. Friend is a great champion for his area, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can make his pitch directly.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The President of the European Council said in a speech this morning that the red lines that the Government have set themselves on Europe are incompatible with frictionless trade and a borderless Ireland. May we have an urgent debate—a debate that we have not yet had—on the consequences of the Government's red lines for Brexit negotiations?

Andrea Leadsom: The Government's red lines are that we are leaving the European Union in March 2019, in line with the result of the referendum. That means that we are leaving the single market and the customs union, and it means that we are taking back control of our borders, our laws and our money.

Everything is a negotiation. The Government have made it clear that we want low-friction trade and zero tariff and non-tariff barriers wherever possible. The Prime Minister will make a speech tomorrow on our negotiating position, but the hon. Gentleman must realise that there are no hard and fast answers at the moment. This is a negotiation, so what someone from the European Commission or the European Council may have said does not make it necessarily the fact.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Last week saw yet another abuse of leaseholders in my constituency, this time in Coleshill, where some one-bedroom flat owners received bills for up to £8,000 a year in ground rent. May we have a statement on how the important Government work on leases with short review periods and doubling clauses is progressing?

Andrea Leadsom: I met the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government this week to discuss that subject, in my role in connection with policy. My hon. Friend has raised a very serious matter. Abuses of this sort need to be stopped, and we are committed to stopping them through our programme of leasehold reforms. That means, for example, legislating to prevent the sale of new-build leasehold houses except when necessary, making certain that ground rents on new long leases for both houses and flats are set at zero financial value, working with the Law Commission to support existing leaseholders, and making the process of purchasing a freehold or extending a lease much easier and cheaper.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I hope that the House will indulge me if I tell a personal story. Last year I received a court warrant at my home in Scotland. It turned out that an Alan Brown in London, with a London address, had skipped a bus fare and been caught by an inspector. That Alan Brown did not respond to any correspondence, so an additional fine was levied in his absence. The case was passed to a private collection company, which decided to target random Alan Browns, and served the warrant on me in Scotland. The company would not budge, but I managed to get the court to cancel proceedings—or, at least, it said that it had cancelled them. Last week, however, I received another notification of a warrant on my property, live as of yesterday.

May we have a debate about the English court system and the presumption of innocence before guilt, and about how the English court system and Transport for London are using private companies whose sole objective is to exact money from people?

Andrea Leadsom: Perhaps we should have a debate on why so many people are called Alan Brown. That is the fundamental issue here.

The hon. Gentleman has raised a serious point about the way in which some collection companies pursue random people, but also pursue people to the point of doing them serious harm. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on the issue.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I can tell the hon. Gentleman that good lawyers are always available, even at short notice.

So far, much of the debate about the European Commission's draft withdrawal agreement has centred on its effect on Northern Ireland, but hidden away in one of the footnotes is, regrettably, a restatement that Spain would have a veto on the application of either a transitional or a final agreement to the overseas British territory of Gibraltar. May we have an early, perhaps even an immediate, statement from the Leader of the House that Her Majesty's Government's position remains that such a scenario is wholly unacceptable, and that Britain will in no circumstances agree to any arrangement that prevents Gibraltar from being treated in exactly the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope I can give my hon. Friend the assurance from the Dispatch Box that Gibraltar's interests will be protected, as will every other part of the UK and our dependencies. He raises an important point, and he will be aware that the Prime Minister is making a key speech tomorrow, and I will certainly make sure that I pass on his comments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Although the second debate has been withdrawn, there is a well-subscribed first debate and I am keen that we progress expeditiously. Questions are quite long and it would be good if they could be shorter.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I start by saying how pleased I was that the Leader of the House mentioned the Eve Appeal and the fact that this is the month of ovarian cancer awareness, as it is important that we mark and remember that?

There is a broad consensus that faster connectivity between east and west is vital for the northern powerhouse. However, in May we will have a revised TransPennine timetable which will result in slower journeys from Hull. Hull and Humber chamber of commerce has tried to meet with TransPennine to discuss this, but has not been able to get very far. I am sure the Leader of the House agrees that it is important that that meeting goes ahead, but may we have a debate in the House of Commons about the fact that not just north-south connectivity but east-west connectivity is important?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that east-west connectivity is vital. I hope she was able to attend Transport questions, because this would be a question very directly answerable by Transport Ministers. We are delivering unprecedented investment in better transport across the north—over £13 billion, which is the largest amount in Government history—but I encourage the hon. Lady to take up the specific point she raises directly with Transport Ministers.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Next week is national apprenticeships week. May we have a debate to highlight the opportunities available for people starting an apprenticeship? The best advocates for apprenticeships are apprentices, but if we have a debate Members could have a go and do our best to fill the gap.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that apprenticeships are a fantastic opportunity for young people. In my seven years as an MP I have had seven apprentices from schools in my constituency, and I thoroughly recommend that to all Members; that has been brilliant for me and for those individuals, and it is a very worthwhile experience. We now have more than 3 million apprenticeship starts since 2010. The Government are committed to apprenticeships as a very good choice for young people, and I encourage my hon. Friend to seek a Backbench Business Committee debate on the subject, as I am sure many hon. Members would want to talk about their experiences.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Given that employment law is reserved to this place, may we have a statement or a debate on employers forcing their employees to remain at, or come into, work when there is a red weather warning? There are many reports in Scotland of employers refusing to release staff when public transport is not available; does the right hon. Lady agree that that is not acceptable?

Andrea Leadsom: Clearly all employers, in both the public and private sectors, should take very careful heed of severe weather warnings, and particularly the red warnings we have seen across some parts of the United Kingdom, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to urge employers in his constituency to listen to those warnings and release people where necessary.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It was recently reported in the local press in the Scottish borders that a Transport Scotland study had found that it was not going to be viable for the borders railways to extend to Hawick and on to Carlisle. If that is the case, it will be bad news for my constituency and those in Cumbria. Given that bringing the railway to Carlisle will involve investment from the UK Government, may we have a debate on the benefits of extending the borders railway to Carlisle?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and I can say to him that the UK Government are committed to working with the Scottish Government to drive forward the cross-border borderlands deal, and we hope to agree a deal later this year which will see significant investment to transform the local economies in the borderlands area. Funding for a study into reopening the line he mentions is being sought as part of this proposition.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It has been one hell of a week, Mr Speaker, particularly for my little sister. A week last Saturday, my sister broke her neck. She was in the Royal Blackburn Hospital for three days until there was a bed free for her at the Royal Preston Hospital where they could operate. Thankfully, the operation went well and my sister and all of my family are so grateful to all the hard-working doctors, nurses and staff in the NHS, but one thing I noticed was all the extra hours before and after their shifts that the doctors and nurses were doing. May we have a debate on the extra hours done by our public sector workers?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I wish the hon. Lady's sister the very best for a speedy recovery. That must have been a real shock to all her family, and we all pass on our

best wishes. I am enormously grateful to and have great respect for all those who work so hard in the national health service. What they achieve is amazing, as is the commitment shown by all workers in the NHS. We have many opportunities to debate the NHS in this Chamber; we have held many such debates. There are nearly 15,000 more doctors and more than 14,000 more nurses on our wards than there were in 2010. There is much more to do; we are undertaking one of the biggest training programmes ever in our history in the NHS to start training more doctors and nurses. We want to alleviate some of the pressures, but I pay tribute to them for all the excellent work they do.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Today is Purim, the commemoration and celebration of the delivery of the Jewish people from the evil Persian king, Haman. It is also Holi, the first day of spring, celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists worldwide. Both festivals commemorate the triumph of good over evil, so will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing everyone happy Purim and Holi hai?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising both of those celebrations and I am delighted to join him in congratulating all those celebrating. I wish them a very happy time.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Dydd gŵyl Dewi Sant hapus, Mr Speaker—happy St David's day. Llongyfarchiadau, congratulations, to the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and the SNP spokesperson for using the Welsh language, which, historically, we were allowed to use recently in the Welsh Grand Committee of this House. I was pleased to make a speech in the Welsh language. Has the Leader of the House considered whether that welcome move could be extended into the Chamber now that technology makes it perfectly possible to have a freewheeling House of Commons-style debate using translation equipment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting suggestion and I am happy to discuss it with him further.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I have had constituents contact me overnight who are very concerned about the fact that Northamptonshire County Council seems to be closing Thrapston and Raunds libraries on all but one day a week. That has happened without any consultation with the public and I am surprised, because it is in this year's budget and not the one for the year ahead, which has been so talked about in the media. May we have an urgent statement on this, because people in Northamptonshire are very concerned about what has happened?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is very important to both his constituency and mine. There are seven Members of Parliament in Northamptonshire who are concerned about cuts to services. I was not aware of the closures he mentions, but I am happy to take that up directly with Ministers on his behalf.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Three weeks today will mark the sad anniversary of the tragic attack on Westminster, which saw five people killed on Westminster Bridge and the death of PC Keith Palmer.

[*Matt Western*]

Will the Leader of the House give the House an idea of what plans there are to mark that occasion? I would also be grateful if she could support my early-day motion 938, which calls for Carriage Gates in New Palace Yard to be renamed the Palmer Gates.

[That this House believes that the Carriage Gates should be named the Palmer Gates, to commemorate the life and professional service of PC Keith Palmer and to mark his gallantry and ultimate sacrifice in putting his life before those he courageously sought to defend; acknowledges its profound gratitude to PC Keith Palmer and to all members of the police and security services who place themselves in the defence of the public and of democracy; and calls on the House of Commons Commission to consider commemorating the naming of the gates on 22 March 2018.]

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the upcoming anniversary of those awful events on 22 March. There will be commemorations in this place and House staff are looking into the detail of that at the moment. Announcements will be made as soon as possible. As for his specific point about renaming Carriage Gates, he might like to write to me or possibly to you, Mr Speaker, to look into this further.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I welcome the Leader of the House's comments on the Calcutta cup. I thoroughly enjoyed my day and I would like to draw the House's attention to early-day motion 978, which celebrates Scotland's historic success in that event.

[That this House congratulates the Scotland Rugby team on an historic 25-13 Calcutta Cup victory over England that was full of flair, fight and finesse; recognises the fantastic work done by Gregor Townsend and his entire coaching staff; commends captain John Barclay and his entire pack for the huge effort in dominating the breakdown and a solid set piece performance, with special mention to Johnny Gray for his 20 tackles; applauds Finn Russell as he stood up to his recent critics with a magnificent man of the match performance, including the pass of this, or any other, six Nations Championship, further commends Huw Jones for his two try display, his ninth and tenth in only 14 caps; notes that this victory was celebrated right across Scotland and beyond; and wishes Gregor, John and the boys all the very best for the rest of the Championship.]

Yesterday was rare diseases day, which highlighted the importance of research to find a cure for rare diseases, of which there are up to 7,000. I have been working with the Scottish Huntington's Association on the difficulties of obtaining insurance, and with my constituent, Michael Conway, who was diagnosed with adrenoleukodystrophy in 2016. May we have a debate to mark rare diseases day and the importance of sustaining research collaboration, particularly after Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the importance of continued investment in research into rare diseases. I am sure that part of the frustration felt by those who suffer from them is due to the lack of funding, precisely because the diseases are rare. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment or Back-Bench debate on this subject. I would also like to say that, while I congratulate Scotland on winning the Calcutta cup, I do so through gritted teeth.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Twenty years ago, building on the work done by John Major, Tony Blair's Labour Government were involved in intensive negotiations in Castle Buildings in Belfast. I was there as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Northern Ireland Office. Those negotiations led to the Good Friday agreement. The anniversary of the Good Friday agreement is unfortunately during the recess, so may we have a long debate before the House rises for Easter in which we can discuss the implications of the threat to the Good Friday agreement from the "Wrexite" coalition—between the Democratic Unionist party, whose members were demonstrating outside when the agreement was reached, and the European Research Group—which is now running this country?

Andrea Leadsom: I can completely assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are fully committed to the Good Friday agreement, and that nothing is in any way being considered that would do damage to that agreement. However, I say gently to those who try to suggest that the Government are in some way not committed to it simply because we are leaving the EU that that is entirely untrue and exceedingly dangerous talk.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am sure the Leader of the House will agree that it is time we were given an opportunity to debate our industrial shipping heritage. In my constituency, we are still aggrieved that great icons such as the Queen Mary, the Cutty Sark and even the royal yacht Britannia are not at home in port in West Dunbartonshire, and that it is up to volunteers such as the Maid of the Loch Trust, which is rebuilding the Maid of the Loch at Loch Lomond, to ensure that that part of our industrial shipping heritage will once again set sail on the bonnie loch. I am sure the Minister will agree that it is time we debated that, and that she will congratulate the trust on its work.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned some very famous ships, and I join him in congratulating the trust on its work on that fine heritage in his constituency. I encourage him to seek a Backbench debate in which all those with shipping interests in their constituencies can come together to celebrate that proud heritage.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): In the light of the figures that many Members have received today from the Fire Brigades Union, may we have an urgent debate on the funding of the fire service, which has lost hundreds of millions of pounds of grant? In my constituency in Nottinghamshire, the fire service will lose 15% of its grant—some £2.8 million—over the next few years. That is unacceptable; it is not good enough, and we need to have a debate about it.

Andrea Leadsom: The fire brigades do a fantastic job. We have heard about some horrendous fires in recent months, as well as the appalling Grenfell disaster, in which the fire brigades really came into their own and did an incredible job for us, for which we are very grateful. However, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that, thankfully, the number of fires is decreasing, and the role of fire officers is therefore changing and adapting. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can talk about the specific issues in his constituency,

but overall, the fire brigades deserve our respect and our gratitude, as well as a recognition that their role is changing.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust decided to set up a subsidiary company, and that was confirmed today. I appreciate the fact that there will be a half-hour debate on this subject next week, but will the Leader of the House push for a longer debate on public accountability, given the level of opposition to this decision and the fact that even MPs were cut out of being able to make representations on it? Will she organise such a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, there is a debate on that subject next Tuesday, and I am sure that he will want to take this matter up at that time. I think that he is referring to the decision made by some trusts to bring together different aspects of care in order to give a better service to patients. We should all embrace the possibility of better wraparound care, but if he has specific concerns, he should raise them at the debate next week.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am sure that we all want to pay tribute to the public sector workers who have struggled into work in this severe weather to keep vital services running, but may we have a statement on our preparedness for this weather? In all the years that I have been alive, we have had winter. We also have severe episodes of winter, but we seem to fall over quite easily when that happens. Countries that have this sort of weather on a regular basis seem to cope with it. May we have a statement on our resilience, so that we can learn lessons from what has happened this year, in the hope that we can get our trains running a bit better so that people are not left waiting at cold stations with no information about what is going on?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Obviously, we want to minimise disruption, and it is frustrating for people when trains are cancelled and schools are closed, for example. Equally, he will recognise that there are some exceptional weather events going on at the moment. Whitehall Departments have clear plans for dealing with disruptive weather, and we heard at Transport questions today about some of the excellent operations to dig people out of snowdrifts and to ensure that the trains can run. At the same time, there are always lessons to be learned from these events, and I am sure that the Whitehall Departments will be looking at what we can do better.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a statement from the Home Office regarding resources for UK Visas and Immigration and, in particular, the MP correspondence unit? I and colleagues from all parties in Scotland have found recently that the resources simply are not there, and that standards are not being met. We are dealing with very vulnerable constituents who have fled war, famine and sexual violence, but we are unable to support them. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement on the resources for UK Visas and Immigration?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises issues relating to the Home Office, and he is absolutely right to do so. As he knows, there are Members' helplines

to enable concerns raised by Members of Parliament to be fast-tracked, but if he has specific issues, I encourage him to write to Home Office Ministers or, if he wants to write to me, I can take this matter up on his behalf.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My constituents are finding it ever more difficult to get access to dentists locally, so may we have a statement from the Government on the access to and provision of dentists in areas such as Scunthorpe, Bottesford and Kirton in Lindsey?

Andrea Leadsom: We know that dentistry is absolutely vital, and that tooth decay is an increasing problem because, let us be honest, too much sugar is being eaten. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this matter. So far as the specific provision in his constituency is concerned, I recommend that he seeks an Adjournment debate on the subject.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Members of the Civil Nuclear Constabulary should be able to retire at the same age as members of the regular police force. The Civil Nuclear Police Federation has maintained this since the divergence in 2013. My understanding is that part of the Government is in agreement, but that part of it is not. May we have an urgent statement on when there will be equality in the retirement age?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point on equality of retirement ages. As he will know, the Government have taken great steps to try to ensure equality of retirement, and we continue to do so right across the public sector wherever we can. I suggest that he raises his specific point directly with Ministers, or through my office if he would like to do that.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I am sorry about the inconsistent bobbing, Mr Speaker, but it has just been announced that the Scottish Conservative conference this weekend in Aberdeen has been cancelled. That means that many more of us will be stuck down here throughout the rest of today and this evening. Although many people are spending their day at home, many more are continuing to go into work in these difficult conditions. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the emergency service workers in Scotland and right across the United Kingdom, and to all others who are keeping going today to keep us all safe?

Andrea Leadsom: I am happy to do so. It is amazing the efforts to which some people will go to keep others safe. I include the emergency services and many council workers right across the United Kingdom, who are out there gritting and sweeping away snow so that we can all get home.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I hope that this "beast from the east" is not another sign of Russian interference in Scottish politics.

When will a Minister next come to the House to explain what, if anything, the Government are doing to support university lecturers who are striking over reforms to their pensions? The decision by employers to accept ACAS arbitration is welcome, but constituents of mine at Glasgow University who are striking want to see

[Patrick Grady]

progress so that they can get back to teaching their students, so what pressure will the Government bring to bear to ensure that lecturers' pensions are protected?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is for universities to resolve this crisis, and Ministers are working hard to try to ensure that all sides come to the table. I have to say that it is extremely difficult for the students. My eldest child, who is graduating this year, is feeling the brunt of this, with no lecturers, no input, no tuition and no face time. The students, who have done nothing wrong and who have paid for their education, are faced with no input at what for many is a crucial time. I urge lecturers not to punish students for this dispute.

International Court of Justice

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee Statement

Mr Speaker: Ian Murray will speak on this subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, the occupant of the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and will call him to respond to these in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning. I call Ian Murray to make the statement on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

12.21 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to make this statement, on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee, on our fourth report, which is on the International Court of Justice. Our Chair, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), and other members of the Committee are in Birmingham today and send their apologies for not being present—given that the Committee travels to some of the most challenging places in the world, little did they think that Birmingham would be the most challenging yet, considering the difficulties in getting there and back today.

In November last year the UK Government were unable to secure the re-election of the UK judge, Sir Christopher Greenwood, to the UN International Court of Justice. As a result, the UK is not represented on the ICJ for the first time since the Court's creation in 1946. Sir Christopher was first elected to the ICJ in 2009 but, despite his impeccable record and what the Foreign and Commonwealth Office told us was a long and extensive lobbying campaign, he lost to candidates from France, Somalia, India, Brazil and Lebanon. On 6 February the Lebanese candidate was sworn in, signalling an end to Sir Christopher's nine-year term of office.

This is a bitterly disappointing diplomatic failure and can only be a step in the wrong direction for what the FCO describes as "global Britain." This follows recent setbacks and vote losses at the UN, such as on the Chagos islands. During voting rounds, the UK candidate's support in the UN General Assembly fell away sharply, leading to a run-off with the Indian candidate, which ended in deadlock. Further rounds of voting led to no improvement in the UK's position, despite consistent support in the UN Security Council, and on 21 November the Government conceded the contest to the Indian candidate.

This loss is of deep concern. One of the key strengths of the UK is our commitment to multilateral governance and the application of the international rule of law. These commitments will need to play a key part in the UK's future foreign policy strategy and in any global Britain agenda. We conclude that the lack of a UK judge on the ICJ will harm the UK's influence on the global stage and the UK's future foreign policy strategy.

We heard a number of possible reasons for the UK's failure from Ministers and former UK diplomats to the UN. These ranged from the popularity of other candidates to regional allegiances and a wider shift in power away from the permanent five of the Security Council, despite

the French candidate being re-elected. Perhaps the most concerning reason, however, was offered by Lord Hannay, a former UK permanent representative to the UN. He suggested that it might be an indication that the UK's international standing had diminished, and that there might have been a fall in what he dubbed the UK's "trepidation index"—how far other countries worry about treading on our toes.

What are the next steps? The FCO used tactics that had worked in the past and was surprised when they did not work this time around, because they expected Sir Christopher to win. The UK mission in New York lobbied extensively, as did the FCO's network in London and overseas, and as did Government Ministers during bilateral discussions. But this did not work.

We are also concerned that the FCO does not appear to be particularly curious about why the support of other countries in the General Assembly fell away, and nor do Ministers seem too interested in finding out the reasons why the support for the UK diminished against what had been promised to them previously by other nations. When we asked the Minister what reasons he had been given by other countries, he was unable to give any definitive answer. Lord Ahmad, the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the United Nations, did place some emphasis on building a "Commonwealth caucus" but was unable to tell us how many Commonwealth countries—not including India, of course, whose candidate defeated the UK's—voted for the UK's candidate.

The FCO has rightly launched an extensive internal exercise to identify the reasons for the failure and to learn lessons for future contests. It intends to keep the findings of that exercise private but, for the sake of accountability to Parliament and the public, we recommend that it should share its findings with the Committee, so that we can assure ourselves that it is taking the required action. The FCO should also inform the Committee each time it intends to campaign for a UN position, so that we can help. However, without the benefit of incumbency, the next opportunity to elect a judge of the ICJ will be much more difficult and the FCO needs to prove that it can adapt its approach.

One resource that the FCO does not make full use of is Parliament. Members across this Chamber and in the other place have international experience and networks that can be mobilised, and we have all been part of election campaigns. We recommend that the Government should brief the Committee and other relevant parliamentary groups on future elections to make best use of this resource.

We have to ensure that the UK's influence and guidance on international organisations such as the UN is not diminished or diminishing, which is why the FCO's lessons report is critical to determine the causes behind this embarrassing defeat. I commend this statement to the House.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his statement, and to the Select Committee for its work. Does he agree that this is particularly disappointing because the United Kingdom has historically had an immensely high reputation in international law and international tribunals, and has some of the most experienced and highly regarded international lawyers, of whom Sir Christopher Greenwood is one? Does he consider that one of the lessons to be learned, in contrast to what happened in France, is that

the Government must be particularly careful, as we leave the European Union, not to give any signal that we place any less value on international rules-based legal systems and international tribunals, which should remain central to the attention of Her Majesty's Foreign Office?

Ian Murray: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The former UK ambassador to the UN made exactly that point in evidence to the Committee. The UK was very much at the forefront in developing the international rules-based system, and we must be very careful that France does not become the voice of Europe in the UN Security Council, and therefore the voice of the UN when it comes to the place that the UK should be taking. There are, by convention—but by convention only—two places on the ICJ for European or western powers, and the fact that the UK is not there might show us that in some way the UK's power and influence are much diminished.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way he has introduced our report. This decision has been taken while we are still inside the European Union. Does he fear that, if we leave the European Union, we will have even less influence in future?

Ian Murray: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is not only a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, but a distinguished former Chair. There is a real danger, as I have just said, that France will become the voice of the European Union in the UN Security Council, and therefore in the UN General Assembly, which means the UK's voice would be diminished. No direct implications of Brexit were outlined in the report, but mainly because the Minister refused to answer whether that was a reason for the defeat. However, there is no doubt that the UK's international voice is much diminished as a result of Brexit.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his statement and his Committee on its report. Reading the report, it does not strike me that this is about the loss of UK influence in the world; it instead smacks of complete cock-up by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, with a lack of ministerial direction about the importance of securing this re-election and, frankly, the civil service messing up the procedure for doing so. No wonder they do not want to share the internal report with the Committee—it would be embarrassing to senior civil servants and to the Minister concerned. I encourage the Committee to pursue the cock-up theory, rather than ideas about this country's loss of overall influence in the world.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman raises a perfectly valid point. One of the recommendations in our report is that the FCO's lessons learned report should come before the Committee, even on a private basis, so the Committee can be assured that this was a cock-up and not something wider. However, I draw his attention to the fact that the Foreign Office has used this process for a number of successful elections in previous years. Had the diminishing vote in the General Assembly been brought to the Foreign Secretary's attention sooner, it may or may not have helped, depending on whether or not the Foreign Secretary may or may not help those

[*Ian Murray*]

particular processes. However, the hon. Gentleman's points will be taken back to the Committee and used in future reports.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): This is a blow to our international influence, and certainly to any notion of empire 2.0. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that kind of language and attitude is perhaps a contributing factor to these decisions, including the decision to refer the Chagos islands case to the ICJ? Does the Committee intend to look into whether our lack of a judge on the ICJ may have any influence on its decision on the Chagos islands case? From my point of view, restoring the islanders' right to return would be welcome.

Ian Murray: The Chagos islands issue is not mentioned directly in the report, although it is used as an example of where the UK has taken votes to the UN in recent times and lost. It is clear that not being on the ICJ diminishes the UK's voice on making sensible decisions at the UN. One of the report's conclusions is that the real difficulty is not directly the loss of a judge on the ICJ but in how we get a judge back on to the ICJ. Incumbency is a special thing in being able to promote a future election. Indeed, not being the incumbent will make it much more difficult next time.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wonder whether my hon. Friend got the same impression as I did. Repeated witnesses told us that there was a kind of shrug at international meetings, with people saying, "What on earth are you doing with regard to Brexit? Why are you choosing to step back from your international role?" That might have contributed to this election result.

There was a second kind of shrug from all the Government Ministers, who seemed to go, "You win some, you lose some. Does it really matter?" If that is the sense permeating throughout Government, we certainly will lose influence around the world. Do we not need a much stronger sense of leadership from the top of Government, and particularly from the Foreign Secretary?

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend is also a member of the Committee. He is right that we extensively questioned Lord Ahmad, the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN, on the reasons for the loss of our place on the ICJ, and he did not seem to have any reasons for that loss. We questioned him in depth on what countries had fed back to him on why they did not vote for the UK, or why they voted for the UK in the first round and then changed their vote to another nation. Again, he did not really have a reason. There seems to be significant complacency in the Foreign Office, and Ministers, the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office will have to up their game significantly post Brexit to ensure that the UK's voice is not diminished.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I compliment my hon. Friend and the Committee on this report. Does he agree that one of the results of the election is damage to our reputation within the UN structure itself? To take anything other than an enthusiastic view on how we can rectify the situation and do better next time would be foolish for our worldwide reputation.

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend is right that we have to learn the lessons, which is why we have asked for the private report to be shared with the Committee when it

is produced so that we can monitor what is happening in terms of future elections. One of the strongest recommendations in our report is to allow Parliament a role on these issues. Many people in the Chamber, including the distinguished former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), go on international delegations. As individual Members of Parliament, we could ensure that we use those bilateral relationships to make the case at key votes in international organisations, including the UN. That would help to keep the subject at the top of the agenda when we speak to bilaterals across the world. That is one of the key recommendations that Parliament should seriously consider so that we can all help to make sure that we win future votes.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating my hon. Friend on his presentation of the Foreign Affairs Committee's report and, indeed, in congratulating all the Members involved in the content of that report.

Did the Committee take evidence on whether the cuts to the Foreign Office's budget affected its ability to lobby for the judge?

Ian Murray: Many of the reports that the Foreign Affairs Committee has produced and is currently producing have questioned the Foreign Office on whether it has the necessary resource. The report presented by the Chair of the Committee last week showed very clearly that the Foreign Office looks as though it is robbing Peter to pay Paul, moving staff around the world to increase its presence in bilateral countries in the European Union—that resource has come from other places.

Lord Ahmad, the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN, told the inquiry that he wanted to look at whether we should work on a Commonwealth caucus but that he does not have any resources to do so. It seems that the Foreign Office's priorities are the EU, the Commonwealth and developing relationships with China and other trading partners, but the Foreign Office has no additional resource. There have been bids to the Treasury, and we encourage the Treasury Bench to consider those bids seriously so that the Foreign Office is well resourced to be able to achieve those goals.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this slot on the Floor of the House. This is the second week in a row that the Foreign Affairs Committee has succeeded in presenting one of its reports.

I am pleased to hear that the Committee is visiting Birmingham today. As a west midlands MP, I welcome that outreach. I simply want to record that I have listened to all today's exchanges, which will be communicated to the Foreign Secretary and the ministerial team. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will obviously formally respond to the report in due course.

Ian Murray: I am grateful to the Minister for that response. We look forward to the Foreign Office not only responding to the report but producing the lessons learned report for the Committee so that we can see what we can do to ensure that Parliament can be involved in these voting processes.

Point of Order

12.37 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure you will have seen the news that a foundation hospital trust in Gloucester has just announced it is setting up a wholly owned subsidiary—that is where a hospital trust essentially sets up a private company and transfers NHS staff, and indeed assets, into that company. Dozens of hospitals are doing this, or are looking at doing it, because of the underfunding of the NHS. It will create a two-tier workforce, thousands of jobs could be transferred and, essentially, it is a backdoor privatisation.

Has the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care given you any notice that he will come to the House to explain why the underfunding of the NHS is allowing the fabric of a public national health service to be undermined in that way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I have not received any notification that the Secretary of State intends to make a statement on this issue, but I am sure the Treasury Bench has heard the concern. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will continue to pursue this through the routes available in this House, of which he is very well aware.

Seasonal Migrant Workers

12.40 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that seasonal migrant workers make a substantial and positive impact on the UK economy; believes that easy access to seasonal migrant workers is vital for economic prosperity; and calls on the Government to bring forward proposals to allow businesses to continue to access seasonal migrant workers from EU and non-EU countries.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for accepting the application for this important debate, and I thank the right hon. and hon. Members who supported it. I also thank all those in the British agricultural community who have campaigned relentlessly on this issue, and I am grateful for the work that has been carried out by the all-party group on fruit and vegetable farmers, of which I am a vice chair.

Madam Deputy Speaker, £1.2 billion was the value of soft fruit production—

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Is the hon. Lady not a little surprised that given that the word “agriculture” is in the title—a bit of a hint there—this debate is not being responded to by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and that a Home Office Minister is responding instead? Is it not important that we get DEFRA to put on the record what its position is on this crucial issue?

Kirstene Hair: I believe we have the right Minister on the Front Bench; this is an immigration issue, and that is the case I am indeed fighting.

The sector has grown by 131% over the past two decades. These incredible figures are proof of all the skill and talent, and the industrious nature, of the British farmer. My constituency reveals the true scale of production that is now possible. Despite being less than 3% of the country, we certainly pull our weight, producing more than 30% of Scotland’s soft fruit. The noble strawberry is symbolic of Angus, and it is a wonderful experience for my constituents to be able to buy on their doorstep a punnet of fruit that has been grown in the surrounding countryside.

Given this sizeable industry, within the first two months of being elected I personally toured all the major fruit farms in Angus. I was greeted with a product with a taste and flavour that would be the envy of anyone, but I was also confronted with something else: a sector that was struggling. Although automation and modernisation are at the centre of the British farming sector, as they should be in any area that wishes to thrive, certain aspects of getting a crop from the field to the supermarket shelf will still require a human touch and may always rely, to a degree, on manual labour. At this time, the picking and harvesting of soft fruit crops can only be done effectively by hand. The picking of crops requires efficiency, endurance, and a deceptive level of knowledge. It is not a simple task. The whole production process is not down to unskilled labour, as is often said, but rather a skill gleaned through years of working on farms. Without question, this is tough work. I remember as a child a day of fruit picking being sold to me as a fun day out, but as soon as the sick

[Kirstene Hair]

feeling overcame me from eating too many raspberries, the novelty soon wore off and the labour intensity of the role shone through.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend has brought my childhood to the forefront of my memory, because I was brought up in Forfar in her constituency. There, we used to spend at least half of our summer holidays picking strawberries and then raspberries, and in October we would have the tattie holidays, picking the potato crop. That was how we grew up and learned how to work. I congratulate her on the case she is making that this is a skillset that is developed—sometimes it is even genetically passed through generations—and we should be protecting it. She is making a convincing case. Does she believe there is also scope for investment in technology—mechanisation and automation—in this area?

Kirstene Hair: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. It is incredibly important that we look into automation, but I do not see how the soft fruit sector could adapt to full automation; there will always be a degree of manual labour.

About 80,000 men and women currently make the journey across to the UK to take part in this process. It is estimated that by 2019 this figure will rise to 95,000, due to the expansion of many farms, as well as the elongated season that arises from the innovative farming techniques we now see. Make no mistake: this is seasonal work and there is no need for pickers all year round. They are required for the preparation, planting and, in higher numbers, the harvesting. Precision is key; there can be no delays in farming. Being too late or too early has catastrophic effects on the quality and subsequent price—

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Lady mentioned the duration of the season, but how long does she think that duration is? It has been put to me that because of polytunnels the season can be as long as nine months.

Kirstene Hair: I would agree with what the right hon. Gentleman says; the National Farmers Union Scotland's recent report "CHANGE" suggests a season of up to 10 months, but I would say the nine to 10-month period would cover the harvest of soft fruit and of other sectors.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There are some other sectors where it is much more difficult to have such an extended season, such as in the new vineyards we have in the south-east of England and in south Wales. It is a very short season there and quick decisions have to be made as to the right day to start picking if we are to get the best products out of the grapes. Does the hon. Lady therefore accept that we are going to have to have a proper system, as a matter of urgency, if we are not to see all those grapes, and the soft fruit, go to waste?

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I absolutely agree with what he says. Later in my speech I will address what I believe that system should look like to ensure that all sectors of agriculture can take full advantage.

In the past few years the recruitment of these 80,000 seasonal agricultural workers has become increasingly difficult. This is not a problem that is unique to the UK; it is being encountered across farming communities throughout Europe. In the past, Britain's seasonal workers typically came from eastern Europe. High unemployment and lower living standards in these regions meant that the possibility of seasonal work in Britain, regardless of its brief nature, was appealing. According to data produced by the World Bank, unemployment in Romania, Bulgaria and Poland in 2000 stood at 7%, 16.2% and 16.3% respectively, whereas in 2017 the figures were 5.9%, 6% and 5.1%. I am sure everyone in the Chamber will agree that the prosperity now enjoyed by these states should be applauded and is testimony to their own economic endeavours. However, the impact that this success has had on British farming, along with other factors, including the weakened pound, enhanced welfare in Romania, Bulgaria and Poland, and people's desire for a more permanent role, is why we are all here today.

Without sufficient farm workers, crops are left to rot in the field—a scene that was, unfortunately, witnessed last year. Some farmers, for the first time, had to watch their wonderful premium produce waste away in the fields, as the workforce had dispersed by late in the season. A recent survey conducted by NFUS horticulture and potato members between January and February of this year had some startling outcomes, which I hope will convey the seriousness of the current situation. All 100% of those who were contacted said that they were "concerned" or "very concerned" about the impact that labour shortages would have on their businesses in 2018 and beyond; 46% said they had difficulty harvesting their 2017 crop due to labour shortages; 65% of respondents said that recruiting non-EU workers was more challenging in 2017 than in 2016; and 74% anticipated new and increased challenges in recruiting non-EU workers in 2018.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Has my hon. Friend heard, as I have done from growers in my constituency, that the particular worry is the decline in the number of returning workers? The returning workforce is really important, as farmers are used to having the same workers coming back year after year, and these workers already have the skills and knowledge to be very effective and productive.

Kirstene Hair: I agree with my hon. Friend on that. My soft fruit farms in Angus have workers who come back for six, seven, eight, nine or 10 years, and we are also seeing a decline in that. Obviously, that skill we are losing in British farms is of great concern.

Most alarming was the farming industry's response to these issues. Farmers are businessmen, after all, and if the figures do not stack up, they have little choice, no matter how difficult that decision is. Some 58% of respondents said they were likely or very likely to downsize their business and 42% said they would cease current activity. British Summer Fruits and the British Leafy Salads Association, which collectively represent 90% of growers in their sectors, carried out a similar survey in 2016, which had results reflecting those of the NFUS one. However, this most recent survey is more startling.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady for having secured this debate. I was contacted a few months after the referendum by a farmer in my

constituency who said that the farm manager, a Polish gentleman who had been working seasonally for him since Poland had joined the EU, brought a skilled crew of workers every year. They had never had any problems at the UK border until the weeks after the 2016 referendum, when every single one of them was stopped and given the ninth degree about who they were, what they were doing and why they were coming to the UK. Has she picked up anything from the farmers in her constituency to suggest that this very clear message that these workers were not welcome at the UK border is helping to deter people from even attempting to come here to work on our farms?

Kirstene Hair: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but I do not think his story would resonate with any of the farmers in my constituency. There has been an issue for several years, since before the referendum in 2016, and any farmer would agree with that.

Action must be taken, or we will watch the demise of an industry that is so inherently British. Migrant workers enjoy coming over to the United Kingdom, which is why so many farms have loyalty from them, year after year, with some having a 10-year return rate. They are rewarded with a healthy wage—some pickers in Angus earn up to £12 per hour, which is well above the minimum wage.

As for a solution, there is only one choice: the introduction of a system that permits individuals from European and non-European states to come to the UK specifically to carry out this seasonal work. This is not labour that can be undertaken by the existing British workforce. We do not have the numbers in the rural areas where it is required, and nor do we have people who are willing to undertake the lifestyle that is necessary for the harvesting of crops. Early starts and intensive work is the norm. As I said before, it is skilled work. One can go and pick fruit, but to achieve the necessary rate requires stamina and skill, which are generated over time. To put it simply, it is hard graft.

It is without question that if a job is available, a British person should have a chance to compete for it, but I am reminded of an example that demonstrates my point. There is a producer, which I shall not name, that has on two occasions attempted to find seasonal staff from among the local workforce. On the first occasion, the producer worked with the local jobcentre and advertised extensively on social media and in the recruitment section of the local newspaper. There was a high volume of local applicants and the producer went on to hire 90 workers. Within three weeks, only 10 members of staff remained. In 2017, the same producer offered 12 jobs; 10 employees started and only two remain. The job is simply unattractive to the domestic workforce.

In July last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) led a debate on this very topic. He stressed the need for the introduction of a seasonal migrant scheme, and drew the support and presence of Members from across the political spectrum, including the shadow DEFRA Minister at that debate, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). The need for a scheme has only grown with time, as has the support for it. I am grateful for the encouragement and backing from the entire Chamber, with Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National party and Democratic Unionist party representatives all urging the Government to act.

I have strongly supported this issue since I came into office and know that it requires the input of the farming community. Following constant lobbying from my local farmers, I have taken the case to my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Secretary, to immigration Ministers, and to the Prime Minister herself. Along with the National Farmers Union Scotland, I have pressed our argument at every level. Every time I have delivered my case, it has been recognised. I will continue to push for swift action.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and on the great work she has already done to try to push this matter forward. This is of course an incredibly important issue, but does she agree that there are many other industries that would also like the Government to look at their workers' immigration status, including financial services and our great universities? Does she agree that the Government in the round should be doing an extensive piece of work on what the immigration system should look like to support those industries post-Brexit?

Kirstene Hair: Obviously, a lot of work is going on through the Migration Advisory Committee, and that will be produced in its totality in the autumn. I fully agree that immigration is not just important for the agricultural sector; indeed, in hospitality and many other sectors people are genuinely worried and looking forward to the immigration framework that is produced in due course.

I was delighted when last month my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs accepted an invite to Angus, when we toured the largest fruit farm in my constituency. During our meeting, and after repeated questions on the subject, I was finally promised that a clear answer would be given on the issue. That was repeated at the National Farmers Union conference last month, although it was within neither the timeframe that I requested nor the one that the farming community requires. Farmers need clarity and they need it urgently. I will continue to fight until we receive it.

Why do we need a scheme so urgently? Three words: harvest twenty-eighteen. It is imperative that we act now, because our farmers cannot plan, cannot invest and cannot ensure that the crops they sow will be harvested. This is an industry in turmoil. The Migration Advisory Committee is currently producing a report on the impact of European economic area workers in the UK labour market, and it will be published in the autumn. Following consultation with farmers in my constituency, I contributed to the report, stressing the situation in Angus. I am certain that other Members present also added the voices of their own constituents.

We do not yet know the findings of that developing report, but the MAC has in the past been vocal about the necessity of retaining seasonal workers. In a report from 2013, when the previous scheme was repealed, the MAC acknowledged the likely events that would take place:

“Growers were in general agreement that, at least in the short term (one to two years), they will be able to find the required supply of seasonal labour from Bulgaria and Romania. However, based on their experience following the EU accession of eight

[Kirstene Hair]

Eastern European countries (A8) in 2004, growers expressed strong concerns that they will find it increasingly difficult to recruit workers from Bulgaria and Romania, who will likely seek employment in other sectors with less physically demanding work and more permanent employment. In addition, because SAWS workers predominantly live *in situ* on the farms, and thus provide a flexible and quick response to peaks and troughs in filling orders, farmers are concerned that, without a scheme, workers will be less flexible and reliable.”

The introduction of a new scheme, similar to the one that was abandoned, is the only option. It is imperative that we create a system that makes the process of coming to work in the UK for seasonal periods as simple and attractive as possible. Migrant workers should have the ability to work across farming operations, perhaps starting off dressing potatoes, then bringing in a cereal harvest, and finishing in a soft fruit tunnel. We need a system that enables them to work wherever there is demand in the agricultural industry. That is what the workforce wants and what the farmers want.

Countless countries throughout Europe are having to turn to alternative means to secure new labour sources. Spain is dependent on labour from the north of Africa; Italy has previously recruited large numbers from Bangladesh; and Germany, like us, has been dependent on Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Croatia. We are competing directly with those countries, and if we do not ensure that British farms seem the most appealing prospect, foreign workers will go elsewhere, as they rightly should.

In closing, I say again how much I—and, I am sure, farmers throughout the United Kingdom—appreciate the presence of all Members today. There is a need for us to make progress during this debate and for a system to be put in place in the very near future. Since 2013, there have been calls for a seasonal agricultural worker scheme, and with every year that has passed the situation has become more strained. The British rural sector is a key part of our national economy, and one in which we have seen tremendous success in recent years. More broadly, our international standing in respect of agriculture is impeccable. I am so incredibly proud of the produce that we grow across Angus and, indeed, our United Kingdom. I so desperately want to ensure that our high-quality British produce will dominate our shop shelves. We must safeguard this industry; I hope that this debate will help to guarantee its protection.

12.58 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to be able to make a short contribution; some of us have to try to get back via non-existent stations and railway lines that will not be open. I am sure that will be the case for many people.

I have a couple of observations. I intervened on the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), and she put forward a valuable case with which I entirely agree. I do not know why the scheme that she called for has not yet happened. We had a debate in November 2016 and, more particularly, the debate on the back of a Select Committee report in July last year, in both of which Members said categorically that there was a need to reintroduce the seasonal agricultural workers scheme in some form.

Last year, somewhere between 10% and 15% of fruit and vegetables were ploughed back into the ground due to the lack of available labour. There are different reasons why some labourers may not want to come—it is to do with not just Brexit but the change in the value of the pound—but they did not come because there was very little encouragement for them to come. The scheme is all about trying to make sure that there is sufficient labour from abroad. Labourers have traditionally come from abroad, so this is not a recent thing; it has happened for decades. It has been more important recently because we do not have enough domestic labour. There is an issue to be addressed there.

People say that technology may be one of the answers, but, unfortunately, technology cannot yet pick strawberries—not without bruising them and making them next to useless. I do not understand why it has taken so long to address this matter. Is it because DEFRA has not made strong enough representations? The Secretary of State seems very keen to go out and embrace every green group and get every farming organisation on his side, and, certainly, he seems to be very savvy with the media, but when it comes to delivery on a fairly basic part of his Department’s responsibility, we have not seen any real action. Although he has not been in office for that long, this is a pretty important issue for the farming community. I know that because the NFU and other parts of the farming industry lobby me regularly and tell me that this is, while not their top concern, one of their major concerns.

My first question is why the matter has not been addressed. Is it because the Secretary of State is not able to make efficient representation, or is it just that, at the moment, the Home Office seems to want to block any attempt to allow people into this country because it wants to get the numbers down, even when those people are desperately needed, as they are in this sector? The hon. Lady told us that very clearly.

My second and concluding point is that we need to recognise that the whole rural community feels that it is not being listened to on this issue, especially given the way it has made its representations—over time and in a very detailed, comprehensive and thoughtful manner. The hon. Lady quoted all the figures, and I will not in any way try to reproduce them. My understanding here is that, unless we get those numbers, organisations will go out of business and fruit and veg will not be picked. Indeed, it is not just that part of the agricultural industry that is facing these issues. The dairy industry has regularly employed people from abroad. Those people come here because of the nature of the experiences they get, the English they learn and, indeed, the way in which we have looked after them for generations. So the second underlying point here is the rural economy versus the urban economy. I make no bones about the fact that I am always trying to represent the rural community in my constituency. Its voice is not always heard as loudly as it might be and it is not always heard as loudly as it might be on these Labour Benches, but it is important that we get its point of view across. It is important to ensure that our farming industry has a very strong voice, because it will mean that we get action.

Therefore, between DEFRA not delivering on this and the rural community feeling somewhat isolated and unable to deliver on one of its key demands, we need some assurance from the Home Office today that it will

move this matter forward. It is too late for this year; the harvest is already well under way in that it has been planted. Perhaps somebody, somewhere, will pick the produce, but—I am not being funny—who will want to change their whole life experience by suddenly thinking come May, June or July, “Well, I’ll go to Britain.” People make plans months and months in advance, and yet they have been given no assurance whatever that a scheme exists for which they can get a visa, and no assurance that they will be—dare I say it—welcomed in this country, because there is an underlying view either that they are not needed, or that they are needed in far fewer numbers than they used to be.

I say to the Home Office: please can we have a scheme back in place? Hopefully, it will do what the old scheme used to do, which was very efficient—in fact I do not know why it was removed. I was not in the House at the time, so I was not part of any decision. None the less, it was removed and we are now seeing the catastrophic consequences of that. It is a tragedy when food is wasted because it is not picked. We need an answer today, and we need a scheme, if not for this year, certainly for next year. Perhaps people will reconsider and still come to this country in the summer. I pray that the Home Office and DEFRA will get their act together and put this scheme back in place, because it is desperately needed.

1.5 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing the debate and on putting the case for farmers in Angus so passionately.

In my constituency of Chichester, we are home to a fresh food industry that has an annual turnover in excess of £1 billion and employs 9,000 people full time. This industry has thrived for several reasons, not least because, apparently, we are the brightest part of the UK, with our sunny climate and coastal proximity, which magnifies the brightness by up to 10%. This makes Chichester a great place to grow fruit and veg.

The growers in my area can only continue to grow, in every sense of the word, if they have the workforce to harvest their crops. According to the chairman of the West Sussex Growers Association, the impacts of Brexit, or the EU referendum, are already being felt. Investment locally has been held back by many growers, as they are awaiting the outcome of the negotiations. I am aware that some of their costs for raw materials have increased by up to 20% owing to the falling value of the pound on the international markets. On the flipside, our currency devaluation has made our home-grown crops more competitive, so, for some, sales are up.

Seasonal migrant labour within the growing industry has been part of its history since the post-war period. The work that it does is often physically demanding and repetitive, but it is skilled. I can personally attest to that as I have had the opportunity to pick peppers at Tangmere Airfield Nurseries, where they supply 50% of all the UK grown peppers sold in supermarkets nationwide.

Many growers are struggling to maintain the levels of labour needed. The NFU industry survey identified a shortage of 13% across the 2017 season, peaking in September at 29%, and a fifth of businesses said that last year had been the hardest recruitment year compared

with any previous years. Furthermore, growers in my area claim that recruiting more skilled employees who are fluent in English has recently been much harder. They have attributed that to the lower value of the pound, which has meant that seasonal workers can earn just as much, or more, in other European countries, and we are competing for that talent. As a consequence, 73% of UK industry employers are taking steps to encourage seasonal recruitment, with wages up by 9% in 2017 over the previous year.

The rural industries have generally made efficiencies and increased productivity by using advanced robotics to move rows and rows of pots through giant glasshouses from seed, to germination, to packaging. As an industry, the utilisation of technology is key, and growers and farmers in my constituency have invested heavily in that area. However, there is still a point at which people are needed, most commonly during the picking stage.

In Chichester, the industry is keen to upskill and train its employees, and has begun to implement training schemes using the apprenticeship levy. In the coming weeks, several growers are meeting representatives from further education colleges to see how they can collaborate on apprenticeship schemes using the levy and have more home-grown resource.

On my visit to Tangmere, I met a former packhouse worker from Poland, who now runs the whole warehouse operation. As in any industry, hard work and talent are rewarded with promotion. For example, the entire management team at Hall Hunter, a local producer of soft fruits in my constituency, is from Bulgaria.

Since the referendum, immigration control has been discussed by people in the industry at length. Owing to the short-term nature and skill level of the majority of the work, we need to create a migration tool to ensure that our rural industries are able to attract and recruit the people they need. Many, including the NFU, are calling for the reintroduction of the seasonal agricultural workforce scheme—known as SAWS—which could be an appropriate mechanism to ensure labour security for the sector while maintaining control of our immigration system.

Whatever system we put in place, it must facilitate seasonal workers to come to this country to fulfil the needs of the sector. The system needs to be as frictionless as possible, allowing for remote application and high levels of automation, and ensuring that there are as few barriers as possible to bringing in the much-needed labour. Flexibility is required to take into account crops with longer harvest seasons or career progression for those skilled workers who are offered it.

Although the rural industries are concerned about workers as we leave the EU, they also see opportunities as a consequence. Many are hopeful about access to international markets where we can sell our quality produce. Others feel that there may be opportunities to expand our market share domestically as some crops are undergrown in the UK, including tomatoes, of which a massive 80% are imported, despite having the perfect growing conditions in Chichester.

We must do what we can to make sure that we have a suitable mechanism in place to support the growing industry, ensuring that it has the right workforce it needs when it is needed. If we can get this right, I am confident that this industry will continue to thrive in my constituency and across the UK.

1.10 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this important debate and the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for leading it with an excellent speech. This debate could not have come at a more critical time for British farmers. Despite the weather outside, summer and the harvest season will be upon us before we know it. I am glad to have been able to co-sponsor the application as another vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for fruit and vegetable farmers.

We have already heard how important migrant labour is to our farming sector. That is true all year round, not just for seasonal work. It is true right across the supply chain—not just in picking, but in packaging and processing, right through to the retail and hospitality sectors. Migrant labour is important not just in low-skilled work, but in highly skilled jobs such as food scientists and vets, which I will mention again later.

Migrant workers have made a huge contribution to the British economy. The whole rhetoric during the Brexit campaign about their being a drain on local resources was not matched by the figures. They have a lower than average use of the NHS, use local shops and put money into the local economy. As we are hearing today, they will be much missed when they are no longer welcome on these shores. The debate today is about seasonal migrant labour, which is where the most pressing problem lies. This is not just a far-off problem that we need to deal with in the distant, post-Brexit, post-transition period future. The shortage in seasonal workers is happening now.

There are already alarming reports that food is rotting in British farms as there is simply no one available to harvest it. In total last year, something like 4,300 jobs were left unfilled. One farm in Scotland had to leave up to 100 tonnes of blueberries at a cost of £500,000. Another farm in Kent could not find workers to pick 2,000 tonnes of raspberries, costing it £700,000. Although demand for British fruit and veg has risen drastically—demand for strawberries alone rose by 180% from 1997 to 2015—the ability to source migrant workers has fallen. In September 2017, a huge 29% shortage was identified, and there are reports that the 2018 harvest has already been written off by many farmers. At a recent meeting of the APPG, which the farming Minister attended, we heard from a farmer in Kent—I think it was the same farmer who had lost £700,000—that he was already incurring significant losses due to a shortage of labour. He was talking about moving a substantial part of his business to Spain, which is clearly not what we want to happen.

Besides the obvious problem with food waste and inefficiencies, these rotting harvests jeopardise the already thin profit margins of British farmers, putting their entire businesses at risk. There is also the risk of cutting off the ongoing supply of quality British food getting to our supermarkets, as well as the tarnishing of the British brand abroad if we are unable even to get our own food out of the ground. As we have heard, the truth is that it is becoming far more difficult to attract workers.

In recent years, agriculture has become so heavily reliant on workers from eastern Europe, particularly the recent EU accession countries. Statistics show that migrants

make up about 20% of regular full-time staff in the agriculture sector, with the majority coming from Romania and Bulgaria. According to estimates from the Association of Labour Providers, 90% to 95% of seasonal agricultural workers are from other EU countries. But as people from these countries now have the right to work and settle in the EU, they are looking not for seasonal work, but for permanent, better paid jobs often in towns and cities, rather than in rural areas. They want to be in places where they can bring their families with them, with better schools and local opportunities for family members to get jobs—places where they can make a life. We saw this first with Polish workers. We have heard from farmers that, going back a few years, perhaps 90% of their labour force were from Poland. That has very much disappeared, as those workers have been replaced by people from the newer accession countries—the Romanians and Bulgarians. However, these new workers are now following the Polish workers into permanent jobs in the towns and cities.

Pay and conditions for agricultural work are not attractive, certainly not enough to attract British workers and increasingly not enough to attract migrant workers either. Accommodation in rural areas is expensive and, if provided by employers, it is often very basic at best. In some cases, it is far worse than that. Unite the union has done some excellent work highlighting some of those concerns in its excellent report, “From Plough to Plate”. We also hear stories about the role of gangmasters and even human trafficking in the food and agriculture sector.

The labour shortage is real. It is an immediate threat. I am not being alarmist and neither are other Members who are raising these concerns. The Government urgently need to address the issue. This was recognised by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on which I sit. Last year, we conducted an inquiry into labour constraints and published our report in April, just before the election disrupted everything. We took evidence from a Home Office Minister and a DEFRA Minister, and we felt that there was a huge degree of complacency from the Ministers that the issue was something that we could muddle through, that it would all be fine and that we did not need an urgent response. Our report concluded that:

“We do not share the confidence of the Government that the sector does not have a problem: on the contrary, evidence submitted to this inquiry suggests the current problem is in danger of becoming a crisis if urgent measures are not taken”.

We also had real concerns about the lack of empirical evidence on which the Government based their decisions; they were using flawed statistics. In another of the Committee’s recommendations, we stated:

“We are concerned that the industry has such different experiences to those reported by the Government”.

In other words, the Government were not listening to experiences directly from people working in and running businesses in the sector. We continued:

“It is apparent that the statistics used by the Government are unable to provide a proper indication of agriculture’s labour needs. These statistics and their utility for measuring supply of, and demand for, seasonal labour must be reviewed by the end of 2017 to give the sector confidence in the adequacy of the official data on which employment and immigration policies will be based for the period after the UK leaves the EU.”

It is an understatement to say that the Government’s response, which came out in October last year, was weak. It showed shocking complacency. The Government

chose to reject the hard facts and data that had been presented to the Committee by the sector, and failed to acknowledge that their own statistics were not fit for the purpose of measuring seasonal labour in specific sectors.

The strong feeling that I had during these discussions in the Select Committee and the APPG was that an ideological fervour for Brexit among certain Ministers—and, with that, unbending support for stringent curbs on freedom of movement—had completely overridden any common-sense approach to this problem. The response was very much, “We voted for Brexit. We voted to stop freedom of movement. That is our approach, no matter what evidence we have that this is going to harm the British economy.” I have heard that the then tourism Minister—the current Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen)—took a very different approach. When he was in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, he went in to bat with the Home Office for the tourism sector, saying that hospitality absolutely needs some flexibility to bring in migrant workers. That approach was not replicated by the farming Minister, which is one of the reasons why we are where we are now.

It was very welcome that the Environment Secretary made positive noises about reintroducing the seasonal agricultural workers scheme in his recent speech to the NFU. That scheme was scrapped in 2013 on evidence that we did not need it because we had workers from accession countries—the Romanians and Bulgarians. However, that is now no longer the case. It is worrying that we are only now starting to talk about the possibility of reintroducing SAWS; it would be far too late to get such a scheme in place for this year’s harvest.

However, I am not convinced that reintroducing SAWS would, in itself, solve the problem. As I have said, many people who would previously have done such work simply do not want to do it, and do not need to do it, any more. The exchange rate, the uncertainty following the Brexit referendum, the feeling that they are not welcome here, and even the British weather all mean that working elsewhere in the EU is a more attractive prospect. As we have heard, the economic situation in their own countries has improved to the extent that perhaps they do not need to come over here. Certainly, the poor exchange rate means that the financial benefits of doing so are much less, and taking home money with which they can afford to pay for things in their own countries is not such a pull. Even countries such as Poland cannot get workers; it is looking to Ukraine, for example, for people to do its agricultural work.

I do not see how far we can carry on with this chasing after cheaper labour, looking ever further afield. A year or two ago, I was on a flight from Stansted to Moldova that was full of Romanian workers who had clearly been hopping on budget flights, coming over here to work, and going back to their families at the weekend. If we are looking further afield, budget flights on easyJet are not going to bring in workers from Vietnam or Cambodia for £30 a time.

Tom Brake: Is the hon. Lady aware that someone who is now a Cabinet Minister suggested that in Kent, I think, farmers should start preparing to bring in people from Sri Lanka? I do not know whether that Minister also agreed to pay for their flights.

Kerry McCarthy: Exactly: to what extent do we keep chasing? As other countries become more affluent, why would people come here and not go to other countries where they would be able to earn more without—

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Lady will know, presumably, as she has clearly studied these matters very closely, that SAWS brought in people from all kinds of places—from Africa, Asia, and so forth. When that scheme ended, that opportunity ended for those people too. Does she welcome that?

Kerry McCarthy: I think we are going to have to look further afield. I am not arguing against reintroducing SAWS; I am just casting doubts on whether that will be enough to address this problem and whether we will be able to attract workers. We will find that this applies even to some of the countries that we previously recruited from. For example, British companies in Kenya are sourcing beans, flowers or whatever—monocrop cultures—and employing workers there. Will we be able to attract workers to come over to Britain for the British summer when there is production in their own backyard?

There is much talk of stepping up recruitment of British workers—the Government focused on that quite heavily in their response to the EFRA report. We hear about having more skills, and the role of agriculture in universities and in high tech. It is very important that we encourage far more people to go into agriculture and the food sector, but those are not the types of jobs that we are talking about. The problem with attracting British workers is that the areas with the highest unemployment do not tend to be that close to the areas that need these seasonal workers. Students are often mentioned, but they have many other options. Moreover, as the hon. Member for Angus said, this is quite tough work. It is not just about fruit picking in the summer when the sun is shining, if it is, given the British climate; it is about jobs like picking Brussels sprouts in the freezing cold. It is backbreaking work, not something that people do because they fancy a little holiday while getting a bit of pocket money on the side.

As the Environment Secretary acknowledged in his recent speech, the sector will also have difficulty in accessing skilled labour when freedom of movement ends in areas where shortages are currently filled by European economic area workers. Some 90% of abattoir vets come from EU countries, and the vast majority arrived in the past five years, so they are not automatically covered by the right to stay here. The existing immigration system for non-EU skilled immigration is complicated, expensive and slow. There is no Environment Minister here today, but I would like to know—perhaps the Immigration Minister can tell us—whether the Environment Secretary has made a submission to the Government’s Migration Advisory Committee on the future visa needs of the sector, as well as pushing for SAWS.

At a broader level, the Environment Secretary sees the long-term solution to this problem lying in the move from

“a relatively labour intensive model of agriculture to a more capital intensive approach.”

However, automation and mechanisation, such as robotic fruit harvesting, is said to be at least five years away from commercialisation, and that means five years of

[Kerry McCarthy]

missed harvests and countless farms going under. Even after those five years, probably only the largest, most profitable businesses will be able to afford to buy into such technologies. There are also some areas in which, I am told, automation is simply not possible. Asparagus has to be picked individually. Raspberries are too delicate not to be picked by hand.

This is part of a much broader concern. I would have liked the Environment Secretary to come before the House this week when the agriculture Command Paper was published. In fact, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on agroecology for sustainable food and farming, I have just put out a statement welcoming very much of what is in that Command Paper and the whole concept of moving to public money for public goods. I hope that he will consider the strong case made by people in the agroecology sector for making farming more sustainable and more environmentally friendly. We also need to look at the economic viability of the sector. Sufficient labour is absolutely crucial to that. We need some answers here today from the Home Office. We also need a much stronger focus from the DEFRA team, who are not here, on what they are going to do to address this impending crisis.

1.26 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), my co-chair on the APPG on fruit and vegetable farmers, on securing this important debate and on giving us the opportunity to have this important and urgent conversation in the Chamber. I also thank her for all the work she is doing to campaign for seasonal workers. It is a great pleasure to campaign with her on the matter.

With fields in my Kent constituency currently blanketed in snow—as is the case, I am sure, for pretty much all of us—the pleasures of summer strawberries and autumn fruits seem rather far off, but that is certainly not the case for our fruit and vegetable growers. They are already very worried that they will not have enough workers to harvest the crops this year. The NFU has been gathering extensive data on the growing problem of the workforce shortage. For example, in May last year, there was a national shortage of 9,000 workers. Later in the year, 60% of apple and pear growers reported that they were short of labour for their harvest. Last year was difficult; this year will be harder. As for further into the future, farmers are very worried.

The uncertainty has consequences. It takes three to six years to grow a productive fruit tree. Farmers are putting off investment decisions because of their fears about future access to labour. Thirty-one per cent. of top fruit growers say that uncertainty about staff has made them change their investment plans, so some are reducing investment, some are scaling down their businesses, and some are saying that they are going to chop down and scrub up their orchards.

That is particularly sad and worrying in the context of the past couple of decades, which have been a great British success story for fruit and veg growing. It has been a great area of growth for our economy. For example, home-grown berry production has increased

by 131% in the past 20 years and the industry is now worth £1.2 billion. Strawberries have gone from being a luxury that a family might occasionally buy for a special event such as a barbecue to being a very normal and common part of a family's weekly shop throughout the summer—and very frequently British berries are being bought. The UK's production of fruit and vegetables is a great success story for our country. It is a growing industry that we should be supporting. But unless we fix the labour shortage, prices will go up, fewer people will be able to afford British fruit and vegetables, that growth may well reverse and a share of the British produce that we currently consume will be replaced by imports.

Like the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), I have a farmer in my constituency who is not alone in shifting production overseas because of the shortage of labour here. Labour shortages are not just a problem in Britain. As other Members have said, the whole of the European Union is struggling to recruit its workforce for picking fruit and veg. Germany, Holland, Spain, Portugal and Poland already have permit schemes that enable them to recruit workers from beyond the EU. If in the UK we introduced our own seasonal workers scheme, that would simply allow our growers to compete on a level playing field with their foreign competitors.

Since I became a Member of Parliament for a Kent constituency, where we grow lots of fruit and this is a common topic of conversation, I have often heard people say, "Why can't British people do the work?" In the past we had the wonderful thing of people coming out of London to pick fruit in their holidays. Constituents tell me that they first came to Kent from the east end of London with their family when they were children to pick fruit and hops. It is also said that students could make up this workforce.

I have spoken to the growers in my constituency about this. They too would like to recruit British workers—local workers—to pick and pack the fruit and they have tried to do so. They have advertised locally and some have sometimes managed to recruit a very small number, but they know from experience that the local workforce do not supply the labour they need.

Part of the problem—and this is a good thing—is that we have very low unemployment. In my constituency there are about 700 people currently claiming jobseeker's allowance. In the season, farms in my constituency require a workforce of 5,000 to 10,000 workers, and one farm alone employs around 1,000 seasonal workers, so those 700 people in my constituency looking for jobs simply cannot plug that gap.

Mr John Hayes: As my hon. Friend will know, I represent a constituency that, with the surrounding area, produces about 30% of the fresh produce in the country, with a big demand for seasonal labour, which it has had for a very long time. Would she concede that the ready supply of relatively inexpensive labour displaces investment in recruitment, in skills and in technology and automation? That is certainly the macroeconomic evidence from around the world, as well as in this country.

Helen Whately: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. When employers have access to a ready supply of relatively cheap labour, they may choose

to use that workforce rather than invest in technology. We know, though, that there are particular challenges with the automated picking of soft fruit, which I will come to in a moment. Although we would like to see more automation, it is not going to be achieved overnight. We need a near-term solution to the immediate labour problem, hand in hand with investment in the technology that can help us to shift to a less labour-intensive industry.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some valuable points. Will she not only join me in welcoming seasonal migrant workers to help in constituencies such as mine, but work with me and others to put pressure on the Government to ensure that we are championing our agricultural industries and increasing their prestige and the jobs that they create? They will then become viable options for young people, and we will show young farmers the great contribution they are making in constituencies such as mine and hers.

Helen Whately: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We absolutely should be championing our agricultural industries and encouraging and enabling more young people to go into careers in agriculture. There is a challenge for farmers: they would hope to be able to recruit skilled British labour for all sorts of jobs, but young people are tending not to go into the sector. We should absolutely encourage British people to do that.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, while we all support greater investment in technology within the agricultural sector, we are never going to be able to have a technological solution for harvesting in conditions such as those on hillsides in south Devon?

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I am wary of saying “never”, but it is true that, with certain landscapes or certain produce, it is very difficult to have an entirely automated production chain. That is simply impossible, or certainly a very long way off. In the process of getting there, we must ensure we do not destroy our industry. If we do not even manage to sustain the industry now, we will not have the opportunity to do all sorts of wonderful automated fruit production in future.

Many people have said that we might be able to employ students, but as Members have said, the duration of the season has changed. Thanks in part to things such as polytunnels, we now have a much longer fruit-growing season and it is far longer than the student holidays. Along with the expectations of the consumer and the supermarkets and the requirement for a certain level of intensity and consistency in production, that means that a casual student workforce simply is not the right answer for modern production.

In the long term, recruiting people from further and further afield is probably not the answer either. It probably is not going to make sense to fly people from the other side of the world to come and pick fruit indefinitely. As I said, I think automation will gradually replace manual labour, and in some parts of the production line it already has. There is a large amount of automation in various parts of the production line, particularly for vegetables, rather than soft fruit.

Farmers and growers tell us that the robotic picking of soft fruit is a long way off. A robot has been developed, but it is very slow. It is certainly not able to do it at remotely the rate or cost-effectiveness that is expected by supermarkets and consumers. When a product is being manufactured, the robot needs to pick up a consistent part and put it into something, but every single bit of soft fruit is different. That requires a huge amount of sophistication from the robot’s vision systems and artificial intelligence. That technology is out there, but we are some way off.

That said, I very much welcome that, in the newly published Command Paper on the future for food, farming and the environment in a green Brexit, there is a recognition of the need for investment in research and development in agriculture to improve productivity. There is also an industrial strategy challenge fund to support this area. I urge the Government to do even more to consider how to incentivise automation in the horticulture industry but, to be clear, the benefits of that automation are particularly for the future. We have to deal with the immediate problem our farmers have and their ability to harvest fruit this year and in the next few years.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. She is right, of course, that there will continue to be a demand for labour, but that demand is not static, for the very reasons she has just given. In Lincolnshire, colleagues are working with the local enterprise partnership and the University of Lincoln to look at exactly the matters that she has described, and I invite colleagues across the House to do so with their own local universities and LEPs. There is real progress to be made in looking at where greater productivity can stem from greater automation and technology, as well as the investment in skills that I mentioned earlier.

Helen Whately: I agree with my right hon. Friend.

I want to talk briefly about the health dimension of this debate. There have been headlines just this week that more than seven in every 10 people born between the early 1980s and mid 1990s will be overweight by the time they reach middle age. We know that one in five children are obese by the time they leave primary school. One part of tackling the obesity crisis we face as a society is to encourage people to eat more healthily.

On average, our fruit and veg consumption needs to increase by 64% to be in line with the Government’s dietary guidelines, and one of the biggest factors influencing people’s food choices is price. The price of fruit and veg is already going up. On average, prices of the most popular vegetables rose by 3.2% last year, and fruit prices rose by 7.2%, compared with overall inflation of 2.7%.

Just the other day, I happened to be talking to a couple of mothers, who told me how they were shopping around to get the best value fruit and veg. For instance, they chose a shop that sells carrots, including the funny shaped ones, for 39p a bag, because they wanted to give their children a healthy diet. They are worried, however, about the rate at which the price of fruit and veg is increasing; if those prices continue to go up, they are worried about whether they will be able to afford fresh fruit and veg for their families.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for kindly giving way. Fruit and veg is seasonal and so are the prices, because of availability and supply and demand internationally. It is interesting that she mentioned carrots, because that process is now highly mechanised. I own a carrot factory—it is in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The automation is such that the lifting, washing and selection of carrots are all mechanised, but the price of carrots and vegetables has never been so low. We are in a very competitive industry.

Helen Whately: I defer to my hon. Friend's expertise on carrots. The reason I gave them as an example is that they were mentioned by those two mums. The point I was making was how price-sensitive they are. I have heard people say, "Oh, fruit and veg are really cheap", and that that is not a factor in shopping choices, so I gave that example to illustrate that shoppers look very carefully at the specific prices of fruit and veg. As prices go up—as I have said, the price of fruit has gone up on average by 7.2%—they will affect people's choices and their ability to purchase fresh fruit and veg for their families. In particular, I am worried that the labour shortages now and those on the horizon will only push up further the price of fruit and veg.

A seasonal workers scheme would help British growers to keep on producing affordable fruit and veg. While we are on the subject, I think that the new agricultural policy is an opportunity for us as a country to go further, to try harder and to look harder at what we can do to support the production and consumption of fruit and veg. We need to look at how we can support growers more, looking the whole way along the supply chain. We need to consider how we can reward retailers for selling healthy food and how our overall agricultural policy can encourage and enable consumers to buy healthy fruit and veg, so that the British people can eat a healthier diet. We now have a golden opportunity to do that as we rethink our agricultural policy.

None of that, however, will be possible without a workforce to pick and pack the produce we grow. Therefore, I again urge the Government to introduce a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, to not keep our growers waiting, to put an end to this uncertainty and to get on with it.

1.43 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). I suspect that we know some of the same farmers and they are quite complimentary about how she represents them on this issue. I hope, however, that she will rediscover her inner remainder and join us in a campaign to stay in the European Union, because the farmers in Kent to whom I have spoken would certainly like us to do exactly that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing the debate. She and others have given us all an opportunity to reminisce on the strawberry or raspberry picking that we did in our youth. I picked strawberries in France for 50 hours a week, at 10 francs an hour. I can confirm that after my first day of strawberry picking, I was sick as well, and that I dreamed of picking strawberries throughout the rest of the month, because that was what I was doing. I can also confirm

that the explosive capacity of a raspberry is much greater than that of a strawberry and that, on impact, a raspberry makes a bigger stain.

My speech will be based mainly on my knowledge through family who are farmers in Kent. Their experience is that there has already been a significant downturn in the number of workers coming from places such as Bulgaria and Romania. That is happening for a number of reasons, one of which is that the value of the pound has dropped, thereby reducing their remittances. Their own economies are also growing strongly, in part as a result of their membership of the European Union. Although Members of this House are occasionally reluctant to talk about the benefits of the EU, I suspect that it has played a significant part in the economies of Bulgaria and Romania. Given their growing economies, I am concerned that the process of Brexit is making it harder for the UK to export to the very markets that we have helped create through supporting those countries' membership of the European Union.

I am told that the workers who are coming now are older and less well educated, so it is no longer the students who are coming, but an older section of the population who, unlike the students, often do not speak English. Those students came partly because they wanted to practise their English and earn some money, but also because they wanted to consider staying in the UK for the longer term. Clearly, that is now of less interest to them, because of the perception, and more, of the United Kingdom since the vote on 23 June 2016.

As a number of Members have already said, we should not expect those people to be replaced by UK workers. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent referred to the 700 people on JSA in her constituency; clearly, if all 700 of them worked, they would not replace the 5,000 to 10,000 seasonal workers who come to work on the farms in the surrounding area. The hon. Member for Angus has confirmed that the picking season can last up to 10 months, so such workers are required for a substantial period. One farmer to whom I spoke said that he has always sought British workers for his farm. In six years, he had one apply but they lasted precisely two and a half weeks. We are not going to find people in the UK jobs market to replace everyone currently working in a seasonal capacity.

Where will the workers come from? As countries such as Romania and Bulgaria get stronger, and given that alternatives such as Spain and Germany are now more attractive to them because of the fall in the value of the pound, we need to look further afield. I do not agree that we need to look as far afield as Sri Lanka; the farmer I spoke to reckons that the additional cost for that might be three times that of bringing over someone from Ukraine. The farmers would have to bear that cost, which would make our industry less competitive. Indeed, that is already happening because the workers who are coming over now are older and less productive, which adds to costs and will presumably also lead in the longer term, if not immediately, to an increase in food prices.

The old SAW scheme allowed workers from Ukraine and elsewhere to come, and that is what farmers want to happen. They want the market to be open to the 40 million Ukrainians and to the Moldovans and the Russians. That scheme was tightly controlled; it did not mean that people came to the UK to work and then disappeared

into the jobs market. They came here, worked hard, earned money and then they returned home, so there was no issue with people disappearing and working unofficially. That is what is being called for, and I believe that Poland is now providing visas to Ukrainians. Poland is benefiting from an influx of Ukrainians, and that is making its agricultural sector much more productive. Those workers in Poland earn the anything-but-princely sum of £20 a day—we would not want to replicate that here, but it demonstrates that Poland is accessing those workers who are contributing to its agriculture, while our agriculture is suffering.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent highlighted some cases of produce that had not been picked, but on the whole I think that Kent has probably just about managed this year, and it is the coming season that will present the real challenge. Any scheme needs to be up and running now—it cannot start in the new financial year in April or some time towards the end of the year. The season lasts for 10 months, and those people are needed now, not in four or five months. Hon. Members will have heard the figures quoted by the NFU about a 12.5% shortfall in seasonal workers this year, and the situation is unlikely to improve over the next 12 months.

A number of Members have rightly pointed out that although, in the longer term, automation might provide part of the solution—it has done so in some industries—currently it cannot do that in the agriculture sector. It is not about saying that because we are using all this cheap labour we are not investing in equipment; the equipment to invest in does not yet exist, although it might be there in five years' time for apple and plum picking.

Colin Clark: I have already declared an interest in that I own a carrot factory. There is enormous mechanisation in factories. The right hon. Gentleman is right in what he says about the picking of soft fruit, but picking top fruit now involves serious mechanisation, as does processing it. Having been in the industry, I know that the availability of relatively cheap labour stopped an enormous investment in mechanisation, but such mechanisation has now come down greatly in price. Does he agree that some of the issues regarding the availability of labour will encourage factories to mechanise? Many of these jobs are very repetitive and would be better mechanised.

Tom Brake: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and I am happy that he intervened. This must be a balance, and my understanding is that although currently a huge amount can be done with mechanisation in a packing environment, we are not yet there for apple and plum picking, and we may not be there for three, four or five years—who knows? There is a lot of talk about technological solutions being the answer to the border issue between Ireland and Northern Ireland—or, indeed, between Camden and Westminster—but in practice those blue sky solutions do not yet exist. I did hear someone suggesting that drones might be the solution to the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, so perhaps that is also the solution for picking apples and plums. Realistically, however, those technological solutions are not yet there.

What is the solution to this problem? Hon. Members will not be surprised to know that the Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign for a vote on the final deal,

so that if people do not like what they are offered once an eventual deal is struck between the UK Government and the EU, they have a chance of pulling away from it and stopping Brexit. If that does not happen, what is the immediate solution to our problem? Clearly, it is to allow workers from EU and non-EU countries—increasingly, it will be non-EU countries—to come to the United Kingdom through controlled schemes that have worked effectively in the past. It will also be about supporting technology to ensure that investment goes into those areas where that can make a difference.

We also need a seasonal scheme. In the past I have heard senior Ministers say, “Oh, we can sort it all out by introducing six-month visas”, but that will not be sufficient. As we have heard, the season now lasts for 10 months, so the visas must be longer than the six months proposed. If all that can be implemented now—not at the end of the year and not next season—there is a realistic prospect that most of our farmers will be able to pick all their crops. If we do not act now, however, there is a real risk that reports towards the end of this year will be about a substantially greater proportion of fruit and veg left to rot in our fields.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is just possible that our farmers will get through this year because freedom of movement is still available and farms have access to eastern European migrants who hopefully will come and do the work. Next year is when it all kicks in, because freedom of movement will end and the available sources of labour will go with it. At that point we will need innovative solutions to bring in seasonal labour so that the crops can be picked.

Tom Brake: I agree entirely, and there must be a sense of urgency about this. As I understand, however, yesterday the Government made a U-turn, and having said that March 2019 was the cut-off point for new arrivals, they will now allow people to continue to arrive during the transition period. If that is correct, that may help the industry for a further few years.

1.56 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and, like other colleagues, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this debate. Hon. Members have spoken compellingly about our need to address this issue here and now, and I will focus mostly on issues of time, because we do not have the luxury of that on our side.

I am sure that Members across the House will join me in paying tribute to our farmers and fishers. If we think it is cold here, imagine what it is like on a Dartmoor hill farm right now, or out on a Brixham trawler. We should pay tribute to all those who put food on our plates, and thank them for what they do. I particularly thank Riverford farm in my constituency, the National Farmers Union, and all those farmers who have written to me about this issue for the work they are doing to collect evidence for this debate.

As I have said, we do not have the luxury of time, and Riverford farm has made the point compellingly to me that this autumn it has to make crunch decisions about employing workers for the following year. There is still

[Dr Sarah Wollaston]

great uncertainty about the transition period, and as we have heard so compellingly from Members across the House, even if a transition period is in place, there is a shortage in our workforce here and now, and we could use the mechanism of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme to address that.

The Government have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to research the impact of leaving the European Union on the UK labour market, and to consider how to align immigration policy with a modern industrial strategy, but that is not due to report until autumn. It will then take time to implement such a scheme, and I do not think we have the luxury of that time.

Many nations across the EU already supplement their workforce with a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, so will the Minister give us some hope that the Home Office will take a decision on this issue sooner than we would expect under the current timetable, with a report coming forward in autumn? As we have heard, the uncertainty is delaying investment now for the future, and we need something to take back to our constituents who work in these important businesses. They are already making great efforts to recruit locally, but as we have heard, even with those efforts and schemes to encourage and retain a UK-based workforce, they are still dependent on a workforce that is supplemented from outside the country.

As the mother of someone who works in the robotics industry, I appreciate the investment going into those technological solutions. I am afraid, however, that it simply will not provide all the answers we need to make sure our crops are picked in a timely manner. There can be nothing more heartbreaking than seeing crops rotting in the fields, as I am sure the Minister will reflect in her closing remarks.

Colin Clark: We have heard from other Members that the labour force will have to come from outside the EU and the EEA. As we leave the EU, is this not an opportunity for a policy to employ people from outwith the EEA area? If we were not leaving the European Union, there might not be the same opportunity because of EU regulation.

Dr Wollaston: I really think this is entirely in addition to it. I remain of the view that we should be focusing on the issues of frictionless trade and keeping very close links to our European Union partners as we exit the EU. I think these issues will arise irrespective of that, as we have heard. Whatever the situation with transition, I hope that the Minister will consider this as something we could use to supplement the arrangements we will have.

Most of all, I would like the Minister to give us some indication of when we are likely to see a decision. Farmers in my constituency here and now are starting to make decisions about their future plans and investment that will impact not only their businesses; remember that they also employ a local workforce in many other capacities, and their decisions will affect them. The implications for our industry are very far reaching and I hope the Minister will give some indication of when we are going to see an answer.

2.1 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on an excellent introduction to the debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for it. I draw the attention of the House to an interest. I receive support from the Good Faith Partnership, which provides a secondee in my office to work with me on migration issues. The secondment has just started in the past few days and I will be placing details in the Register of Members' Financial Interests later on this week. I also speak as chair of the all-party group on migration, and it is in that capacity that I want to contribute to the debate.

Last year, the all-party group produced a report on the impact specifically on small and medium-sized enterprises of losing access to labour from the European Union post Brexit. We heard evidence from employers and recruiters across a range of sectors—not just agriculture and food processing, although clearly that sector faces an important and very urgent need—all of whom highlighted the need for access to skilled labour, but also to so-called unskilled labour, at times of heightened need. We heard from other seasonal sectors, including air conditioning and central heating engineers, and the hospitality sector, which has peaks at Christmas, Easter and over the summer. The point was made clearly to us that jobs in customer services or catering, for example, while possibly seen as unskilled jobs, cannot be characterised as unskilled in terms of the nature of the activity that needs to be carried out.

The variety of sectors and job roles that reflect the need for seasonal labour points to the need for a range of tailor-made immigration solutions. As we have heard this afternoon, that should not preclude the upskilling of the domestic workforce and increasing participation among underemployed sectors of the domestic workforce, such as older workers or those who are not in education, employment or training. It is important to say, as have heard this afternoon, that seasonal jobs are not always attractive to UK workers. It is not just that they cannot be bothered to do them in all cases. It may be that they live in the wrong part of the country and have family commitments, and so cannot move to take seasonal work. Low pay may make it simply economically unviable for UK workers to take some of these posts, and the arduous physical nature of the work, which we heard about from the hon. Member for Angus and others, means that older workers might struggle to take up the hours of work in those jobs.

Already, a number of sectors have expressed alarm about the impact of Brexit on long-term access to labour. As Professor Jonathan Portes said, we need to attend not just to the question of the UK choosing which migrants come to this country but to making sure that the migrant labour that we need chooses to come to us. Yet even as early as the beginning of last year, alarm bells were sounding from a range of employers and recruiters. Lee Biggins, the founder of CV Library, told the drinks business last year that hospitality and agriculture bosses might struggle to find staff as Brexit negotiations got under way. Similar concerns were expressed by Tim Rumney, of the Lake District Hotels Association, in February 2017. As the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) pointed out, it is important to note

that not just short-term labour market needs but often our long-term needs are met by seasonal workers coming and gaining skills, and then staying on and progressing to fill skills gaps in industries in this country over a longer period.

The Recruitment and Employment Confederation reports that recruiters were already struggling to fill some low skilled roles before the 2016 referendum. It points out that increasing labour shortages could lead ultimately to higher costs for consumers as a result of higher recruitment costs, greater bureaucracy to bring in migrant workers and the cost of visas for more migrant workers, which SMEs who gave evidence to our all-party group inquiry would be unable to absorb and would need to pass on to customers. Consumers might also experience a knock-on effect on service levels, and for the workers themselves there would be an increased risk of exploitation and illegal working, which is a concern.

The Recruitment and Employment Confederation also says, as we have heard repeatedly this afternoon, that while automation is clearly part of the solution to our labour needs in a number of seasonal sectors, it will be practically and economically viable for only some of the labour currently performed by low-skilled seasonal workers, at least for the foreseeable future. Interim solutions—quite long interim solutions—are therefore needed now for a number of sectors.

Whatever immigration schemes Ministers devise in the coming months as we anticipate our departure from the EU, they must not be solely designed on the basis of EU workers currently working in full-time permanent positions and the need to replace that form of labour in the UK. The evidence points clearly to the need for a range of tailored solutions. We have heard much this afternoon about the possibility of reinstating a seasonal agricultural workers scheme and other sector-specific solutions, although the Institute for Employment Studies points out that too many sector-specific solutions will increase, rather than reduce, complexity for employers.

The focus must be on designing simple and cost-effective reasonably priced application processes, recognising that it is employers who will bear the costs, but that they will pass those costs on to customers at the end of the line. It is not possible to look at blanket approaches to setting salary or skills thresholds, and it is very important that appropriately light-touch processes take place at our borders to enable migrant workers to come in. At the same time, immigration strategy must pay careful attention to the impact on host communities. Local authorities need to be supported and encouraged to develop strategies for integration, even of short-term workers, to improve community cohesion and avoid seasonal workers facing ostracism, isolation and abuse.

Finally, the Government will of course rightly want to give attention to the risks of exploitation and, in its most extreme form, trafficking and abuse. That clearly requires the enforcement of decent working conditions and minimum wages, working with employers and employer bodies to stamp out abuse, and ensuring that there are good sources of independent information and advice available to migrant workers both in their home countries and when they arrive here.

All these strategies are emphasised in the draft global compact on migration, which is now being negotiated at the United Nations. They point to the need for a holistic

strategy in the immigration White Paper, which we anticipate in the next few months. I conclude by saying to the Minister that it is important that the strategy and White Paper come forward as soon as possible. Clarity is needed now for businesses and workers alike.

2.10 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this debate on an important issue for so many agricultural businesses across the United Kingdom. She described very well the issues and challenges, and I do not intend to repeat them in the short time available to me this afternoon. A number of agricultural businesses in the borders rely on seasonal migrant workers, although not to the same extent as in Angus, so I thought that it was important to make a short contribution to the debate.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to put on record the fact that seasonal workers are very much welcome in the borders and contribute hugely to the local economy. There are businesses such as that of Neil Thomson—of Caverton Mill farm near Kelso—who employs more than 20 seasonal workers to pick over 200 acres of broccoli and cauliflower. These workers are reliable, hard-working and they contribute to the local economy in the Scottish borders. Indeed, one has been kept on permanently and has moved his family to the area.

As others have mentioned, there have been challenges in recruiting seasonal workers in recent years, but we have to be careful about attributing that to Brexit. Across other sectors, including hospitality and healthcare, the number of people coming from the European Union to work here has been falling. That trend started long before the EU referendum was even announced.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point about seasonal workers, but if he looks at the figures for all of Scotland, he will see that almost 50% of the workforce in hospitality in Edinburgh and Glasgow is made up of people who come from elsewhere in the European Union. How would a seasonal workers scheme help that when at the moment, as members of the European Union, they can come here freely?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point. I would say that this debate is focused on the agricultural sector. There are definitely challenges in other parts of the economy, but that does not remove anything from the fact that in the past 10 years there has been a downward trend in the number of workers who are coming from the EU to work in our economy.

Seasonal work in the United Kingdom now appears less attractive than it was a decade ago because of a range of factors. A number of Members have described those, but the most notable is the drop in the value of the pound. Many voices in the industry favour the reintroduction of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which came to an end following the admission of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU. We now have the opportunity to bring this scheme back or at least to look at something similar—an opportunity that has only been brought about because of Brexit. I join in calls for the United

[John Lamont]

Kingdom Government to look closely at reintroducing the scheme as a way of meeting the seasonal needs of farmers not just across Scotland and in my constituency, but across all the United Kingdom.

A final point I want to make is that this issue starkly highlights the importance of maintaining the United Kingdom's internal market and the easy movement of staff across the UK—something that the Scottish National party Government in Edinburgh seems unable to understand. Seasonal migrant workers often start working in one part of the United Kingdom and travel across the country on different jobs in one season. The effect of the SNP's call for a separate immigration policy would make it harder for workers to do that. As Jonnie Hall, the director of policy at the National Farmers Union Scotland said, the last thing that farmers need is a “checkpoint at Berwick”. As is often the case, the needs of the farming sector are the same north and south of the borders, and it is in the farmers' interest that this is dealt with on a UK-wide basis, rather than on a Scottish-only basis.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Lamont: I give way to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West.

Christine Jardine: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way, but if the last thing that the NFU wants is a checkpoint at the border, why does he think it would appreciate one between here and Europe?

John Lamont: I understand that Lib-Dem party policy is for us to go back into Europe, but the reality is that the British people have voted in a referendum to leave the European Union. We have to accept the democratic decision of our fellow countrymen and women and I do not accept any suggestion that we should veto that or say that they have not made the right decision. We now need to get on with Brexit to deliver the best result for all our constituents—for Scotland and all of the United Kingdom. I appreciate that the Lib Dems do not agree with that, but we must now get on with Brexit as best we can.

As I said, we need to deal with immigration on a UK-wide basis, rather than take a Scotland-only approach. Instead of constantly pushing for differentiation from the United Kingdom, the Scottish Government would better serve farmers by working with their UK counterparts to ensure that we develop a seasonal migrant system to meet the needs of Scottish farmers.

I conclude by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Angus again on bringing this important debate to the attention of the House, and I look forward to working closely with her, and the United Kingdom Government, to get the best deal for Scottish farmers.

2.15 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all here. Happy St David's day—and happy first day of spring,

just in case anybody did not notice. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I commend the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for having secured it.

Many years ago—I suspect before some Members here were born—I worked for the Health and Safety Executive, based in Dundee, and I spent quite a lot of time around Angus and Perthshire visiting small local businesses. One thing that struck me then was that in addition to the significant direct employment in fruit growing and fruit processing in places such as Angus, Perthshire and Aberdeenshire, the number of small, family-owned businesses and other trades and professions that rely on agriculture is massive. There are mechanics, engineers, blacksmiths, lawyers, accountants, and haulage contractors, as well as the visible jobs, with people out working in the fields. Effectively, the whole economy of that part of Scotland is underpinned by our soft fruit and produce industry. That is why it is so important to protect it.

Scottish quality fruit and veg now adds £300 million a year to our GDP. It is 10% of our entire agriculture output—almost as much as the much more obvious Scottish farming industries of dairy and sheep farming, for example. Whatever happens with our relationship with the EU and others, I hope that those who rightly take massive pride in producing some of the best fresh fruit and veg in the world will continue to market it under Scotland, the brand, to draw attention to the fact that it is branded as being as good as anything people can get from anywhere else in the world.

I note that in a single year, one growers co-operative, actually based in Angus, reported a loss of income of £660,000, simply because of labour shortages in a single year. That is one co-operative of 18 growers that is not likely to be any different from a lot of others. This industry and this part of our economy is under severe stress and severe threat. As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) pointed out, it is difficult this year, but if the Government do not act, and act very quickly, next year and the following year could become impossible. This has been an iconic part of Scottish culture for decades, if not centuries, but we could see an end to soft fruit growing in parts of Scotland. I will come on to the UK Government's response to that potential threat later.

It was reported in *The Guardian* last summer that a survey by the NFU found that between January and May 2017, farmers in the UK recruited a total of 13,400 workers, 14 of whom were from the United Kingdom—not 14,000 or 1,400, or even 140, but 14 out of almost 13,500 came from the United Kingdom. Other speakers have commented on the complex reasons why it is simply not credible to expect overseas seasonal migrant workers to be replaced by home-grown workers any time in the next 10, 15 or 20 years, and perhaps never at all. The industry will not last that long if we cannot pick the fruit from the fields.

We also have to remember that as well as the potentially disastrous impact on parts of our agriculture sector, the Government's attitude to immigration—they treat it as numbers to be dragged down at all costs—affects so many other things which, certainly in Scotland and many other parts of the United Kingdom, we should be proud of having built up over the years.

Relative to the size of its population, Scotland possibly has more of the world's top universities than any other country. Part of the reason for that is the number of overseas students and the number of exceptionally talented and dedicated overseas staff, including research staff and lecturers, who have come here purely as a result of freedom of movement, and who no longer express an interest in coming because they are not sure what their rights will be.

The demands on our NHS and care services are obviously very much in our minds at this time. Those services also rely heavily on incoming workers. I hope that it is not stretching relevance, Madam Deputy Speaker, to give a special mention to a consultant surgeon in Glasgow who this morning walked for three hours in the snow to get to work in Paisley. That is the sort of dedication that we see among NHS workers, regardless of where they have come from.

According to the article from *The Guardian* that I mentioned earlier—written last year—the director of an employment agency called Hops Labour Solutions, which exists to bring in seasonal workers to support the UK agricultural sector, said:

“The grim reality is that the perception from overseas is we are xenophobic, we're racist”.

We might take exception to those words—we might like to think that we are not xenophobic or racist—but if that is how we are perceived by even 10% of people who might have been thinking of coming to work in the United Kingdom, we have a problem. It is a sad but undeniable fact that one of the immediate impacts of the vote to leave in the referendum in June 2017 was a massive spike in racist and racially motivated crimes in many part of the UK. Thousands of EU nationals living in the UK have come before Select Committees and told us that they have experienced a significant increase in racially motivated attacks, that they have begun to feel that they are no longer welcome, and that friends who have thought about coming here have been made to feel that they might not be welcome either.

I am not saying that that was one of the Government's intentions in calling the referendum, and I am certainly not saying that it was the intention of anything like all the 17 million people who voted to leave, but we must face up to the fact that, as one of the consequences of the referendum, a climate of undercurrent has been allowed to develop which makes people from the European Union feel less welcome and less valued than they were before. If the Government continue to ignore or deny that, the problem can only continue to get worse.

The hon. Member for Angus pointed out, very eloquently, that although some parts of our fruit and vegetable growing industry can be mechanised, others cannot at this stage, and it will be several years, if not longer, before that will be possible. Solutions that rely simply on significant investment and mechanism might work in some industries, but they certainly would not work for soft fruit growers.

When we debated the seasonal agricultural workers scheme last year, the then Minister gave an assurance that the scheme could be reintroduced within five to six months if necessary. I suggest that it is now necessary, and that the Government should be seeking to reintroduce the scheme within far less than five to six months if that

is at all possible. They clearly accepted that there might be a need to change the bad decision that was made in 2013, and I suggest that the need has now been established.

Deidre Brock: At a recent Scottish Affairs Committee meeting in Fife, we heard the views of Jonnie Hall of NFU Scotland on that very issue. He told us how frustratingly difficult he found it to “get traction”, as he put it, with the Home Office to even meet and discuss the union's suggested solutions for dealing with the looming crisis, including SAWS. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on Home Office officials to meet representatives of NFUS and other experts in the sector as a matter of urgency to try to find a way out of this Brexit boorach?

Peter Grant: Absolutely, and I would extend that to many other areas of activity, whether in private sector industry or in our greatly stressed public services. Home Office officials need to get out of the office and meet the people who work in agriculture, the health and social care services and universities, and hear why their approach to immigration—whether it is immigration on a permanent basis or migration on a temporary basis—is simply wrong.

Pete Wishart: I was at the debate when the Select Committee reported the urgent requirement for a seasonal agricultural workers scheme and the five to six-month time limit was mentioned. Is my hon. Friend as baffled as I am over why those in the Home Office are so cloth-eared when it comes to the demands for the scheme? Could it have anything to do with their self-defeating obsession with immigration—with seeing everything through that lens, and stopping people coming to this country?

Peter Grant: I do not think that that criticism applies only to the Home Office. I think that it applies to the entire Cabinet and, indeed, the entire Government. There is still far too much of an obsession with immigration as a bad thing that must be brought down at any cost. It is becoming clear that if the Government are to get anywhere close to delivering the headline reduction in immigration that they claim would be a good thing, the health services and the agriculture sector will suffer, as will a great many industries.

I was somewhat surprised by what was said by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). He made some valuable points, but he is in complete denial about one fact. Although this problem is not entirely the creature of Brexit, and existed to an extent before Brexit, anyone who claims that Brexit is not making the problem worse really needs to return to planet Earth. It is patently obvious what one impact—one inevitable consequence—has been, not only of the result of the vote itself but of the vile xenophobia that characterised so much of the debate. It was always going to be a consequence, and we are seeing it now, whatever the hon. Gentleman may try to tell us. It has made the United Kingdom a less attractive place for people to want to live and work in: it has made us less appealing.

The hon. Gentleman blamed part of that on the fall in the value of the pound. I wonder what might have caused the value of the pound to go through the floor

[Peter Grant]

so suddenly, some time towards the end of the third week of June 2016. I wonder what it might have been that upset the international economists and business people at that time of the year. It did not seem to affect the dollar or the euro, so it cannot be blamed on global changes. Perhaps the Government tend to try to blame other factors.

Even the House of Commons Library, which is not generally renowned for taking sides in political debate—indeed, it is rightly renowned for not taking sides in political debate—tells us in the briefing that it prepared for today's debate that since the closure of SAWS, and particularly in the run-up to the UK's exit from the European Union, employers have been finding it more difficult to recruit staff from overseas. The Government's responses, including the assurances that we were given on 6 July 2017 about the reintroduction of SAWS or a similar scheme, have still not been taken any further.

There has been mention of a consultation paper published a couple of days ago by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The foreword is written by the Environment Secretary. We in Scotland remember very fondly promises from the Environment Secretary, who assured us that one of the consequences of Brexit would be that Scotland could have control of its own immigration policy. Perhaps the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk would like to go and tell the Environment Secretary that he had clearly taken leave of his senses if he thought that that was ever a possibility.

In all the 64 pages of the consultation paper, the word "seasonal" appears once. The crisis facing parts of our agricultural sector as a result of the inability to attract seasonal workers is hardly even recognised by DEFRA's flagship new consultation paper—and, presumably, draft policy. When it refers to the labour force that is needed in agriculture, it talks of the investment and skills needed to mechanise. It talks of engineers and science and technology workers. It talks of things that are needed in some parts of agriculture, but those things will make no difference whatsoever to the soft fruit industry, and to other parts of agriculture where mechanisation is simply not realistic. That gives the worrying impression that the soft fruit industry will be allowed, literally, to wither on the ground.

Since the Government wrongly abandoned SAWS in 2013—and we all remember the Home Secretary who made that decision, who knew better than all the farmers, the NFU, NFU Scotland and all the rest of them, who knew more about how to run agriculture than the people who worked in it—the difficulties faced by the sector have been made substantially worse, and will continue to become substantially worse.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I apologise for interrupting the hon. Gentleman and I appreciate that this is an important subject in his constituency and he has made some important points, but I point out to the Chamber that if the second debate that was due to take place this afternoon had not been cancelled, the time limit on Back-Bench speeches in this debate would have been approximately seven minutes, which is normal for a debate of this kind on a Thursday afternoon. The reason the second debate was cancelled

was not in order that some Members in this debate could make speeches twice as long as they would have done in other circumstances, but because of the very unusual weather conditions under which we are operating. While Members might be aware only of what is happening in this Chamber, I have in mind the hundreds of employees in this building who will have great difficulty getting home to their families today, and every extra minute taken in speeches in here is stopping somebody getting a train and having to get a later one that might now be cancelled. The hon. Gentleman is a most hon. Gentleman and he normally sticks very carefully to time limits. We do not have a time limit this afternoon, but he has taken twice as long as he would have taken if I had put a time limit on in normal circumstances. I am sure he will bear that in mind.

Peter Grant: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Pete Wishart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The ruling you have just made is very important, and I wonder whether it might be worthwhile abandoning this afternoon's business now so that Members and staff can get home sooner because of the inclement weather.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point, but I have neither the power nor the inclination to abandon the business. I am, however, making an appeal to the decency of Members, and say that sometimes if one is making a point it can be made just as effectively if made more quickly.

Peter Grant: I certainly take on board your comments, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I was winding up anyway. Had there been a proposal from the Government to amend the Standing Orders today to bring forward the moment of interruption, I do not think any of us would have opposed that—even those of us who had known since Wednesday that we were not getting home until tomorrow.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Since that is a challenge to a point I have just made from the Chair, I say that it is not always necessary to make rules in order to have people behave with decency and consideration. The hon. Gentleman is one of the most considerate and decent Members of this House and I am making absolutely no criticism of him; I am merely pointing this out, and he is not the only Member who has exceeded the seven minutes that would have been the time limit.

Peter Grant: Thank you again, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The scheme was abandoned wrongly, erroneously, arrogantly by a Home Secretary who would not listen to those who would be most affected, and that continues to be the tone of most of what the Government do in relation to both Brexit and almost anything else—and of course they always say it is all the Scottish Government's fault.

The reason why we are having this debate and having to consider reintroducing this scheme is the Government's continued obsession with freedom of movement being a bad thing that has to be stopped. Freedom of movement of people, and of goods and services, and of ideas and beliefs, is an unqualified, unreservedly good thing, and I want to see it retained as far as possible. I ask the

Minister again, although it is not her decision to make, to please go back to her Government and say to them that the way to prevent the massive disruption to our agriculture sector, and other sectors of our economy, both public and private, is not simply to urgently reintroduce SAWS to deal with the difficulties we will face this year, but to reconsider their unilateral decisions about freedom of movement, and to look again at whether we want to isolate ourselves from the biggest trading market in Europe. If we remain in the single market and the customs union most of the difficulties raised today will be reduced, if not solved entirely.

2.34 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I will speak briefly and quickly, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing it.

Between 2007 and 2013, the seasonal agricultural workers scheme facilitated Romanians and Bulgarians travelling to the UK for seasonal work on farms and, in 2012, the year before the scheme closed, 513 farms used the scheme and almost 21,000 work cards were issued. Seasonal workers from overseas have played a crucial role in the agricultural industry. For all the technology we now see on farms, and for all the automation and robotics, a human hand is still needed for many of the jobs involved in getting food from the farm to the supermarket shelf. As we have heard in the debate, 80,000 people a year make their way to this country to assist in this process. Ensuring a reliable workforce is available is so important, or else we will find ourselves in situations where fruit and crops are left to rot and waste.

There are worrying signs that a shortfall is affecting the industry. Last year, there was a shortage of 15% in seasonal migrant workers in the horticultural sector. The Scottish Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, is currently carrying out an inquiry into immigration. We have heard from a range of sectors who are experiencing, or are concerned about, such shortfalls and pressures. While members of that Committee may ultimately disagree about how we best tackle those problems—some preferring a regional approach, others, such as myself, inclined to look more towards a UK-wide sectoral response—there is no question but that immigration is necessary, and will continue, and we need to ensure that the UK remains an attractive place for individuals to come to work and live.

Immigration is not just necessary; it is also good and desirable. Britain would not even be half as “Great” today if it were not for immigration. It is for these reasons that I am joining calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Angus and many others in the Chamber today for the reintroduction of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which will allow people to come to this country to fill the gaps in our domestic workforce.

Such a scheme would allow us to guarantee access to the skills and labour that our rural businesses need, while also allowing the Government an important element of control over the number of people arriving here for work. Although I accept that immigration and the desire to control it underpinned a significant element of the vote to leave the EU, I cannot accept it was a direction

to Government to somehow end immigration to this country and pull up the drawbridge. Rather, I take it as a signal that the British people want the British Government to be able to control the numbers who come here, based on our current needs. A seasonal agricultural workers scheme would allow us to do this, opening up more places at times of high demand and reducing them when the domestic workforce can cover the gaps.

Our post-Brexit approach to immigration should be flexible. The correct level of immigration to the United Kingdom is the amount of immigration we need at any point in time. We must be able to adapt our approach as our society and economy change. Another benefit of a seasonal scheme would be our ability to open it up more widely. Even prior to 2013, only select European countries could take advantage. I would like any new system to be open to anyone from any country who has the necessary skills and expertise.

Earlier this year, the Home Affairs Committee released a report, part of which looked at the old seasonal workers scheme. The Committee was overwhelmingly positive about it, saying it was

“well managed by the Home Office”

and that

“growers got a supply of efficient labour, migrants received a good wage, British workers were not displaced and integration issues were limited”.

Following such a glowing report, why would we not reintroduce a similar scheme now?

Of course, in addition to any new seasonal workers scheme, I would like to see the Government taking steps to bolster the skills of the domestic workforce here in the UK and to do more to encourage locals into this kind of work. But it is important to recognise what employers are telling us: in this line of work, it is hard to recruit workers in sufficient numbers from the UK. That is the reality, so we must have a system that allows us access to the labour we need.

Contrary to common belief, a lot of this seasonal work is skilled. It is undoubtedly hard and time-consuming. The people who come to this country contribute to our thriving rural communities, and I am delighted to support a motion that would make it easier for that to happen. I urge the Government to take forward the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus in the motion.

2.37 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In the interests of time, I will be very brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this important debate.

Those of us who have taken the time to go across the road to read the EU exit analysis briefing—which has largely been leaked and is now in the public domain—will know that the agriculture industry will be the most impacted upon of all the industries following Brexit, and that is in addition to the effect of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which, as we have heard, came to a close at the end of 2013.

The scheme was set up in 1945 to address post-war labour shortages, and more recently it allowed fruit and vegetable growers to employ migrant workers from the European Union and beyond to do short-term, low-skilled agricultural work for a maximum of six months. The reason given by the coalition Government for the scheme’s

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

closure was that there were already sufficient numbers of workers to meet the labour needs in the agriculture and horticulture sectors. However, that has proven not to be the case. Since the closure of the scheme, the industry has been suffering a shortfall in workers, crops have been left unharvested and the very viability of the industry has been left in the balance. Many in the sector are calling for the scheme to be revived, or for something similar to be put in place.

As the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) stated, by the very nature of seasonal work and of having a short employment period, the work has historically proved unattractive to British citizens, and the numbers required in these rural areas often far outstrip the unemployed population in surrounding areas. The EU has introduced protection for seasonal workers in the agriculture sector in the form of the EU seasonal workers directive, which was adopted by the UK in 2014 and sets out the parameters that states must adhere to. Action is needed now, as 43% of labour providers do not expect to be able to source and supply sufficient workers for the food manufacturing and distribution sectors in 2018, meaning that food will be rotting in the fields because of labour shortages. If the Government truly care about supporting the agriculture and horticulture industry, they should introduce a new source scheme now or ensure that when the immigration Bill is introduced special attention is given to migrant workers that are needed to support this and other industries.

We need a long-term solution to labour shortages in the UK and the Government should not let British farms go under because of their arbitrary immigration targets. We need to make sure that the Government's approach to Brexit does not adversely impact jobs and prosperity and that we have an immigration policy based on the needs of the economy.

2.40 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing the debate and I shall speak briefly.

Let me start by saying that, without wishing to be unhelpfully competitive, I think that the issue of migrant workers has been shown to matter perhaps more in my constituency of Boston and Skegness than anywhere else in the UK. I say that not because of the hugely valuable contribution made by people from outside Lincolnshire to our largely agricultural economy over many centuries, or because of the quality of the brassicas, but because it was the issue of migrant workers from primarily eastern Europe that in large part provoked the stronger vote for Brexit in Boston and Skegness than anywhere else in the country.

I have said before in this House that we should not be shy of saying that in certain parts of the UK immigration was for the great majority the prime reason for voting to leave the EU, and I say it again now. I hope that this debate will be part of the process that secures for Britain not only the labour force we need for the future of our agricultural sector but an immigration policy that carries with it popular consent and does not precipitate the kind of widespread discontent that was in part expressed during the debates we heard around the referendum.

Let me emphasise that my constituency has always welcomed seasonal workers—at first from the midlands, then from Ireland, then from Portugal and then from the expanded EU countries such as Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and beyond. The many shops that might otherwise be empty in my constituency and that call themselves eastern European supermarkets now serve the vibrant new communities that exist because of seasonal work. Although that vibrant new economy is a great thing, the social complications of a huge new community have been hugely challenging for many in my constituency. The lack of a functioning immigration policy primarily based around seasonal workers, as a result of Tony Blair's decision not to take up transitional options, served only to highlight the real need for a functioning seasonal agricultural workers scheme, such as that which we used to have and which I hope we will have again in the future.

A third of Boston's population is now made up of people from abroad who most often came for seasonal work, exercising the rights they had acquired under freedom of movement. That approach did not work for my constituency then and it would be wrong to suggest that it would now. What we need is an approach that acknowledges that the season, so called, is in fact now much longer—partly because of the associated industries, as we have heard—and that also acknowledges that, when we have freedom of movement such as that which we have seen previously, it results in significantly increased pressures on public services and significant social challenges.

The scheme we are talking about today is needed for both economic and social reasons. It is vital we get this right and that we seize the opportunities that it might present. I would like to plant three ideas in the Minister's enormous mind. First, a SAW scheme should be demanded. The Migration Advisory Committee should pay heed to the possibilities of mechanisation, which I believe are genuinely enormous—I would suggest to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), were she in her place, that there is no part of the industry that could not in due course be mechanised. But we need to pay attention to the needs of the industry now. That is of course not to say that enormous numbers are always necessary, but the NFU and large major operators such as those in my constituency must have their voices heard.

Secondly, we should explicitly tie the conditions in which a person lives and the consequent pressures they place on local services and local housing supply to the supply of seasonal work permits. I would argue that a sponsor, either a major operator or a properly regulated gangmaster, should have to indicate the length of time a person will definitely be paid for, regardless of what work they are doing, and they should have to prove that they will be housed appropriately. Properly done, this is a real opportunity to tackle some of the modern slavery that taints agricultural work and on which this Government have already done so much.

Thirdly and finally, I would ask that through the sponsorship scheme I have just spoken about we might be able to have a little nudging influence over regional patterns of migration. There can be no border posts between Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, but it might allow us to better monitor and predict local pressures on some public services, although of course changes to free movement will affect that much more.

I conclude by saying that this economically vital move can be a huge opportunity—an opportunity to avoid the mistakes of the past and to shape our country for the better. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will consider both sides of that coin as she works on this vital project.

2.45 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this important debate and agree with her that the issue is now becoming critical in dealing with some of the pressing issues we have in both of our constituencies. I could not help thinking of her predecessor, Mike Weir, who was such a doughty champion of agricultural businesses up and down Angus. I think it was Mike who, in making informed and proper interventions in a series of debates, first warned of the danger of losing the seasonal agricultural workers scheme and the impact that would have on businesses in her constituency and mine. We owe a great deal to Mike Weir for his work over the years.

I represent some of the finest agricultural businesses in Scotland. Strathmore, shared by me and the hon. Member for Angus—I actually used to represent her part of Strathmore years and years ago—and the Carse of Gowrie could perhaps be described as the bread basket of eastern Scotland. The town of Blairgowrie in my constituency is almost exclusively synonymous with the soft fruit industry. Much of the heritage of east Perthshire is bound together with tales of the berry farms and stories of luggies, cleeks and dreels. This is all at risk because of the cloth-eared approach of this Government to the issue of seasonal agricultural workers and their self-defeating and damaging obsession with seeing absolutely everything through the lens of immigration. For this Government, immigration is something that has to be stopped and that has to be curbed. What we are seeing now in our agricultural businesses is that this has become collateral and a real issue that now threatens the viability and survival of many farms in my constituency.

I tried to figure out why the Government were so resistant to proposing a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. It can only be about immigration, and if it is not the Minister can get up and tell me why there is that reticence. It is all about immigration, isn't it? I am seeing a blank look, so I presume that it is. I know that everything about leaving the European Union is, for this Government, about stopping, curbing and doing everything they can to stop people coming into this country.

The hon. Member for Angus referred to the helpful and useful report from NFU Scotland that demonstrates the scale of the reliance on foreign and migrant labour of businesses in my constituency—and hers, and those of all other Members from Scotland. I know it is hard to believe, as we look outside and see the snow brought in by the “beast from the east” settling on the good city of London, but the first British strawberries of the season have already appeared. They have come from a place in south Wales, and they have beaten the record set more than 10 years ago in February 2006. This demonstrates the scale of the innovation in the industry, the technology that is being applied, and the way in which the season has now been extended by incorporating new planting methods and the use of polytunnels.

The extended cropping period now usually lasts from April to the end of October. It is fantastic to be able to get a punnet of strawberries before the Easter holidays and still to be enjoying them beyond Halloween. That is the type of season that we now have, and it is an issue that we need to address.

However, something remains the same in the business despite the advent of new technology, and that is that someone has to ensure that the crop is planted, maintained and harvested. Someone still has to do that work. We have heard stories from other Members about this. When I was a young lad, that work was traditionally done by young local people. The young Wishart, for example, would regularly head out to the berry fields with his luggy by his side, enjoying the prospect of being in the open air and supplementing his meagre pocket money over the course of the summer. Then, in the tattie holiday, I would be howking the tatties oot the fields. That was the sort of thing that we always enjoyed. That work paid for my first musical instruments. That is the contribution that seasonal work in the fields made to the aspiring Wishart as a musician. Now, practically all that soft fruit is lifted by people from the other side of Europe, on whom our producers rely almost exclusively to get the crop in.

I was in this House when the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was put in place, and I remember the debates that we had on it. It has to be said that the Labour Government were always quite keen to get shot of it. They were not the most—how shall I put this—friendly Government towards the countryside and agricultural issues. Those issues were just not part and parcel of the way in which the Labour Government looked at things, and why should they be? Very few of their Members represented countryside areas. Then the Conservative Government came in, and we were told not to worry about the demise of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme because we were in the European Union. We were told that people from the accession countries—as they then were—would regularly come in because of freedom of movement, and that we would not need the scheme any more because there would be a steady supply of labour.

Well, that has worked out perfectly, hasn't it? We are just about to leave the European Union, and all of a sudden, that source of migrant labour will diminish. I intervened on the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), to make that key point. We will probably just about get by, this year. I am not certain that all the businesses in my constituency will manage to survive, but I think that we will somehow muddle through because we still have that access to eastern European labour. However, that will go next year unless we have transitional arrangements in place. Will the Minister give us an assurance that there will be transitional arrangements until the Government get their act together? Next year will be critical, because our usual source of labour will end. I am not going to get into a debate about where we will look for other migrant workers. We have heard all this stuff about Ukraine and Sri Lanka, but that sounds like fantasy when we have had such a good source of migrant labour up to now.

The other massive disincentive that we have heard about today is the exchange rate. These seasonal agricultural workers could now go and work in more clement conditions in Spain and elsewhere in southern Europe where they

[Pete Wishart]

would be earning euros, so the exchange rate would not be an issue for them. The Government should not pretend that the declining exchange rate has nothing to do with their chaotic Brexit. It has absolutely everything to do with it. We have taken a double hit when it comes to seasonal migrant agricultural workers: we are losing them not only through the lack of freedom of movement but because this chaotic Brexit has ensured that they earn less money when they come here.

I have probably visited all the farms in my area on several occasions, as well as some in the constituency of the hon. Member for Angus, and I have found an incredible melting pot of people from different cultures and nationalities who come to Scotland to sample a different experience. Over the years, we have seen people enjoying the experience of being in Scotland at all sorts of cultural evenings and ceilidhs. Those people are the brightest and best of their countries. We think of them just as fruit pickers, but they are the students who will soon have their own hard-earned euros. We want to give them a positive experience so that they will come back to Scotland to spend them. That is soft power at its very best. Seasonal agricultural workers are good for the producer, good for the migrants who come here, good for the local communities and good for our nation. Minister, sort it out!

I have the James Hutton Institute in my constituency, and it does fantastic work to ensure that our crops—mainly raspberries and strawberries, but also potatoes—are more resilient, productive and pest-resistant. The people who work there are primarily European, and they are thinking about going away. Why would they stay in a country that is telling them that they are the source of all its problems and ills, and whose defining priority is to ensure that people like them stop coming here? Why would they continue to work here when they have transferable skills and could go elsewhere, where they would be made to feel much more welcome? From the field to the laboratory, we are dependent on that labour, and that is what we are putting at risk.

I have only one message for the Minister, because we have debated this time and again: get it sorted. Put forward a scheme so that we can go back to our farmers and tell them that there will be something in place that will allow them to harvest their crop. Some 750 tonnes of Scottish soft fruit production is dependent on the Minister doing the right thing. Otherwise, we could end up in a situation in which, despite having one of the best products in the world, our shelves will be packed with foreign produce. I have only three words for the Minister: get it sorted.

2.55 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will keep my remarks brief, following your wise words.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on opening the debate, and all other Members who have contributed to it. There is clearly a consensus that the Government need to take urgent action. Labour would take decisive action to reinstate the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. We would put jobs and prosperity at the centre of our approach to Brexit. We would not sacrifice crops and British farming businesses in order to please factions of the Conservative party.

Farming and agriculture have the most pressing need for seasonal migrant workers. The Association of Labour Providers estimates that between 90% and 95% of seasonal workers in food processing and agriculture are from other EU countries, mainly Romania and Bulgaria. The sector is already having difficulty finding labour to meet its needs. Even before we voted to leave the EU, businesses were calling for the Government to act to address the labour shortage. A report by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee found that:

“The current problem is in danger of becoming a crisis if urgent measures are not taken to fill the gaps in labour supply.”

The Committee was also concerned that the Government did not seem to recognise the scale of the problem.

In his speech to the National Farmers Union, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs finally acknowledged the extent of the problem, but he did not commit the Government to doing anything about it. He said:

“It’s already the case that the supply of labour from EU27 countries is diminishing as their economies are recovering and growing... I also understand that you need to see action quickly. Not least to deal with imminent pressures in the year ahead. The NFU has put forward strong and, to my mind, compelling arguments for a Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme.”

But he stopped there; he did not commit to taking any action.

The only commitment that the Government have given is that “the Migration Advisory Committee is looking into it.” That is not good enough, because the MAC will not report until September, after the end of this year’s peak season. Businesses need to know in order to plan for next season. Also, the remit of the MAC’s investigation is very broad, so there is no guarantee that seasonal migrant workers will be central to its recommendations, or that it will find in favour of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. Even if it does, how much longer will it take for the Government to implement it?

Other sectors are also reliant on seasonal migrant workers, such as hospitality, tourism and care work, to name a few. We have just gone through a winter crisis. The national health service is turning away desperately needed staff because Britain has hit the cap on skilled visas for the third month in a row. Cambridge University Hospitals states that the cap has prevented it recruiting three doctors—two for intensive care and one specialist in liver and pancreatic surgery. We need certainty for many different sectors, and a long-term solution to labour shortages in the UK’s most important industries.

Labour will not let British farmers go under because of factional infighting and arbitrary immigration targets. Our approach to Brexit will be for jobs and prosperity first. Labour is for fair rules and reasonable management of migration. We will design our immigration policy based on the needs of the economy. We will not do what this Government are doing and say, “This is our immigration policy,” and then work out afterwards what that means for the economy.

3 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this debate. I pay tribute to her for the eloquent way in which she made her points. I have absolutely no doubt that her constituents have an extremely effective representative in this House.

I am grateful, too, for all the other speeches we heard this afternoon. There has been a great deal of consensus, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) rightly pointed out. We have had a series of well-informed contributions, although early on I felt that I should perhaps have had lunch first, given the wide variety of produce we got to hear about. I thank the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) for reminding me that today is the first day of spring.

This Government place great value on the UK's food and farming industries. We recognise them as crucial to the UK economy and to the fabric of rural Britain. Let me be clear that I say that both as a representative of the Government and in a personal capacity. The constituency I have the honour to represent covers 162 square miles, and I reassure the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who yelled from a sedentary position, "You need to get out into the fields", that I certainly do so in my constituency. I am astonished to hear that he was in the House when the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was originally introduced, as that happened in 1945. He is clearly ageing extremely well.

My constituency is far smaller than the constituency of Angus, but it is still large and has sizeable rural areas, so I am very aware of the role that the farming community plays in shaping the rural economy and preserving the countryside—to say nothing of the vital role it performs in putting food on our plates.

As hon. Members know, this week the Government published "Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit". I am delighted to have the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), here with me this afternoon, and he will no doubt concur that we want to see a more dynamic and more self-reliant agriculture industry as we continue to compete internationally, supplying products of the highest quality to the domestic market and increasing our exports. Alongside that, we want a reformed agricultural and land management policy to deliver a better and richer environment in our country.

As we have heard, there is a huge opportunity for UK agriculture to improve its competitiveness by developing the next generation of food and farming technology. I reassure hon. Members that their comments about automation in soft fruit picking have not fallen on cloth ears—I am very conscious that huge parts of the sector are reliant on arduous manual labour.

We want to help attract more of our graduates and domestic workforce into this vibrant industry. Importantly, the White Paper also addresses the issue of apprenticeships. We will create more apprenticeships, widen participation and create progression for apprentices. Our reforms will help meet the skills needs of employers by putting them in control and enabling them to work with education providers to develop their workforce now and in the future. We heard that message from across the House. My hon. Friends the Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), all mentioned the need to make working in the sector more attractive to our young people.

We have heard much this afternoon about the UK's exit from the European Union and the issues that that brings for the labour force. The Government have been

very clear from the start that our first priority is to safeguard the position of the 3 million EU citizens already in the UK and of the British citizens living in Europe. The practical consequence is that all EU citizens currently working in the UK, whether they are fruit pickers or farm managers, can stay and settle in the UK if they so choose.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear in her Florence speech last year, it is our intention that, for around two years after we leave, EU citizens will still be able to come and go and to work in any capacity with a registration system, so there will be no cliff edge for employers. Only yesterday, we set out what the rules will be for those who arrive during the implementation period, so that individuals planning to live, study or work in the UK after March 2019 will know what the arrangements will be if they want to stay for longer than two years. It is crucial to business that those arriving during the implementation period will have certainty that they can stay for the long term.

We have clearly stated throughout the negotiations that we value EU citizens and the contribution they make to the economic, social and cultural fabric of the UK. Our offer is that those EU citizens and their family members who arrive, are resident and have registered during the implementation period will be eligible, after the accumulation of five years' continuous and lawful residence, to apply for indefinite leave to remain. That was an issue that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) raised.

For the time being, the UK remains a member of the European Union, with all the rights and obligations that membership entails. Employers in the agricultural and food processing sectors, and elsewhere, are free to continue to recruit EU workers to meet their labour needs. This debate is very timely, in that it follows the publication last week by the Office for National Statistics of two important sets of numbers. The first were the quarterly net migration statistics, which show that although the rate of European net migration has slowed, it is still positive. The ONS figures indicated that in the year ending September 2017 there were 90,000 more EU citizens in the UK than there were a year earlier. Secondly, the ONS published the labour force statistics, which demonstrate that in the period October to December 2017 there were 100,000 more EU citizens in the UK labour force than there were a year earlier, including 79,000 more Romanians and Bulgarians. Of course, I appreciate that there is a difference between established workers and seasonal workers of the kind who predominate in agriculture, but it is important that we recognise that there are many EU citizens in the UK and that there are more than there were at the time of the referendum.

In 2013, the last seasonal agricultural workers scheme was abolished, on the independent advice of the MAC. We know that since then the agricultural sector has been working hard to recruit the labour it requires. The hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned an important aspect of this—the treatment and condition of workers who come over to this country. It is important that we continually have an eye to modern slavery, that we look at the conditions in which people are living and that they are paid the minimum wage. In an important part of the review that we undertook with Matthew Taylor,

[*Caroline Nokes*]

he emphasised the need to make sure that employees had good conditions and indeed had payslips. That remains a priority for the Home Office.

We recognise the concerns raised by Members from across the House about labour shortages. That is one reason why we have commissioned the MAC to conduct a review of the UK labour market's reliance on EU labour and the read-across to the industrial strategy. I know that the MAC has received many submissions from within the agricultural sector and from DEFRA—I say that to reassure the hon. Member for Bristol East. They will weigh heavily in the MAC's deliberations and recommendations. My door is always open to representations, and Home Office officials regularly meet representatives from all sectors of the economy, from business and from academia—

Pete Wishart *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: Given that many Members took a great deal of time, I am not going to take any interventions.

I also assure Members that we keep the situation under constant review, referring specifically to a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made that point clearly when he addressed the National Farmers Union conference last week. That applies equally to all sectors of the economy. We have heard a little this afternoon about tourism and other sectors that might also be affected.

This Government are determined to get the best deal for the UK in our negotiations to leave the EU, including for our world-leading—

Pete Wishart *rose*—

Caroline Nokes: No, I am not going to give way. The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues took many minutes up earlier.

As I was saying, we are determined to get the best deal, including for our world-leading food and farming industry. In the meantime, we will continue to support the industry, to work with it and to review the situation going forward. I would like the industry to be assured that it has friends in government. I look forward to discussing these issues again and to keeping the recommendations under close review, and I will be appearing shortly before the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, when I am sure this matter will be raised—

Pete Wishart *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman can see that the Minister does not intend to take an intervention. [*Interruption.*] Order. He knows that he cannot make points from a sedentary position. He has already made his points and the Minister has heard them.

Caroline Nokes: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also heard you when you exhorted people to keep their contributions short. The hon. Gentleman has made many contributions from a sedentary position, some of which I have even deigned to answer. As I said, I will look forward to continuing to discuss these matters with colleagues across government and to making sure that the views of the agricultural sector, which have been expressed so effectively by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus, continue to be heard. I conclude by, again, thanking all Members for speaking and thanking my hon. Friend for initiating this debate.

3.10 pm

Kirstene Hair: The contributions of all Members on both sides of the Chamber and from throughout our entire country have provided a hugely insightful and powerful case for our seasonal migrant workforce. The passion for the British farming industry is palpable. I know that many other Members wished to contribute today but were stopped in their tracks by the weather conditions.

I am delighted at the Minister's positive remarks about securing the future of our soft fruit and veg industry in the ongoing changing conditions. In my view, the arguments are clear and the solution is clear. I shall continue to urge the Government to carry on their work to ensure that farmers are supported and to end this unnecessary tortuous wait for a system to be implemented. We desperately need British produce to be available on supermarket and shop shelves at a price that is affordable. As I have said before and will say again, I will continue this campaign until I get the outcome that I believe the British farmers want and the migrant workers deserve, and I will do so for Angus and for the whole United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises that seasonal migrant workers make a substantial and positive impact on the UK economy; believes that easy access to seasonal migrant workers is vital for economic prosperity; and calls on the Government to bring forward proposals to allow businesses to continue to access seasonal migrant workers from EU and non-EU countries.

Future of ATMs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Wendy Morton.*)

3.11 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am delighted to rise to speak to an issue that I am tempted to say affects all constituencies throughout the country: the future of automated teller machines and their provision to our constituents.

By way of introduction, I should say that this debate was triggered by LINK—the body that co-ordinates most of the ATM network and sets the rules for ATM providers—which has proposed and confirmed changes to its interchange fees, following a rather flimsy four-week internal consultation with its bank and ATM-provider members. The core of the proposal is that LINK will reduce its interchange fees by 20% over a four-year period, from 25p to 20p per transaction. The first 5% reduction—from 25p to 23.75p—is set to take place on 1 July this year. Interchange fees will then fall by another 5% on 1 January next year, with a further 5% reduction in fees expected again in January 2020 and again in 2021.

Concerns have been expressed by Members from all parties and by organisations as diverse as Which? and the Federation of Small Businesses. More importantly, because they are key to the network, ATM machine providers—companies such as Cardtronics—have made significant representations to us. This issue is potentially so serious that the Treasury Committee has been hearing evidence on it. In a statement on 31 January, the Chair of that Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nick Morgan), said:

“Any significant reduction in free access to cash would be an unacceptable outcome. This will be the first major test for the Payment Systems Regulator. They must ensure that customers do not lose out as a result of LINK’s proposals.”

I shall return to the PSR in a moment or two.

LINK’s proposal comes against the backdrop of significant bank closures, an issue that is often seen through the prism of a rural telescope, but which also affects larger market towns, suburban areas and large city centres. The cri de coeur usually goes up from the banks, as they reduce their estate, of the need to use digital banking. That is an easy solution for very many people and indeed it is very popular—I use it myself—but in rural areas where broadband speed is not as fast as it needs to be and mobile telephone signals might not be strong enough to enable people to log on to banking services, our banks have been very much at the heart of communities, socially and commercially. With their closures, access to cash through ATMs becomes even more pivotal. There was the flimsy consultation by LINK of its members, who clearly have the whip hand, but there was precious little, if any, identifiable engagement with or consultation of consumers in our communities. I am happy to stand corrected, but I believe nothing came through to Members of Parliament suggesting what LINK might be doing.

Reliance on ATMs grows. I know that the Treasury and my hon. Friend the Minister, who I welcome to his place and with whom I have discussed this issue, believe that the use of cash is decreasing. I am sure that he will give us the up-to-date statistics on that, as there is a trend in that direction. The death of cash has long been predicted, but has never actually come about. It has

declined by about 34% in the past decade or so, but there is still a need for cash. I am tempted to say that, disproportionately, the need is among our older people—65% of my constituents in North Dorset are over the age of 70—and those on low or fixed incomes who find managing their weekly budgets much easier via cash transactions than merely by contactless payments or by using some other form of card.

Access to the cash that ATMs dispense clearly provides for a social and financial inclusion agenda. You do not have to take my word for it, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is amazing when people turn up whom one vaguely knew at university. A friend of mine from university days—yes, I can remember that far back—happens to be the chief cashier at the Bank of England. Victoria Cleland is quoted in *The Guardian*—I was given this quote, as *The Guardian* is not the newspaper of choice necessarily in the Hoare household—saying that the predictions of the death of cash are premature and that “cash is definitely here to stay.”

When the chief cashier herself says

“I personally don’t really use contactless”,

that perhaps says something about the over-reliance of some of our service providers on technology, as they neglect the fact that not all our constituents, including the chief cashier of the Bank of England, feel terribly comfortable using it.

I am very grateful for the submissions that I have received from the Association of Convenience Stores. It does not support the LINK decision. It represents 33,500 convenience stores, and in rural constituencies such as mine where the out-of-town shopping mall and the large superstore is not common, such stores provide not only a retail function but will often host an ATM as well.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I know that the turnout today reflects not the importance of the debate, but the weather. Does he share my concerns about the comments of the chief executive of LINK who went on record before Christmas in the *Daily Telegraph*, saying that cash machines will largely disappear, and completely disappear in rural areas? Is that not an odd comment from the chief executive of LINK, which is charged with a public service remit to protect cash?

Simon Hoare: It is not only odd; it is both perverse and totally contrary to the expectations of the regulator and the duties that LINK ascribes to itself. I will come in a moment to the role of the Government, particularly the Treasury, in this issue. There is a real danger of constituents being caught in a pincer movement between competing business and commercial interests. There are duties or expectations of the regulator, but it has no real teeth to deliver. If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I hope to come to that in a moment or two.

The Association of Convenience Stores does not support LINK’s decision. It has raised a number of issues, including bank closures, saying that “the withdrawal of ATMs has increased the role that ATM providers and convenience stores play in providing consumers with access to cash.”

Of course, ATMs hosted in convenience stores and other retail outlets also provide benefits to the high street and other shopping parades by providing access

[Simon Hoare]

to cash to facilitate consumer spending. Wanting, quite properly, local money to be spent locally is one of the major arguments deployed by the Federation of Small Businesses with regard to its concerns.

LINK has suggested that retailers could fill the gaps in the ATM network through cashback services. Again, in theory it is probably right. However, the practice of a one or two-man shop—or, indeed, a one or two-woman shop—in an isolated rural setting holding enough cash not just to deal with transactions, but to hand money to people on a cashback basis totally neglects the impact of the insurance premiums that those retailers would have to incur, often in marginal retail businesses. That is not to mention the security concerns of staff working in those shops at a time when rural policing is not of a high visible profile. It seems a rather dangerous premise on which to base a strategy.

I am very grateful for the support of 41 colleagues from across the country and across this House who wrote to Hannah Nixon, the managing director of the Payment Systems Regulator, who has been both punctilious and courteous in her dealings with me. We outlined our concerns in our letter of 29 January, highlighting the potential disproportionate impact on rural areas, although we did not limit our concerns only to rural areas. Again, I thank Hannah Nixon for her promptness, as she replied on 31 January. Her response gave some comfort, but not enough.

I urge the Treasury Bench to think about these things. I appreciate and understand that we want a light touch when it comes to regulation, but a light touch does not mean contactless. A light touch does not mean that we just pull away and let things evolve as is seen fit. Indeed, a number of concerns have been expressed, particularly by the providers of the machines, in relation to what happened across the pond in the United States. LINK here has predicated its decision to reduce the interchange fee primarily—or certainly in great part—because of changes in the market by other providers, such as Visa. We always used to say that when the United States coughs, 20 years later we will probably get the cold. The race to the bottom in reducing overheads through the interchange fee in the United States has led to a significant reduction in the provision of ATMs and in access to cash, often for the poorest American citizens. Let us learn from that example. Let us be alert to it.

I return to the letter of 31 January from Ms Nixon. Two words cause me some concern. She tells me and the other MPs who signed the letter that the Payment Systems Regulator has made

“clear to LINK what we expect”

and that,

“Promoting the interests of users is one of our statutory objectives”.

I am tempted to say that promoting is good, but protecting—looking out for—would be better; and demanding and ensuring, rather than expecting, would give us more cause for comfort.

Sturminster Newton is a very pretty market town in my constituency that saw its last bank close last year. That has been sad. It has had a huge impact on residents and on businesses within the town. My very good friends Andrew Donaldson and Chris Spackman—excellent town councillors and diligent local public servants—have

been trying to fill the gap that this has created. The town does have a couple of ATMs, but their capacity is small in terms of the volume of cash they can hold, and one of them has very poor reliability. They were just on the cusp, with Cardtronics, of delivering a new ATM for the town. We should bear it in mind that when Lloyds had its ATM, it was dispensing £180,000 per week, rising to about £200,000 when big events were going on, such as the annual cheese festival.

Councillor Spackman contacted Cardtronics and was put in touch with its EU corporate director. Very helpfully, it was going to come and deliver a new ATM, but that was pulled, citing

“recent proposed reductions to the Link transaction fees”

which

“had reduced the viability of our ATM making it uneconomic for them”—

that is, Cardtronics. He said that he

“doubted any other operator would be interested in installing an ATM in Sturminster Newton”

and that as a result

“there would be ‘cash deserts’ in rural areas”.

Sturminster Newton is quite a small town of about 4,500 people. However, the rural catchment—I declare an interest as it includes the town that my wife and I look to for service provision—has about 18,000 people. Therefore, 18,000 people in a sparsely populated rural area now have real difficulty in getting hold of cash.

I have tabled a number of parliamentary questions, and I am grateful for the answers that my hon. Friend the Minister has given. I drew particular comfort from a letter I received on 7 February from my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) in his capacity as Economic Secretary to the Treasury. He says in the third paragraph:

“I know you have an interest in this issue. The Government has always aligned with MPs on the question of continued widespread free access to cash, and made it clear to LINK that while sustainability of the ATM network is important, it must not put this access at risk.”

So the Treasury Committee, consumer organisations such as Which? and the Association of Convenience Stores, very many Members of Parliament, Cardtronics as a representative of the ATM providers, and my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary are drawing together a coalition of interest and concern to ensure access to banking and access to cash through the ATM network. I have sat and listened to, and read, submissions from LINK, Cardtronics, and others. Earlier this week, there was a very useful event upstairs in one of the Committee Rooms where both organisations were able to make presentations, and information has been submitted by the regulator.

I ask the Government to accept this point: while the use of cash is on the decline, its death has been greatly exaggerated. Technology will not always fill the gap, and cash will always provide a very important mainstay in our economic and retail life. Against that backdrop, the regulator clearly has a remit, and LINK has an aspiration. The Minister represents Newark, a constituency that in its size and demographic is probably not that dissimilar from my own, and indeed from that of many other Members. I see that his Parliamentary Private Secretary is my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who I have no doubt has similar issues in his constituency.

I encourage the Minister not to take a laid-back approach to this. We must hold people to account and ensure that the regulator has the confidence to be as muscular as possible. The current trend that the regulator and LINK seem to have of retrospective review and analysis of how these things have panned out is not good enough and is not giving comfort to me, as the Member of Parliament for North Dorset, to many colleagues across the House and to our constituents that we are looking out for their interests and seeking to preserve their access to a robust and reliable ATM network.

3.30 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): May I begin by wishing you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and other hon. Members a happy St David's day? As the subject of today's debate is cash and its availability, I wish the same to the staff of the Treasury's Royal Mint in snowy Llantrisant today. I had the pleasure of visiting them last month for the appointment of the Royal Mint's first ever female deputy master and chief, Anne Jessopp. Anne is the first woman to hold that post since the Mint was founded in 886 AD. It has taken just over 1,000 years, but a woman is now finally in charge at the Mint, and as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) said, a woman is the chief cashier at the Bank of England.

One of Anne Jessopp's first tasks as deputy master of the Mint was to launch the 50p piece that the Mint has created for the 100th anniversary of female suffrage. Unfortunately, although those coins are available online at www.royalmint.com and can be purchased by visiting the Royal Mint, not many of them will enter circulation. That is because there is limited demand for new coinage. Therefore, the Mint, over the course of this year, is unlikely to require new 50ps. Therein lies part of the heart of today's debate: the use of coinage and notes is in decline, and digitisation is transforming the way we use cash and spend money, as it is every other aspect of our lives.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. The relatively few Members who were able to join us today due to the poor weather is no reflection of the importance of this issue to either the Government or Members of Parliament. First and foremost, I want to assure Members that the Government recognise the importance of widespread access to free cash, and we will do everything we can, with the industry, the regulators and LINK, to ensure that access is maintained.

I want to address three areas, which I hope will allay some of the concerns that my hon. Friend raised and speak to how important this is to the Government. The Treasury and I personally will be following this extremely closely as it develops in the months and years to come.

First, as my hon. Friend laid out well, the increasing digitisation that we are experiencing across society is having a major impact on cash. It has been important already, and I think its impact will be quite profound in years to come. That plays into a wider debate that the Treasury is interested in and in which all parts of Government have to engage, which is how we can embrace the new and ensure that the United Kingdom makes the most of new technology and does not shy away from it. We cannot stop the world and get off it, but we have to protect the vulnerable in society and

ensure that the benefits of new technology work for all people in all parts of the United Kingdom, whether in great cities such as London or in rural areas such as Dorset, Nottinghamshire, Cornwall and the others represented here today.

The use of cash has fallen from 62% of all payment volumes in 2006 to 40% in 2016, the last year for which we have reliable figures, and it is predicted that, by 2026, it will make up just 21% of all our payments. As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, however, claims that we will move any time soon to a completely cashless society are off the mark. The use of cash—both coinage and notes—will continue to decline significantly in the years ahead, but it seems unlikely that any of us will live in a country without any form of cash. That poses an important challenge to Government on how we can manage this period of transition in a way that works for everyone.

Cash remains extremely important in the day-to-day lives of UK consumers and businesses. It is still the form of payment that the UK public reach for the most, and 5% of the adult population rely either entirely or almost entirely on cash to make all their day-to-day payments. Many of them, of course, are the most vulnerable, the most financially excluded and the most elderly members of society.

To provide free access to cash, the UK has one of the most extensive free-to-use ATM networks in the world. Compared with our major international competitors, including the United States, our network is extensive and generally free, and those are important things that we want to continue. There are more ATMs in the UK than ever before, about 54,000 of which are free to use, which represents an increase of 50% in the past decade alone.

Ged Killen: Is not the Minister concerned that the LINK decision on the interchange fee might reverse free access to cash? The problem is that LINK is relying on the ATM operators themselves to tell it when cash machines are no longer financially viable. Is it not the case that many machines may already have closed after the event?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, which I hope I will be able to answer over the course of my speech. One of the motivations for LINK and the industry's actions is to reduce modestly the number of ATMs in those areas with the greatest density, including cities such as London, but their pledge to the Government and to consumers, which I will go on to talk about, is that that will not be to the detriment of those in rural areas, market towns or harder-to-serve areas, which are not exclusively rural but could be areas of greater deprivation, even in cities such as London. We have had a fairly strong promise from LINK and from the regulator that there will be no detriment to rural areas. I will come on in a moment to how that will be enforced in practice.

We all recognise that there is a decline in the use of cash, which is making it harder to maintain our current level of free access to cash. That is the challenge that the changes hope to address. I appreciate that we have to view the issue through the lens of bank branch closures, which affects my constituents and those of most Members across the House. The Government, the financial services industry and the regulator therefore have to act to ensure that the needs of the consumer continue to be met. My comments, on behalf of the Government, represent consumers, not the regulator

[Robert Jenrick]

or LINK. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset is absolutely right that we in this House represent the consumers, and their interests must be our primary concern.

Secondly, I wish to address exactly how we do that, which brings me to the particular role played to date by the Payment Systems Regulator and the role it will play in the future, if it lives up to the Government's expectations. In November, LINK—the main payment scheme behind the UK's ATM network—launched a consultation on reducing interchange fees by 20%. As I have said, that was designed to reduce the duplication of cash machines in city centres while protecting the more isolated machines. That is the organisation's stated objective, to which we will hold it to account. At the time, the Government and many Members of this House were clear that any changes must not have a harmful impact on consumers. If machines are lost in cities, the impact should be generally imperceptible, and if they are lost in rural and harder-to-serve areas, they should be replaced, wherever possible.

Simon Hoare: I agree with my hon. Friend about the overprovision of ATMs in a city centre environment, but I just want to make sure that he is alert to the fact that ATM providers—the Cardtronics of this world—often use the moneys they secure from such machines to subsidise rural provision. In effect, they are cross-accounting. The opportunity to use that cross-subsidy spare fund will, in effect, disappear as a result of a diminution of ATMs in large cities. That is one of the big problems.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises an important point to which the regulator must pay close attention, but it estimates that the impact of the changes will be modest, even in city centres with a heavy density of ATMs. The main operators of card machines—the companies he mentioned earlier—are generally financially successful. This industry has more than £1 billion of revenue a year, and its market caps are between £500 million and £1.5 billion. Generally speaking, these sizable businesses are in sound financial health. There is no reason to believe that the changes will alter that, although the regulator must bear that factor in mind.

The PSR, which the Government established to deal with such difficult issues, has taken the lead in examining the area. It has engaged with LINK and held a consultation. My hon. Friend raised concerns about the scope of that consultation, but the PSR believes that it has engaged with MPs, although perhaps not as much as it could have done. It has spoken to a number of different parties across the country—indeed, future consultations could learn lessons from the number of individuals and parties to whom it chose to reach out.

The PSR has come back with three requirements that LINK's proposals must fulfil. First, there is a commitment by LINK to do “whatever it takes”—we must remember those words—to protect the broad geographical spread of free-to-use ATMs. Secondly, any cuts in the interchange must be incremental, and at just 5% in the first year. There will be a review after one year, so in July next year there will be a review before the next cut of 5% could, or would, be implemented. I have received assurances from LINK and the PSR that no further cuts will take place unless they are satisfied that there has been no significant

material detriment to the rural and harder-to-serve areas. Thirdly, there will be a greater than ever focus on financial inclusion, and LINK will continue filling gaps in the network and protecting those ATMs in areas that are harder to serve.

LINK will maintain all free-to-use ATMs that are a kilometre or more from the next or nearest free-to-use ATM, including where a community loses ATM access because of a branch closure. LINK will increase the subsidy for ATMs in areas with poor cash access to keep free-to-use machines going. It will conduct an annual review not just in the first year but, if the changes continue, every year thereafter. That review will consider the impact of the interchange fee reduction on the provision of free-to-use ATMs as phased in over the four-year period, and take action as and when required.

LINK has promised to place a page on its website from 1 July that will have sufficient specificity for every Member of the House to look at their constituency. It will show every free ATM across the country, so MPs will be able to view availability in their part of the world. The website will highlight any areas where free ATM availability is in danger of being lost and state what action is being taken to tackle that. For example, my hon. Friend will be able to look up the ATM that we have heard about in his constituency and see whether it is in danger and what action is being taken to address that. That is important to ensure that MPs and people across the country—including those local councillors who were mentioned—can continue to monitor and ensure that LINK lives up to its promises.

Finally, the way that the PSR will police LINK's commitments can, and should, be stringent. We set the PSR up in 2015 with a specific statutory objective to ensure that the interests of the users of payment systems—not those of the banks—are promoted, with robust powers to enforce that. We expect the PSR to step in and act if needed. I have spoken to the PSR and to LINK, and the PSR understands the importance that the Government place on free access to cash, and the strength of feeling in Parliament and the country. Both organisations have made an explicit commitment to do whatever it takes to maintain the network and provide an additional subsidy per ATM at whatever level is required, to ensure that any machine that is in danger of being lost is replaced by another within a reasonable distance.

In conclusion, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset for raising this important issue that affects my constituents and people across the country. I have been assured by LINK and the PSR that the motivation for these changes is to ensure that the proliferation of ATMs in urban areas is sustainable, and that we continue to have a free-to-use ATM network—an important issue for the whole country and one that sets it apart from many others—but not at the cost of harder-to-serve areas: the rural areas and the market towns. The promise made to me by LINK is that it will do whatever it takes. The pledge has been made to me by the regulator that it will robustly hold LINK to account for that. The Treasury and I will be watching both very hard to ensure that those pledges are fulfilled on behalf of the people of the country.

Question put and agreed to.

3.45 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 1 March 2018

[MS KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Freedom of Religion or Belief

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. This debate is specifically about how the UK Government can work to advance the right of freedom of religion or belief at the 37th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. It is a pleasure to speak on these issues. I thank all the hon. and right hon. Members who have taken the time to come on a Thursday afternoon. There are lots of reasons to say, “No, I cannot be here.” I was speaking at the Christian Solidarity Worldwide event on Wednesday, and I reminded people that there would be snow on Thursday. I said, “Maybe the snow will keep you here.” I said that graciously—I do not want to keep Members for anything but the right reason—but there were Members who had to go home early and Members who were unable to get home and so have come. We are pleased that everyone has made the time to be here. I thank you, Ms Buck, for chairing this debate, and we look forward to significant and helpful contributions from all Members.

I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which speaks on behalf of those with Christian belief, those with other beliefs and those with no belief. I am also the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Pakistani minorities. I want to put those two things on record before we start the debate.

I thank Members for participating in this important debate and for continuing to speak out. Every Member here has spoken out on behalf of those who are persecuted for their religion or belief. I also put on record my thanks, in anticipation, to the Minister. We know how much commitment he has for these issues. He is a Minister who will respond to our requests to him in the way that every Member believes in their hearts that he would. It is pleasing to see the shadow Minister in his place. We know he has the heart for this issue, and we look forward to his significant contribution. I look forward to hearing the comments of other Members on how the Government will raise the issue in the UN Human Rights Council session, which kicked off on Monday. We are having this debate today because we want to send our comments to that session. Hopefully the participation we have in Westminster Hall today will go to ministerial level, governmental level and then to the UN.

As most Members in the Chamber will know, the UN Human Rights Council is responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights. At each session of the UNHRC, member states come together to discuss human rights violations, give them international attention and make recommendations. We will use the debate to highlight issues that we hope can then feed

into the UN human rights commission, which is also meeting. That is why I am very thankful for the opportunity to have this debate, so that Members can raise freedom of religious or belief issues with the Government, and so that the issues can be brought to the UN and given the international attention they desperately deserve.

As Members will know, I have campaigned for many years to raise freedom of religion or belief issues in my role as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. I hope to discuss some of those issues in the hope that it will help the Minister and his team to advance the right to FORB at the UN Human Rights Council. As the debate unfolds and as people participate and make contributions, we will form a joint opinion of what we want among all the parties here, the shadow Minister and the Minister, and that will go up into the heart of Government.

I want to speak about five issues; other Members will speak about others. They are: the mass violence of armed Fulani Muslim herders in their conflict with Christian farmers in Nigeria; the criminalisation of blasphemy and religious conversion in Nepal; the continued state-sponsored persecution of the Baha’is in Iran; forced conversion in Pakistan; and abuses of freedom of religion by the Eritrean state and the ongoing imprisonment of Patriarch Abune Antonios—given my Ulster Scots accent, I hope that sounded as it should.

Sessions of the UNHRC represent an excellent opportunity to increase international attention on an issue, so it would be remiss of me not to use this debate to shine a light on the growing violence of armed Muslim Fulani herders in their conflict with Christian farmers in Nigeria. Since 2001, climate change, overpopulation and extremist religious interpretations have combined to cause mass violence between those two groups in Nigeria’s middle belt. Despite rarely being discussed in the media, the global terrorism index estimates that up to 60,000 people have been killed in the conflict since it began 17 years ago. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced, and thousands of villages, churches, mosques, livestock and businesses have been destroyed, at great cost to local and state economies.

There is no doubt that violence has been committed by actors on both sides of the conflict, but the Fulani herdsmen militia, armed with sophisticated weaponry including AK-47s, is thought to have murdered more men, women and children in 2015 and 2016 than Boko Haram. We all know how cruel, brutal and violent Boko Haram is. In 2014, it was recognised by the global terrorism index as the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world. The scale of the violence is unprecedented. At the federal and state level, the Nigerian Government have long failed to respond adequately.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I declare that I, too, am a member of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. I am most concerned about what is happening in Nigeria because I do not think we know how many people in the country have been displaced by the violence. It is largely unsung in the press, but having looked at it, I would estimate that at least 50,000 or 60,000 people are displaced for religious reasons within Nigeria.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and his membership of the all-party group. He is there, as we all are, for the same purpose: to try to

[*Jim Shannon*]

make lives better and to fight—not physically, but verbally and emotionally—for those across the world who are persecuted.

The Nigerian Government have developed neither early-warning systems nor rapid response mechanisms to violence, and the federal police are rarely deployed. That worries me. Actors on the ground who spoke with the US Commission on International Religious Freedom universally reported that when the police are deployed, they stick to main roads and do not venture into more rural areas where the violence occurs. If they do not go where the violence is and try to stop it, it does not work. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the problem. As Nigeria is a member of the UNHRC, I hope that the Minister and his team will urge the Nigerian Government to do more to defend their citizens. I hope the Minister will offer support to help them do just that.

I will now discuss the situation with freedom of religion or belief in Nepal, which is also a member of the UNHRC. As the Minister knows, article 26(3) of the Nepalese constitution prohibits

“any act or conduct that may jeopardise other’s religion”

or

“convert another person from one religion to another”.

On 8 August 2017, the Nepalese Parliament passed a criminal code Bill that strengthens those constitutional restrictions and outlines significant criminal penalties for offenders. In other words, it is another level of persecution, this time legal. The Bill greatly threatens the rights of religious minorities in Nepal, as the broad definition of the criminal code’s provisions means they can be applied to legitimate expressions of religion or belief. For example, the charitable activities of religious groups or speaking about one’s faith could be considered to be attempts to convert another person. The wording of the Bill is also similar to the wording of blasphemy laws in neighbouring countries, which have been widely misused to settle personal scores, to target religious minorities and to further extremist agendas. The introduction of the Bill is concerning for advocates of human rights and freedom of religion or belief.

What is even more concerning is that the Bill was signed into law on the very same day that Nepal was elected to be a member of the UN Human Rights Council. On Nepal’s appointment to the UNHRC, its permanent representative to the United Nations said:

“This election offers post-conflict Nepal an unprecedented opportunity to prove its worth as an international contributor to the cause of human rights in Nepal and around the world”.

I challenge Nepal to prove to the world that what it is saying in words will happen, because the legal position in Nepal at the moment is contrary to the UN Human Rights Council and what it says. I hope, as I am sure everybody in the room does, that Nepal intends to take this opportunity. I hope that we will challenge Nepal, and that it will change its laws on blasphemy and religious conversion. Nepal’s new role means that it is even more important that the country takes protecting the rights of religious minorities seriously.

It is also important to remember that between 2014 and 2020, the Department for International Development will spend approximately £600 million in Nepal. The UK Government thus have significant influence, through

which they can encourage the Nepalese Government to promote freedom of religious belief, not in words, but with action. I ask that the UK Government use that influence, and hold bilateral meetings with Nepalese representatives at the United Nations Human Rights Council, to encourage Nepal to live up to its obligations as a member of the UNHRC.

Another area of grave concern for those who take an interest in human rights and religious freedom is the plight of the Baha’i community in Iran. We have some people in the Gallery today who are here to represent the Baha’is, and we are here to represent them as Members of Parliament and from a legal point of view. The Baha’is in Iran continue to face systematic, state-sponsored persecution. This session of the UNHRC happens to fall during the second cycle of the universal periodic review of Iran’s human rights record. As part of the review, many UNHRC countries have made recommendations to Iran on how it could improve its treatment of the Baha’i community. Those recommendations have covered detention, access to education, access to employment and non-discrimination in legislation. I am sad to say, however, that it seems that none of them has been implemented, which is frustrating.

Moreover, since the election of Dr Hassan Rouhani as President in 2013, ostensibly on a reformist agenda, more than 150 Baha’is have been arrested. As of January 2018, 77 Baha’is were imprisoned because of their beliefs, and more than 30,000 pieces of anti-Baha’i propaganda have been disseminated in the Iranian media. We are here today to speak for the Baha’is and to reassure them. They are people whom we will probably never meet, but we meet their representatives.

I understand that the UK Government are likely to co-sponsor and support a resolution on human rights in Iran at this session of the UNHRC. Perhaps the Minister will be kind enough to confirm that? I certainly would welcome it, and I look forward to that confirmation. The resolution, if adopted, would renew the mandate of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, a post previously held by the late Asma Jahangir. I should like to return to the tragic and untimely passing of Mrs Jahangir later.

Given the sad absence of a report from the special rapporteur on Iran at this session, would the Government kindly consider making a statement during the interactive dialogue on Iran, referencing the dire situation of the Baha’is in that country? Of course, many serious violations of human rights require attention, but I suggest that a statement on Iran is needed to emphasise the intensification of abuses against Iran’s unrecognised Baha’i minority. If people cannot access education, either at secondary or higher level, are unable to own a business or a house, cannot access healthcare, and do not have freedom of religious belief, something needs to be done. The treatment of the Baha’is can, in many ways, be seen as a litmus test for Iran’s sincerity on wider questions of human rights progress.

Another vital issue that I would like to raise is forced conversion and marriage in Pakistan. Pakistani non-governmental organisations, such as the Movement for Solidarity and Peace, have estimated that at least 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam, and forcibly married or sold into prostitution annually in Pakistan. I cannot begin to understand what has happened to those young girls.

The horror and brutality that they go through is unbelievable, and must be recognised by the Government at the UNHRC.

As the Minister will no doubt be aware, Pakistan had a universal periodic review of its human rights record in November 2017. As part of that process, Pakistan received and accepted three recommendations about tackling forced conversion and forced marriage. Pakistan accepted that something has to be done, which is a welcome development, but there are concerns that the recommendations will not be pursued. I am aware of situations in the past where recommendations have been made and no progress has followed, which is unfortunate. I do not want just a verbal confirmation that Pakistan will do something; I want to see actions, because actions are better than words.

In November 2016, the Sindh provincial assembly unanimously passed a Bill against forced religious conversions. The Bill was sent to the governor for approval, but in January 2017 he refused, citing concerns raised by religious scholars and political parties that the clauses were against the teachings of Islam. Such pressure has also impeded the establishment of a national council for minorities' rights. In 2014, the supreme court ordered the Government of Pakistan to set up such a body to monitor cases of violence and persecution against minorities. The court also ordered the establishment of a special police force to protect minorities and their places of worship. As far as I am aware, those two bodies are yet to be established. Again, there has been verbal commitment, but no action. Let us see if we can move things on. Would the Minister be willing to speak to his Pakistani counterpart to find out about the status of the Sindh Bill and those new bodies? I am also aware of the problems of education, of access to books, and of books that tell stories that are slanted against Christians.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, and I concur with everything that he is saying. Earlier this week, I met with Cecil, who was here with Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I was moved by some of the stories he told me about his own kids' experiences at school of censorship in the things that they are taught. The important thing to put on record is that we are not asking for a leg-up; we are just asking for equality, particularly for the Christian faith. It is really disappointing that Pakistan is not adhering to that. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that DFID has a role to play here? Some of these books are paid for by international aid money. It is concerning that the authorities are overlooking that.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I had the opportunity to meet the gentleman to whom he refers, and I agree that his stories were heart-rending. No one could fail to be moved by what he told us.

Finally, during this month's UNHRC session there will be a specific interactive dialogue on the human rights situation in Eritrea. The UK can contribute to that dialogue by raising the Eritrean Government's continued abuse of FORB. That abuse was highlighted in 2016, when the UN commission of inquiry on human rights released a report, concluding that the Eritrean Government perceive freedom of religion as a threat, and that there are reasonable grounds to believe that

they have committed crimes against humanity. If we believe that—and that belief has an evidential basis—we need to do something.

In Eritrea, there are only a handful of recognised religious organisations, and people who practise unregistered religions face fines and imprisonment, often without charge or trial. Estimates of the number of religious prisoners in Eritrea vary, but it is thought that there are between 1,000 and 3,000 prisoners. Reports of the torture and inhuman treatment of those prisoners are, sadly, only too frequent. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, prisoners have been held in metal shipping containers, underground cells, and in the open air, in desert areas surrounded by barbed wire or thorns.

Even the recognised religions are tightly controlled by the state in Eritrea. Abune Antonios, the patriarch of the recognised Orthodox Church, was deposed and replaced roughly 10 years ago. He has been under house arrest since that time. Here we are 10 years later, having been unable to persuade the Eritrean authorities to release him. Antonios was reportedly released in 2017, appearing at a mass in July following an alleged reconciliation with the Eritrean Government. It is widely believed that his tightly managed appearance was aimed at convincing the international community that the human rights situation in Eritrea was improving and, more significantly, at convincing the Eritrean people that the division caused by the patriarch's removal was over—paving the way for a pro-Government successor. After his reappearance, the patriarch was returned to house arrest. He has not been seen since.

Will the Minister urge the Eritrean Government to release Patriarch Antonios and the prisoners of conscience detained unlawfully simply because of their beliefs? I also suggest that he encourages the Eritrean Government to extend invitations to relevant UN representatives, enabling them to conduct unhindered, thorough, independent and impartial human rights investigations?

To sum up, FORB is a fundamental human right. Tragically, countless people worldwide are suffering because of its denial. In Nigeria, armed violence by Fulani herders has taken the lives of countless innocent people. In Nepal, the Government's laws threaten the freedom of religious minorities. In Iran, the Baha'i community are oppressed by the state at every point in their lives. In Eritrea, holy men and peaceful believers wind up unlawfully imprisoned. In Pakistan, thousands of young girls are taken from their homes and married off to men against their will. Those are just a few examples of FORB violations across the world.

I believe it is our duty as parliamentarians to speak out for those who have no voice, those who are suffering and neglected and those who want to live their lives in peace—those who just want to worship their God in the way that they want. The 37th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council offers an excellent opportunity to help those vulnerable people, and I ask that the Government raise these issues at this month's session. During the dialogue with the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, I ask that the Government repeat their stated commitment to FORB. I know the Minister will do that, but will he give us the assurance that it will go to the next stage, to protect the lives of persecuted religious minorities?

Will the Minister also share the steps that he has taken to advance FORB with his counterparts at the UNHRC, and encourage them to take such measures

[*Jim Shannon*]

as well? That would be helpful for the debate, and to reassure those in Westminster Hall, in the audience and those watching outside.

Before I finish—this is one of those “finally and penultimately” moments, but I am getting there—I hope hon. Members will not mind if I say a few words about the late Asma Jahangir, the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran. Her name is familiar to many human rights activists and will be familiar to many in this room. She was a lawyer and campaigner, who co-founded and chaired the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. She suffered imprisonment and house arrest for her support for democracy and human rights, but her resilience and capabilities saw her become the first woman to serve on Pakistan’s Supreme Court Bar Association. She was a strong defender of human rights in Pakistan and spoke out against violence against women, a position that exposed her to serious threats. At the international level, she was called to serve the United Nations human rights machinery in three roles, first as the UN special rapporteur on extra-judicial executions, then as special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and finally as special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, a post she held until her death last month on 11 February, aged only 66. Speaking as someone who is close to 66, that is a young age—I am not that close, but I am going that way.

Pakistan has lost one of its most courageous daughters, the United Nations has lost one of its most effective human rights defenders and many people of faith and campaigners for religious freedom and for women’s rights have lost a friend. She will be mourned in prayers by many communities. I hope that in our debate today in this House we are paying some tribute to Asma Jahangir’s work and her contribution to human rights.

In conclusion, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to bring this subject forward for debate and I thank all hon. Members for coming to participate. I look forward very much to the responses from the shadow Minister and the Minister. Today, in this House, we can be the voice for the voiceless across the world.

1.52 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I compliment the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his exceptional speech, which was a tour de force of some of the issues that the Government need to address. He mentioned the situation in Nigeria, Nepal, Iran, Pakistan and Eritrea.

We have to keep making the case for freedom of religion and belief. We must not take it for granted. With the indulgence of colleagues, I would like to make that case, speaking personally from the experience of my faith group. Many colleagues will know that I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Last summer, quite a few hon. and right hon. Members attended performances of the British Mormon pageant, a musical drama depicting the arrival of the first Mormon missionaries in Great Britain in 1837 and the story of the first British converts and their faith. It was performed by a cast of hundreds of volunteer actors and musicians in the grounds of the Mormon temple in Chorley.

The story of the Mormons is a very British one. At one time there were more Mormons in England than in Salt Lake City, and the British influence on the Church is evident to this day. For example, a singing group of early Welsh Mormon converts became the world-famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

When the first missionaries arrived in England in 1837, they travelled to Preston from Liverpool, where one of the missionaries had family. When they stepped off the coach from Liverpool, they found themselves in the middle of an election meeting in Preston market square—Preston was unusual at that time because the franchise was wider than the norm. They were greeted with the unfurling of an election banner that read, “Truth will prevail.” That is a very appropriate theme this afternoon.

The early missionaries took that as a good sign for the work that they were about to commence, but the early members of the Church were subjected to persistent and organised violent persecution. Prophet Joseph Smith, the first president of the Church, was assassinated, and the Mormon pioneers were eventually driven out of the United States. Led by Brigham Young, a latter-day Moses, they established their Zion, a city of refuge in the mountain west, which is Salt Lake City today.

The Church has 13 articles of faith, one of which reads:

“We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience and allow all men the same privilege. Let them worship how, where and what they may.”

Given the history and the origins of my Church and its earliest adherents, Members will understand that freedom to live in peace according to one’s beliefs and conscience, devoid of offence towards others, is a matter of deeply felt importance to me.

Today, more than at any time past, none of us can ignore the global and regional importance of religion to politics, conflict resolution, economic development, humanitarian relief and more. Some 84% of the world’s population identifies with a religion, yet 77% of the world’s inhabitants live in countries with high or very high restrictions on religious belief.

Article 18 of the United Nations declaration of human rights says:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

In its latest annual report, Open Doors attempts to rank the countries that are the worst persecutors of religious minorities. It has been described as a “Who’s Who” of intolerance, brutality and fear. There is a top 10 of countries that are described as practising extreme persecution of religious minorities: North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, Eritrea, Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Iran.

The report also makes the point that all faiths endure persecution, but Christians are among those who suffer the most. My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) made the point as lately as yesterday, in questions to the Department for International Development, that we should dedicate a fixed proportion of international aid to tackling religious persecution. I support that. The United Kingdom should take a lead

and set an example. We have at least some influence over countries on that list I read from the Open Doors report.

If we in this Parliament do not commit to defending the rights of all people to tend to their own soul in whatever way they see fit, who exactly do we expect to step forward and fulfil that role and responsibility for us? While it is right that we should approach human rights from a legalistic point of view, we should also be concerned about the spiritual welfare of those who are denied the freedom to exercise their conscience. Our determination to be the defenders of freedom of religion and belief should shape how we interact with other societies and how we bring our global influence to bear.

The plight of the Baha'i community in Iran is appalling. Knowing members of the Baha'i community here in the United Kingdom and recognising their gentle and engaging nature, I find their plight tremendously upsetting. Their situation has not been unnoticed by the international community. The United Nations universal periodic review is a mechanism by which all UN members have their human rights records scrutinised by their peers. The Chilean Government, who conducted a review of Iranian human rights, said that Iran should adopt provisions to prevent all forms of discrimination against women and girls and, in particular, to promote access to higher education for members of the Baha'i community and other religious minorities. The Iranian Government accepted that recommendation, but it has not been followed through and the Baha'i religious minority in Iran continues to have limited access to higher education. It remains official policy in Iran to deny members of the Baha'i faith access to higher education. Iranian policy states:

"They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is."

In other words, students who have a minority point of view are expelled.

The Iranian Government have failed to live up to their commitment to remove discrimination from education, and continue to expel Baha'i students from Iranian universities. I ask the Minister to consider whether the UK mission to the Human Rights Council in Geneva should at the very least make a clear statement about the plight of the Baha'i community in Iran specifically about the denial of access to higher education. All Governments have a responsibility to deliver on the promise of religious freedom, and to protect the freedom to worship and the basic tenet of the free exercise of conscience.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is speaking very powerfully about Iran's persecution of the Baha'i community, which I have raised with Ministers previously. It is widely known that a secret police service in Iran monitors Christians. I implore the Minister to raise that with Iranian authorities. The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point, and we should not shirk from holding Iran to account on this very serious issue.

Stephen Kerr: I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, and I endorse what he said.

All people—those of faith and those of no particular faith—should observe the laws and respect the culture of the country of which they are citizens or residents.

Freedom and respect for law and order are two sides of the same coin. There is a strong correlation between how laws are framed and held inviolate so that individuals are permitted the free exercise of conscience, and the peace and prosperity that societies enjoy. Although we largely enjoy freedom of religion and belief in our country, Parliament and parliamentarians should be alert to the constant need to protect that fragile and precious privilege.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making some very powerful points. At a briefing in the other place last week, I learned that, in a lot of the refugee camps near Syria and in other parts of the middle east where there is a war situation, Christians, Sunnis or Shi'as—in other words, people who have a different religious perspective from that of the majority—either pretend to be something they are not or stay outside, which is very unsafe, because their fear is so extreme. Although I am proud of what we do to support refugees in that situation, does the hon. Gentleman agree that our Government must say that responsibility comes with the funding that we give?

Stephen Kerr: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and endorse what he said. Conditions should be attached to the support we give. I, too, feel tremendous pride in UK aid and what it does in refugee camps, but minority groups must not be excluded.

The lessons of history teach us that there can be awful consequences if the majority becomes insensitive to, and apathetic about, the rights and privileges of conscience and choice of even the smallest minority. Freedom of religion is the right to choose, change, declare and act upon one's faith. It includes the freedom to worship, but it is much more than that. It is the right to exercise or practise one's religion without Government interference.

Religious freedom, including our freedom to act according to our conscience within the law, protects the space we all need to live our lives according to our beliefs and values. An assault on that freedom is an assault on our basic ability to live as we choose and be who we are openly and freely without hindrance. All people—those of faith and those of none—have a stake in protecting religious freedom for that reason. Fairness is never easy. It does not just happen. We must be aware of how we interact with each other, even on a casual basis. That approach runs counter to a troubling tendency, perhaps most evident on social media, for the attributes of people of faith to be reduced to nothing more than a caricature of their beliefs. A "fairness for all" approach goes beyond that. It asks people to try to understand the concerns and needs of others, even if they disagree with them. Most of the time, people with whom we disagree have sincerely held beliefs and a reasonable basis for holding them. We must respect each other.

Religion, especially in an environment of respect, strengthens the social fabric of society. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks said that religion

"remains the most powerful community builder the world has known...Religion is the best antidote to the individualism of the consumer age. The idea that society can do without it flies in the face of history".

The Prophet Mohammed said:

"None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."

[Stephen Kerr]

We should commit ourselves consistently to apply the principle of selfless love for our fellow human beings. We should seek to improve ourselves as individuals and our society in the exercise of the United Kingdom's influence as a global power.

2.6 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): On the border of my constituency is the largest mosque in western Europe. Unveiled across its entrance is a welcoming banner that reads "Love for all, hatred for none". The mosque can accommodate an incredible 10,000 worshippers, so it is no wonder that there is a thriving Ahmadiyya Muslim community in my constituency.

The Ahmadi community identifies as Muslim, but does not believe that Mohammed was the final Prophet sent to guide mankind. Not only does freedom of religion evade the Ahmadi, but they are actively persecuted across the world, including in the UK. I would like to take hon. Members on a global tour, from Africa to Asia, and from Greater London to Glasgow.

Algerian Ahmadis live in fear and are denied fundamental human rights, contrary to the guarantees offered by the Algerian constitution. Between the summers of 2016 and 2017, 280 Ahmadi Muslims across Algeria were arrested due to their faith. In Egypt, the Interior Minister, Mr Magdy Abdel Ghaffar, issued arrest warrants earlier this year for at least 25 Ahmadi Muslims, following which the Ahmadi publications secretary, Ahmed Elkhatib, was arrested after a raid on his home.

In Burundi, 13 young Ahmadis were arrested earlier this year. They were attending a religious education class at a mosque in Bujumbura city when it was raided by the secret service. I am pleased to hear that that situation has now been resolved, although it should never have occurred in the first place. In Indonesia, Ahmadi mosques have been burned down, some Ahmadis have been denied voting rights and the right to marry, and many have been driven out of their homes.

I could go on, but the persecution is happening right here on our doorstep. In Glasgow in 2016, Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah was murdered by an extremist. During the police investigation, officers claimed that the incident was "religiously prejudiced". In Waltham Forest, Muslim members of the Waltham Forest communities forum actively stopped an Ahmadi Muslim being re-elected in October 2017, stating that he could not be a representative of Islam.

The country I want to focus on today is Pakistan, which is home to an estimated 4 million Ahmadis. Across the country, they are actively targeted by the state on the grounds of their faith. In 1984, under General Zia, the Government of Pakistan made it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslims, to refer to their faith as Islam, or even to preach or propagate their faith. Since that year 259 Ahmadis have been killed, and 183 assaulted for their faith; 84 mosques have been demolished, sealed, burnt or forcibly occupied, and 52 banned from construction; and 65 Ahmadis have been denied burial in a Muslim cemetery. Yet Pakistan is a country where people have a constitutional right to freedom of religion.

In order to vote in the forthcoming elections, Ahmadis must either sign a declaration that they do not belong to the Ahmadi community, or acquiesce to their status as non-Muslims. What is more, that separate electoral list for Ahmadis is published and publicly available. On Monday, the High Court in Islamabad ordered Pakistan's national citizenship authority to provide detailed information on an estimated 10,000 Pakistani citizens who are believed to have changed their religion from Islam to Ahmadiyya. No wonder Ahmadis face such widespread persecution.

In October 2017 Captain Muhammad Safdar, the son-in-law of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, gave a hate-filled speech in the National Assembly, encouraging all public authorities, including the judiciary, to oust the Ahmadiyya Muslim community from all aspects of life in Pakistan. The following day three Ahmadis were sentenced to death on spurious charges. In December I received an extremely concerning report that Captain Safdar was visiting the UK. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, I wrote immediately to the Home Secretary. Twelve weeks later I received a quite remarkable response from UK Visas and Immigration:

"In order to safeguard an individual's personal information and comply with the Data Protection Act 1992, we are limited in what information we can provide when the request is made by someone who is not the applicant. We are therefore unable to provide you with information about Captain Safdar without his written consent."

Let me make that clear. As a Member of Parliament, representing hundreds of Ahmadis in my constituency, owing to data protection I was unable to receive confirmation that a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan who had just made a hate-filled speech against the Ahmadi community was entering the UK. I ask the Minister, in whose interest is it for the data protection of that man to be considered more important than the protection of the Ahmadi community as a whole?

Freedom of religion is one of our most fundamental human rights. It is an indispensable pillar of the freedom of communities and societies worldwide. The case of the Ahmadi community globally proves that it should not be taken for granted because, when it is denied, the consequence to life can be threatening.

2.13 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the subject of freedom of religion or belief. I was going to speak about three countries, Nepal, Egypt and our own, but the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke so eloquently at the start of the debate, has already discussed Nepal, so I will limit my speech to just two countries.

I want to highlight the latest position for those of religious minorities and atheists in Egypt. At the end of last year, a 35-year-old man told the news agency Al-Monitor:

"Atheists in Egypt are afraid to publicly come out as such. If you proclaim yourself a nonbeliever, you literally open the gates of hell; you stand to lose many of your friends and will be treated like an outcast. Your own family may accuse you of mental illness and possibly disown you. We are being forced to live as hypocrites for fear of facing discrimination and harassment."

He also said that the situation was getting worse.

A number of recent cases back up that claim. In December, Egyptian security forces arrested Ibrahim Khalil, a 29-year-old computer science graduate, who prosecutors at the Dokki police station interrogated for five hours on accusations of “defaming religion” and “administering a Facebook page that promotes atheism”. He was ordered to be detained pending further investigation. The Egyptian Parliament has recently been discussing a Bill to criminalise atheism, classifying it as contempt of religion, which is punishable by up to five years in prison under Egyptian law.

I encourage the UK Government to seek to persuade the Egyptian Government to end discriminatory and restrictive policies, including legislation banning atheism and minority faith groups, as well as legislation restricting church construction, and processes that make registration of conversion challenging. I am pleased to see the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), in his place today because he has taken a genuine personal interest in this subject over many years. I am confident that he will refer it to his Foreign and Commonwealth Office colleagues, who I know have previously expressed concern about the situation in Egypt.

I must also mention, once again, attacks on Coptic Christian churches in Egypt. Most recently, over the past 12 months, more than 100 Christians have been killed, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I commend the work of CSW, in particular its recent publication, “Faith and a Future: Discrimination on the Basis of Religion or Belief in Education”, launched at the CSW meeting earlier this week in this place, which a number of us attended. If the Minister has not received a copy, I hope he will accept mine, because it contains many recommendations.

Turning back to the position of Christians in Egypt, in April last year, attacks on two churches killed 44 and left scores injured. In May, at least 28 people were killed and 23 injured when masked gunmen opened fire on three vehicles transporting members of the Coptic community to the St Samuel the Confessor monastery. In October, an extremist attacked Father Samaan Shahata Rizkallah, a 50-year-old Coptic Orthodox priest, chasing him, stabbing him repeatedly in the head, neck and abdomen with a meat cleaver, and imprinting a cross on his forehead. Father Samaan died from his injuries. In December, in the Helwan neighbourhood south of Cairo, a gunman attacked a Coptic-owned shop, killing two brothers. Later that day, the same gunman attempted to storm Mar Mina church, killing members of the congregation and a police officer at the checkpoint guarding the church. Several others were wounded. The gunman was endeavouring to enter the church to detonate explosives, but fortunately was intercepted and arrested.

These are incidents, the like of which we have heard time and again in Egypt over recent years. I implore the Minister and the UK Government to call on the Egyptian Government to ensure that all such attacks are thoroughly investigated, with perpetrators brought to justice and proper investigations launched, so that accusations of complicity—including within the security forces—are also investigated. Will the Government encourage the Egyptian Government to ensure that the measures put in place to combat terrorism do not violate human rights, including freedoms of association, expression and religion or belief?

Given that, I want to reflect on how and why the UK should lead on matters of religious freedom. I want to express concern about freedom of religion or belief in our own country. In more than seven years in this place, I have spoken many times, including in this Chamber, about challenges to religious freedom in other countries. I have to confess, however, that while I was preparing for this debate I was in some trepidation about speaking about the subject with reference to our own country—I thought I might be seen as somewhat out of kilter with what we call the “mood of the room”. So it was with some relief that I heard other Members speaking about their concerns about challenges to freedom of religion or belief in this country. I am therefore somewhat surprised, but ironically also very pleased, that I appear to be echoing concerns already expressed by colleagues relatively early in the debate. As has been said, we cannot credibly ask other countries to pursue religious freedom diligently if we do not do so ourselves.

Our former, well-respected colleague, who spoke many times about this subject, David Burrowes, the former MP for Enfield, Southgate, told me today about a meeting that he and the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) held with an Iranian parliamentary delegation in the last Parliament. David Burrowes challenged that delegation on human rights issues in their country, including the persecution of Christians. They challenged back, picking up on abuses in this country, and in effect said, “Put your own house in order before you criticise us.”

Precious religious freedoms have been hard won in this country over centuries by many, including free church Christians, Catholics and Jewish people. As the recent publication, “Turn the Tide: Reclaiming Religious Freedoms in the UK”, reminds us:

“The very first clause of Magna Carta includes the statement... ‘The English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired’”.

That is one of only four of the Magna Carta’s 63 clauses that remain part of the English law. It ends:

“This freedom we shall observe ourselves, and desire to be observed in good faith...in perpetuity.”

From the 16th century, Britain led the world in developing those freedoms, spreading them to other countries round the globe. Many died to achieve those freedoms; others were imprisoned or exiled, or had to leave the country; others were denied an education, not allowed to hold jobs in the public sector or stand for Parliament, simply because of their faith. William Tyndale gave his life so that the Bible could be freely read in England. John Bunyan, author of “The Pilgrim’s Progress”, spent 12 years in Bedford County Gaol for the right to preach and worship freely.

The hard-won freedom of religion is under attack in the UK today, whether unintentionally by those who lack religious literacy, more deliberately from aggressive secularists, through attacks by one faith on another, or simply by those who ridicule people of faith in the 21st century. Those people are ridiculing our Queen and our Prime Minister, both of whom have very publicly declared faith. We hear of British adults who were raised in other religions and converted to Christianity being subjected to extraordinary abuse, including physical violence. One from the north of England wrote to his MP about his family’s troubles. He said:

[*Fiona Bruce*]

“We were forced out of our...home after...several years of suffering as converts...in the form of persecution which entailed assault, daily intimidation, criminal damage to property: smashing house windows and also 3 vehicles written off”.

In fact, the empty house next to them was set on fire, in the hope that the fire would spread to their property. Eventually, the family was moved out under armed police protection to a new home elsewhere in the country.

Two street preachers were arrested and prosecuted in 2017 for peaceably preaching from the Bible—we know that they were peaceable because there was a film of the event. A Crown prosecution lawyer suggested at the court hearing that publicly quoting from the Bible should be considered a criminal offence. The street preachers were fined but later acquitted on appeal to the Crown court. Their case is seriously disturbing. The fact that the police and Crown Prosecution Service decided to prosecute the men simply for publicly reading the Bible challenges the long-established freedom in this country to do that. That was one of the very first aspects of freedom of religion to be established, when in 1537 Henry VIII issued a royal decree to that effect. As I have mentioned, that was the freedom that William Tyndale died for in 1536.

Let it be said and heard in this Parliament that reading the Bible in public is not a criminal offence in this country in the 21st century. The case I have mentioned appears to have resulted from a misunderstanding of the law by public officials, but such instances are deeply concerning and have a so-called chilling effect on the freedom that many Christians feel they have to speak about their faith in public in this country. That is deeply troubling, and we in this place, who value freedom of speech so precious, need to be more keenly aware of it and call it out. I am not saying that every complaint of religious discrimination we hear is justified—sometimes we might not hear the whole story—but there have been enough instances in recent years to cause us concern.

Parliamentary colleagues in this room may remember the assault that took place against the Brethren denomination just a few years ago, when the Charity Commission sought to remove its charitable status. I remember more than 40 MPs crowding into this very room to raise objection after objection. More recently, we have had to combat the suggestion—again in this very room—from the Government, that churches running more than six to eight hours of Sunday school or youth clubs each week should have to register with the authorities and be monitored by Ofsted for the content of their teaching. That suggestion would have turned the clock back two centuries in terms of religious freedom in this country. I sincerely hope that, as there has been no public announcement on that proposal, the Government have quietly dropped it.

Even more recently, there has been a suggestion that those wanting to hold public office should have to swear an oath supporting a currently undefined set of 21st-century British values. That harks back to my earlier reference to people being barred from public office because of their religious beliefs. Great work was done through the 18th and 19th centuries to remove such barriers to people becoming school teachers, Army officers, lawyers, mayors, or students or academics at Oxford or Cambridge Universities. Drawing up a new set of beliefs that people

have to sign up to could take us back to the 17th century, and attempts to draw one up have been troubled. Although most things on such a list would be universal values, not necessarily everything would be. If the Government are still considering that suggestion, I urge them to reconsider it and to withdraw it.

The issue of freedom of religion, belief and expression in our country merits much further attention. Government need to ensure that UK laws that target violent extremism do so precisely and do not impinge on the religious freedoms of peaceable citizens, whose faith often motivates them to contribute very positively to society. To that end, Government should consider requiring officials to include religious belief in the equalities impact assessment, along with the current criteria of race, disability and gender, to ensure protection from discrimination. After all, religious belief is also a protected characteristic.

It would be beneficial for Government to look at ways to improve religious literacy across Departments and public officials, as suggested in the report, “Improving Religious Literacy”, published in 2017 by the all-party parliamentary group on religious education, which I have the privilege of chairing. That is being done in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development. I very much welcome that recent work, but it needs to be done more widely. If we are to be coherent and carry integrity internationally, religious freedom in this country must be nurtured, manifested and supported as well as it is abroad.

2.28 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend—I hope I can call him that—the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on opening this debate in such a manner and highlighting many of the issues that belief and religious faith face across the world. I have to say that I am of dubious faith, but even we of dubious faith recognise the connection between the freedom and love of democracy and religious belief. It is a matter that we should take more seriously.

I want to highlight to the Minister the case of China very briefly and another state, India, in slightly more depth—something I am sure he is not surprised by. In the light of some of the situations faced by Christians in China, specifically Roman Catholics, I hope that the Minister, perhaps via the papal nuncio, will feed back to the Holy See that, in its deliberations with the People’s Republic of China to overcome some of their disagreements over the last 70 years, it might reflect on how the Roman Catholic faith survived the tyranny of western communism and how it should deal with the practice of Roman Catholicism in its connections with eastern Communism. Undermining the underground Roman Catholic Church in any fashion would be a retrograde step, not just for those practising their faith in the Roman Catholic fashion but for all people of faith in the People’s Republic of China.

I turn to the situation in India. The Republic of India, the world’s largest democracy, has a legal system based on common law, is a signatory to many UN declarations, including on human rights, and is a Commonwealth nation. I hope that the Government, through the Foreign Secretary, will raise a few points

with President Modi and his officials at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London in April.

According to some reports, appallingly, India has risen from the 28th most dangerous country in which to practise the Christian faith to the 11th. Christianity in India is not some modern belief flown in from the United States mid-west, but finds its roots in the Christianity of St Thomas the apostle between, some would say, the birth of Christianity and the 6th century. Yet well-known people in the state of India continue to call publicly for the country to be free of Christians by 2021. So far, there have been 23,000 incidents of physical and mental abuse against Christians of all denominations, and 635,000 Christians have reportedly been detained without trial or unfairly arrested. That is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of Christianity.

We should not forget the situation of Sikhs in India. Those in the Sikh community make up the largest proportion of the Indian diaspora in Scotland. Let us not confuse the expression of Sikh faith and its persecution in India with the authentic debate about self-determination. There should be no doubt that the Sikh community faces profound discrimination and intolerance in the practice of its faith. The number of Sikhs detained for very long periods by state authorities continues to rise across all the states that make up the Indian nation. That is a matter not only for those who practise the Sikh faith in India, but for every UK citizen—including many constituents of Members here—who wishes to travel to the Punjab to visit holy sites and/or their families.

Since the detention without charge of my constituent, Jagtar Singh Johal of Dumbarton, members of the Sikh community across the UK have become gravely concerned that they, too, may be detained on the simple premise of being a member of the Sikh faith. To travel to a Commonwealth nation in a situation like that is quite profound. I will therefore ask some specific questions of the Minister for the Government to consider.

First, when President Modi attends the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in April, what discussions will the UK Government have with the Government of India about the persecution of Christians? Secondly, what discussions will the UK Government have with the Government of India on the persecution of those of the Sikh faith? Thirdly, how will the Minister use the responses to his letters to heads of mission about freedom of religion or belief? How will those responses inform Foreign and Commonwealth Office policy, and how will the FCO encourage heads of mission to ensure that their diplomatic staff are trained to spot and resolve freedom of religion or belief violations? Finally, will the Government ask other Commonwealth nations in April what actions they are taking to build a more tolerant society, where religious belief is not only legislated for but defended?

2.34 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We should congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on how he introduced the debate and his work over many years to highlight these issues. I have joined him in many debates over the years. As usual, he spoke up in a powerful and noble way. I am grateful to all those who spoke before me, and I adopt all their points. I do not disagree with anything anyone said.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) rightly described the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims. I was astonished by the reaction of the Iranian parliamentary delegation to this country that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned. I agree that there are examples of politically correct magistrates and police officers being over-zealous in dealing with Bible preachers, and everything she said was right, but to equate that with a criminal regime in Iran that hangs and persecutes people and treats minorities with complete contempt is ridiculous. When we speak out, we should attack the really evil regimes around the world. There are forces for good that are trying to resolve difficult cases.

I say to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) that the papal nuncio has visited Parliament. We have been talking to him and to our ambassador to the Holy See in the past week, and the all-party group on the Holy See is going to the Vatican. The situation with the underground Church in China is unbelievably complex, but there is no question of the Catholic Church deserting those brave people. We hope some sort of compromise or consensus can be achieved with the Chinese Government.

The honest truth is that the people who are persecuted in the world are overwhelmingly either Christians or members of minority Muslim communities who are persecuted by majority Muslim communities. There are of course very bad examples of discrimination by Christians, but I hope that the Minister will not use the usual rather easy Foreign Office line that there is persecution everywhere in the world. I agree that there is persecution in too many parts of the world, and all persecution is terrible, but the people whose lives are made a complete and utter misery and who are overtly oppressed are overwhelmingly either Christians or members of minority Muslim groups.

We are going to stand up one by one and attack various Governments for persecuting people, so let me start with a good news story from Israel. Recently, the Israeli Parliament considered a private Member's Bill that would have granted expansive powers to confiscate church property in Jerusalem. Astonishingly, it would have allowed the municipality to confiscate even properties that had previously been sold by church bodies. Such *ex post facto* laws are almost unheard of in Israeli jurisprudence. Indeed, traditionally, Christian communities have been protected in Israel.

The Christian community in the holy city united in protest and even closed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the first time in decades. Luckily, the Knesset suspended its consideration of the Bill, but the Israeli Prime Minister's role in having it stopped is noteworthy. He stepped in, as *The Jerusalem Post* reported:

"Netanyahu became involved after it became clear that the closure of the church had the potential to cause Israel considerable diplomatic damage".

Our Government should take heed. Diplomacy can work, and Her Majesty's Government should not be afraid to protest or condemn, even when our close friends are involved.

Let me deal with one aspect of the persecution of Christians. There is a Christian Solidarity Worldwide briefing many pages long from which one could take numerous examples, but I want to deal with the persecution of Christians in the Nineveh plains of northern Iraq,

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

mainly because I know the region and have visited it. All but one of the Christian villages I visited in the Assyrian plain near Mosul were overrun. The Iraqi Christian population numbered more than 1.4 million in the 1980s, before our disastrous invasion of Iraq. By mid-2015 it had declined to 275,000, and it had further declined to 200,000 by last year.

The Syriac Orthodox patriarch, Ignatius Aphrem II, told the recent Budapest international conference on persecuted Christians:

“I am afraid the day will come when our visitors come to see us as dummies in a museum, placed in old churches or monasteries. I fear that, in failure of the necessary steps, we may only become memories of the past in a very short time.”

If one goes to ancient Christian communities in the middle east, one hears the mass said in Aramaic, which is the language of Jesus Christ—the original language. However, we should listen to what the Syriac Orthodox patriarch said about Christians being driven out of the foundation place of Christianity.

The situation is not entirely hopeless. Many refugees who were only internally displaced have tried to move home and rebuild their communities.

I recently received a memorandum on the current status of Christians in northern Iraq from a member of the senior leadership of the Christian Church community in northern Iraq. I have met this gentleman and talked to him at length, but for security reasons I cannot give his name, because he is resident in the region. The fact I cannot do that, as he is scared for his safety if I read out his testimony, says something about the problems we face. Anyway, our friend in Iraq writes:

“The displaced Christians from the historically Christian towns of the Nineveh plain are in the midst of a gradual, often halting, return to their homelands. Of the...100,000 Christians originally displaced from the region, approximately 30,000 to 40,000 have begun efforts to move back. Of these, many have also still retained some form of residence in the greater Irbil region, where they took refuge during their displaced status. As such, there is continual movement back and forth between greater Irbil and the slowly rebuilding towns of Nineveh.”

However, he goes on to point out that there has been almost no return of Christians to Mosul, because of justified fears for their safety in the city. I went to Mosul and saw the Christian communities there before ISIL—because of the appalling events there, nobody in their right mind would have gone anywhere near that city in recent times. Because of the security concerns there, Mosul’s Christians remain displaced. They cannot return home and rebuild their lives, and they cannot help Iraq return to some sense of normality and stability. Our correspondent notes that they

“are dependent largely upon the resources of the Christian churches and aid groups.”

Again, not all is hopeless; there are signs of progress. I am relieved to hear that the United Nations Development Programme has changed its previous policy and is now starting to work more closely with Church leadership in Nineveh, which provides almost the only real local government in the area. Hungary has been strong in its work in this field: in addition to appointing an ambassador-at-large for persecuted Christians, it has donated €2 million to help reconstruction in the villages of the Nineveh plain.

What can we do? How can the United Kingdom help? I turn to the Minister. Our friend on the ground in northern Iraq has given me concrete suggestions, which I put to the Minister and to which I hope he might respond. First, the UK Government need to put pressure on the leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Government in Baghdad to resolve their disputes peacefully and swiftly. That is an easy ask, Minister, but it may be more difficult to achieve. The travel blockade that prohibits international air travel to Irbil is particularly debilitating and has had a disastrous effect on humanitarian relief and reconstruction efforts.

Secondly, we need to encourage the Iraqi Government to remove all paramilitary forces from the Nineveh plain and replace them with regular Iraqi army and security forces. The Hashd al-Shaabi units there are mostly Shi’a from southern Iraq, with Iranian backing, and their continued presence adds to uncertainty and insecurity about the future. Thirdly and finally, our Department for International Development needs to examine closely as a potential model the new co-operative relationship building between the United States Agency for International Development and the UNDP.

Our friend on the ground notes:

“In particular, we need to examine the structural forms of co-operation and co-ordination which are ensuring that practical and efficient working relationships are being established in which the Christian minorities are properly involved in the rehabilitation process. DFID should not be allowed to simply provide boilerplate representations regarding the effectiveness of the prior UNDP programs which the UN itself has admitted need to show greater responsiveness to the reality on the ground, a reality in which the Christian churches continue to provide the de facto local government leadership in their region.”

My correspondent cites the example of the \$55 million donated by USAID being deployed around the Nineveh plain in a co-ordinated approach, with close contact between the office of the UNDP director for Arab States and the Christian leadership in northern Iraq. He notes:

“This new approach has shown great early promise at improving efficient use of aid funding, and has significantly improved the confidence of the Christian minorities in the UNDP efforts.”

Yes, 3,557 houses have been burnt down, 13,088 houses have been severely damaged, 8,297 have been partly damaged, and reconstruction is very slow. We can be guilty of exacerbating these appalling problems because of our previous foreign policy. I do not want to go on about that—oceans of ink have been spilt on whether it was right to invade Iraq and to destabilise Saddam, Assad or Gaddafi—but all I will say, as I have said before, is that, in our perfectly justifiable attempts to improve democracy and undermine authoritarian regimes in these countries, we have unleashed totalitarian forces, and the victims of those forces have been the minority Christian communities. I hope the Minister will forgive me if I dwell at some length on northern Iraq, but it is one of the most horrible, most pitiable and most terrible parts of the world.

2.46 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate, his wide-ranging speech and indeed his overall commitment to religious

freedom. The contributions of all hon. Members have shown how important it is to remain vigilant about attacks on religious freedom, whether in this country or elsewhere.

I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha'i faith. On numerous occasions, together with other hon. Members, I have raised the plight and persecution of the Baha'is in Iran. However, today I draw attention to a disturbing development: the persecution of Baha'is in Yemen, driven by Iran. I speak specifically of the case of Mr Hamed bin Haydara, a Yemeni Baha'i sentenced to death by public execution by a Houthi-controlled court in Sana'a on 2 January. The persecution of the Baha'i community in Yemen is a recent, extremely disturbing development, and Mr bin Haydara's case is a graphic illustration of a growing problem, which is a matter of great concern.

Mr bin Haydara is a 54-year-old father of three who has been detained since 3 December 2013. He was first arrested by the national security agency in Sana'a. In the early months of his detention, he was subject to torture, beatings and electric shocks, and he was forced to sign documents while blindfolded. He was detained without charge for 13 months until January 2015, when he was charged with collaboration with the State of Israel, apostasy and harming the political status of the Republic of Yemen. The prosecutor sought the death penalty. More than half of the 38 court hearings in his trial were postponed or cancelled, and the death sentence was announced in his absence. That must raise questions of due process, even in the troubled country of Yemen.

The Baha'i community has reported that six other members of its community are detained in Houthi-controlled prisons and that arrest warrants were issued for a further 25 Baha'is, so there are fears of a wider crackdown on the Yemeni Baha'i community. It appears that elements of the national security agency and the prosecution service in Sana'a are determined to persecute them.

The memorandum of the Iranian supreme revolutionary cultural council in 1991 dealt with the Baha'i question. It stated:

"A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country."

It is believed that that policy is now being enacted in Yemen. Indeed, it is deeply disturbing to hear the analysis of the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, who on 22 May 2017 observed:

"The recent escalation in the persistent pattern of persecution of the Baha'i community in Sana'a mirrors the persecution suffered by the Baha'is living in Iran".

In view of the gravity of the threat to the life of Hamed bin Haydara and the steadily increasing oppression of the innocent Baha'i community in Yemen, particularly in those areas under the control of the Houthis, will the Minister request that the UK mission speak under agenda item 10 of this 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council on the situation of Yemeni Baha'is? Will the UK mission also inquire specifically about Mr bin Haydara's case and that of other Yemeni Baha'is during the interactive dialogue with the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed? Of course, it is he who has already drawn attention to the plight of the Baha'is in Yemen and the concerns he feels about that.

Those are just two steps that could and should be taken to raise the plight of the Baha'is in Yemen. We must not let them down, and I hope the Minister can give me a positive response to both requests.

2.51 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is a real pleasure to be here to support my very good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I endorse what other people have said about his conviction and his drive to bring this matter to public attention.

I want to make a slight change from the way other people have spoken. I want to talk about what I have seen as a witness to religious-inspired genocide, particularly between Bosnian Croats, who are Catholics, and Bosnian Muslims, sometimes called Bosniaks. Both sides are ethnically exactly the same; they are South Slav peoples. The only difference is religion.

In 1992-93, I was the British United Nations commander in Bosnia. During my time, I found evidence of atrocities before April 1993, but nothing like what I found on 22 April 1993. That day, I was in the hills on the instructions of the European Community Monitoring Mission ambassador, trying to stop the fighting between Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat forces. I was on the frontlines, and a Bosnian Muslim commander said to me, "You know, we're not stopping fighting, because our people are being killed by them over there, and they've been killed in large numbers in a village called Ahmici." I said, "I don't believe it." They said, "They are." I said, "Look, if I go there and I discover you're wrong, and I come back and tell you that you're wrong, will you take my word for it and stop the fighting?" It was a sort of trade-off.

They said yes, so I left there and went off the hills. My men and I were attacked a couple of times by snipers. We bypassed a Croat special forces unit that opened fire on us and we went into the village called Ahmici. As I entered, I saw the mosque at the entrance had had its minaret toppled—not a good sign. I drove all the way up to the top of the linear village, about a mile. As I passed through it, I saw such devastation that I could not believe it. There were some houses still standing; they had crosses on the door, marked in paint. Everything else was destroyed.

At the end of the village I deployed a platoon of men—let us say 36—either side of the road, in straight lines, and we went through. I was looking to see whether I could find anyone. We did not find anyone; we saw dead animals, but we did not find anyone until about one third of the way down the village. We came across a house, and my men came back to me and said, "This is disgusting, sir, absolutely disgusting."

We went to the house, and in the doorway were the remains of a man and a teenage boy. They were burned, and they were shot—there were shell cases on the floor—but around the back was worse. We went into a cellar at the back of the house, and when we first saw what we saw, we could not believe it. Our eyes did not believe it. The first thing that hit me was the smell; then, in waves, I realised what I was seeing. I was seeing the remains of a family. That family had been massacred—my goodness, I hope they were shot before they were burned. I do not know whether they were burned alive; I damn well hope

[*Bob Stewart*]

they were not, but they were shot. There was a mother, back arched, and there were children. My men and I came out retching.

I had no idea what to do. I could not talk about it, I could not do anything, I was there in a neutral capacity, but I had to do something, because this was religious genocide. It was disgusting, and we had to do something about it—not just talk about it, not just report it. We were on the ground, but what could I do? I did not have enough men. What could I do? Who would I attack?

Then I thought, “The best way of dealing with this is to publicise it right across the world.” So I called a press conference beside my tank. I accused the Bosnian Croats directly of causing the massacre, because the houses with the crosses on were Christian Catholic houses, and those that did not have a cross, the Bosnian Muslim houses, were destroyed.

A couple of days later, I buried over 100 people in a mass grave, mainly women and children and old men. As I was coming away, there beside the road I saw a family in line, dead: mother, father, boy of about 10, girl of about six—dead. The girl was holding a puppy. The same bullet that had killed her had killed the puppy. I took the bodies to the local morgue. I took them into the morgue and said, “Please deal with these bodies.” That is not a great job to do; it is horrid.

The next day, I went down the same road to discover that those bodies had been put back where I had found them. Guess why? It was because I had taken them to a Christian morgue, not a Muslim morgue, so they put the bodies back where I had found them. That is appalling.

I have given evidence in five trials as a result of those activities, at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. I knew the commanders on both sides; I had dinner with some of them. On the face of it, they were normal, decent people. I have to ask: what is it that makes normal, decent people turn to such brutal techniques? How can normal people kill a child, a woman or a man? How can they do that? It seems to me extraordinary.

Obviously, we have never been in that situation, but why is it that the Nazis, for example, who were normal German people, could do that? Why could normal people in Cambodia, or elsewhere, do that, mainly because of religion? Why does it happen in the name of religion? I do not think there is a mainstream religion in the world that advocates violence against another religion, is there? There are lunatic offspring that claim to be part of a religion, but not the mainstream religions, so why is it that, despite that, we still have people being killed or persecuted for religious reasons? I do not know the answer.

I believe, in my heart of hearts, that religion is often used as an excuse to persecute—a really damn good excuse to back up other reasons for persecution. I remember talking to a Christian Croat farmer. I challenged him on why he had attacked the next farm along. He had been to school with his neighbour. He had known him since they were children. They apparently liked one another. He said to me, “I want his farm; he doesn’t deserve to keep it, because he is a Muslim.” Do hon. Members see what I mean by saying it is an excuse?

I suspect that religion is often used for that reason—to give people an excuse to do what they wanted to do in the first place.

I hope I am wrong, but I now believe that we will never be able to stop religious persecution, not completely. But my God, it is our duty to do everything we can to try.

3.3 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. It is quite difficult to follow the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). He has provoked a lot of questions on why we think religious freedom is important and why we need to move forward with it and for the Government to do more to support oppressed people.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on persuading the Backbench Business Committee that we needed to have the debate at the time of the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for having been persuaded by him in his inimitable way.

I first heard about the Baha’i faith when I met Mr Dan Wheatley, who is a member of the community here and is a persuasive and strong advocate for that community. I subsequently joined the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha’i faith, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) is the chair. The faith has been spoken about today. It is actually the world’s youngest independent religion. It was started in Iran, and it now has 188 communities around the world, all of which I consider follow a noble and caring teaching faith. Its teaching includes the oneness of humanity and, particularly, the equality of men and women.

However, like many other faiths that have been spoken about, the Baha’is have suffered periods of violence and oppression, in Iran and beyond, as has been eloquently described. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Iranian Government have persecuted the Baha’is. In 1991, a Government memorandum, prepared at the request of the supreme leader, urged that the community should be treated in such a way that

“their progress and development shall be blocked.”

That memorandum, which established Iranian state policy towards the Baha’i community, remains in force. Other hon. Members may be aware of the document and the actions it mandates to repress the Baha’i people. I will focus particularly on one area: restrictions on the right to work. We talk a lot about how important employment is for everybody, not only in the economic but the social sense. A direct result of the memorandum is the Iranian Government’s discriminatory policy to prohibit and restrict the Baha’is’ right to employment—a policy that has been expanded over the years—which has had such an effect on the people in the community.

The hon. Member for Strangford rightly paid tribute to the life of Asma Jahangir, who was the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran at the time of her tragic death last month. In her last report, dated 14 August 2017, she noted:

“Baha’is continue to be systematically discriminated against and targeted, and efforts are afoot to systematically deprive them of the right to a livelihood.”

It is also notable that Iran's actions are in contravention of a recommendation that it accepted from Sri Lanka at the start of the UNHCR's last universal period review. Recommendation 138.88 stated that Iran should:

"Continue its national policy to promote equal opportunities and treatment with respect to employment."

There are many examples of how Iran has failed to implement that recommendation, and I will highlight but a few. On 20 April 2016, 17 shops belonging to Baha'is were sealed for being temporarily closed on Baha'i holy days. Days later, on 28 April, four additional shops in the same province were sealed for the same reason. Later that year, after Baha'i-owned businesses throughout the province, in cities including Sari, Qaem Shahr and Bandar Abbas, were temporarily closed on 1 and 2 November to observe a Baha'i holy day, Iranian authorities sealed a total of 124 business premises belonging to 132 Baha'is.

Again, in July 2017, 16 Baha'i-owned business premises in Khuzestan province were sealed following the observance of another holy day. It was a small relief that, two months later, after great effort by the business owners, 14 of the sealed business premises were unsealed. In the same month, the business premises of a non-Baha'i in Ahvaz were sealed for employing a Baha'i. The owner of the business was forced to dismiss the employee and, after being provided with an assurance of non-co-operation with the Baha'is, the authorities issued an order to unseal the business. Further, on 1 May, the business premises of 18 business owners in a city were sealed by Amaken—the public places supervision office—again because they were closed on a religious holiday.

For us, it would seem impossible for that to happen in our country. There would be an outcry. But these Iranian citizens, who are simply trying to make a living while staying true to the faith that they have chosen to follow, are being treated in this way. I admire their courage and perseverance. I do not know whether I or anyone else in the room who has never had to suffer for their faith could endure such persecution. I confess that I would never want to be tested to such a degree. We all need to think about how we would deal with persecution and whether we would be able to withstand it for our faith. The people who have been mentioned today, wherever they are, deserve our admiration.

In view of Iran's failure to adhere to accepted international human rights standards, including commitments that their own Government have made within the framework of the universal periodic review, I urge the Government to continue to support, co-sponsor and lobby for the resolution on human rights in Iran at the Human Rights Council.

Finally, I support the request made by the hon. Member for Strangford that the UK raise the situation of the Baha'is in Iran in an agenda item 4 statement at the UN Human Rights Council, given the sad fact that Asma Jahangir is no longer with us. We are all united in this today. The fact that so many people have turned up on a cold afternoon, perhaps not knowing whether they will get home this evening, shows that we ardently feel that religious freedom should be upheld.

3.12 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member

for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon). I extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee and also to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. Please note, Sir David, my interest as a member of the all-party group. I want to take a moment to express my deep thanks to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for sharing his experience as to why this debate today is so fundamentally important.

Human rights are bandied around. They are written and printed, and we speak about them a lot, but today we have heard evidence as to why it is so important that they go beyond words, statements and intentions and become part of what being human and civilised should really be about. Freedom of thought and belief in religion are mentioned in many documents: our own Human Rights Act, the European convention and the UN convention. Those are examples of why, as a civilised world, we can do better for our future. We have heard evidence today from across the world, and indeed from within the United Kingdom, about the great tragedy that people still use others' religion as a reason to persecute, to be violent towards and to treat differently. They use religion and non-religion—atheism or agnosticism—to say, "You are different enough for me to inflict pain and inhumanity on you," whether through employment for Baha'is, or through property, approach or education. As the world seems increasingly separated, we need Governments, individuals and Parliaments to stand up and say, "Together we are stronger." Together we recognise our differences. We hold that as important in the friendships that we make.

Much has been said about the Baha'is today, and I ask to be associated with the comments that we have heard, but I want to ask about Yemen, where recent changes show the potential for another truly tragic part of history to roll out. We have an opportunity. The situation is complex and there are never simple answers, but there is a simple basis: differences in religion are never a reason for treating people differently.

I want to ask the Minister about an event that happened on 21 February when the UNHCR representative was here. I had the privilege of listening to him submit evidence about what is happening. A number of points came out that I want to raise today, which I want the Minister to take away and in due course respond to. The first relates to a statement that I have read in various places, which is that people of minority religious faiths choose not to go to refugee camps. It seems there is an obvious explanation, but I am not sure whether that is correct. I heard the UNHCR representative say that it was by choice and that the majority of refugees are not in camps.

It is important that the Government look into whether the statistics and the explanation are correct, particularly in relation to the number of refugees from minority faiths that are settled in the United Kingdom. There seems to be a difference in the percentages. It is horrible to reduce people who have refugee status to a statistic, but there seems to be a much smaller number of religious minority refugees settled in this country than perhaps there are in other parts of Europe and across the world. It might be a choice that those individuals and families make, which is fine, but I find that anomaly somewhat worrying.

The second thing relates to some of the recommendations made, particularly with regard to the Government's role in relation to the UNHCR and the process of assessing

[*Martin Whitfield*]

vulnerability and protective needs and providing humanitarian assistance to refugees. The characteristics of vulnerability are gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, and the language of refugees. Will the Minister comment on how much work is being done to establish religion as one of those areas of vulnerability? It seems to get raised. It is certainly within the documentation, but there needs to be an assessment of how strongly religion forms one of the characteristics of vulnerability.

My next point relates to the training that UNHCR staff get on religious persecution and the safeguarding of religious minority refugees. This country and the Government can be justifiably proud of the knowledge that sits within their Departments, and the world can only benefit by its being shared. It would be nice to know that that is being rolled out to support the UNHCR in various other areas.

We have heard some enormously powerful testimony today. The right to practise a religion or to practise no religion is a fundamental part of being a human being. There are complex questions and complex situations, but no simple answers. Using the power of communication, politics and diplomacy, we need to take our place in the world and strive to ensure that in future the powerful testimony that we have heard today can be consigned to history and we can learn to live together.

3.19 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir David. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing time for this important debate. I pay tribute to his work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and the effort that he has put into it over the years.

We have had a consensual debate. I do not think I have disagreed with any point made by any Member. That speaks for the strength of feeling across the House. We live in a world where about 80% of people identify with a religion, so freedom of thought and religious belief is an essential human right. No one should be persecuted for practising their religion. Yet religious persecution is growing across the world. It is therefore more important than ever that we should stand up to protect that freedom of religion and belief. That freedom includes the right to hold no faith. The issue truly affects everyone.

Earlier this week I had the pleasure of meeting Cecil Chaudhry, of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, who I see is with us today. We discussed the work of the commission in Pakistan and the growth in the incidence of blasphemy cases against religious minorities in the past 30 years. An area of concern that Cecil brought to my attention was bias against religious minorities within the curriculum taught in schools in Pakistan. He furnished me with a book, "Education: the Sole Hope for Change". I briefly read it over last night, and would be more than happy to pass it to the Minister if he has not seen it already. A number of colleagues have pointed out the influence that the UK can have through its aid policy. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made similar points, and I echo that view. Hopefully we may get action in this case.

When we last debated freedom of religion and belief, for International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day in October, I listed a huge range of issues that constituents had raised with me. I will not repeat a similar list today, but the House can rest assured that there has been no let-up in the interest in the issue from people in my area. Those issues echo the points hon. Members have made today, and I shall not rehearse the same arguments, but there is an important observation to be made: my constituents do not show simply tribal interest. It is not a case of Christians complaining about Christian persecution and Muslims complaining about Muslim persecution, but instead it is decent citizens complaining about worldwide oppression. I think that there is something we can take from that. They may be influenced by their own belief, as is the case for many of those who have spoken in the debate.

In a similar vein, I am pleased to note the positive steps being taken in Scotland, and particularly the work of local ecumenical groups in my constituency, whose very existence fosters an attitude of openness and discussion. At a time when churchgoing has been in steep and steady decline throughout these islands, it may seem that, at least in the case of Christian belief and practice, its days are numbered here. However, a closer look at the situation on the ground in Scotland reveals that there are still signs of proactive attempts by faith-based communities and organisations to stem the secular tide and exercise the important human right of religious freedom that we are debating today.

As an example of that, large-scale preparations are currently under way by churches in and around central Scotland to host an ambitious three-day series of stadium events this summer at the grounds of Falkirk football club, on the border of my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally). It is billed as the Central Scotland Celebration of Hope, and there is an inclusive invitation to everyone who wishes to come. The family-friendly concerts are free of charge and are scheduled to take place on 15, 16 and 17 June, and will be fronted by the American preacher, Will Graham. The rallies at Falkirk stadium follow a successful, smaller outreach that he conducted in Peterhead two years ago, and will include live performances by Christian artists from around the world.

Will Graham is the grandson of the late Dr Billy Graham, who, of course, passed away last Wednesday, at the age of 99. When Dr Graham first came to Scotland in March and April 1955 to hold Christian rallies in Glasgow's Kelvin Hall as part of the "Tell Scotland" movement, people from far and wide came to hear him speak, and many others around the country attended corresponding events in churches, and watched live broadcasts relayed by the BBC. The Rev. Tom Allan, chair of the All Scotland Crusade, which co-ordinated the Billy Graham mission activities in 1955, estimated that over a two-month period

"a total of 1,185,360 people in Scotland attended meetings of one kind or another".

The Church of Scotland's peak national membership of 1.2 million in 1962 has been attributed, in substantial part, to the religious revival that followed Billy Graham's visit. Congregations from across the denominational spectrum also benefited from a boom in church attendance during that period.

Rev. Will Graham's upcoming Central Scotland Celebration of Hope is expected to draw large crowds to Falkirk stadium from across the nation and beyond. My colleague John Swinney MSP, the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, and I are among the civic representatives looking forward to attending that positive local event. As happened at the numerous, high-profile rallies in Scotland for Will's well-known grandfather, the last of which were held in the stadiums of Pittodrie, Murrayfield and Celtic Park in 1991, there will be live-streaming of the Falkirk stadium event in churches and at other venues around the country and, of course, on the internet for everyone. Perhaps that is an indicator that, far from this being a twilight era for Christianity, there may be another resurgence of spiritual interest just on the horizon.

Often the language we use is important, and we must be careful about inadvertently creating a religiously intolerant society. In this regard, I particularly welcome the term "Celebration of Hope", which is far more inclusive language than the old expression "crusade" or even "mission". Sadly, not everyone is as thoughtful, as is highlighted by another local matter I have been dealing with. This time the culprit is the press, and I want to single out the *Mail Online* in particular. The excellent local family-based group in my area, Al Massar, aims to tackle Islamophobia through a range of community activities such as its local football team, which gives free training, and Eid in the Park, a massive community event in the Falkirk area. It works well with local schools, the council and the NHS on various projects. The group is all about community cohesion, and unfortunately felt compelled to complain about reporting of an event it held at the Scottish Parliament to mark World Hijab Day. I shall not go into the full details of the article, but it contained factual errors, and the phrase "antiquated, oppressive, religious tool"—very negative language, which could very easily fuel Islamophobic rhetoric. I have of course supported the group's complaint to the Independent Press Standards Organisation.

I am sure that the Minister and other Members will be aware that only one complaint out of over 8,000 about discrimination made to the IPSO has been upheld in the past year. The problem appears to be that the editors' code of practice relates to "prejudicial or pejorative reference" to an individual, not a group. Surely that needs to be changed. The UK Government's commitment to religious freedom, here and abroad, has been stated many times in this place. I am broadly in agreement with it, and I hope that the Minister can perhaps help with that point too.

On a positive note, sometimes those in the press are on side of the angels, and are on the receiving side of abuse and intolerance. I want to flag up the case of the journalist David Clegg, of the *Daily Record*, who gave a statement to the police the other day about threats received following his reporting of neo-Nazis targeting the Muslim Labour politician Anas Sarwar. I am sure that hon. Members will wish to join me in saluting his championing of the contribution made by Scots of all ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Thankfully, I live in, and am proud to represent, a very open and welcoming constituency. There is a clear message from the communities that I serve, and from Scotland as a whole, that we welcome people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, and that Scotland is

a truly welcoming and diverse nation. We must seek to develop a religious literacy—a point made by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—that will enable us to engage in constructive intercultural dialogue, and so better understand and live alongside one another. Together we must do all that we can to ensure that the basic human right of freedom of religion and belief is promoted. Today's consensual debate has been a welcome step in that direction.

3.28 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir David. I join my colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my good friend—I hope he does not mind my calling him that—over many years, who was able to table the debate, and in acknowledging the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us the time this afternoon.

It is rare to have a debate of this kind. It brought hon. and right hon. Members together from across the House in a range of emotional, moving contributions and speeches, in which they spoke as one against discrimination against and persecution of people with or without religious beliefs. It is a rare thing in the House that we come together to fight that discrimination across the world and, indeed, in our own society, so I congratulate my friend the hon. Member for Strangford.

The hon. Gentleman drew our attention to a number of issues across the world, not least in Nigeria, where armed Muslim bands have been persecuting Christian farmers over 17 years. The violence is on an unprecedented scale, and we do not often see it reported in the media here. He also mentioned the threat to religious minorities in Nepal. That really grieves me as a person who has visited Nepal on several occasions and was an observer at the elections there in 2013. It is tragic that it is prepared to introduce new laws on blasphemy and religious conversion and is joining the United Nations Human Rights Council at the very moment when it is being intolerant of religious minorities.

We heard much this afternoon, and not just from the hon. Gentleman, about persecution of the Baha'is in Iran. I certainly join him in asking the Government to make a statement on their views on the persecution of the Baha'is, which happens in both Iran and Yemen, as we heard. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the forced conversions that we have seen, in the media, in Pakistan. I think that he was the only Member to draw attention to the situation with the Eritrean Government, who see freedom of religion as a threat to them and demand that religions be registered in that country.

The hon. Gentleman, very movingly, drew our attention to and rightly praised the UN rapporteur Asma Jahangir, who died on 11 February. It was a really good eulogy and an appreciation of a woman who has not had the coverage and publicity that she deserved. We will not forget that she was born in Lahore, but her alma mater was the London School of Economics. She was educated, in other words, in this country; we should be very proud of her as well.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who said that we must continuously make the case for religious freedom. He made a passionate

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

contribution on the basis of his deeply felt personal faith. He also mentioned Iran's persecution of the Baha'i minority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) has been absolutely brilliant in upholding the rights of the Ahmadi community, not just in her constituency, where they are well established—their philosophy is, “Love for all, hatred for none”—but throughout this country where Ahmadis have been persecuted and, more importantly, in Pakistan, where they suffer the most appalling abuse and, of course, arbitrary arrest and worse. My hon. Friend is a champion of the rights of the Ahmadi Muslim community, and long may that continue. She has upheld the rights of Ahmadis throughout the world and drawn their situation to the attention of right hon. and hon. Members and the media. I congratulate her on her excellent contribution.

We then heard from my hon. Friend—I hope that she will not mind my calling her that—the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). She and I served together on the Select Committee on International Development. When Members serve on a Select Committee and travel across the world, they get to know one another right across the parties and they grow to respect one another, which is the way it should be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton has always been a spokesperson not only for her deeply held Christian faith, but for the rights of other religious minorities. She talked about atheists in Egypt and the way they are persecuted. She raised the case of Ibrahim Khalil and said that the Parliament in Cairo is now considering a law to criminalise atheism. That is extraordinary. She raised the repeated attacks on Coptic Christians, and the murder and brutality that they experience. She said that freedom of religion is also under attack in the UK today—perhaps not on the scale seen in other countries, but intolerance is being shown in spite of the right that was declared in Magna Carta all those centuries ago. My hon. Friend's speech was detailed, well informed and very carefully written.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) told us about religious persecution in China and India. It is very important to remember that in those countries, and despite the fact that India is the largest democracy in the world, there is still religious persecution and on a scale unimaginable in parts of Europe. He said that Christianity is more persecuted in India now than it ever has been. Of course, we must also remember the plight of the Sikhs in Punjab. Many of us represent strong Sikh communities. I recently had the privilege to be in Kerala, where I met a Christian preacher, Dr Paul Chellakumar. I do not think that he will mind my mentioning his name in the House in this debate, because he goes around the villages, small towns and communities in Kerala, preaching the message of the gospel. Kerala is home to the largest minority of Christians in India; many are from a Catholic background. Indeed, I met the Indian Minister of State responsible for tourism, the federal Minister for tourism, whose first name is Alphons, which is not a very Indian name.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who made it clear that there should be no comparison between Iran's persecution of religious minorities and any issues that we may have in the UK.

Of course, he is absolutely right, but that does not mean that discrimination in the UK should go unnoted. We should of course draw attention to it, as I am sure he would agree. The hon. Gentleman also talked, with great knowledge and experience, about the persecution of Christians in northern Iraq. He mentioned Mosul. I was in Baghdad just a few days ago with an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation, and we heard even more detail of the appalling destruction of western Mosul—the final town to be taken by Iraqi forces when Daesh was expelled. We were told by the United Nations and by Iraqi interlocutors that the destruction in western Mosul is now worse than the destruction in Dresden during the second world war, and that there are more than 30,000 IEDs—improvised explosive devices—unexploded, undetonated. Many of them are attached not just to the rubble, but to the corpses within that rubble. The UN estimates that it will take 10 years to clear the rubble away. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned, of course, the Christians of Nineveh. We heard a great deal about them on our visit to Baghdad.

Then we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), who does such brilliant work chairing the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha'i faith and has drawn attention over and over again to the persecution of Baha'is not just in Iran but, as she told us, in Yemen. She told us about the case of Hamed bin Haydara. I dare say that that is not a unique case, but it is one that we really need our Government to draw attention to in the Human Rights Council and in all their discussions with Iran and the Yemenis, as well as with the UN. Iran, she said, calls this the Baha'i question. I just say to Members: where have we heard that before? Substitute the word “Jewish” for “Baha'i”, and we know what we are talking about there. I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent contribution.

Then we were all hushed into total silence by, and paid great attention to, the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). We have heard his contributions on many occasions and we know his background and the bravery and leadership that he showed when he was the British commander of UN forces in Bosnia from 1992 to 1993. That is the thing that most people know about him, but I had never heard, and I am not sure that other hon. Members ever had, the story, the description, of the slaughter in that village, which obviously so profoundly affected him and which he called religious genocide. I thank him for that contribution. It behoves all of us to listen to that history and try to learn the lessons of it. We must do all we can to eliminate the bigotry of religious genocide. It is truly shocking, even all these years later. I thank him very much for reminding us.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) talked about the Baha'i faith being the world's newest and founded in Iran, and said that Iran continues to persecute Baha'is and prohibit them from one of the most inalienable rights of all people, which is the right to work, the right to earn a living, the right to have dignity in work.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) talked about the need for Governments and Parliaments to say, “Together, we are stronger,” and to remember what is happening in Yemen. He said that of course there are no simple answers, but differences in religion should never be an excuse for treating people differently. I am sure that we can all agree with that.

This debate, as has already been said, is timed to coincide with the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council, which is being held from 26 February to 23 March. The United Kingdom, as we know, is party to the international covenant on civil and political rights, and article 9 of the European convention on human rights, which is part of the Human Rights Act 1998 and protects freedom of religion or belief.

The number of countries that regulate religious symbols, literature or broadcasting has increased dramatically over the last 20 years and religious persecution has increased since 2000, globally and really disturbingly. I think it useful to quote again from article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

It does not protect someone’s religion or belief from being subject to adverse comments or insults. Article 9 of the European convention adds:

“Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

That could, perhaps, be taken both ways. I hope not. We have seen that violation of freedom of religion and belief is a global issue. Some 80% of the world’s population now live in countries with high or very high levels of restriction and hostility towards certain beliefs. That has to be changed.

I would like to turn to a couple of areas that have not been covered in detail this afternoon. First, the situation in Myanmar—Burma—and the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims. They are the world’s most persecuted minority. They have been denied citizenship in that country since 1982 and are thus effectively stateless. Human Rights Watch has called the violence against the Rohingya “ethnic cleansing”. More than half of the Rohingya population of Myanmar—1.2 million in total—have fled the country, mainly to Bangladesh, during this current wave of violence. I know that the Minister is doing all he can and he has made statements in the House accordingly. I know the Foreign Office is deeply concerned. I hope it will work even harder. It will certainly have the Opposition’s support in anything it can do to try to stop the violence and help the Rohingya.

In China, article 36 of the Chinese constitution states that Chinese citizens

“enjoy freedom of religious belief”.

It bans discrimination based on religion and forbids state organs or individuals to compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any particular faith. However, the state recognises only five religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam and Protestantism. Clearly, it does not recognise Judaism, although I do not think there are many Jews in China. Chinese authorities tightly control religious activity, as we know. However, they tightly control it even further for the Uyghur Muslim community in the province of Xinjiang. The state also monitors the Tibetan Buddhists in the Tibetan autonomous region, as they call it, to quell dissent, because they regard Tibetans as a threat to the state. That is a cause I have been involved in over many years. China also calls

the Falun Gong, which has not been mentioned this afternoon, a cult, and thousands of Falun Gong practitioners have been sent to jail since 2015. We have heard, of course, about the organ harvesting that they claim is being practised against them.

In Bangladesh, the constitution protects religious freedom and equality for all, yet the Government of Bangladesh have been criticised for not tackling adequately the increasing Muslim extremism that is targeting the Hindu and Christian minority. I hope the Minister will mention that in his summing up.

We have heard a great deal about Iran, but of course the number of the Baha’i community in Iran is now up to 300,000, although nobody knows truly how many Baha’is live in Iran. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha’i faith, knows more than I do about that.

We have not heard about Saudi Arabia—one of the most intolerant countries in the world—where apostasy, the act of conversion to another faith, is punishable by death, as is the case in Iran. In Egypt, as has been mentioned, Copts have been targeted, often by Muslim extremists, with the suicide bombings of churches and religious meetings, and the Government continue to restrict the building of churches. I will not even talk about Daesh, because I want to leave the Minister enough time to answer all the points that have been made.

In winding up, I want to draw attention to a couple more areas. One is the general persecution of Christians. We have heard about Christian persecution in many countries, including Egypt and Pakistan. Christians are also persecuted in North Korea and, as we have heard, in Nigeria and Eritrea. We have also talked about Nepal, which has criminalised Christian conversion and evangelism. We have not mentioned Jehovah’s Witnesses, who are banned in Russia, as the Government consider them an extremist organisation. Many of us may have our doubts about Jehovah’s Witnesses, but I would not call them a terrorist or extremist organisation.

In the United Kingdom, according to data released by the Community Security Trust, the number of anti-Semitic incidents has risen by more than one third to record levels in 2016. According to the London Metropolitan police, the number of hate crimes against Muslims has increased from 343 incidents in 2013 to 1,260 in 2016. The Casey review highlighted that in 2015, polling showed that at least 55% of the general public believe there is a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society. That is something that we in this House can change together, if we are so minded.

Finally, let me quote the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin). She said:

“All our partners carry out comprehensive vulnerability assessments to ensure aid”—

that we give from the United Kingdom—

“is reaching those most in need, including those from religious minorities as it is already recognised that religion may be a factor in causing vulnerability.”

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s 2017 report, “Freedom of Religion or Belief Toolkit” states that

“it is in the interests of the UK to help people to enjoy freedom of religion or belief and to end discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.”

3.47 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is a pleasure to be here, Sir David. I am delighted to represent the Government in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on bringing this to the attention of the House—once again. *[Laughter.]* Joking aside, it is an enduringly important issue, not least, as has been mentioned, as we are in the midst of the 37th UN Human Rights Council.

I will touch on a number of points. First, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and all members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. Their tireless work and commitment to religious freedoms is not just important, but assists the Government in making their case. Every time I am abroad, as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, I can make the point that this is a big priority for Parliament, so this work is of considerable diplomatic importance. I apologise in advance if I fail to deal with one or two specific points. I will try to ensure that I write to colleagues.

The hon. Gentleman knows that his passion ties closely with my own instincts, which for 16 of the last 17 years were also held from the Back Benches. I contributed to many debates like this before I became a Minister. As he kindly pointed out, I have tried to use my ministerial office to make something of a difference to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's approach.

I was reproached by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). It was slightly tongue in cheek, but there is a level of seriousness about this. He will appreciate that we need to make the case for religious freedom across religions. I take the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) that we need to make the case more robustly—I will try to do so in the months and years ahead—that those who choose not to have a religion should not face prejudice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough is right, to a large extent, that there are some specific Christian issues. Those he raised about Iraq are absolutely terrible. As he rightly points out, for some 1,600, 1,700 or 1,800 years there were Christian villages in parts of Iraq and Syria where Christianity has now, I fear, been banished for good. The tragedy is that past totalitarian Governments looked after the interests of minorities—not just Christian minorities, but other religions—better than the new, so-called democratic Governments that have come into play have.

I hope my hon. Friend also recognises that we will, and must, make the case for religions other than Christianity. We are not blind to the fact that there are specific Christian and other minorities. I will do my level best for them, at least in the part of the world where I represent the Government.

I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for doing a fantastic job of summing up the debate. I will not go through that process again—I will try to say new things—but I wish to respond to one or two points.

I say to the hon. Member for Strangford that the UK co-sponsored last year's resolution on Iran, and will co-sponsor a resolution along those lines again to renew the special rapporteur's mandate. On Eritrea and the detention of Patriarch Antonios, we have called for his

release with the EU and will continue to work at that level. As a Minister, I have found that working with international bodies can make a difference more generally.

I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East for his kind words about Burma. What is happening to the Rohingya at the moment is dreadful. He will recognise that we have to work internationally, but one of our concerns about the UN is that, even at the Security Council resolution level, we run the risk of vetoes from China and Russia. I have to say—one or two of my colleagues had better close their ears while I do—that, in terms of international organisations, it is within the EU that we can make more of a difference. I was in Brussels on Monday and we worked together as EU nations. Of course, we will do so post-March 2019 as well. We often have to work on a multilateral basis in those areas. As the EU 28, we have started down the road towards sanctions against some of the military's worst elements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) rightly brought up the Baha'i community in Iran, about which we have repeatedly expressed concerns. We will continue to do so, I hope quite robustly, at the conference that is taking place.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan. I know the mosque to which she referred. Lots of politicians seem to congregate there at election time, but she is a more regular attendee. I fully recognise her concerns and will come on to the specific work that we have done. I am working closely with my colleague, Lord Ahmad, who is an Ahmadiyya himself and, as the hon. Lady knows, was a councillor in Merton before going to the Lords.

My frequent jousting partner, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), alluded to a consular case that we continue to work closely on. He made some profound points about Prime Minister Modi and about Christian and Sikh minorities in India. We will do our best to raise some of those in an appropriate manner at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in mid-April, to ensure that Parliament's voice is properly heard. He will appreciate that diplomacy sometimes needs to be done behind closed doors, rather than with megaphones. He also made important points about China and the Roman Catholic Church. We will find ways to ensure that those points are addressed to the heads of missions and that we bring them up properly.

I apologise that I had to escape for a quick comfort break in the middle of the speech by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellum), but I think I heard all her points. On the specific Yemeni case of Mr bin Haydara, we strongly condemn what is happening and are working with international bodies—the EU among others—to raise it directly with the Houthi authorities. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met the Baha'i community in London on 18 January. I will pass on the hon. Lady's specific concerns. She will recognise that Yemen and Iran are not my part of the world, as it were, but those issues need to be properly raised.

As everyone remarked upon, my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made a very powerful speech. He rightly reminded us why we should never cease in our efforts to ensure proper freedom of religion and that religion is not used as an excuse for some of the worst aspects of humanity.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) spoke about Iran and the Baha'i community, which we are very concerned about. We will continue to express those concerns. I, too, admire its resilience in the most difficult circumstances. We have referred to Christian communities that have been banished after a millennium and a half of being somewhere, but the Baha'i community developed its religious base more recently. One can only admire its resilience.

I will come back to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) about his specific questions—he alluded to the fact that I would need to do that. He made a very thoughtful speech. We would like to get to the bottom of the situation that he rightly raised. We need to look at whether those with avowed religious beliefs are poorly represented among refugees or whether, as is a possibility, many are not expressing religious beliefs because they realise that they are likely to have great difficulty in refugee camps.

I will now turn to my own speech, as I know that other hon. Members want to return home. We in Government will remain committed to promoting and defending the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world, including the freedom to change religion and the right to have no religion at all.

At this point, I will reflect on the incredibly thoughtful speech of the one person I missed out: my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. She rightly raised issues that are a lot closer to home. If I had one small point of disagreement with her, it would be this: we need to recognise that religious extremism is often the precursor to violence, which comes back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham. Although the Government need to deal with that sensitively, I agree with her that all too often, our rather mealy mouthed political correctness threatens long-standing freedoms of religion.

On the day the Government jettisoned the Leveson inquiry as being a bit too difficult to implement, we might well reflect on her words about the desirability of insisting that politicians sign up to a pre-election pledge of presumably secular values. Like her, I hope we can think again before heading down a path that might have the unintended consequences to which she referred.

I have said this many times before, not least in this House, but it bears repeating. The Government promote freedom of religion not just because it is the right thing to do, or because religion matters to many around the world—some 80% of the world's population are guided by their faith, according to the Pew Research Centre—but because where that freedom is absent or restricted, intolerance and mistrust can grow. In certain conditions, that mistrust can easily turn to violence and conflict, as has been alluded to.

Societies where people are free to practise their faith are almost always more prosperous and more stable. Evidence also suggests that tolerant societies are better equipped to deal with extremism. However, as we are all too aware, this fundamental freedom is being denied to countless millions across the world. Worse still, some face the most appalling persecution because of their faith or belief.

Our last debate on the subject was on International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day in October, after which my noble Friend the Minister for human rights,

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, wrote to British ambassadors and high commissioners around the world about their everyday work promoting freedom of religion or belief. He and I then wrote jointly to British ambassadors and high commissioners across my patch—Asia and the Pacific—for an update on their work on freedom of religion or belief and details of the future work they envisage. Their responses included a number of interesting strategies and activities, many of which are necessarily conducted through discreet, patient diplomacy.

I should like to share briefly with the House some recent examples of what our posts around the world have been doing to promote and defend religious freedom, first through their bilateral relationships with host Governments and secondly through their project work. I pay tribute to hon. Members, because we have been able to make this case as a result of the pressure they have brought to bear. As a Minister, I feel proud to be able to ensure that so many of our overseas posts are on the front foot when it comes to addressing these issues.

In Nepal, our diplomats have raised and continue to raise our profound concerns about the provision in the new penal code that could be abused to curtail freedom of religion. We shall continue to ensure that its implementation is in line with international standards. Like the hon. Member for Strangford, I am especially displeased that Nepal's legislation on blasphemy and conversions was being finalised at the very moment that the country was admitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council. I take this opportunity to put on record our concern about that.

We are concerned about the use of blasphemy laws in Indonesia and rising intolerance towards the Ahmadiyya, Shi'a and Christian communities. The UK, along with other EU member states, has made representations to encourage the Indonesian Government to ensure that blasphemy laws are not applied in a discriminatory manner. We have already made such representations in London, and I hope to do so again when I visit Indonesia later this year.

In Uzbekistan, our embassy has increased its engagement with religious communities, including by strengthening its connections with the country's very diverse Christian denominations and Jewish communities and with Jehovah's Witnesses, who are struggling to receive permission to worship across the country, as has been discussed. The UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, visited Uzbekistan in October—the first visit from a UN special rapporteur in 15 years.

In my work with the UN, I have been struck by the fact that Kazakhstan, a member of the Security Council, is working closely with a number of other central Asian states. They have a long way to go, but I believe that many of these countries are very keen to become more active in the international community. Freedom of religion or belief is an issue on which, patiently and through diplomacy, we can bring some pressure to bear. I hope we will see some improvement.

Freedom of religion or belief remains a priority area for our engagement with China. We continue to raise our concerns on persecution of religious minorities through our UK-China human rights dialogue. It is worth putting on record that China is making significant progress on our priority issues, including climate change, human trafficking and modern slavery, and is taking a role in the international community. Progress has been

[*Mark Field*]

made, and we need to give credit where it is due. We are making advances in certain areas, which I hope will be a precursor to improvement of religious tolerance along the lines that we have discussed.

As has been pointed out, Bangladesh has policies and laws intended to safeguard the rights of all citizens to practise their faiths freely. None the less, religious tolerance remains under pressure. Our high commission in Dhaka remains in regular contact with religious groups and leaders and is developing a strategy dedicated to addressing intolerance against religious minorities. Lord Ahmad publicly visited an Ahmadiyya mosque in Bangladesh last August, making a robust case for religious tolerance.

In Pakistan, our excellent high commission is working to promote religious tolerance; I saw that work for myself when I visited Pakistan in November. I have raised and will continue to raise the treatment of religious minorities—including discrimination and violence against the Ahmadiyya and Christian communities—with Pakistan's Ministry of Human Rights.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the Minister agree that the first step towards solving a problem is accepting that it exists? On a recent visit to the Pakistan high commission, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and I met the deputy high commissioner, who informed us that there was no discrimination against Ahmadis in Pakistan and that there were no issues relating to blasphemy laws or Ahmadis going through the Pakistan judicial system.

Mark Field: I accept that point, although that was not my experience in the discussions I had. We will continue to make the case for the Ahmadi minority. We will also raise another issue that was brought up today: the persecution and forced conversions that the Hindu minority face.

Let me touch briefly on our project work. The United Kingdom is working to promote freedom of religion or belief and religious tolerance through a range of UK projects. Some are funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office through our Magna Carta fund for human rights; others are funded by the Department for International Development. DFID and FCO officials are, I hope, working side by side in that regard as seamlessly as in other areas of government.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is one of a range of human rights that DFID takes into account when providing direct financial support to foreign Governments. I cannot speak for my ministerial colleague and hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) or for the Secretary of State, but I know that they will be made well aware of concerns raised in our debate. DFID and FCO officials work closely to focus the minds of Governments of countries that receive aid on the fundamental importance of respecting all human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Let me give some examples of how UK funds are spent. Our embassy in Rangoon in Burma is supporting projects to address the drivers of prejudice and inter-communal violence. The Rohingya issue has been dreadful, but is by no means the only profound minority issue in Burma today. We have tried to deliver an inter-faith

dialogue and workshop for civil servants, parliamentarians and non-governmental organisations. One has to find a way to address the catastrophic issues around the Rohingya.

Similarly, we are supporting a project in Pakistan that shows animations in schools and online to highlight the value to society of diverse religious, social and ethnic groups. Our Magna Carta fund is supporting a project to raise awareness of challenges faced by freedom of religion campaigners in south and central Asia. Our aim is to persuade people of the need for better protection for such campaigners. The project also trains them in advocacy so that they are better equipped to defend themselves. It has facilitated discussions between human rights defenders and the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, who was delighted to tell us that those interactions have helped him to develop his own analysis of the specific threats facing human rights defenders.

I thank all hon. Members for indulging me in my attempt to put as much of our work on the record as possible. A huge amount is going on. I am very pleased that my team at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is so energised, not least by the passion felt in Parliament for the work being done. Our diplomatic network will continue to work hard to promote and defend the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief around the world through direct engagement with host Governments and UK-funded work. We are also ensuring that our staff are trained in religious literacy to improve their ability to carry out this important work.

I always look forward to working closely with the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. I thank hon. Members profoundly for their work to ensure that the public profile of this crucial issue remains so high.

4.9 pm

Jim Shannon: Thank you for calling me to speak again, Sir David.

First of all, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have made the effort to come along today. Many others wanted to be here but, because of the weather conditions, they had to get home. Some are here because of the weather conditions—they could not get away. [*Laughter.*] No, that is not fair. They are here because they are interested, which is the main thing.

We have had some magnificent contributions to the debate. I will not give a summary of them, Sir David, because I would not have the time and you would not let me. However, I will just say that there were significant contributions from the hon. Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), and for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day).

I thank the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Leeds North East—for summing up so well. It is very hard to follow that act, but I thank him because he is a gentleman with passion.

I say to the Minister that we are very privileged in the all-party group on freedom of religion or belief. Some staff members are here today and the all-party group

does so well because of the workers here in Parliament, and because of what they do for the group and stakeholders. Our communication with the Minister has been substantial and it is immensely appreciated by both us and our stakeholders. We recognise in the Minister a man—can I say this?—who has a passion for and interest in this issue. I am minded of a biblical story. I will not go into too much detail, Sir David, but I will just say to the Minister that we are here to “strengthen your arms” and hold them up, if I can use that analogy. Those who know the story—everyone here will—know that it is a very important one.

I will just say thanks again to everyone for contributing to the debate, and finish with a quick quotation from Scripture. It is from James 3:17-18:

“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

I will just say that everyone here today has made the voice of the voiceless heard in this House, and how well they have all done.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief.

4.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 1 March 2018

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Data Protection Bill

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has made the following statement under section 19(1)(a) of the Human Rights Act 1998:

In my view, the provisions of the Data Protection Bill are compatible with the convention rights.

[HCWS501]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

EU Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I will attend the EU Environment Council, which takes place on 5 March in Brussels.

Following the adoption of the agenda, the list of “A” items will be approved.

Under non-legislative activities, Council will exchange views on delivering the circular economy action plan, including; a) European strategy for plastics in a circular economy, b) monitoring framework for the circular economy and c) implementation of the circular economy package: options to address the interface between chemical, product and waste legislation.

The following items are currently on the agenda to be considered under “Any Other Business”:

- Regulation on CO2 standards for cars and vans;
- Developments regarding shipping and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO);
- 21st European Forum on Eco-innovation for air quality (Sofia, 5-6 February 2018);
- Global Pact for the Environment;
- Implementation of the regulation on invasive alien species.

The UK has additionally tabled an AOB with France calling on the EU and its member states to ban commercial trade in raw ivory within the EU to tackle the current elephant poaching crisis.

Two further AOB items have been added to the agenda on the elimination of deforestation from the supply chain and the 24th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24, Katowice, 3-14 December 2018).

A lunchtime discussion will then be held on enabling eco-innovation transition towards a circular economy.

Council will conclude with an exchange of views on Greening the European Semester. This will address the integration of environmental considerations of the European Semester with the implementation of environmental

policy, linking to the Environmental Implementation Review and Environmental Compliance and Governance Action Plan.

Until the UK leaves the European Union, the UK remains a full member of the EU and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of our negotiations with the EU on the future partnership will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future.

[HCWS499]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Today the security service reduced the threat level to Great Britain from Northern Ireland-related terrorism from SUBSTANTIAL to MODERATE. This means that a terrorist attack is possible, but not likely.

The threat level to the UK from international terrorism remains at SEVERE, and the threat level to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism also remains at SEVERE, meaning that an attack is highly likely.

Threat levels are designed to give a broad indication of the likelihood of a terrorist attack. They are a tool for security practitioners working across different sectors and the police to use in determining what protective security response may be required. They also keep the public informed and give context to the protective security measures which we all encounter in our daily lives.

Despite the change which has been made today, there remains a real and serious threat against the United Kingdom from terrorism and I would ask the public to remain vigilant and to report any suspicious activity to the police regardless of the threat level.

The decision to change this threat level is taken by the security service independently of Ministers and is based on the very latest intelligence, considering factors such as capability, intent and timescale. Threat levels are kept under constant review.

[HCWS500]

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Child Migration Programmes

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to announce that the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse has today published its first regular report, which can be found at www.iicsa.org.uk.

This report relates to its child migration programmes case study. The child migration policy was misguided and deeply flawed. Successive Governments have accepted that the policy of child migration was wrong. The 2010 national apology has been reaffirmed in each subsequent year. Over £9 million has been made available to former child migrants to help them be reunited with their families.

Across Government, we look forward to viewing this report and considering how we can respond to its content. Meanwhile I would like to thank Professor Jay

and her Panel for their continued work to uncover the truth, expose what went wrong in the past and to learn the lessons for the future.

[HCWS503]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Tower

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In my update to the House on Grenfell Tower and building safety on 18 December 2017,¹ I referred to anxieties about the long-term future of the Grenfell Tower site from those who have been most affected by the terrible events of 14 June 2017.

I set out that the Minister for Grenfell Victims was working with the local community and council to agree a set of written principles that will guide the way forward on decision making for the future of the site. The bereaved, survivors and immediate North Kensington community will lead and be at the heart of the decision-making process.

I am today placing a copy of the agreed principles in the House Library so that our commitments are on the record. I am also placing in the Library a copy of a letter from myself and the Minister for Grenfell Victims to residents offering assurance about ongoing engagement regarding management of Grenfell Tower.

[HCWS498]

PRIME MINISTER

Investigatory Powers: Oversight

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On 1 September, the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, Lord Justice Fulford took on responsibility for overseeing the use of investigatory powers by public authorities. This was a significant milestone in the transition to new oversight arrangements under the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

To enable the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to take on additional oversight functions not covered by his statutory responsibilities, I gave two directions to the Commissioner on 22 August 2017. Issuing these directions forms part of our rigorous intelligence oversight system.

One direction instructed the Commissioner to keep under review compliance with the consolidated guidance on detainees by officers of the security and intelligence agencies, and members of the Armed Forces and employees of the Ministry of Defence so far as they are engaged in intelligence activities. The consolidated guidance sets out the standards that personnel must apply during the detention and interviewing of detainees held by others overseas. The other direction instructed the Commissioner to keep under review the application of the security service guidelines on the use of agents who participate in criminality and the authorisations issued in accordance with them. In accordance with my obligation to publish such directions under section 230 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016,¹ I am now depositing in the Libraries a copy of both directions.

[HCWS502]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 1 March 2018

TREASURY

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from an answer given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) during Topical Questions to Treasury Ministers on 27 February 2018:

Sir Hugo Swire: Reducing tourism VAT to 5% after we leave the European Union would create an extra 121,000 jobs and £4.6 billion in revenue to the Treasury over 10 years. It would be a great boost not only to our great cities, but to our great coastal towns, such as Exmouth, Sidmouth and Budleigh Salterton in my East Devon constituency. Will the Chancellor commit to looking again at this issue as we leave the EU?

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend is nothing if not persistent and consistent. I cannot remember how many times he has raised this issue. There have been numerous requests for new VAT reliefs since the referendum, some of which are currently not permitted under EU law. We have calculated that if we were to grant all the VAT

relief requests that we have received, that would come to more than £38 billion a year. On VAT and tourism, the Government have received representations on this issue, and we are looking again at the case for change. We have issued a call for evidence on the impact of VAT and air passenger duty on tourism in Northern Ireland, and we will certainly keep this issue under careful review. [*Official Report, 27 February 2018, Vol. 636, c. 678.*]

Letter of correction from Mr Hammond:

An error has been identified in the Oral Answer given to the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) at Treasury Topical Questions on 27 February 2018. The correct answer should have been:

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend is nothing if not persistent and consistent. I cannot remember how many times he has raised this issue. There have been numerous requests for new VAT reliefs since the referendum, some of which are currently not permitted under EU law. We have calculated that if we were to grant all the VAT relief requests that we have received, that would come to more than £38 billion a year. On VAT and tourism, the Government have received representations on this issue, and we are looking again at the case for change. We **will publish** a call for evidence on the impact of VAT and air passenger duty on tourism in Northern Ireland, and we will certainly keep this issue under careful review.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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**not later than
Thursday 8 March 2018**

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