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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 26 March 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Pension Protection Fund: Former Carillion Employees

1. **Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure support for former Carillion employees whose pensions will not be covered by the Pension Protection Fund. [904547]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): There are 12 Carillion defined benefit schemes in a PPF assessment period. The PPF is working with scheme administrators to determine whether they can pay pensions at or above PPF benefits. Where a scheme cannot do this, the PPF will assume responsibility and pay compensation.

Eleanor Smith: The workers in the Carillion defined contribution scheme should not have to suffer any detriment to their pension. Will the Government be looking to draw back bonuses paid to the Carillion executives to put back into the pension funds?

Ms McVey: As I said, the Carillion schemes are at present in the assessment period for the funds, and we are looking at what happened in those instances. The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that we have brought forward our White Paper on defined benefits and increasing the regulator's powers to support these schemes in the best way possible, to make sure pensioners get those pensions that they so rightly deserve. It is the Conservative party that will be strengthening that for workers, to make sure we look after such pensioners.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State pay particular attention to that group of public sector workers who transferred into Carillion and are now retired, and who were covered not so much by the PPF, because they were given ex gratia payments rather than pensions, at the time they transferred?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend raises an important question, and he is right: a number of Carillion employees were compulsorily transferred from the public sector, and we are looking at whether they can now rejoin the public sector service scheme. We are working hard to determine that.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree that the Carillion pension crisis, as well as the many pensions crises over

the years, support the Scottish National party calls for the UK Government to urgently set up an independent savings and pension commission to take a robust look at the pensions landscape?

Ms McVey: The regulator is independent, and that is what it does: look at pension schemes. We have, through the White Paper, strengthened the regulator's powers and now for the first time brought forward criminal sanctions should any director or employer bring into harm wilfully and neglectfully the workers' pension scheme.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The catastrophic collapse of Carillion saw thousands of workers pay the price, including with their pensions. It was a monumental failure of governance and by Government, who knew Carillion was sinking into difficulties and went on awarding contracts despite profit warnings. The Secretary of State has said before the Select Committee that the Pensions Regulator knew about the mounting problems in 2014; were the Government alerted and did they choose to ignore those warnings, or did the regulator choose to ignore them and fail to alert the Government?

Ms McVey: The regulator and assessors are now looking into a whole series of issues. Fundamentally, one of them has to be how Carillion's books went from being a healthy balance-sheet to, a year later, not being a healthy balance-sheet. The auditors and accountants who had signed those books are now being thoroughly examined to establish what happened there before the regulator would have had to look into things, so a lot of investigations are going on.

Universal Credit Roll-out

2. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What assessment she has made of the efficacy of the roll-out of universal credit. [904548]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): Universal credit is a modern flexible benefit which provides tailored support to claimants. Three separate research studies show that UC is having a positive impact on employer outcomes. The changes announced in the Budget are giving even more support for claimants.

Richard Graham: Before Christmas, many on the Opposition Benches predicted disaster as more of our constituents claimed their benefits through universal credit. In fact—and I believe the changes made by the DWP have made a significant difference—the early anecdotal evidence in Gloucestershire, from the Jobcentre Plus and Gloucester City Homes, is that things are moving smoothly ahead. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is broadly the case across the country, and that the introduction of trusted landlords is making a significant improvement to relationships with housing associations, and will she do more to roll that out?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct. Three independent studies are saying that universal credit is getting people into work quicker, and that they are staying in work longer and also looking for more work. He is exactly right about the trusted partner status. The reason he has started to do extra work with his jobcentre, looking at

tenants who might not have a roof over their head, was the false information cited in Prime Minister's questions by Jeremy Corbyn, who said that one in eight would be evicted. That was not the case, and, as we are seeing, people are now getting into work and their homes are being protected.

Mr Speaker: I say gently to the Secretary of State that one must not refer to other Members by name. The right hon. Member for Islington North is the Leader of the Opposition, but he should not be referred to by name.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I ask the Secretary of State not to give an immediate reply to this question but to ponder it. The Secretary of State has told me that the 98 members of jobcentre staff on temporary contracts in Birkenhead are going to be laid off because they have come to the end of their contract period. Unlike Gloucester, we are having real problems with the roll-out of universal credit. I had five cases last week, including one involving a woman who had been reduced to living on 7p. Might not some, if not all, of those staff be redeployed to ensure a smooth transition from traditional benefits to the new one?

Ms McVey: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman saying that I could speak to and work with him to see what is happening in Birkenhead. What I know is that we on this side of the House brought forward up to 100% advances, so that anyone in need of money could have it. We have also stopped the waiting days, and from April we are providing the two-week housing payment. That is what we on this side of the House have done to protect the most vulnerable, but the Opposition voted against it.

23. [904569] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): I recently visited jobcentre staff in Bedworth to see how universal credit was helping my constituents. I was delighted to hear of encouraging examples of success, including one claimant who had been helped into work within weeks. Under the previous system, she would have waited months to get the same help. Does this not show that universal credit is acting faster to transform lives?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct, and I want to thank him for going to meet people at his Jobcentre Plus and for speaking to the dedicated work coaches who are working tirelessly to help people to get into work. These are the tales that I am hearing. Universal credit is an in-work and out-of-work benefit. We are about getting people into a job and then helping them with progression, so that they can get into a job and have a career and also have job progression. That is why we have over 3 million more people in work.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)
rose—

Mr Speaker: This question is not dissimilar to that tabled by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), and she should have her opportunity now, because we will probably not reach her question later.

18. [904564] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let me take this opportunity to tell the Secretary of State that in three of the eight wards in my constituency, child poverty is at over 50%. Universal credit has only just started to be rolled out, and it will only make things worse. Her Government are also going to take away free school meals—[*Interruption.*] In the future, there will not be the access to free school meals that there is now. What is the level of child poverty that she is willing to support?

Ms McVey: We have had this debate before, and this has been corrected many times. Actually, 50,000 more children are going to have free school meals. These scaremongering stories are not true at all. Let us look at what is happening. We now have 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty—a record low. We now have 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty—a new record low. There are also 500,000 fewer working-age adults in absolute poverty—a record low. This Government are about helping people to get into work, which is the first step they can take towards taking control of their life. From there, they can have career progression.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the roll-out of universal credit. How does that compare with the debacle that was the implementation of tax credits under a previous Government?

Mr Speaker: Order. No dilation is required. A pithy encapsulation of what the Secretary of State regards as her personal triumph is one thing, but a lengthy denigration of the policies of the previous Government would be another.

Ms McVey: Universal credit is working, and it had to be put in place, in part because the Opposition's tax credits were a failure.

Mr Speaker: Very fleet of foot.

Personal Independence Payments: Disability Assessment

3. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If she will take steps to ensure that personal independence payments claimants who have been diagnosed with degenerative medical conditions do not have to undertake a disability assessment. [904549]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Assessments are important, so that people who need support receive the right level. Where there is enough existing evidence to determine benefit entitlement, claimants do not need a face-to-face assessment. We are committed to continuously improving PIP, so that those with degenerative diseases get the support they need in a timely fashion.

Rachael Maskell: People with degenerative neurological conditions, such as motor neurone disease, are still being called for PIP assessments, which is degrading and causes much distress. Will the Minister therefore ensure that the practice ends immediately, so that people's dignity can be restored?

Sarah Newton: PIP is working, and it is working well for all people with disabilities, including those with degenerative conditions. The reality is that 89% of claimants with motor neurone disease are on the enhanced rate of daily living and 90% are on the enhanced rate of mobility. That compares with 52% on the higher rate of care and 89% on higher rate mobility under the disability living allowance, the predecessor benefit.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Last week, I hosted a pensioner and senior citizens' fair in Morley and Wrenthorpe. At the event, a gentleman with Parkinson's disease told me that he had to reapply for PIP every two to three years, which caused him great distress. What are the Government doing to ensure that claimants with degenerative conditions such as that do not have to go through any unnecessary stress?

Sarah Newton: It is absolutely right that we would like to make decisions without face-to-face assessments where possible. Where there is medical information, we do not ask people for such assessments. Of course, how often we ask people for reassessments is down to the healthcare professional, so sometimes people are not asked for a long period of time.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Several constituents who are claiming both employment and support allowance and PIP have told me that the application forms are difficult to complete. The forms ask for a lot of the same information and are completed exclusively by some of the most vulnerable in our society. Anyone would think that the Government wanted to make the process and the forms unnecessarily complicated and difficult. Why not make the forms easier to understand and allow applicants to be considered for both benefits with one form?

Sarah Newton: We work very hard with stakeholders. Our forms are co-designed by disabled people and those who support disabled people, and I am grateful for the efforts to which they go to work with us. It is well worth noting the relatively high levels of satisfaction with the application process, but we are of course always looking for ways to improve things.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome the Department using a collaborative approach with stakeholders and healthcare professionals to ensure that reassessments for severe conditions are as simple as possible. Will my hon. Friend continue to work with those stakeholders, who are often experts in their field, to improve the assessment process, particularly for conditions such as MS?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes a good point about how closely we work with disabled people and stakeholders. He makes particular reference to the severe conditions work that we have implemented for ESA claimants, where we have worked with stakeholders to design a new process, so that the most poorly and vulnerable people have a personal, tailor-made process.

Child Poverty: Family Indicators

4. **Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con):** What progress she is making on developing family indicators to measure the Government's progress in tackling child poverty. [904550]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): Good morning, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.] The Government are committed to action that improves children's long-term outcomes by tackling the root causes of poverty and disadvantage. In April 2017, we published nine indicators that track progress in tackling the disadvantages that can affect families and children, and we aim to update them annually. The next publication is due shortly.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not chortle; the Minister is a courteous fellow and should be respected.

Steve Double: Given the huge costs financially and socially of family breakdown to people both in and out of work, what is the Minister doing to improve the family indices across society and to reduce family instability?

Kit Malthouse: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his constant and vigorous campaigning on the issue, and particularly on the importance he attaches to fatherhood and family stability. The Government agree with him about that, and a number of programmes are designed to move the dial on the nine indicators that we have published. For example, alongside the fight against worklessness and the troubled families programme, we are specifically investing £39 million in a programme to reduce parental conflict and increase family stability.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister may be in a bit of a time warp this morning, but is the Secretary of State on a different planet from the Children's Commissioner for England? Will she talk to the Children's Commissioner about child poverty in our country and look at this morning's report, which links child poverty and low educational expectations? Get on with it, man!

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman will know, all hon. Members should be engaged in the battle against poverty. We in particular have chosen to take a different approach. Pleasingly, the Children's Commissioner has identified that low educational attainment is critical to the future employment and economic prospects of all children. That is why we are focused on it as one of the two planks of Government policy on the matter, why we have concentrated so hard and why we are so pleased that so many more children are going to good and excellent schools.

22. [904568] **Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con):** The latest figures for the east midlands show that just over 106,000 of children in poverty are in workless households. That is down 23,000 since 2010. Although there is much more to do, does my hon. Friend agree that jobs created under this Government are transforming the lives of the most vulnerable in our society?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and is a renowned champion of those in poverty in his constituency. It is interesting to note that nearly three quarters of children in poverty move out of poverty when their parents move into full-time work. We must capture and use that in our constant fight against poverty.

17. [904563] **Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** Two thirds of children in poverty live in a household where at least one parent works. New analysis shows that child poverty will increase dramatically by

2030, with the main reason cited as UK Government cuts. Will the Secretary of State come to my constituency to see for herself the devastating effects of her Government's cuts, which already have an impact on too many children in North Ayrshire and Arran?

Kit Malthouse: I have seen reports of the new analysis this morning and, obviously, we are more than willing to have a look. However, such reports—there have been several in the past few weeks—tend to accept in the small print that forecasting poverty in the future is a very inexact science and often leads to odd results, not least because they often do not take behavioural change into account. The whole thrust of the Government's welfare reforms has been not just to ensure that we get assistance and money to people efficaciously, but to effect behavioural change because we know that accessing work is by far and away our most potent tool in the fight against poverty.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): School breakfast clubs play a key role in tackling child poverty, including helping parents get to work. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the announcement last week of £26 million investment in school breakfast clubs and commit the Department to supporting them across the country?

Kit Malthouse: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is a doughty champion of school breakfast clubs and has established one in his constituency. He is on the right lines and we support him in his efforts.

16. [904562] **Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):** Last week, figures from the Equality and Human Rights Commission showed that child poverty among single-parent families is predicted to rise from the current figure of 37% to 62%. In the same week, the new all-party parliamentary group on single parent families followed Ronald Reagan's lead in 1984 and held a UK Single Parents' Day for the first time. Will the Minister please unfreeze the benefits cap so that the figures I cited are not realised? Will he or his boss—either would be welcome—address our APPG at the first opportunity?

Kit Malthouse: There is no question of unfreezing the benefit cap because it is encapsulated in primary legislation. It might be interesting for the hon. Lady to know that, in the year after the benefit cap was imposed, 100,000 children moved out of poverty altogether. I am surprised that she has not welcomed the news that was announced last week that, as the Secretary of State said, more than 1 million people have moved out of absolute poverty. That shows the greater usefulness of the absolute poverty indicator compared with those for relative poverty, which the EHRC used in its report.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Today, we have learned from independent analysis from the Scottish Government the full impact of the UK Government's cuts on levels of child poverty. Later this week, the Scottish Government will be publishing their plans to do what they can, using the limited powers of the Parliament up the road, to address this looming crisis, but what are this Government doing to address child poverty?

Kit Malthouse: As I outlined in my earlier answers, this Government believe that the two routes out of poverty are education and work. We have seen, in

essence, a jobs miracle in this country over the past few years, with millions of people moving into work since 2010. It is absolutely the case that children in workless households achieve less, have less good welfare and have more mental health problems, so moving people into work is critical. I have seen reports in the media of the evidence the Scottish Government have brought forward this morning, and we will look at it carefully. I am always aware that one foundation of nationalism is to blame everyone else for problems, and I look forward to seeing the Scottish National party's proposals in Scotland and whether they will actually work.

Neil Gray: Of course we know that 68% of children living in poverty do so in working households, so the Minister's rhetoric simply does not match the reality. We also know from the research today that the root cause of child poverty and its predicted rise comes directly from the cuts to the reserved benefits in respect of the benefit freeze and the two-child limit. So when will his Government face up to reality and act to stop children being hungry, because everyone knows that it is this Government's responsibility?

Kit Malthouse: This Government have moved heaven and earth to help those on lower incomes: with the introduction of the national living wage, they have had the fastest pay rise in 20 years; we have taken millions out of paying tax altogether with the rise in the personal allowance; and we have given parents up to £5,000 of assistance by increasing their access to free childcare up to 30 hours a week. There is an enormous amount done, but an awful lot still to do. As I say, we have yet to see any concrete proposals from the SNP on its much-vaunted plans to deal with poverty in its own patch, and we look forward to seeing them.

Jobcentres in Glasgow

5. **Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):** What plans her Department has for the future of jobcentres in Glasgow. [904551]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): There are no current plans to revisit the announced jobcentre provision in Glasgow. Doubtless the hon. Gentleman will welcome the 1,000 jobs a day created in this country since 2010 and the fact that the claimant count in his constituency has gone down by 50% since then.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Let me bring the Minister back to the nature of the question by asking whether he can answer something else. On 5 February, I asked the Minister for Employment for all the impact assessments done on the closure programme. I did so through a freedom of information request, as he suggested on 12 February. On 23 February, he told me that it would take too much time and cost too much money to provide me with all those things. So will today's Minister drop the diplomatic and bureaucratic flannel, publish every impact assessment and get them in the post to Glasgow Members of Parliament?

Guy Opperman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I will take it up with him after this debate; I will be delighted to sit down with him and be clear on

that matter. The Minister for Employment is at the G7 in Canada, so he cannot answer that point, but we will take it up.

Child Maintenance: Parents' Income Increases

6. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential merits of introducing a legal obligation on parents paying child maintenance to report increases in their income. [904552]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): Such an obligation already exists.

Matt Western: If that is the case, can the Minister explain what the lead time is in respect of someone having to declare that change in income? What would be recommended—for example, would it be one month or two months?

Kit Malthouse: Paying parents who are in the Child Maintenance Service must declare changes in income immediately if they vary by more than 25% of the previously declared level. Of course every paying parent is subject to an annual review, where adjustments are made to the payments if required.

25. [904571] **Mr Marcus Jones** (Nuneaton) (Con): I have recently spoken to several parents in my constituency who are not receiving child maintenance payments because former partners are not declaring all their income, despite apparently having lifestyles that would enable them to contribute. What more can the Minister do to make sure that people are contributing properly to looking after their own children?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. As he may know, we have just finished a consultation on what greater powers we can take to ensure proper and efficient recovery for those in receipt of support. We are looking at a series of measures, not least integrating our information systems much more closely with those of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, so that we have a fuller picture of people's income. We will be looking at proposals to make estimates of unearned income and, indeed, imputing income from asset values for those who attempt to conceal their income but still hold very significant assets. In the final analysis, we may well take powers, depending on the results of the consultation, to deny people a passport—and remove their passport—if they refuse to pay.

In-work Households Living in Poverty

7. **Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What assessment she has made of trends in the number of in-work households living in poverty. [904553]

10. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of trends in the number of in-work households living in poverty. [904556]

24. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of trends in the numbers of in-work households living in poverty. [904570]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): As Members would expect, we make constant assessments of the level of poverty in the UK, given that our primary purpose as a Department is to stimulate and support social mobility and give people the tools and assistance to build a better life. There are 1 million fewer people living in absolute poverty since 2010, and working families are around four times less likely to be in relative poverty than working-age adults in workless families.

Laura Smith: Even though they are in work, many families in my constituency of Crewe and Nantwich are struggling to feed their children. That suggests that work is no longer an escape route out of poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that child poverty will increase from the 4.1 million recorded in the Government's latest figures to 5.2 million by 2022. The Government originally claimed that universal credit could lift 350,000 children out of poverty. How many children do they now expect to lift out of poverty, and by when?

Kit Malthouse: I hope that no one in the House is complacent about poverty, particularly child poverty. As I said in answer to earlier questions, and as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we are entirely focused as a Department on doing what we can to try to deal with these issues, but they are complex and deep-seated, so the solutions will be, too. Having said that, we believe that there are two primary causes and two primary solutions, the first of which is work and the second education. We are throwing everything we have at that to try to improve things. If we look back at the results thus far, we see 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty, 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty since 2010, and half a million fewer working-age adults and 100,000 fewer working-age lone parents in absolute poverty since 2010.

Mr Speaker: The copious character of the briefing is in one sense very impressive, but unfortunately exceeds the time available for its delivery.

Mr Cunningham: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to pay tribute to a stalwart in Coventry who for many years helped the homeless. Mike Parker started the Coventry Open Christmas shelter in 1992 to provide warmth, food and shelter. His funeral was today. The shelter started as a one-night one-off and developed into a long-running campaign. It helps hundreds of homeless people in Coventry every year. Mike Parker helped to ensure that those who were lonely and hungry had somewhere warm and friendly to go. He will be sorely missed in Coventry.

Now for my question: will the Government look into ending the freeze on children's benefits, lift the two-child limit on tax credit and fix universal credit to help to lift in-work households out of poverty?

Kit Malthouse: May I, too, salute the hon. Gentleman's constituent? I did not know him, but he sounds like a remarkable man. I am sure he will be missed by those who loved and knew him.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the two-child limit. In our welfare reforms, we have tried to establish for those who require assistance through the welfare system the same choices that are made by those who do not

have that kind of assistance. Having said that, we have ensured that nobody who currently has more than one child will suffer, and of course all children will continue to receive child benefit, irrespective of their status.

Stephen Morgan: As we have already heard, the majority of children living in poverty live in households in which at least one person works, so why does the Minister refuse to end the freeze on the majority of in-work social security support and to provide the support that working families so desperately need?

Kit Malthouse: We believe that the solution for working families is universal credit and that people should take control of their own lives and work hard so that they can build a life for themselves and their families. That is exactly what we are trying to achieve through our welfare reforms.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: New Forest West brevity now, to be copied by others afterwards.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Is there evidence that in-work benefits depress wages?

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. A fair amount of analysis of that idea is currently going on. As soon as we have a conclusion, we will let him know.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Minister confirm what he and the Government think is the most useful measure of poverty? Is it absolute or relative poverty, and can he tell us why?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend displays her normal mental acuity in putting her finger on the point here. She is completely right: relative poverty is a poor indicator of how people are faring. For example, if everybody's wages were to double overnight tonight, absolute poverty would plummet, but relative poverty would stay exactly the same.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right: using relative poverty produces perverse results. What is he doing about it and what is a better measure?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend made a remarkably good speech about this just a week or so ago, and I congratulate him on his foresight. He is absolutely right: relative poverty as currently measured suggests that there are quite a lot of poor people in Monte Carlo, which, of course, is not an intuitive picture that people would have. As a Department, we are looking at other measures. We believe that absolute poverty, which currently stands at an all-time low, is a better indicator. Of course material deprivation, which asks specific questions about how people live, holds some promise as an indicator that the public might appreciate.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I am disappointed to hear the Minister be so facetious about a subject as important as child poverty. At the last count, 72% of households whose benefits were capped were those of lone parents and 77% of those lone

parents had a child under five. They can escape the cap by working at least 16 hours a week, but are then hit by the cuts to work allowances in universal credit, which trap many in poverty. According to Government figures released last week, more than half a million children are currently in poverty in lone-parent families where their parent—usually the mother—is either in full or part-time work. If the Government really believe in making work pay, will they reverse the cuts to work allowances?

Kit Malthouse: I know that the hon. Lady likes to present herself as some kind of latter-day mahatma and as the only person in this House who cares about poverty, but, of course, that is not true. Many of us—as councillors, voluntary workers, social workers and so on—have spent many years fighting poverty, so it would be helpful to the general tone of debate in this House if she were not quite so accusatory. Our view, and the Office for National Statistics points this out, is that 100,000 fewer work-age lone parents are now in poverty and that their biggest problem—the biggest thing that assails them—is childcare. The 85% payment for childcare under universal credit and the increase in availability to 30 hours will give the greatest assistance to lone parents.

Personal Independence Payment Claims Review

8. **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What progress has been made on the Government's review of personal independence payment claims; and if she will make a statement. [904554]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (**Sarah Newton**): The exercise to identify claimants affected by the MH judgment will start as soon as we have made the changes to the guidance needed to implement the judgment. We are currently engaging with stakeholders to design these changes. Of course, I will continue to regularly update the House.

Stephen Doughty: Earlier on, the Minister said that the personal independence payment was working. Well, of course, if it was working, the Government would not have lost the High Court case in the first place. These delays are simply unacceptable. Why are so many of my constituents still telling me that they are being biased against when they have mental conditions or the degenerative conditions mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell)? Why are veterans coming to me to express serious concerns about their own employment and support allowance and PIP assessments, and what will she do about that?

Sarah Newton: We will implement the judgment in full, but it is really important that we continue our work with stakeholders to get this right. We are working at pace to make those changes. On the general points that the hon. Gentleman makes, we are utterly committed to making sure that, with PIP and ESA, people have a good claimant experience, and we are regularly implementing changes.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I recently visited the local centre at Cofa Court in Coventry where PIP assessments take place and saw the process. Will the Minister confirm that assessments are always based on what claimants are able to do and that they are always carried out by a medical practitioner?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for taking the time and trouble actually to visit the centre where the assessments are taking place. If more Members in this House were to do that, they would be better informed about the reality of the process. It is absolutely right that the assessments are undertaken by properly qualified medical professionals.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): As well as the gross failings of the personal independence payment, we see another Government failure with the employment and support allowance underpayments where an estimated 70,000 sick and disabled people were incorrectly assessed and denied vital social security support. Will the Minister update the House on the progress that she is making in arranging to identify and to backdate awards to those former incapacity benefit and severe disablement allowance claimants?

Sarah Newton: I am delighted to be able to update the House on this important exercise. Back in August last year, the first payments went out to people who had been identified as underpaid. We are making really good progress with identifying other claimants who will benefit from the additional payments, and we have recruited up to 400 new members of staff, so that we can carry on our work delivering these payments.

Marsha De Cordova: How is the Department prioritising ESA claimants underpaid as a result of incorrect assessments, aside from those with terminal illnesses and conditions? Will the Minister confirm that claimants who were victims of underpayment will not be subject to reduced ESA eligibility due to lump sum payments being classed as savings?

Sarah Newton: On the first point, I assure the hon. Lady that we are working closely with our stakeholders. I am grateful to the disabled people and the organisations who are working with me and my colleagues in the Department to ensure that we are contacting the underpaid people who will most benefit from receiving these payments. On the second point, there are proper practices and procedures within the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that lump-sum payments are not taken into consideration as people's capital allowances. I have made a detailed statement to the House but if the hon. Lady would like to raise specific questions with me, I suggest that she bring them along to our meeting on 19 April.

Cold-Calling: Pension Fund Transfers

9. **Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con):** What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on prohibiting cold-calling in relation to pension fund transfers. [904555]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Secretary of State, Treasury Ministers and I hold regular discussions on this topic as part of our work on the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill, which spans both Departments' policy areas.

Mr Fysh: Given the importance of pensions and the many changes that have occurred under successive Governments, what proactive steps can the Department

take now to ensure that my constituents and others are kept up to date and informed about their own pensions and the options available to them?

Guy Opperman: Pensions guidance is a vital part of the work that the Government are doing. We are committed to ensuring that people have access to the information and guidance that they need to make effective financial decisions. My hon. Friend will be aware that we are debating the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill in the House tomorrow. I urge him to come and listen to the positive developments in that Bill.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: No time for preamble, I am afraid, as we have a lot to get through and we are running late. A short sentence—Jack Dromey.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Port Talbot shift supervisor wept as he told the story of how he had been conned out of his pension, and that 20 people on his shift had followed his lead. The ban on pensions cold-calling is welcome, but will the Minister go further to ensure that it is for the Financial Conduct Authority, not just the Information Commissioner, to play a role in enforcement, so that those who act disreputably using information obtained through cold-calling are struck off and can never practise again?

Guy Opperman: I will answer this question in detail tomorrow, when I have more time. Anyone considering transferring their pension should speak to the Pensions Advisory Service.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The good doctor is a clever bloke; I am sure that he can blurt it out in a sentence.

Dr Lewis: Does the Minister agree that people who use cold-calling to cheat others out of their pensions are the lowest form of pond life, and will he arrange for criminal sanctions to be visited upon them?

Guy Opperman: Yes, yes and Project Bloom, a City of London police operation to ensure that we stop scammers, has brought many prosecutions—pending and future.

Disability Confident Scheme

11. **Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con):** What progress her Department has made on the implementation of the disability confident scheme. [904557]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I am pleased that there are 600,000 more disabled people in work than four years ago. Disability confident employers are contributing to the thousands more jobs that we have created every week since 2010. There are now just under 6,000 employers signed up to the disability confident scheme. I am delighted that all Departments have achieved disability confident leader status.

Scott Mann: Seasalt is a fantastic, disability confident business in Cornwall. It is a great Cornish fashion and home hardware business that employs over 500 people. What more can be done to encourage more Cornish companies to take on this fantastic scheme?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend truly is a champion for his constituents. I am very proud of the terrific Falmouth-based company, Seasalt, which has a shop in his constituency and produces fantastic products. The Cornwall and Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership is working with local businesses and agencies as part of the Government's strategic work and health unit, so that we can ensure that more companies of all sizes become disability confident.

Universal Support

12. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What progress her Department is making on implementing universal support. [904558]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Funding has been agreed for local authorities to implement universal support to help claimants with transition to universal credit. That partnership working is fundamental to the successful implementation of universal credit, which is of course part of the 1,000 jobs a day that we have seen under this Government since 2010.

Alex Burghart: Will the Minister ensure that as universal support is rolled out, it helps people to overcome the two most pernicious barriers to work—addiction and mental health problems?

Guy Opperman: I agree that it is vital to ensure that people can overcome the barriers to work, including mental health problems and addiction. We are already investing in the skills and capability of the work coaches, but we have also trained 1,800 universal credit work coaches in how to support claimants with specific mental health issues.

Poverty: Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016

13. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effect of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 on levels of poverty. [904559]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): Impact assessments of policies in the Act were published in 2015. Evidence shows that work is the best route out of poverty. The welfare reforms are designed to incentivise people to make the choice to move into work and to give them the tools and assistance to progress.

Patrick Grady: Does the Minister agree with his colleagues in Westminster Hall last week who were still trying to blame the financial crash of 10 years ago in making it a justification for these reforms? Will he finally admit that the reforms are in fact an ideological smash and grab on the poorest in society by a Government obsessed with rolling back the size of the state?

Kit Malthouse: One of the really disappointing things about the debate on welfare and benefit reform in this place has been the persistent defence of the old benefits system, which was effectively a fraud perpetrated on the poor designed to trap them into being so. I would have hoped that the hon. Gentleman would welcome the fact that in the three years to 2016-17 the number of children

living in poverty in Scotland was down by 24% compared with the three years to 2009-10, with relative poverty down in the same period too.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): With unemployment soaring at 9.3% in France and 11% in Italy but only at 4.3% in the UK, does my hon. Friend agree that one of the best ways of staying out of poverty is getting a good, educated job?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is exactly right—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is treating us to a combination of his intellect and his eloquence, and his ministerial colleague, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), is engaging in a rather undignified finger-wagging exercise with the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell). It is very unseemly and very unfair on the cerebral Minister at the Dispatch Box. Mr Opperman, Mr Campbell: calm yourselves. Take some sort of soothing medicament and you will feel better.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) is exactly right. Time and again when we visit Jobcentre Pluses—I would recommend that people do so—we hear heartwarming, encouraging and inspiring stories of people who have got themselves out of poverty by working and being educated and trying hard. Our entire objective is to give them the tools and assistance to do so.

Job Vacancy Trends

14. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of job vacancies. [904560]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): On average, more than 1,000 people have been employed every day since 2010. There are 816,000 vacancies—a rise of 10,000 since the last quarter and 56,000 since a year ago.

Stephen Metcalfe: I thank my right hon. Friend for her excellent and informative answer. However, to make sure that the vacancies get filled, we need to link up jobseekers with those vacancies. What action is she taking to ensure that people know what opportunities are out there for them?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct. This Government have brought forward new schemes like work experience, sector-based work academies and support for childcare to enable people who are job-seeking to go for those jobs. Universal credit, which is an in-work and out-of-work benefit, is giving that extra support. Let me just say this: BT Openreach, 3,500 new jobs across the country; UPS, 1,000 jobs in the east midlands; Siemens, 700 skilled jobs in Yorkshire; and Toyota, 3,000 jobs in Derby and Wales. That is what this Government are doing in supporting those people into those jobs.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Ministers have repeatedly said this afternoon that the best way out of poverty is through work and education, so why have they introduced

the limit on free school meals under universal credit, which is a work disincentive and will prevent more than 1 million children in poverty from receiving free school meals and the educational achievement they deserve to get out of poverty?

Ms McVey: The Opposition have been putting across fake news, or maybe it is clumsy research or just misinformation. Even “Channel 4 News” had to put up a factsheet correcting what the Opposition are saying. Some 50,000 more children will be getting free school meals. We are helping those who need support, with not only childcare but free school meals and progression in work. Please listen and learn.

Eligibility Threshold for Free School Meals

15. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect on levels of in-work poverty of changes to the eligibility threshold for free school meals for households in receipt of social security benefits. [904561]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): An estimated 50,000 more children will benefit from a taxpayer-funded free school meal by 2022 under universal credit. I will repeat that: 50,000 more children will get a free school meal. We are already ensuring that all existing children receiving free school meals will continue to receive them until roll-out or that phase of education is complete.

Paul Blomfield: There clearly is a serious mismatch between the Secretary of State’s figures and those published by the highly respected Children’s Society, which tells me that 7,000 children will lose out in Sheffield alone. Will she undertake to publish the basis on which she has calculated those figures?

Ms McVey: The Department for Education will be doing that. Sometimes charities are given the wrong information and therefore say the wrong information, having been led astray by Opposition Members. The Opposition voted against those free school meals. They voted against the removal of waiting days. They voted against advances of up to 100%, and they voted against two weeks of housing benefit support for the most vulnerable people in society. Shame on you.

Topical Questions

T1. [904572] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): We are pleased with the progress we have made on the roll-out of universal credit, which is now live in 250 jobcentres. Universal credit is a modern, flexible benefit that helps people move into work and, importantly, progress in work through tailored support from dedicated work coaches.

Mrs Hodgson: The Department is always quick to act in cases of overpayment and sanction claimants for any breach of rules, yet an investigation by the National Audit Office revealed that the Department has underpaid

an estimated 70,000 people over the last seven years. What will the Department do to ensure that those who have been left out of pocket are repaid the money they are entitled to as soon as possible?

Ms McVey: When we have, or if we have ever, underpaid people, we will support them, make sure that it is correct and pay them back.

T4. [904575] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the new support for mortgage interest scheme has been specifically designed to maintain people in their homes and that none of my constituents should be concerned about the day-to-day payments on their mortgages?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): My hon. Friend raises an important point, not least because we are approaching the deadline for the switchover of SMI from a benefit to a loan. He is absolutely right—this change is specifically designed to keep people in their homes. I urge people to ignore the scare stories being put around, look at the paperwork, take the phone call that has been made and ensure they make a good decision in time.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Had the Secretary of State read the full article that she refers to on Channel 4’s FactCheck, she would have seen that it said that our numbers were in fact correct.

Ms McVey *indicated dissent.*

Margaret Greenwood: Well, it did. I recommend that the Secretary of State rereads it.

In less than two weeks’ time, support for mortgage interest will change from a benefit to a loan. Government figures released on Friday show that, even at this late stage, the DWP has still not managed to contact 40% of claimants by phone to explain the change, and 30% of all claimants have already declined a loan. A large proportion of claimants are pensioners, and Age UK is warning that many may instead try to manage by cutting back on essentials such as heating. Why have the Government failed to give claimants adequate notice, and will they call a halt to this policy, which risks inflicting hardship on thousands?

Kit Malthouse: We have been communicating the changeover with approaching 500,000 pieces of paper since last July, and well over 350,000 telephone calls have been made to the something like 90,000 people in receipt of this benefit. There are specific provisions, post the changeover, to deal with people who perhaps attempt to manage on their own and feel that they cannot do so in that, post the deadline, they can reapply for support and backdate it to 6 April if they so wish.

T8. [904579] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): The Government have done a lot to help pensioners, but far too many still suffer from poverty, particularly older pensioners. What more will the Government do to help that particular group?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): My hon. Friend is right: we now pay £1,000 more in the basic state pension than

in 2010. For those in employment, 23,000 people in his constituency have a private pension due to auto-enrolment. Pensioner poverty of itself has fallen dramatically, but I am happy to take this up and to discuss it with him in more detail.

Mr Speaker: I wish the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) a happy birthday on Thursday, which will be an important day in the life of the hon. Gentleman and I am sure of the people of Tewkesbury.

T3. [904574] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What equality impact assessment have the Government and the Secretary of State made of the emotional and psychological impact on the women subject to the two child cap and the rape clause and, further, on the DWP workers who have to implement it? Does she agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who has fought so valiantly on this issue, that forcing women to relive abuse in an interview is an utterly disgusting and abhorrent policy?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady raises an important point. She will know—I was asked this question in a Westminster Hall debate last week—that we have attempted to deal with this issue with some sensitivity. The undertaking I have given to her hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central is that if she believes there are particular issues with the system in place for dealing with this, we are more than happy to look at them. I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Lady as well to discuss it.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give an example of a policy that has been strengthened, or indeed dropped, as a result of being subject to the family test?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and one with which I have been grappling since I was appointed to this position. He will know that a number of programmes across the Government are aimed at strengthening families, not least the troubled families programme, which has seen an investment of something like £982 million. On new initiatives, he may have heard me mention in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) that we are investing—newly announced in the Budget last year—£39 million in a programme designed to reduce parental conflict. That has been done on the basis of looking for parenting programmes that will create more stability and therefore happier outcomes for families.

T5. [904576] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Thanks to the beast from the east, a lot more people now understand that how cold they feel has more to do with wind chill than with ambient temperature. Why do the Government not take wind chill into account when triggering cold weather payments?

Kit Malthouse: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, triggering cold weather payments is done on the basis of absolute temperature: it has to fall below 0 °C for a length of time. I must confess that, as someone who is married to a Canadian, I know only too well the effects

of wind chill and the significant difference it makes. If he will allow me, I will take away that issue and have a look at it.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome the comments from my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work about getting more people with disabilities into work. Given that there are 650 potential employers in this House, what more can be done to improve disability employment in the House and in our offices around the country?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his work and his campaigning on this issue. He is himself a Disability Confident employer, as are all Work and Pensions Ministers. Some 70 Members of Parliament have now taken this step, and I really encourage all those who have not done so to come along to one of our excellent Disability Confident events so that they will have the confidence to employ people with disabilities and health conditions.

T7. [904578] **Mr Gavin Shuker** (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): When I was a child in receipt of free school meals, the majority of my peers growing up in poverty were in workless households. That is no longer the situation: today, the majority have one parent in work. Will the Secretary of State explain why?

Ms McVey: You can't have it that we are not helping enough people and then, on the other hand, that we are. What we have said is that this has always been for people who were not in work or those on low incomes. What we have done is slightly raise the threshold, and now more children who need free school meals are getting them. That is something that this Conservative Government are doing. I would also like to welcome the rise in employment in the last quarter in the south-west area and the hon. Gentleman's seat by another 48,000 people. That is more people in work who can help their children.

Mr Speaker: A short sentence of Walsall eloquence—Eddie Hughes.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that young people with disabilities should have access to work experience while they are still at school? Will she join me in visiting Walsall College students on supported internships?

Sarah Newton: My colleague is a fantastic champion for his constituency, and he is absolutely right: every young person should have that opportunity of work experience. I will be delighted to visit Walsall College with him to see the excellent work on supported work experience.

T9. [904580] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Despite the Secretary of State's assurances to the contrary, we have heard time and again in this place about the problems with universal credit, which will roll out across Paisley and Renfrewshire North in September. The SNP Renfrewshire Council has set aside £800,000 to mitigate the worst elements of UC. Does the Secretary of State think that it is local government's responsibility to plug gaps in her Government's failed welfare reform?

Ms McVey: In Scotland we have seen a rise of 207,000 people in employment. This is what universal credit is doing too: making sure people are in work, and making sure they are in work quickly. We are sorting them, and work coaches are supporting them. We have given Scotland the flexibility to do additional work on the ground.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Auto-enrolment has been a great success, but does my hon. Friend agree that we need to do more to encourage the self-employed into it? What steps is he considering in that regard?

Guy Opperman: Myself and my opposite number, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), were extraordinarily trendy: we were at a hackathon this morning, which is taking place over two days in Hoxton. The Government are working very hard to make sure that the self-employed have the benefits of auto-enrolment.

Mr Speaker: It sounds like a scintillating experience, I am sure.

T10. [904581] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): My constituent, Emily Johnson, having worked all her adult life, gave birth to a baby daughter in December. Because she moved into an in-work training programme in September, she has been denied maternity pay and maternity allowance. Because her husband is self-employed, universal credit assumes he earns enough to support all three of them, although this is demonstrably not the case. Why is a woman who has paid into the benefits system all her adult life denied any support at this time?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady raises what sounds like quite a complicated case in terms of entitlement. If she would like, I am more than happy to arrange for a meeting in the Department to make sure that her constituent is getting the help and support that she needs.

Mr Speaker: I am trying to help colleagues, but I would ask colleagues to help each other. A short sentence each would suffice, and then you are not denying somebody else the chance.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): On Saturday, I was delighted to launch a new bus route from Ilkeston to East Midlands airport, through Long Eaton and Sandiacre, which will undoubtedly open up more opportunities in terms of the many vacancies in the logistics hubs at the airport. Does my right hon. Friend agree that transport providers and employers working together will really make sure that my constituents have every job opportunity?

Ms McVey: It has always been about everybody working together. This Government, and this Department in particular, want to make sure that we step outside the silos and work across Departments and that work coaches stand outside what they need to do to make sure that they are reaching into people's lives to help them progress.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What is the Minister going to do about employers such as the one in my constituency who sacked a lot of young people without paying them the wages they were owed, with the result that one of them—a pregnant woman—ate nothing but Smash for three weeks?

Ms McVey: The best thing the hon. Lady could do is give us the name of that employer so that we can see what he has done and what he is doing, because this Government will not stand by any bad employer. We want to help workers and make employers do the right thing.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): We often hear from Opposition Members that all the new jobs created are zero-hours contract jobs. Given their track record on accurate information, will the Secretary of State set out what proportion of workers are on zero-hours contracts and how many new jobs are actually full-time jobs?

Ms McVey: Zero-hours contracts or flexible contracts—whichever way people want to see them—are at 2.8%. This year, over 90% of jobs are permanent. From 2010, there have been 75% permanent and full-time jobs. Most of those this year are professional.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): A number of childminders in my constituency are reporting problems with late payment from their customers who are in receipt of universal credit, partly because of the waiting time for the first payment and partly because of bureaucratic requirements. Will the Secretary of State or one of her colleagues meet me to discuss this pressure on childminders?

Ms McVey: We would be happy to meet the hon. Lady, who does so much in this area. What I will say, however, is that I do not understand why Opposition Members voted against advance payments up to 100%, why they voted against the two-week home payment and why they voted against the extra support we are giving.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On Friday, I met a number of Corby employers who were all raving about the apprenticeship route. What steps is the Department taking to promote apprenticeships to jobseekers?

Sarah Newton: Apprenticeships are a great opportunity for people of all ages. I am particularly keen to support the new measures the Government have brought in to make it much easier for people with disabilities to get an apprenticeship and make progress in work.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The abolition of support for mortgage interest has been characterised by the poor provision of information to vulnerable claimants with learning disabilities and a very low take-up of the new loan scheme. Will the Secretary of State cancel the abolition of SMIs, or at the very least delay it while these issues can be resolved?

Kit Malthouse: We will not be cancelling or delaying, but we are of course sensitive to vulnerable claimants, in particular those who lack mental capacity and may need assistance or representation when dealing with their financial affairs. There is a separate process for enabling their transfer across and they will not be subject to the deadline. Indeed, our contractor, who is making contact with recipients thus far, has people who are specifically trained to identify those who may have become incapacitated or vulnerable during their receipt of the benefit to make sure they too are not subject to the current deadline.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that everyone should have the opportunity to travel? Is she as disgusted as I am by the recent case of Frank Gardner, who was left stuck on a plane at Heathrow for two hours because the airport had lost his wheelchair?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for her constituency and she is absolutely right to raise this case. Today, I have already written to the managing director of Heathrow airport. I will be working with my wonderful sector champion, Michael Connolly from Birmingham airport, to bring the industry together

with airports to make sure we deal with this issue in the strongest possible terms so that disabled people can absolutely have access to air travel.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the urgent question I should advise the House that there is a prime ministerial statement to follow and a heavily subscribed debate. Exceptionally, therefore, I am not looking to run exchanges on the UQ very fully. There will be a brief opportunity to contribute. It will be an initial airing in the Chamber of this issue. Please do not be disappointed if you do not get in today. There are other pressing demands on parliamentary time.

UK Passport Contract

3.38 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on why the contract for the new UK passport has been awarded to a French-owned company.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Her Majesty's Passport Office is currently procuring services to design, manufacture and personalise UK passports from summer 2019, when the current contract ends. HM Passport Office has undertaken a rigorous, fair and open competition in accordance with UK law, and in line with EU and World Trade Organisation rules. This process began in March 2017, at which point HM Passport Office clearly set out the requirements under which potential suppliers should table their bids.

The security of the passport and passport holders' personal data is paramount, and the tender requirements clearly set out the high standard of security that must be met to undertake the contract. For example, under the next contract, all passports will continue to be personalised with the holder's personal details in the United Kingdom, which ensures that no personal data will leave the UK. However, the printing of blank passports in the UK is not a new requirement. Robust processes that have been established over a number of years have determined that manufacturing passports overseas presents no security concerns. Under the current contract, up to 20% of blank passports are produced in Europe. There is no reason why overseas production should not continue in the future and, as such, a national security waiver could not apply.

While there are no security or operational impediments to outsourcing the production of passports, there are significant benefits in terms of both value for money, and production innovation and development. This procurement has identified the supplier that best meets the needs of our passport service—keeping the UK passport at the forefront of travel document security, while offering the best value for money. I am unable to confirm any details of the bids while the process remains subject to commercial and legal sensitivities. However, a public announcement to confirm the winning bidder will be made once the contract is formally awarded.

Liz Twist: Last week, I visited staff at the De La Rue factory in my constituency who currently work on the passport contract. They provide secure, quality-assured passports with great pride. Can the Minister tell the House and my constituents what assessment has been made of the security implications of the production of UK passports by a non-UK company, or their production outside the UK? What assessment has she made of the deliverability and reliability of Gemalto's bid, which I understand was over £100 million less than other bids, in the light of the Government's experience of Carillion's failure? Why was it felt appropriate for the Prime Minister to open the new headquarters of Thales—the French security and defence company that has recently taken over Gemalto, one of the bidders for the passport contract—during the procurement process? The Government must provide clarity about whether the bid was discussed at all during the visit.

In responding to press inquiries about the contract, the Home Office has drip-fed information and referred consistently to price and best value. However, does the Minister agree that best value is about more than money? It is about having a secure and reliable passport system that works for the UK. There must be questions about how Gemalto can make a contract worth £390 million work. In fact, I understand that the bid from De La Rue was significantly less than the previous price, and that it operates a gain-share agreement whereby any excess profits are returned to the Home Office.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for her question; she is quite right to champion the excellent staff in her constituency. However, I reassure her that the winning bidder will of course comply with the UK's security policy framework and international security standards to mitigate and prevent internal and external threats to the manufacture and onward transportation of blank books. It was very important to the Home Office to abide by international rules, and WTO, UK and EU law, regarding the fairness of the procurement process. A great deal of financial due diligence was done on all the bidding companies, and we are of course determined to have a UK passport that will contain the most up-to-date and innovative security features, making sure that our travel document is at the forefront of security globally.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): There has been a slightly childlike, jingoistic element to the debate on this issue from the moment it started, as we could have had whatever colour passports we wanted while still remaining members of the European Union. However, given that we are embarked upon this, does my right hon. Friend agree that De La Rue is a very successful British company that wins fair, international tender contracts, and earns a great deal of money for this country by printing other people's currencies and official documents? When we negotiate trade agreements in the future, we will be pressing other countries to open up their public procurement processes to genuine, fair, international competition. It would be totally ridiculous to abandon that principle now to give into not only constituency pressures, which I understand, but otherwise nationalist nonsense that ought to be ignored.

Caroline Nokes: I very much appreciate my right hon. and learned Friend's contribution—how could I not? He is absolutely right to point out that we wish to be a global, outward-looking trading nation. All the companies that participated in this tender process provide identity documents and bank notes, and other passport providers have bid. The reality is that in a fair procurement process, we had to look at quality, security and price, and this was the contract that provided the best value on all counts.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the concern among supporters of every party in this House and none about the prospect of a British passport being printed by a Franco-Dutch company. The Government cannot be allowed to hide behind EU procurement rules. They must take responsibility for the potential fallout on workers, their families, the community and the Government's wider industrial strategy. Does the Minister accept that

[Ms Diane Abbott]

it was wrong that the workers at De La Rue were not directly informed of the Government's decision, but instead heard from the media that their jobs were at risk? Is this what senior Ministers in the leave campaign meant by "taking back control"?

Far from taking back control, it seems we cannot control where our passports are printed. We understand that passports may be manufactured partially in the UK, but it is telling that for security reasons—security reasons that the Minister does not appear concerned about—in countries such as France state-run companies make the passports. What is the total cost of the switch to blue passports? We read reports of savings of £120 million made in the allocation of the contract. Last December, the then Immigration Minister estimated the cost to be £500 million. We are now told that it is £490 million, so the original estimate seems to have been almost exactly correct.

Finally, the Minister must understand why the public see this whole episode as a farce. Labour Members call on Ministers to re-examine this decision and to meet De La Rue, the trade unions and others to ensure that this industry, the quality of the jobs that come with it and our security are protected. Ministers have to understand that the cheapest is not necessarily the best.

Caroline Nokes: I gently point out to the right hon. Lady that it was in 2009 that the rules were changed to enable the British passport to be made overseas and that 20% of blank passports are already printed abroad—[*Interruption.*] She refers repeatedly from a sedentary position to taking back control. Yes, we are: we are taking back control by awarding a contract within procurement rules—WTO rules as well as EU rules, which are embedded in UK law—and it is imperative that we have the most secure and up to date passports at the best value for money.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am concerned for the De La Rue plant in Bathford in my constituency, which produces the very high-quality security paper used in Chinese passports, among others. Would it be possible for the Franco-Dutch consortium to buy its secure paper from Somerset, which would of course be De La Rue paper and of very high quality?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend has done well to point out that De La Rue already prints documents for many different countries. Quite rightly, as with any British company, we wish it to be outward looking and global in its perspective. He makes an important point about paper milling in his constituency that I am sure the successful bidders will have heard.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that everything in North East Somerset is of the very highest quality, and often rather refined.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party sympathises with the workers whose jobs are threatened by this decision but, to be frank, the issue of where the new United Kingdom passport is printed as a result of the Government's handling of Brexit is the least of our worries. Getting a

dark blue passport—as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said, we could have had one all along, had we wanted it—will be little consolation for the loss of our EU rights, including the right to travel freely for work, study or pleasure, the right to free healthcare, and the rights protected by EU law and the Court of Justice. What benefits will we get from the dark blue passport to outweigh these losses? How many British citizens lucky enough to have a parent from another EU member state are, like me and many of my constituents, applying for an Irish, French or German passport so that they can hang on to those EU rights?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. and learned Lady appears to have focused on the colour of the passport and Brexit rather than the issue at hand: the need to obtain the best possible value for money in the new passport contract, and also to ensure that whatever the outcome of Brexit, we have one of the most secure travel documents in the world, with a range of innovative features.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The French Government own 26% of Gemalto, and De La Rue was not allowed to compete for the making of the French passport. Is my right hon. Friend aware of any soft loans or subsidies that have been supplied to Gemalto by the French Government, and will she make public the financial assessment of this £120 million so-called saving?

Caroline Nokes: This procurement is still subject to the full legal process, and I have no intention of making public anything that might jeopardise that. My hon. Friend has pointed out that 26% of Gemalto is owned by the French Government. Having their own national provider enables the French to get around EU procurement rules and, indeed, World Trade Organisation rules. What matters to me is that Conservative Members believe in both fair competition and global trade. We should welcome the fact that we have in De La Rue a company that trades successfully around the globe and secures contracts for all sorts of identity documents and, of course, banknotes. We should welcome the fact that we are not going to nationalise that company.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Given the policy of taking back control, will the UK have its own procurement policy for large contracts such as this one for passports separate from the *Official Journal of the European Union* process? Will that also mean that British firms will be less able to compete for public sector contracts in other EU countries in the many ways in which they can now?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out that there will be all sorts of opportunities post Brexit for the UK to determine its own rules, but I should gently point out to him that this is subject to WTO rules, by which I think we should look to be well guided.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My right hon. Friend can be reassured by the fact that in 2010, when I was doing her job, the Labour MP Michael Meacher complained bitterly about the awarding of the contract to De La Rue because it had been taken away from a firm in his constituency. What was interesting about that firm was that it was an American firm, which had

been given the contract by the previous Labour Government. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a degree of chutzpah in the modern Labour party's saying that the British passport contract needs to be given to a British firm, given that when Labour was in power, it gave that contract to an American firm?

Caroline Nokes: As ever, I can rely on my right hon. Friend to get straight to the point. There is a long history of British passports not necessarily being printed by UK companies. What is important to me is that we award contracts within the rules, that the Government do not seek to circumvent those rules, and that the process is handled fairly.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): When the Prime Minister said that we would have a red, white and blue Brexit, we did not think that she was referring to the Tricolour. Why is protecting British jobs not a priority for this Government?

Caroline Nokes: Seeking to protect British jobs in the way in which the hon. Lady outlines would be protectionist. I want British companies to be able to bid on a global stage for all sorts of contracts, and to be able to compete fairly throughout the world.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to call for a fair and open competition on a level playing field, but is she confident that there will be a level playing field, given that 26% of Gemalto is owned by the French Government? Is she confident that Gemalto's bid, which was significantly lower than others, is sustainable in the long term?

Caroline Nokes: As my right hon. Friend might expect, there has been close scrutiny of all the bids received—that has included a significant amount of financial due diligence—to ensure that the bidders can deliver on this contract, and deliver in a way that provides a British passport with the most up-to-date and important security features to be found in any travel document anywhere in the world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. If we had one-sentence questions, most colleagues would get in, but before I go further, I would be inclined to say, “Are those pigs that I see flying in front of my very eyes?”

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have a great deal of sympathy with my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) as she stands up for her constituents, but does the Minister agree that a lot of young people in this country will look at this debate with absolute bafflement? They never had blue passports; I never had a blue passport. What this actually represents is taking away rights as European Union citizens, which we discussed at great length the other day. That is the real damage in this situation.

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that this is not about taking away rights; it is about awarding a contract within the rules.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The EU leadership group is in turmoil: it is worried about the British passport being made in France, because when the French people see this symbol of freedom and independence and realise that the British people are gaining control of their borders, money and laws, they will rise up and want to leave the EU. What does the Minister have to say to the French?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend tempts me to say something I am really not going to say. What I welcome as part of this whole process is that we have companies in this country and abroad that can take part in a fair bidding process, where the best quality, the best security features and the best value for money wins, regardless of nationality.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): An awful lot of the De La Rue staff in Gateshead live in my constituency, although the plant is in the Blaydon constituency. Has the Home Office carried out any assessment of the loss of revenue from national insurance, corporation tax and income tax to the Exchequer when this contract goes to a French Government-owned company?

Caroline Nokes: It is important to reflect upon the fact that the new bidder will be providing new facilities and new jobs in the UK. We will of course seek to work with any company that experiences issues regarding the redundancy of staff, as any responsible Government would, but it is also very important to us that we make sure that we get best value for money for the British taxpayer.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My constituents in Harlow will welcome a saving of £120 million to the taxpayer, but may I put in an early bid by asking my right hon. Friend to spend that £120 million on the NHS by putting it towards scrapping hospital car parking charges?

Caroline Nokes: I never fail to be impressed by my right hon. Friend's ability to raise the issues about which he rightly campaigns and cares a great deal. Of course we need to consider how we spend any saving to the taxpayer in the best possible way. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the Immigration Act 2016 enables us to use any income received from passport fees to contribute not just towards the costs of the passport, but to securing our borders and making sure that there is easy and safe passage for British citizens through the border.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): How many jobs would have been secured had the contract been awarded to Gateshead?

Caroline Nokes: It is important to reflect on the fact that we do not believe in a protectionist policy. I can tell the hon. Lady that we anticipate that 70 jobs will be created in the UK as a result of the award of this contract, but this is about making sure that we get the best deal for the taxpayer, that we have the most secure and up-to-date travel document and, of course, that we abide by the rules and do not seek to implement protectionist policies in this country.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I absolutely support what the Minister has said, but can we perhaps move forward? What plans does the Home Office have for having not a paper passport, but a piece of plastic rather like our driving licence?

Caroline Nokes: The new passport will incorporate a polycarbonate page, which is the most up-to-date security feature, but there will still be paper pages, so the new passport will not look so radically different from what my right hon. Friend expects, although it is important that new security features are contained the whole way through it.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Many of my constituents who work in the Royal Mint in Llantrisant are proud of the fact that they produce not only British coinage, but coinage for 60 other countries around the world, so we do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater here. However, it is extraordinary that the only argument the Minister has so far advanced for the French being allowed to protect their French-made passports for French-made people is that the company is state owned, because that is just an argument for nationalising De La Rue, is it not?

Mr Speaker: I have learned of a new category of person today: the French-made person.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Made by other French people.

Mr Speaker: Made by other French people; yes.

Caroline Nokes: I do not think that I have at any point advanced an argument for state ownership. To be quite frank, we know that that produces poor value for money and higher prices in general. I am old enough—just—to remember the great British invention of British Leyland's Allegro, and that was hardly a triumph.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): At a time when President Trump is clearly looking to go down the road of protectionism, may I say how welcome it is to hear a Government Minister robustly defending free trade? She has our strong support in pursuing competitive tenders that are in the public interest and the taxpayer's interest, rather than sentimental jingoism.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no place for sentimentalism. I am as sorry as anybody that we do not have a British company at the top of this process, but the reality is that, as a Minister, I have to reflect on value for money, quality and security. Those were our main considerations when determining where this contract should be awarded.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I bring the Minister back from the fantasy land of free trade to the real world, where countries look after their own industries and their own workers? It is interesting that she says she is unable to tell us any details, given that Government spokesmen are briefing the media on the exact financial details. Will she take the opportunity to do so when she makes the announcement? Will she make the announcement to the House, or is she hoping to do it during the parliamentary recess?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are at a standstill point in the process, and I intend to make no announcement until that is well and truly over. He paints a picture of protectionism and a little Britain that I do not recognise. I want us to be an outward-facing, global country in which our companies can have the confidence to bid on the world stage.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I am rather disappointed by the outcome of this process, because a company in my constituency known as Morpho was going to invest hundreds of millions of pounds and create hundreds of jobs. When the Minister finally winds up this process, will she let that company know exactly where it has fallen short, because I do not believe that it would have done?

Caroline Nokes: As part of the procurement process, it was important that we scored issues such as quality, our confidence in the ability to supply, security features and value for money equally. When this is over, we will of course seek to inform all companies as much as we can within the law.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): In Perth, there have already been spontaneous demonstrations, with placards abound, and there are even rumours that the *Daily Mail* has sold out. Does the Minister agree that the billions of pounds of Brexit pain and international isolation will be all for nothing if we cannot have this new symbol of British freedom—the blue passport—British made?

Caroline Nokes: Well, if the *Daily Mail* has sold out in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, I have indeed done well, haven't I? What matters in this process is that we have the best possible passport made at the best possible value to the taxpayer, and that we ensure that we award the contract fairly and, indeed, within the rules.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I tell my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) not only that they make excellent paper down there, but that they make very good plastic notes at De La Rue? May I tell the Minister that my constituents feel that passports are already too expensive and that the last thing we should be doing is choosing a contractor that is not competitive. She is doing the right thing.

Mr Speaker: I think that that question was rhetorical. No more than a single sentence is required in reply, and not even that, if the Minister does not want to respond.

Caroline Nokes: I will just, as my hon. Friend entices me to do, say yes.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I have constituents whose jobs are at risk as a result of this decision. The Minister says that this is a question of value for money, but my understanding is that the new contract represents a considerable reduction compared with the present arrangements, and I believe that De La Rue has been aggressively undercut by what might turn out to be an

unviable bid. Would it not be better to award the contract to De La Rue, secure the jobs in the north-east, and enter into a gain-share arrangement so that the taxpayer can benefit from any efficiencies?

Caroline Nokes: We had to consider financial due diligence and ensure that all bidders were capable of delivering the contract within the quality standards set out and, indeed, with the new security innovations that will be included in the new passport. Ultimately, I believe in free and fair competition, and that is exactly what this result has shown.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have had over 20 inquiries on this matter, so we will now move on to the statement by the Prime Minister.

European Council

4.4 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I turn to the European Council, I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our deepest condolences to the families and friends of those killed in the appalling terrorist attack in Trèbes on Friday. The House will also want to pay tribute to the extraordinary actions of Lieutenant Colonel Arnaud Beltrame who, unarmed, took the place of a hostage and gave his own life to save the lives of others—*son sacrifice et son courage ne seront jamais oubliés*. Just last week, we marked the first anniversary of the attack on Westminster and remembered the humbling bravery of PC Keith Palmer. It is through the actions of people such as PC Palmer and Lieutenant Colonel Beltrame that we confront the very worst of humanity with the very best. And through the actions of us all—together in this Parliament and in solidarity with our allies in France—we show that our democracy will never be silenced and that our way of life will always prevail.

Turning to the European Council, we discussed confronting Russia's threat to the rules-based order. We agreed our response to America's import tariffs on steel and aluminium, and we also discussed Turkey and the western Balkans, as well as economic issues including the appropriate means of taxing digital companies. All of those are issues on which the UK will continue to play a leading role in our future partnership with the EU after we have left, and this Council also took important steps towards building that future partnership.

First, on Russia, we are shortly to debate the threat that Russia poses to our national security—I will set that out in detail then—but at this Council I shared the basis for our assessment that Russia was responsible for the reckless and brazen attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, and for the exposure of many others to potential harm. All EU leaders agreed and, as a result, the Council conclusions were changed to state that the Council

“agrees with the United Kingdom government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible and that there is no alternative plausible explanation.”

This was the first offensive use of a nerve agent on European soil since the foundation of the EU and NATO. It is a clear violation of the chemical weapons convention and, as an unlawful use of force, a clear breach of the UN charter. It is part of a pattern of increasingly aggressive Russian behaviour, but it also represents a new and dangerous phase in Russia's hostile activity against Europe and our shared values and interests. So I argued that there should be a reappraisal of how our collective efforts can best tackle the challenge that Russia poses following President Putin's re-election. In my discussions with President Macron and Chancellor Merkel, as well as with other leaders, we agreed on the importance of sending a strong European message in response to Russia's actions not just out of solidarity with the UK, but recognising the threat posed to the national security of all EU countries.

The Council agreed immediate actions including withdrawing the EU's ambassador from Moscow. Today, 18 countries have announced their intention to expel more than 100 Russian intelligence officers from their

[The Prime Minister]

countries. That includes 15 EU member states, as well as the US, Canada, and the Ukraine. It is the largest collective expulsion of Russian intelligence officers in history. I have found great solidarity from our friends and partners in the EU, North America, NATO and beyond over the past three weeks as we have confronted the aftermath of the Salisbury incident, and together we have sent a message that we will not tolerate Russia's continued attempts to flout international law and undermine our values. European nations will also act to strengthen their resilience to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear-related risks, as well as to bolster their capabilities to deal with hybrid threats. We also agreed that we would review progress in June, with Foreign Ministers being tasked to report back ahead of the next Council.

The challenge of Russia is one that will endure for years to come. As I have made clear before, we have no disagreement with the Russian people who have achieved so much through their country's great history. Indeed, our thoughts are with them today in the aftermath of the awful shopping centre fire in Kemerovo in Siberia.

But President Putin's regime is carrying out acts of aggression against our shared values and interests within our continent and beyond, and as a sovereign European democracy, the United Kingdom will stand shoulder to shoulder with the EU and with NATO to face down these threats together.

Turning to the United States's decision to impose import tariffs on steel and aluminium, the Council was clear that these measures cannot be justified on national security grounds, and that sector-wide protection in the US is an inappropriate remedy for the real problems of overcapacity. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade travelled to Washington last week to argue for an EU-wide exemption. So we welcome the temporary exemption that has now been given to the European Union, but we must work hard to ensure this becomes permanent. At the same time, we will continue to support preparations in the EU to defend our industry in a proportionate manner, in compliance with World Trade Organisation rules.

Turning to Brexit, last week the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union reached agreement with the European Commission negotiating team on large parts of the draft withdrawal agreement. That includes the reciprocal agreement on citizens' rights, the financial settlement, aspects of issues relating to Northern Ireland, such as the common travel area, and crucially the detailed terms of a time-limited implementation period running to the end of December 2020. I am today placing copies of the draft agreement in the Libraries of both Houses, and I thank the Secretary of State and our negotiating team for all their work in getting us to this point.

The Council welcomed the agreement, including the time that the implementation period will provide for Governments, businesses and citizens on both sides to prepare for the new relationship we want to build. As I set out in my speech in Florence, it is not in our national interest to ask businesses to undertake two sets of changes, so it follows that during the implementation period, they should continue to trade on current terms. Although I recognise that not everyone will welcome the continuation of current trading terms for another

21 months, such an implementation period has been widely welcomed by British business because it is necessary if we are to minimise uncertainty and deliver a smooth and successful Brexit. For all of us, the most important issue must be focusing on negotiating the right future relationship that will endure for years to come.

We are determined to use the implementation period to prepare properly for that future relationship. That is why it is essential that we have clarity about the terms of that relationship when we ask the House to agree the implementation period and the rest of the withdrawal agreement in the autumn.

Of course, some key questions remain to be resolved on the withdrawal agreement, including the governance of the agreement, and how our commitments to avoid a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland should be turned into legal text. As I have made clear, we remain committed to the agreement we reached in December in its entirety. That includes a commitment to agree operational legal text for the "backstop option" set out in the joint report, although it remains my firm belief that we can and will find the best solutions for Northern Ireland as part of the overall future relationship between the UK and the EU.

I have explained that the specific European Commission proposals for that backstop were unacceptable because they were not in line with the Belfast agreement and threatened the break-up of the UK's internal market. As such, they were not a fair reflection of the joint report. But there are many issues on which we can agree with the Commission and we are committed to working intensively to resolve those that remain outstanding. I welcome the fact that we are beginning a dedicated set of talks today with the European Commission and, where appropriate, the Irish Government so that we can work together to agree the best way to fulfil our commitments.

We have also been working closely with the Government of Gibraltar to ensure that Gibraltar is covered by our EU negotiations on withdrawal, the implementation period and future relationship. I am pleased that the draft agreement published jointly last week correctly applies to Gibraltar, but we will continue to engage closely with the Government of Gibraltar and our European partners to resolve the particular challenges our EU withdrawal poses for Gibraltar and for Spain.

Following my speeches in Munich and at the Mansion House setting out the future security and economic partnerships we want to develop, the Council also agreed guidelines for the next stage of the negotiations on this future relationship, which must rightly now be our focus. While there are of course some clear differences between our initial positions, the guidelines are a useful starting point for the negotiations that will now get under way.

I welcome the Council's restating the EU's determination to

"have as close as possible a partnership with the UK"

and its desire for a "balanced, ambitious and wide-ranging" free trade agreement. For I believe there is now an opportunity to create a new dynamic in these negotiations. The agreements our negotiators have reached on the withdrawal agreement and the implementation period are proof that, with political will, a spirit of co-operation and a spirit of opportunity for the future, we can find

answers to difficult issues together. We must continue to do so. For whether people voted leave or remain, many are frankly tired of the old arguments and the attempts to re-fight the referendum over the past year. With a year to go, people are coming back together and looking forward. They want us to get on with it, and that is what we are going to do.

I commend this statement to the House.

4.14 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of the statement. I also join her in condemning the appalling terrorist attack in Trèbes, and in offering our solidarity with the French Government and the people of France, and our condolences to the family of Lieutenant Colonel Beltrame, the hero of the siege. She is right to commend the heroic action of police and security services, both here and in France, and to mark the one-year anniversary of the killing of PC Keith Palmer and others on Westminster Bridge, who were quite properly remembered last Thursday in Westminster Hall and in St Mary Undercroft.

On Russia, I welcome the international consensus that the Prime Minister has built; as I said two weeks ago, the most powerful response we can make is multilateral action. So I would like to place on record our thanks to the EU and other states for their co-operation with us. I know that we will discuss these issues further later this afternoon, but I would add my condolences to all those Russian families affected by the Kemerovo shopping centre fire at the weekend.

On US steel tariffs, we need a co-ordinated response to tackle the dumping of steel by some nations and to resist the retreat into protectionism by the United States. The temporary respite from tariffs is welcome, but we must make it permanent.

We are pleased that some progress seems to have been made on the transition period, especially given that the agreement is identical to what Labour was calling for last summer. The only real question is why it took the Government so long to realise that a transition on the same terms is vital to protect jobs and our economy. The Government wasted months and months, dithering and posturing, before accepting the inevitable. That is the consistent pattern of these Brexit talks: wild claims and red lines quickly become climbdowns and broken promises.

Our coastal and fishing communities were told by the Environment Secretary only this month:

“The Prime Minister has been clear: Britain will leave the CFP”—

common fisheries policy—

“as of March 2019.”

Just a few weeks later, we find out that that will not be the case. What happened when we were told by the Brexit Secretary that the Government would deliver “the exact same benefits” of the single market and the customs union? Well, now the Prime Minister is saying, “We won’t be able to have the benefits of the single market” and, after saying it was a viable option earlier this year, any form of customs union is now ruled out, too. In January, we were told by the Prime Minister that EU citizens arriving during the transition period would not get the same rights as those already in the UK. She said:

“I’m clear there is a difference between those people who came prior to us leaving and those who will come when they know the UK is no longer a member.”

Now she is clear that there is no difference.

The insecurity for families and businesses, and the confusion at the heart of Government, have dogged the first phase of negotiations. So can the Prime Minister today give some clarity and confirm that we will not withdraw from the European nuclear agreement—Euratom—until alternative international arrangements for nuclear co-operation are agreed? Will her Government back those pragmatic amendments to the Nuclear Safeguards Bill? The Prime Minister had previously signalled that there would be flexibility over the duration of the transition period, yet in the withdrawal agreement the Government have accepted a definitive withdrawal date of December 2020. Can the Prime Minister explain what happened to her request for flexibility? And what are the Government doing to ensure that this date could be extended if a deal has not been reached? It has been broken promise after broken promise, and I can only hope that the next broken promise does not involve their commitment to “no hard border” in Ireland. The Government have still offered no credible solution, and now, in order to move negotiations on, the Prime Minister has been forced into an agreement that could result in a hard border in the Irish sea. Will the Prime Minister outline how she will prevent a hard border in Ireland, or in the Irish sea, if she rules out any form of customs union?

Many UK nations and regions have benefited from the European Investment Bank. Given that we are still paying into the EU budget, will the Prime Minister explain why the UK will not be eligible for new funding during transition? Does that not leave us still paying in, but to get less?

Has the Prime Minister signed up to there being an Anglo-Spanish bilateral agreement on Gibraltar? Who will lead the negotiations for the Government?

Last week, the Government presided over a new fiasco over passports. In her last Brexit statement, the Prime Minister told the House:

“We are delivering for the British people, and we are going to make a success of it.”—[*Official Report*, 5 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 31.]

Well, tell that to De La Rue workers in Gateshead. It seems that her red, white and blue Brexit has become the blue, white and red of the flag of France. Time after time, the Tories sell off British assets and jobs to the lowest bidder.

The Prime Minister says that last week was a significant breakthrough, but it is the same breakthrough that we were told had been signed off in December, and some of it is still fudged, four months on. Yet we know that the hardest decisions are yet to come. In the second phase of the talks, the Government must stop posturing, drop the impossible red lines, finally put jobs and our economy first and give workers and businesses the clarity that they need.

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of steel. As I said in my statement and at the European Council, we want to work with the EU in talking to the United States, to make the EU’s temporary exemption from those tariffs into a permanent exemption. I referenced, as did the right hon. Gentleman, that there

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is a need for us to deal with the question of overcapacity in the steel market. That is best dealt with in multilateral forums, which is why at the 2016 G20 a forum was set up that included China sitting around the table. The work of that forum should continue and we need to address that issue on that multilateral stage.

The right hon. Gentleman raised various other issues. He will know that membership of Euratom is legally linked to membership of the European Union. We are putting in place the arrangements necessary to ensure that we can continue to operate with others in that area.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about clarity on citizens' rights. The December joint report and the report on the implementation period that was agreed last Friday do precisely that: they provide clarity for citizens as to what their rights are going to be.

The right hon. Gentleman referred once again to the Northern Ireland border. We are very clear and have set out proposals and ways in which we can ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We were also very clear in the December joint report, to which both the United Kingdom and the European Union signed up, that there should be no hard border down the Irish sea—in effect, that the internal market of the United Kingdom should be retained—and that all aspects of the Belfast agreement should be respected. We continue to do that.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the fact that the implementation period was a Labour party idea. May I remind him of two things? First, the concept of a smooth and orderly withdrawal from Brexit was first referenced in my Lancaster House speech in January 2017. Secondly, I seem to remember that the day after the referendum result in 2016, the right hon. Gentleman wanted to trigger article 50 immediately. There was no suggestion of an implementation period then, was there? So, there we go.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talked about changes of opinion. This is the Leader of the Opposition who says that he wants us to continue to be in a customs union, but at the same time refuses to accept the competition policy that is a necessary element of being in a customs union. It is the right hon. Gentleman who, when the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), backed a rerun of the referendum, kept her in her job, but sacked the then shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), when he backed a rerun of the referendum. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that it is the Conservative party in government that is getting on with delivering on the wishes of the British people and delivering a Brexit that works for everyone.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for her strong stance on the Russian attacks over the past couple of weeks? That strong stance has shown to the rest of the world that we take action and point the finger when there is evidence, but that we do not have a never-ending dialogue, as was recommended by the Leader of the Opposition, with those who would harm us the most. Did she take further steps in those Council meetings last week to recommend to the Germans that they look again at this pipeline directly to Russia?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, it is very important that we are clear-sighted when we deal with states such as Russia and recognise the threat that they pose. The subject of the pipeline, Nord Stream 2, was not raised in the European Union Council. On further measures that might be taken by the European Union, we have asked EU Foreign Ministers to look at issues that might need to be addressed in June, when the European Council will again be looking at the matter.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement.

I start by wishing Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey and his family the very best following his discharge from hospital last week. I pay tribute to the NHS staff who cared for him in such difficult circumstances, and, of course, our thoughts remain with Yulia and Sergei Skripal. I want to associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks on the terrorist atrocity in Trèbes and on the selfless sacrifice of Lieutenant Colonel Arnaud Beltrame. I pay tribute, too, to those who have been caught up in the terrible fire in Kemerovo in Siberia.

Last week, the Prime Minister secured an important message in the European Council's formal declaration that it is "highly likely" that Russia was behind the nerve agent attack in Salisbury earlier this month. I note that EU leaders also agreed to recall Markus Ederer, the bloc's ambassador to Moscow, for consultations. That is a strong position that our friends have taken, and I welcome united efforts in responding to the reckless chemical attack in Salisbury. Can the Prime Minister tell the House what discussions she has had with European partners in ensuring that non-governmental organisations on the ground in Russia continue to have support from the United Kingdom and the EU?

Although the Scottish National party welcomed the Prime Minister's statement on 14 March, we want to see firm action taken by the Government on Scottish limited partnerships, which are often used by criminals for money laundering. We also want action on Magnitsky amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. Will the Prime Minister confirm when we can expect to see her Government's plans to clamp down on Scottish limited partnerships and, more generally, to deal with all forms of Russian money laundering?

Turning to the EU Council's conclusions on the latest phase of Brexit negotiations, will the Prime Minister tell the House what representations she made to EU leaders to reverse the conclusions on the UK's fishing rights post Brexit? Last week, fishing communities across Scotland were left in the dark as their industry was bargained away by this Government. Why were the Secretary of State for Scotland and Ruth Davidson permitted to issue a statement on 11 March that we would have control of our fishing grounds for this to be reversed only a week later? What changed? Did the Secretary of State know what was to happen? Had he been properly informed by the Government? It is incumbent on the Prime Minister to secure the rights of fishing communities and to reject any deal that leaves them hamstrung in a transition agreement.

SNP Members continue to hold concerns about the UK Government's approach to the Good Friday agreement and the Irish border. Time is running out. The Prime

Minister cannot play fast and loose with Northern Ireland any longer. Decisions are needed to give businesses and communities in Northern Ireland the certainty in their day-to-day lives that they deserve.

Finally, what discussions has the Prime Minister had with the Prime Minister of Spain on the ongoing situation between Spain and Catalonia and on the arrest warrants that have been issued for democratically elected politicians, including those who are living in Scotland? Surely, we need a political solution, not this situation in which Spain is trying to impose on directly elected politicians.

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. Gentleman, as I am sure everybody in the House does, in wishing the very best to Nick Bailey and his family as he completes his recovery. I also thank the NHS staff who not only treated him, but continue to care for Sergei and Yulia Skripal. I was pleased to meet some of those staff and talk to them about their experience when I was in Salisbury just over a week ago; their dedication was very clear.

The right hon. Gentleman raises a number of issues. We have had discussions with the Scottish National party and others about what a Magnitsky amendment might look like. We have already taken some action, but we are looking to ensure that we take the strongest possible action. Of course, a number of my colleagues in the European Council mentioned their own Magnitsky legislation and that issue.

I will write to the right hon. Gentleman on SLPs, if I may. We have taken some action, but are looking further at what we might be able to do.

On Catalonia, we continue to wish to see the rule of law upheld and to ensure that the Spanish constitution is upheld. On Northern Ireland, talks are starting today with the European Commission on the details of the ways in which we will be able to ensure that there is no hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Where appropriate, those talks will also involve the Irish Government.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman mentions the common fisheries policy. We will be leaving the common fisheries policy and taking back control of our waters. But it is a bit rich for him to make those comments, given that he belongs to a party that wants to stay in the CFP in perpetuity.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The European guidelines of 23 March and the EU proposed legal protocol both insist on the autonomy of the EU legal order and the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice. Will my right hon. Friend give the House an absolute assurance that in these negotiations the Government will not accept exclusive or sole jurisdiction of the European Court over the UK from 29 March 2019, nor after 30 December 2020—at the end of the implementation period—and that the Government will not enter a treaty or introduce legislation that confers such jurisdiction, which a recently retired European Court judge said would be a “legal viper’s nest”?

The Prime Minister: As I have said before in this Chamber in response to a question from our hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), during the implementation period, there will of course continue to be that role for the European Court

of Justice, because we will be continuing to operate on largely the same basis as currently. Once we have ended the implementation period, it will be a very different story. We will then be absolutely in a position that I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) wants: one of taking back control of our laws. As I said in my statement, there are some issues still to be addressed on the withdrawal agreement, including the governance of that agreement. A number of interesting ideas have been proposed that do not give sole authority to the European Court of Justice, which is not something that we would want.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s welcome remarks about European co-operation on Russia show the continued importance of co-operation with the EU after Brexit. She has rightly proposed a security treaty on extradition, Europol and data sharing to be in place by the end of the transition period. But she will also know that a new treaty could take 18 months for other countries to ratify, could yet be referred to the European Court of Justice and will have to deal with some tricky legal and constitutional issues—for example, on extradition, which Norway has taken over a decade to try to resolve. So why is there no fallback clause in the withdrawal agreement, why has the Prime Minister set a hard deadline of December 2020, and what will she do if the security treaty is not in place in time?

The Prime Minister: We are absolutely ready to start negotiations with the European Union on the security partnership and treaty for the future. It is in both sides’ interests to have that treaty in place. So far, that has been the very clear message from my European partners. I think that they will have every intention, as we do, of ensuring that those security arrangements are in place when we end the implementation period.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given the very strong mood in the country to just get on with Brexit, will the Government now produce their draft legislation, so that we can have the new fishing policy, the new farming policy, the new spending policies and, above all, the new borders policies that will represent the Brexit bonus that we are all waiting for?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has covered a number of issues. He will know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is indeed consulting on what would replace the common agricultural policy, and it will be consulting the fishing industry and others on what would replace the common fisheries policy. Of course, legislation will be coming forward as necessary to cover all the issues that we need to address before we see the end of the implementation period and have in place the future relationship.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. I welcome the joint statement that she has secured from EU leaders on Russia and, indeed, the actions of the 18 countries today. It is exactly that kind of internationalist approach that we need.

The Prime Minister mentions the discussions on taxing digital companies whose behaviour as guardians of our data is of course a subject of increasing concern. Does

[*Jo Swinson*]

she agree that Brexit or no Brexit, the UK's only hope of tackling the massive and damaging monopoly power of the likes of Google, Facebook and Amazon is to work closely with our European partners on a co-ordinated approach not only on tax but on data protection and competition regulation?

The Prime Minister: We are looking at the issues around data as part of our negotiations with the European Union. We are bringing the general data protection regulation into UK legislation. This is another area where we want to ensure that we have a good arrangement for data exchange in the future.

Work is in hand at an international level—at the OECD level—on the taxation of digital companies. We believe that the best result is an international result, but we also think it right to look, as the European Union, at whether any interim steps need to be taken to ensure that we are properly taxing these companies.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Flowing from her opening remarks, will my right hon. Friend call on the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the President of its Parliamentary Assembly—Michele Nicoletti—and the Assembly itself to join the British delegation in condemning utterly the Russian Federation's actions, which are wholly unacceptable in a civilised society?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion. I am very happy to join him and the British delegation in making that request.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on getting unanimity on Russia?

Will the Prime Minister state categorically today that no matter what happens, the implementation period will end at the end of December 2020? Does she agree that to go into any negotiation saying that one will never walk away is not the way to get the best result?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady on that point, which I have made in the Chamber in the past. Anybody going into a negotiation needs to be able to take that position.

On the end date of the implementation period, I have spoken about it being around two years. In the negotiations, the European Union wanted it to be at December 2020, and I felt it was appropriate that we had that firm date, so that everybody is clear about when the implementation period will end.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): For understandable reasons, defence spending has more than halved as a proportion of GDP since the end of the cold war. Now that the threat from Russia is re-emerging, can we reassess the need to fill the holes in the defence budget identified by the National Audit Office, the Defence Committee, and, most recently, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy?

The Prime Minister: This is obviously an issue on which my right hon. Friend has campaigned, and continues to campaign, with great passion and dedication. As he

will know, coming out of the national security capability review, we have set out the modernising defence programme. We are looking carefully at the question of our future defence against the background of the threats that we face. Of course, defence and national security covers more than simply what would traditionally be regarded as defence, but we are looking carefully at the capabilities required by the Ministry of Defence.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: My apologies to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who has migrated backwards from his usual seat.

Hilary Benn: Only temporarily.

Mr Speaker: It is only a temporary move.

Hilary Benn: The United Kingdom is a world leader in aerospace defence and satellite systems. Can the Prime Minister clarify whether the attempts that the European Commission is apparently making to freeze British companies out of Galileo contracts that are due to be issued in June are consistent with the transitional arrangements? If not, what does she propose to do about it?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear that as long as we are a member of the European Union, we will meet our obligations, but we should continue to be treated as a full member of the European Union. As the Business Secretary has said, the UK has a world-leading space sector that has contributed a significant amount of specialist expertise to the Galileo programme. We believe it is not just in the UK's interests for us to continue to participate in that programme as we have done, but also in the interests of the European Union, because of the expertise the United Kingdom can provide.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the implementation period agreed last week. It is something that businesses have been calling for, and it provided much needed certainty. Businesses are still saying that they want to know that there will be regulatory forbearance and understanding by regulators during the implementation period as they adjust to a new set of rules. Is that something Ministers are aware of and have been discussing?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. We are aware of the issue of the regulators' stance and have been in discussion with certain regulators about how they can work with their European opposite numbers to ensure that there is a sound regulatory footing during the implementation period.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I associate my party with the Prime Minister's words on the courage and sacrifice of Lieutenant Colonel Beltrame and her very appropriate words on the Russian threat?

Does the Prime Minister share the bemusement of many in Northern Ireland that there is so much concentration on the so-called backstop provisions when we should be getting on with negotiating the overall agreement, which will take care of the Irish border issue? Does she share the concern of many in Northern

Ireland that that is being used by some in the European Union, and indeed some in the Irish Government, to shape their version of Brexit or to thwart Brexit altogether, by inventing problems when there are none? Will she give a clear assurance to the people of Northern Ireland that there will be no backtracking on her firm resolve that no British Prime Minister could ever sign up to the sort of legal text that the EU put forward?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I am absolutely clear, and I share his bemusement that so much focus is being put on plan C when all parties have clearly said that they want to achieve this through plan A in the joint report, which was the overall agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union on their future partnership. I am happy to confirm that I could not—I do not think it would be possible for anybody standing at this Dispatch Box to do so—support something that destroyed the UK internal market. We are clear that we maintain our commitment to the whole December joint report. We will be working on those options, and we are fully confident that we can find a solution through plan A.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): There were many positive aspects of the Council, for which my right hon. Friend deserves congratulations, including particularly the unanimous support from other European countries over Russia's appalling behaviour, showing that our European friends are considerably more robust than the leadership of the Opposition. Does she agree that today's welcome moves to expel Russian diplomats from a number of countries must not be a one-off, but must be seen as the start of a more robust strategy in resisting Putin's provocation wherever it occurs?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. That is why, as I said earlier, EU Foreign Ministers and the European Council will be looking at that issue again. What happened in Salisbury was part of a pattern of aggressive Russian behaviour, and we need to ensure that we are working across all fronts to deal with that aggressive behaviour, whether it is disinformation, propaganda or cyber-attacks. We need to work together to deal with all those threats.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the level of support and solidarity she secured from our European friends on Russia. But how is it remotely acceptable that when a young whistleblower exposes compelling evidence of lawbreaking by the leave campaign, implicating staff at No. 10, one of those named, instead of addressing the allegations made, issued an officially sanctioned statement outing the whistleblower as gay and thereby putting his family in Pakistan in danger? That is a disgrace, Prime Minister, and you need to do something about it.

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that any statements issued were personal statements—*[Interruption.]* They were personal statements that were issued. I of course accept the importance of ensuring that we recognise that, for some, being outed as gay is difficult because of their family and circumstances. I want to see a world in which everybody can be confident in their sexuality and does not have to worry about such things.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Russia respects strength, and one of the lessons of the 1930s is that it is dangerous to give commitments to eastern Europe unless we back up such commitments with military hardware. Our commitment to the Baltic states is relatively modest; I think we have 800 men in the Baltic states. Will the Prime Minister consider increasing our military commitment and our support for the Baltic states, so that we can build European solidarity on the basis of a coalition of peace through security?

The Prime Minister: We do look constantly at the contribution that we are making. My hon. Friend is right that we have several hundred troops in Estonia as part of the enhanced forward presence. We are also contributing in other parts of Europe—to the work that is being done, for example, in Poland. However, we will obviously continue to look at this.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Given that the Prime Minister's political secretary, Stephen Parkinson, is the person responsible for outing the Vote Leave whistleblower, using No. 10 paper and documents, what is she going to do? Prime Minister, you should sack him!

The Prime Minister: No. I am sorry, but that is not what I should be doing. My political secretary does a very good job as my political secretary, and as I have said, any statements that have been made were personal statements.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Were we to adopt the Leader of the Opposition's policy of domestic procurement preference, would that not be a passport to ruin?

The Prime Minister: I welcome my right hon. Friend's way with words in his question, and I think he is absolutely right. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration said earlier this afternoon, we want to ensure we are providing a secure document and good value for the taxpayer, and show that we as a Government believe in competition and open markets.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It has been reassuring to see the other EU member states rally to the United Kingdom's support on the issue of Russia. Does the Prime Minister agree that all member states, and indeed the UK, should be vigilant about human rights abuses wherever they occur, even when that is within an EU member state?

The Prime Minister: Of course, within the European Union we all stand up for certain values—European values—and human rights are among the values that we stand up for. Where any difference is shown by any individual country in relation to that, that is pointed out.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Does the Prime Minister share my incredulity at the crocodile tears of SNP Members over fishing, when they would have had us remain in the disastrous CFP in the first place? May I go on to ask her about the suggestion made last week by my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) of a mitigation scheme to protect our fishermen during the

[*Mr Mark Francois*]

transition period? Has any thought been given to that in the Government, and might we see something about it in the forthcoming fisheries Bill?

The Prime Minister: I share my right hon. Friend's incredulity in relation to the actions of the SNP, which would keep us in the common fisheries policy in perpetuity. We will of course be talking with the fishing industry about the arrangements that will pertain for the industry in the future. I want to see that industry enhanced, and I want to see us doing what we can to ensure—when we are negotiating as an independent coastal state, at the end of the implementation period, in relation to fishing, access to our waters and access for our fishermen to other waters—that the industry can be enhanced, be built on and grow, and that we provide even greater support here in the United Kingdom.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Why is the Prime Minister so attached to the reckless strategy of taking the UK past exit date without settling a treaty on the future relationship that we would have with the EU? She could call that 21-month period an additional negotiation period or a limbo period, but she really should not call it an implementation period, because there may be nothing to implement.

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman looks back at my statement, he will recall that I said that it is our intention that this House, when it comes to look at the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill and to vote on that Bill, should have sufficient detail of what that future relationship is going to be, and that will take place before we leave the European Union.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Many of us are concerned that, in the transition period, most of the red lines have gone, but we can live with it on the basis that they will be restored when we finally leave. What reassurance can my right hon. Friend give me that when we leave, we will be out of the single market, out of the customs union and out of any jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to reiterate what I have said before: we will be leaving the single market, we will be leaving the customs union, and we will be leaving the common fisheries policy—we will be ensuring that we take back control of our waters. My hon. Friend asks me about the European Court of Justice, and we are clear that we will take back control of our laws. However, with his attention to detail, my hon. Friend will know that, within the December joint report, in relation to citizens' rights, there was, as part of that, for a period of time, for those EU citizens who are here, where cases are taken about those rights to UK courts, the possibility for the UK courts to have due regard to the views of the European Court of Justice.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) is rocking back and forth in a state of some perturbation, and it disquiets me to see him in that situation. Let us hear the fella.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): It was reported that the Prime Minister actually stayed at the European Council meeting longer than had originally been intended.

Is that a metaphor for our membership of the European Union? Given that she was there longer, did she have an opportunity to have bilateral discussions with other Heads of Government in the margins of the meeting? If so, could she tell us which ones?

The Prime Minister: I did indeed stay overnight, and the reason for this was, I believe, a very good one, which I think everybody in this House would support. We had expected to discuss the steel and aluminium tariffs imposed by the United States and the position of the European Union on Thursday night. It became clear that the decision of the President of the United States was not going to come through until the early hours of the morning, European time, and that trade would therefore be discussed on the next day, and in order to speak up for UK steelworkers, I stayed on.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I commend the Prime Minister for her statement today? It was noticed by many people that our European Union colleagues and allies acted more quickly in support of the Prime Minister's firm and fully proper actions against Russia than the President of the United States. What guarantees can she give us—what confidence can she give us—that we will continue to have that great relationship with our fellow members of the European Union once we have left the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The United States has, of course, today announced the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats. As part of the implementation period agreement, as my right hon. Friend will be able to see, we have come to an agreement as to how we are going to operate on foreign policy issues during the implementation period. However, it is certainly the case that we continue to be part of Europe; as I said, we are leaving the EU—we are not leaving Europe. We will continue to work closely with our allies across Europe in a variety of forums, including—and this includes, not least, the United States as well—in NATO.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly welcome the robust attitude Europe has adopted towards Russia. Indeed, I warmly commend the Prime Minister for securing that, because I do not think that that was a small feat. May I make a suggestion to her about dealing with Russia, which is that we should do more to tackle the dirty Russian money sloshing around in the City of London? One measure could be easily taken. The Government have, quite rightly, introduced a register of beneficial ownership of trusts, but they are refusing to make it public. Is now not the time to make sure everybody knows who owns what in this country, and to make sure Russian dirty money will not swirl around this country because the City of London Corporation is clean and we will make everything public?

The Prime Minister: We do not want dirty money, whatever its source, in the City of London or the United Kingdom. That is why we have taken a number of steps to enhance our ability to deal with that issue. It is why the National Crime Agency will always act where there are issues around criminal activity or illicit finances. It is why we brought forward proposals in the Criminal Finances Act 2017, which gave us even greater strength, and it is why we will be dealing with the other issue that the hon. Gentleman always raises with me, the Magnitsky issue, in the sanctions Bill.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we live in an increasingly dangerous world, and that our European allies and friends must be persuaded to spend more on defence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend knows that we meet our NATO commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence. We regularly encourage others to meet their commitment.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the steps taken on Russia and on steel, given the steel industry in my constituency. Does the Prime Minister not recognise, however, that there is a complete paradox here? At the very time she talks about the need for more co-operation on Russia, more co-operation on steel, more co-operation on data and more co-operation on counter-terrorism, her Government are pursuing a reckless hard Brexit. Does she not agree that as the facts change, and as people see these changing contexts, people have the right to change their minds?

The Prime Minister: Leaving the European Union does not mean we are leaving Europe. As I have just said, we are very clear that we will continue to work with our European allies on issues of mutual interest and mutual concern. Where we are dealing with threats posed to both those countries and the United Kingdom we will do so in a variety of ways, not least within NATO.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Those who doubted the Conservative party's ability, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, to negotiate with the European Union will surely welcome today's agreement both on the implementation phase and on the bulk of the future withdrawal agreement. Notwithstanding the mantra that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, will my right hon. Friend do everything possible to share the details of the agreement on citizens' rights to both European nationals here in the UK and British citizens in the European Union as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We have made efforts in the past to do exactly that, but we will be looking to ensure that we can provide the maximum information possible to EU citizens living here and UK citizens living in the European Union about their rights and their position so they can have certainty.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Our ability to sign our own trade agreements with third countries is hailed as one of the big prizes of Brexit. Delegations from European Free Trade Association countries that can agree their own free trade agreements, when asked what they make of their freedom, say they follow what the EU is doing. With which third countries does the Prime Minister expect the UK to make trade agreements that are different and better than current EU trade agreements during the transition period or indeed afterwards?

The Prime Minister: It is of course not the case that the EU has trade agreements with every country that we might wish to have trade agreements with, but a number of countries do have trade agreements with the EU. We have discussed being able to move those over into a bilateral relationship at the point of our leaving. When I

talk with those countries, I see a desire to go further than that and to improve the agreements we have with those countries.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that our fishing rights must not be hardwired into any future trade deal?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern there was at the time when we went into the common fisheries policy about the way in which our fishing rights were dealt with. I can assure my hon. Friend that we will be looking to deal with our fishing in a very different way in the future.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister agree that thanks to sessions such as this in the just over 20 months since the referendum, the British public are much better informed about the costs and benefits of leaving the European Union, and particularly about the dangers to our security and our economy? Given that they are much better educated about Europe and the threats, should we not have another vote, now that we know what the cost really is?

The Prime Minister: No.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the response to the Salisbury attack from our friends and allies in the European Union not only shows that she still has a huge degree of standing among our European friends, but bodes well for a pragmatic and mutually beneficial conclusion to the Brexit negotiations?

The Prime Minister: I think that not only the way in which other EU members have supported the United Kingdom and taken action in relation to Russia, but the fact that we achieved the December joint report and agreed considerable amounts of the withdrawal agreement and implementation period does indeed bode well for our future negotiations.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment that the UK will remain in the European arrest warrant. Could she be clear, however, how the joint jurisdiction will take place and what the role for the European Court will be in the application of that arrest warrant?

The Prime Minister: As we have put in a number of proposals, we need to ensure that once we have left the European Union, we recognise the sovereign legal order of the United Kingdom. Obviously, we recognise the legal order that will pertain for the EU27. We will be negotiating the details of issues such as the European arrest warrant as part of the security partnership and treaty that we will negotiate for the future.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the progress that she made last week. She will know that the financial services industry particularly welcomes the implementation period and the commitment in the guidelines for a trade in services based on market access and allowing rights of establishment. Is the British Government's ambition to achieve that under mutual recognition or standards regulatory alignment?

The Prime Minister: A number of proposals have been brought forward as the basis on which we could have the recognition of standards on both sides. Of course, there are some aspects of the financial services sector where standards are set internationally and not just at a European Union level. As part of the detailed negotiations we are going into, we will be looking at exactly what a dynamic equivalence of standards might look like in future.

Stephen Kinnoek (Aberavon) (Lab): The 23 March European Council guidelines state clearly:

“Being outside the Customs Union and the Single Market will inevitably lead to frictions in trade.”

Does that sentence not confirm beyond all doubt that the Prime Minister’s red lines are leading us inexorably to a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic?

The Prime Minister: No, it does not. Of course, the European Union will have set its particular guidelines. We are going into negotiation with it. We have already set out ways in which we can ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and we will go into detailed discussion on those.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress made thus far in the withdrawal negotiations, but can she confirm that it remains her position that no deal is better than a bad deal, and that all necessary preparations are being made for such an eventuality?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I assure my right hon. Friend that we are ensuring that we are preparing for all eventualities.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What does the Prime Minister think the effect on GDP will be of the UK leaving the EU?

The Prime Minister: Let me say to the hon. Lady what I expect to happen as a result of us leaving the European Union. I believe that we will be able to continue to trade on a very good basis with the countries of the European Union. We will also be able to sign trade deals around the rest of the world. The impact on the GDP of this country is not just about our membership of the European Union, but about the steps that this Government are taking through the modern industrial strategy and other, which is why we see record levels of employment in this country and have seen continuous growth for some period of time.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is welcome that the implementation period will create confidence for British business—for all except perhaps the UK fishing industry. UK fishing must be given confidence and must be prepared. Do the Prime Minister and the Chancellor plan to build that confidence by investing in our fishing fleet, improving the infrastructure of our ports and ensuring that we have adequate fish-producing facilities in the UK by 2021?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has a particular constituency interest in this issue, and I can reassure him that the Secretary of State for Environment,

Food and Rural Affairs will be consulting the fishing industry, and working with fishermen and fish processors, to ensure that we have the best possibilities for enhancing and building on our fishing industry in the future.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): If a lorry laden with goods from Ireland or the EU leaves Dublin, drives through the frictionless border to Belfast, boards a ferry to Liverpool, drives 20 miles to my constituency and then unloads, how, in the absence of a customs union or single market, will my constituents know what is in the lorry?

The Prime Minister: The idea that the only way there can be reasonable and sensible arrangements for crossing the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland is by our remaining in the customs union and single market is simply wrong.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, and their teams, on the progress that has been made. In the next stages of the negotiations, will she pay particular attention to young people in this country, who for the past 20 or 30 years have been able to work and study across the EU without hindrance? Can we ensure, even given the red lines, that they and indeed everyone in this country will be able to continue to do so, at least for a limited period—two, three or four years—without needing work permits?

The Prime Minister: I am very clear that people from the United Kingdom will continue to want to work and study in EU27 countries, and that EU citizens will continue to want to work and study here in the United Kingdom. We will be considering some of the specific arrangements that have helped to support students, such as Erasmus, and whether we should continue to be involved in them.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Prime Minister mentioned the Brexit referendum. How concerned is she by reports that the Vote Leave campaign may have broken campaign spending limits in the referendum, and would she support investigations into that?

The Prime Minister: The question of whether rules were followed in the referendum is a matter for the Electoral Commission. I did refer to the Brexit referendum, because the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, and that is what we will deliver for them.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when this country is threatened by the kind of actions and stances we have seen recently from Russia, the House should be united against these stances, as that is the only way in which democracy can defeat despotism?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that we show our unity across the House in standing up to the threat and behaviour of Russia.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The co-ordinated expulsions are welcome and highly significant, but will the Prime Minister be prepared to

take further action if the Government conclude that Nikolai Glushkov was murdered with the involvement of the Russian Federation? That took place in London just eight days after the Skripal attack, in mysterious circumstances.

The Prime Minister: Obviously there is an ongoing police investigation into that individual's death, and we await its result.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), does my right hon. Friend agree that any free trade agreement linked to a specific industry such as fishing would constitute not only something that fishing communities could not accept, but cherry-picking?

The Prime Minister: As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), I am aware of how the fishing industry felt it was treated when the UK entered the then Common Market. I am also very clear that as we leave the EU, we need not only to uphold the interests of the fishing industry but, as I have said to other hon. Friends, to give it an opportunity to rebuild and be enhanced.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Given that the Prime Minister's Government and, unfortunately, the official Opposition have had more positions on Brexit than the Kama Sutra, is it not time that the "I had this idea first" nonsense stopped, and that she and her Government spelled out how our constituents will be protected from the disastrous economic impacts of Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The picture that the hon. Lady paints is not one that I recognise—[*Laughter.*] Indeed, in relation to anything that she said in her question.

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) was preparing to divulge further information. I am not sure that it would be entirely seemly in the context of these exchanges.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the progress that was made last week, and on once again confounding the naysayers and the doom-mongers. I also welcome the comment in her statement about the need for clarity on the terms of the final trade agreement by October. How can we avoid the risk that we end up signing a legally binding exit agreement before we sign a legally binding final-state free trade agreement, given that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed?

The Prime Minister: There is a legal difference between those agreements. It is not possible legally to sign the new free trade agreement until we are outside the European Union, whereas of course the withdrawal agreement will have to go through Parliament and through the European Parliament before we leave the European Union. As I have said—my hon. Friend alluded to this—it is important that we have sufficient detail, and agreed detail, on that future relationship, so that everyone knows what it will be at the time at which they are asked to look at the withdrawal agreement.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's comments about Gibraltar, but will she tell us what specific discussions have taken place about the future of Gibraltar International airport?

The Prime Minister: We are obviously having discussions with the Government of Gibraltar, but discussions are also taking place to ensure that the challenges posed by the relationship between Gibraltar and Spain, including those concerning the airport, are overcome. Some good discussions have been held so far.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): May I put on record my thanks to the NHS staff who cared for my constituent Nick Bailey so well? The whole community of Alderholt, the village where he lives, is very grateful for that, and pleased with the progress that he is making.

My right hon. Friend clearly attended a very busy Council. During the conversations on the margins, was she able to raise with other European leaders the rather ugly rise in the scourge of anti-Semitism in Europe?

The Prime Minister: That was not an issue that I raised at the Council, but I join my hon. Friend in his disquiet at the rise of anti-Semitism that we are seeing, and not just across the European continent. Sadly, we see too many examples of anti-Semitism here in the United Kingdom. There is no place for any racial hatred, hate crime or hate speak in the UK, be it Islamophobia or anti-Semitism.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last week's decision to stay in the common fisheries policy and to have no say in the matter for the next 21 months is further evidence of decades-long contempt for the fishing industry. Last week, Niels Wichmann of the Danish Fishermen's Association said:

"Britain has never ever challenged the quota shares that we have used every year in the annual negotiations".

If the Tories are so concerned about the fishing industry, why have they never challenged the quotas?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman says that the common fisheries policy shows "decades-long contempt" for the British fishing industry, but it is the Scottish National party that wants to stay in the common fisheries policy and show such contempt.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Brexit provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a renaissance of East Anglian fishing, although the provisions of the implementation agreement have created anger and some doubt about whether the Government share the ambition of the industry locally. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that her Government will work with and support East Anglian fishing communities, such as that in Lowestoft, as they work to revive this great industry?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to confirm that we will be working with those who are involved in the fishing industry throughout the United Kingdom to ensure that we can rebuild the industry, and that it will have a very good future.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened very carefully to what the Prime Minister has said today—and, in fact, since her appointment—but

[*Rachael Maskell*]

she has failed to set out exactly how we can have frictionless trade over the Irish border. Will she do that now?

The Prime Minister: Not only have the Government set that out, but we have set it out in papers that were published last year. I suggest that the hon. Lady looks at those.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): As the Prime Minister is aware, my son Clifford was born on 29 March last year, the day we triggered article 50. For this year's party, I have ordered only one cake—a Paddington cake—but next year I will be buying two: one to celebrate my son's birthday; and the other to celebrate our leaving the European Union. I congratulate the Prime Minister on her excellent leadership in getting us to this stage. Next year, may I save her a slice of Victoria sponge to celebrate Brexit day?

The Prime Minister: I will be very happy to celebrate Brexit day with my hon. Friend, and indeed with Clifford.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Prime Minister knows that under single origin principles, most broadcasters in the European Union choose to license within the UK. I met one such last week which told me that it will be moving 700 jobs from the UK to either Dublin, Amsterdam or Luxembourg, and will do so before the implementation period that the Prime Minister talked about. Is this what the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) meant by the Brexit bonus, and what is the Prime Minister going to do about it?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman looks at my Mansion House speech on the future economic partnership, he will see that broadcasting was one of the issues I touched on with regard to a specific strand of the negotiations that we want to address. Of course some broadcasters who are broadcasting into the UK have been licensed in the EU because of the freedoms available at the moment. We recognise that there will be some change to the arrangements, but we want to ensure that we can maintain the strength in broadcasting that we have here.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): May I welcome the Prime Minister's statement? Does she agree that what my constituents in the Black Country and the west midlands want now is for us to move quickly to the substantive negotiations about our future trading relationship with the EU so that we can build on the positive developments in the regional economy and take advantage of opportunities for exporting and opening up trade links throughout the world?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sure that people in the Black Country and the west midlands—these views are shared by people across the United Kingdom—want us to move to the negotiations on the future relationship and to see the benefits that will come when we are able to negotiate our own trade deals and encourage exporting outside the EU.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I strongly advise the Prime Minister to read SNP fishing policy before she comments on it, as she has it spectacularly wrong. Will she explain to the fishing communities of Argyll and Bute why she has agreed to a deal that keeps them in the CFP without a voice? Is that not the worst possible deal that her Government could have achieved for our fishing communities?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, for the 2019 catch, we will of course still be a member of the EU and part of the negotiations. We will be consulted on the 2020 catch and the stability key—the quota—will not change. For the 2021 catch, we will be negotiating as an independent coastal state. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that the SNP has changed its policy on membership of the common fisheries policy, I am very interested to hear that, but so far as I am aware, it has not. He needs to talk to his party's Front Benchers.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am pleased to hear the Prime Minister's continuing support for free trade. Is she aware that De La Rue currently exports to more than 140 countries, including 40 to which it exports passports? Does she therefore agree that the biggest threat to British jobs at De La Rue would be to advocate policies that would restrict passport production only to home countries?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Those who say that passports can be produced only in their home country would be denying De La Rue a significant part of its business.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The European Medicines Agency is departing these shores for the Netherlands. What estimate has the Treasury made of future losses for British science and research, particularly medical research?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady might know, in the Mansion House speech I gave a few weeks ago, I raised the question of our future relationship with agencies including the EMA. We want to discuss with the EU the possibility of an associate membership, crucially so that the system entails only one set of authorisations, which we believe is in everybody's interests in terms of getting medicines more quickly to market.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I, too, congratulate the Prime Minister on the very sensible agreement she reached at the European Council. Unlike the Leader of the Opposition, may I add my personal thanks to the Prime Minister and her team for agreeing a very sensible outcome during the implementation period for EU nationals in our country, as well as UK citizens in the EU27? Given my deep interest in this subject, which the Prime Minister knows well, will she help to facilitate a meeting with the Secretary of State so that I understand the proposed settlement rules that will be drafted in due course?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I would be happy to do that. It is important that the rules are clear for those who have been campaigning on this issue, and I am sure that that meeting will take place.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): At the European Council, was the Prime Minister able to speak to the President of France, who on a recent state visit to India managed to secure a trade deal valued at \$16 billion, despite having the dead weight of the European Union on his back?

The Prime Minister: I did indeed have discussions with the President of France, but we were discussing other issues, such as how we should deal with the threat from Russia.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): In my right hon. Friend's statement on 14 March on the Salisbury incident, she said that

“the United Kingdom does not stand alone in confronting Russian aggression.”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 857.]

We should remember that there were those who questioned that at the time, and also questioned whether some of our allies really believed the evidence that they were shown. Surely what is so significant about today is that we are far from being alone, and that those countries can clearly see the culpability of the Kremlin in this terrible attack.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That was reflected in the conclusions of the European Council that took place on Thursday and Friday last week. It has also been reflected in the actions taken by number of EU countries. Those actions are not just about supporting the United Kingdom; they are in the interests of the national security of those countries themselves.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is pleasing to see our EU partners expressing unanimity behind the Prime Minister in recognising that the shocking events in Salisbury were in fact made in Russia. Among the actions that we now take, will she please revisit the golden ticket visas—the tier 1 investor visas—in the light of the fact that 2,500 oligarchs have acquired such visas in less than 10 years? Will she at least commit to strengthening the checks on the wealth behind these people so that accusations of rich Russians buying their way into Britain with dirty money simply cannot stick?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has in hand a review of that particular tier of investor visas.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Our scientists at Porton Down have played a crucial role in our response to Russian actions in Salisbury. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to them, and continue to support and invest in our cyber, scientific and security personnel, whose role in our defence has never been more important?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to our scientists at Porton Down and at various sites of that particular Defence organisation. We should also recognise that the Ministry of Defence has recently announced some enhancement of the capabilities at Porton Down. It is important that we continue to do that and to enhance our cyber capabilities, as we have done with the nearly £2 billion that we are putting into our national cyber-security.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is surely not good enough for the UK—or, indeed, other EU states—to hide behind the Spanish constitution if that constitution allows for fundamental rights, freedoms and democracy to be trampled all over. Is the Prime Minister seriously saying that however many arrests occur and however many people are locked up simply for expressing their democratic views, the EU and the UK will say absolutely nothing about it?

The Prime Minister: As I have said all along, and as I repeated earlier, we believe it is important that the Spanish constitution is upheld and that the rule of law is upheld.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Prime Minister is right to stress the importance of standing up for shared values “within our continent and beyond.” That being the case, what does she think about politicians being arrested in Catalonia to suppress the peaceful democratic process?

The Prime Minister: As I have just said in answer to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), and as I will continue to say, we believe that the Spanish constitution should be upheld and that the rule of law should be upheld.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Has the Prime Minister spoken to her Spanish counterpart about the need to uphold democracy in Catalonia? If not, will she do so shortly?

The Prime Minister: Conversations that I have had on a number of occasions with the Spanish Prime Minister have contained our reassurance that the Spanish constitution and the rule of law should be upheld.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the 63 colleagues from the Back Benches who questioned the Prime Minister. If others on the Front Bench would follow this textbook example, we would get through lots of questions with commendable speed. I am sure that other Ministers will be taking notice of these important exchanges.

Points of Order

5.24 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier today, the shadow Work and Pensions Minister, the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), said that Channel 4's FactCheck supported the Labour party's claim that over a million of our constituents' children would, as a result of universal credit, no longer receive their free school meals. In fact, FactCheck said:

"This is not a case of the government taking free school meals from a million children who are currently receiving them."

It also confirmed that

"no one who currently gets free school meals as part of the early rollout of Universal Credit will lose their entitlement once the rollout is complete."

Given the number of those who may have been concerned by the Opposition's claim, may I seek your help in correcting the shadow Minister's comments and reassuring families across the country?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and the characteristically courteous and measured tones in which he put it. This is quite important constitutionally, so I hope that he will understand if I say that it is not for me to provide help in setting the record straight, other than in the strictly technical sense that I seek to facilitate colleagues who wish to point out important facts and to place them on the record.

I cannot recall off the top of my head whether the hon. Gentleman was in his place at, I think, business questions, when there was a substantial exchange on the matter of the obligation of a Member not to take clips from the Chamber and report them in a way that was not representative of the truth, and I gave a ruling on that matter. There was a follow-up point of order from the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who quoted one point of view and proceeded to say that it was wrong and that therefore some protection against that was required. I made the point that the advancing of one proposition that was then roundly countered by another was what was known as the stuff of politics, and I do not think that it is for the Chair to seek to intercede.

However, in so far as the hon. Gentleman was seeking help, may I very politely suggest to him that he has found his own salvation? He has put the matter on the record, and he may wish to communicate his words today not only to news outlets in his Gloucester constituency, but conceivably nationwide.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that early-day motion 937 has sat on the Order Paper as a prayer against the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which end the NHS bursary for a number of nursing courses. Wednesday of this week is the last praying day, and the Opposition may by convention call for a debate and vote on the Floor of the House. However, for three successive weeks, the Leader of the House has failed to answer questions from the shadow Leader of the House as to whether she will fulfil that obligation. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), the Leader of the House said that she would give the matter

"consideration and see what more can be done."—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 408.]

The shadow Leader of the House made a similar point of order late last Thursday in the presence of the Leader of the House, but again we got no answer.

As things stand, the other place will have a vote, but the elected House will be denied one. I therefore ask you, Mr Speaker, to confirm our understanding that we have taken the necessary measures to secure a vote under the conventions of this House. Have you received any indication that the matter will come to the Floor of the House this week? If not, will you confirm that it would be in order for the Government to provide time after the recess for a binding motion from a Minister, so that we can have a meaningful vote? Finally, are there any further steps that my hon. Friends and I can take to secure a debate and a vote on the legislation before it is too late?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. With reference to her inquiry as to whether it would be possible, post recess, to table a binding motion, I would want to reflect on that. I say to her that of course it is always open to a Government to withdraw a particular statutory instrument while wishing to preserve the intention to give effect to the policy contained therein, and to table another statutory instrument. That is absolutely not beyond the wit of humankind or the capacity of parliamentary draftspeople. However, that is not a matter for me.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving me advance notice of her serious point of order. Beyond that, I say that whether and when an Opposition prayer is scheduled for debate has traditionally been seen as a matter for negotiation between the usual channels. For the benefit of those attending our proceedings who are not Members of the House, that of course means the Government Whips Office and the Opposition Whips Office. It is not a matter for the Chair. If the debate is not scheduled until the statutory praying time has expired, it is customary to replace the prayer with a motion to revoke. Passing a motion to revoke does not have direct statutory effect in the way that a prayer would do. It would be for the Government to decide on their subsequent action. I understand the hon. Lady's annoyance about this matter. She has made her concern clear and placed it on the record. I suggest that she will have to take the matter forward in discussion with Ministers.

Beyond that, I want to say this. As will be evident to colleagues, many of these matters are proceeded with ordinarily on the basis not of statute, or even necessarily of a requirement of Standing Orders, but of convention and precedent. Those conventions and precedents are important to the collegiate operation of this House. They should not be tampered with or disregarded lightly. It is not desirable for the Chair to be constantly brought into exchanges of this kind, but I very much hope that people of good will on both sides in important positions in the House will reflect on this and, in a very finely balanced House, do what is procedurally right and what they would want, if roles were reversed, to be done to or by them. I hope that is fair and clear.

If there are no further points of order, I call the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The right hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

EU Referendum: Electoral Law

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

5.32 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the EU referendum and alleged breaches of electoral law.

Many Members will have read the articles in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* this weekend regarding alleged breaches of electoral law and specifically allegations about Vote Leave and BeLeave acting in concert. Like others, I have written to the police and the Electoral Commission to request that each and every one of those allegations is fully investigated.

The serious and well-documented allegations appear to show active and regular co-ordination of, and input to BeLeave's campaign by senior staff from Vote Leave, two of whom now work in the Prime Minister's office, and one of whom appears to have been involved in outing one of the whistleblowers, putting them and their families' lives at risk.

It was always going to be the case that providing funding of £625,000 to an almost unknown and relatively newly established organisation, apparently co-located in the same building as Vote Leave, but totally independent of Vote Leave, would attract suspicion. However, the reports add what may be totally new information, including that some of Vote Leave's six-figure donation had never been transferred to BeLeave accounts, or that contracts for work carried out—allegedly on behalf of BeLeave—were not paid for by BeLeave.

I am also aware that the Electoral Commission has been investigating for some months allegations that Leave campaigners benefited from services provided by Cambridge Analytica or its associated companies, and that these were not reported as required by electoral law, whether paid for or provided as a benefit in kind. Given the closeness of the EU referendum result, and its impact on the UK's future, it would be an absolute travesty of democracy if these allegations were not thoroughly investigated by the appropriate authorities.

I am not seeking through this request to pronounce on the guilt or otherwise of those named in reports this weekend, as these matters are of course sub judice. However, if the Standing Order No. 24 debate is granted, I would want to focus on the administration of elections and, in particular, referendums, in order to provide an opportunity for the Government to explain: whether they are content with the law that regulates elections and referendums currently; what action the UK Government intend to take to address any failings in electoral law they have already identified; and what mechanisms are in place to right past electoral wrongs.

The British public need certainty that our elections are free and fair, conducted within the rules, and that they have not been cheated. It is for this reason that I am making this urgent request for your consideration.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the EU referendum and alleged breaches of electoral law. I have listened carefully to his application and I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. I should emphasise, as I am not sure people always appreciate this and it is important to know the facts, that if this debate took place—that is dependent on numbers and so on—it would be a debate on what is called a “general motion” or a general debate. Therefore, it would take place on the basis that, “The House has considered the matter”; it is nothing more or less than that. It is not a question of which side of the argument colleagues happen to be on; it is simply a question of the Chair judging whether, if there is sufficient support in the House under the Standing Order, it should proceed as a debate. I am satisfied that it is proper to be aired. Has the right hon. Gentleman the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: Yes, the right hon. Gentleman has obtained the leave of the House. The debate will be held tomorrow, Tuesday 27 March, as the first item of public business. It is up to me to decide, up to a limit of three hours, how long the debate should last. The debate will last for two hours, and it will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the right hon. Gentleman's application—I am grateful to him.

National Security and Russia

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 21 March 2018, Oral evidence from the Foreign Secretary, HC 538. The First Report of the Defence Committee of Session 2016-17, Russia: Implications for UK defence and security, HC107, and the Government Response, HC668, and oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 21 February, on Departmental priorities, HC814. The First Report of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, National Security Capability Review: A changing security environment, HC 756.]

5.37 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I beg to move,

That this House has considered national security and Russia.

Three weeks ago, the Russian Federation was responsible for an attempted murder here in our country. This was not only a crime against Sergei and Yulia Skripal: it was an indiscriminate and reckless act against the United Kingdom, putting the lives of innocent civilians at risk; it was an assault on our fundamental values and the rules-based international system that upholds them; and it was part of a pattern of increasingly aggressive Russian behaviour, but which, with the first offensive use of a nerve agent on European soil since the foundation of NATO, also represents a new and dangerous phase in Russia's hostile activity within our continent and beyond.

So this debate is taking place because there is no greater responsibility for this House, for this Government and for me as Prime Minister than recognising threats to our national security and acting to meet them. So let me set out for the House: what we now know about the recklessness of this act and its exposure of innocent people to potential harm; the evidence that Russia was indeed responsible; the wider pattern of Russia's illegal and destabilising actions within our continent and beyond; the extensive actions this Government have already been taking; and our determination to work with our international partners to confront the evolving nature of this threat, to defend the rules-based international system and to keep our people safe.

Let me start by updating the House on the situation in Salisbury. Sergei and Yulia Skripal remain critically ill in hospital. Sadly, late last week doctors indicated that their condition is unlikely to change in the near future and that they may never recover fully. This shows the utterly barbaric nature of this act and the dangers that hundreds of innocent citizens in Salisbury could have faced. An investigation continues into all the locations at which the Skripals had been present on Sunday 4 March. As a result, we now have a fuller picture of the recklessness of this act against our country. Although Public Health England has made it clear that the risk to public health is low, and that remains the case, we assess that more than 130 people in Salisbury could have been potentially exposed to the nerve agent. More than 50 people were assessed in hospital, with Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey taken seriously ill. Everyone in the House will welcome the news that he has been discharged and, as we said earlier, we continue to hold him and his family in our thoughts as he makes his recovery.

We are quite clear that Russia was responsible for this act. As I set out for the House in my statements earlier this month, our world-leading experts at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down

positively identified the chemical used for this act as a novichok, a military-grade nerve agent of a type developed by the Soviet Union. We know that Russia has a record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations, and that it views some former intelligence officers as legitimate targets for those assassinations. We have information that indicates that within the past decade Russia has investigated ways to deliver nerve agents, probably for assassination, and has, as part of this programme, produced and stockpiled small quantities of novichoks. That is clearly in contravention of the chemical weapons convention, so it is right that we have been working closely with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, from which a team arrived in the UK last week and collected samples. This is a normal part of our discharging our obligations under the convention, although we are clear as to what the evidence is.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the upholding of non-proliferation regimes with our partners is central to our international security, while Russia has recklessly undermined and violated them. As I have set out, no other country has a combination of the capability, intent and motive to carry out such an act. There is no other plausible explanation—and that is not just the view of the UK Government; it was the unanimous view of every single leader at last week's European Council and it is the view of our allies in NATO and around the world.

There are some who question whether there could be alternative explanations, so let me be absolutely clear: we have been led by evidence, not by speculation. When faced with the evidence, we gave the Russian Government the opportunity to provide an explanation, but they did not do so. They provided no explanation as to why Russia has an undeclared chemical weapons programme, in contravention of international law; no explanation that could suggest that they had lost control of their nerve agent; and no explanation as to how this agent came to be used in the United Kingdom. Instead, they have treated the use of a military-grade nerve agent in Europe with sarcasm, contempt and defiance.

Incredibly, the Russian Government have deployed at least 21 different arguments about it. They have suggested that they never produced novichoks, or that they produced them but then destroyed them. They have tried to claim that their agents are not covered by the chemical weapons convention. They have pointed the finger at other countries, including Slovakia, Sweden and the Czech Republic, and they even tried to claim that the United Kingdom was responsible for a chemical attack on our own citizens. For a nation state like Russia to resort again to peddling such preposterous and contradictory theories is unworthy of its people and their great history.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Cabinet Ministers in this House defended Russia, despite the growing evidence of the enormity of its crimes, from 1929 to 1931. At least that was understandable on the basis of a shared ideology. Now that Russia has abandoned that ideology, to what can the Prime Minister attribute the reluctance of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to point the finger where it properly lies?

The Prime Minister: I can find no reason to attribute to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for the stance that he has previously taken on

this issue. I hope that, like some of his right hon. and hon. Friends, he will take a different position in this debate.

As I was saying, to peddle such preposterous theories is unworthy of the Russian people. It is merely an effort to distract from the truth of Russia's violation of international law. This unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom is a clear violation of the chemical weapons convention and a breach of the UN charter. This act against our country is the latest in a pattern of increasingly aggressive Russian behaviour, attacking the international rules-based system across our continent and beyond.

Russia's illegal actions in Crimea were the first time since the second world war that one sovereign nation has forcibly annexed territory from another in Europe. Since then, Russia has fomented conflict in the Donbass, repeatedly violated the national airspace of several European countries and mounted a sustained campaign of cyber-espionage and disruption.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. She will know that the 2015 strategic defence and security review states that state-on-state threats have dramatically reduced, but given what she has just said and what we all know, can she tell us whether the modernising defence programme will seek to update the part that underpins the SDSR?

The Prime Minister: We have been looking at the overall question of the threats to national security; we do that within the national security capability review. Of course, the modernising defence programme has come out of that, and it will look at the threats that we face and at the capabilities that we need in relation to that, but that will be set in that wider context of the overall national security capabilities that we need to defend ourselves in the future.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Prime Minister will know that, since General Gerasimov updated the playbook of Russian active measures, intervention in democracy abroad has been one of the mainstays of Russian activity around the world. Our national security strategy does not include an explicit objective to defend the integrity of our democracy, and our election law defences are hopelessly out of date. Will she now update that national security strategy and, crucially, update the election law, so that our regulators have the power to keep our democracy safe?

The Prime Minister: We take very seriously the need to ensure that we keep our democracy safe and that we have free and fair elections at all times in this country. The right hon. Gentleman is right—as I was about to go on to say—that Russia has meddled in elections elsewhere. We do look at, and are updating, the arrangements in our electoral law in a number of ways.

It is absolutely right, as I have said, that we have updated the national security issues. We responded to the terrorist attacks that we saw here in the United Kingdom last year by setting up the national security capability review, but that review and, of course, the modernising defence programme will look at the overall threats that we face.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): After Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine, Alexander Litvinenko and now Salisbury, I believe that we are entering, if not a period of cold war, at least a period of cool war in our relations with Russia, which is likely to last for some time. In that context, does the Prime Minister agree that the robust decision of 18 of our allies to expel Russian diplomats is likely to give Russia pause for thought and hurt it far more than our unilateral expulsions in 1971?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said earlier, those expulsions have taken place not just as a sign of support for the United Kingdom, but because it is important for the national security of those countries. The action will have an impact. The expulsion of 23 undeclared intelligence officers, which we have already undertaken here in the United Kingdom, will have a major impact on Russia's intelligence network here in the UK, which I will make reference to later in my speech.

I said a little earlier that Russia has meddled in elections. It has hacked the Danish Ministry of Defence and the Bundestag, among many others. It is seeking to weaponise information, deploying its state-run media organisations to plant fake stories and photoshopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the west and undermine our institutions.

During his recent State of the Union address, President Putin showed video graphics of missile launches, flight trajectories and explosions, including the modelling of attacks on the United States, with a series of warheads impacting on Florida. Of course, Russia used radiological substances in its despicable assault here in London on Mr Litvinenko. Russia is also failing to honour its responsibilities in the international community as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): At the NATO Parliamentary Assembly this weekend, the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) issued a statement to members. We had 100% support from all the NATO alliance parliamentarians for what happened and for our stance in relation to the blaming of Russia. One matter was raised: some of the members were concerned that Britain has very good chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear capability to investigate, but that many of them would not if such a thing were to happen on their soil. Does the Prime Minister agree that, if another NATO ally were attacked in this way, we should provide them with the capability that we have and that we have demonstrated so well?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important point. It is clear from the European Council that, within the EU, we will be looking at the whole question of enhancing our ability to deal with potential CBRN attacks. Regarding the wider group of countries to which she refers, I understand that the NATO summit this summer will be looking at the question of sharing capabilities. We recognise that certain countries hold certain capabilities and expertise, and it is important that they can be put to the use of others when necessary.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Although the improvements at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory Porton Down are very welcome,

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

does the Prime Minister agree that the abolition of the CBRN Joint Regiment in 2011 appears, in the light of current events, to have been premature? As part of the defence review, will she consider rebuilding that facility?

The Prime Minister: The important issue is that we retain the capabilities. Those capabilities may be retained in a slightly different format and in a slightly different way, but we continue to have excellent CBRN capabilities across our whole national security structure.

I said that Russia was failing to honour its responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In particular, it has covered up for the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in Syria, especially in its attempts to impede the joint investigative mechanism of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. This has allowed the Syrian regime to continue to perpetrate atrocities against the Syrian people. For the past month, in contravention of UN Security Council resolution 2401, Russian air power and military co-ordination have enabled the regime offensive in Eastern Ghouta, causing more appalling suffering and impeding the heroic efforts of the humanitarian relief agencies. Over the course of many years of civil war, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have died and many times that number have been displaced, yet Russia has repeatedly failed to use its influence over the Syrian regime to bring an end to this terrible suffering.

From the outset, the UK has been at the forefront of the European and transatlantic response to these actions. In response to the annexation of Crimea, we led the work with our EU and G7 partners in constructing the first sanctions regime against Russia. We have stepped up our military and economic support to Ukraine, including directly training almost 7,000 Ukrainian armed forces personnel. We are the second largest contributor of monitors to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe special monitoring mission. We are driving reform of NATO to better deter and counter hostile Russian activity, and our commitment to collective defence and security through NATO remains as strong as ever. Indeed, our armed forces have a leading role in NATO's enhanced forward presence, with British troops leading a multinational battlegroup in Estonia.

In the western Balkans, we stepped up our support to our newest ally, Montenegro, when it suffered an attempt by Russia to stage a coup. Our western Balkans summit in July will enhance our security co-operation with all our western Balkans partners, including on serious and organised crime, anti-corruption and cyber-security.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Is the Prime Minister concerned as I and others in the House are that the Russians appear to be re-arming various Serb groups in the Balkans? Why does she think the Russians are re-arming Serbian groups in the Balkans as well as doing other things, such as handing out Russian passports?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has particular knowledge and expertise on these matters. This is part of a pattern of increasingly aggressive Russian behaviour, which seeks to foment and sow discord in a number of countries around Europe. I believe that the

western Balkans summit will be an important opportunity for this country, as part of the Berlin process, to enhance our security co-operation with our western Balkans partners.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for her speech to the House. Does she agree that, although a functioning relationship is needed with the Russians, the basis of that relationship has to be the foundation of respect, which was and is seriously lacking in the murderous attack by Russia in our country and, indeed, across the whole of Europe?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier regarding our relations with Russia, we have no problem with the Russian people, who have a great history. It is the actions of the current Russian regime that are of concern to us. Many of us had hoped that Russia would take a different type of approach after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Sadly, that has not proved to be the case.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for being so generous in taking interventions. What assessment have the Government made of other approaches? The British Council, for example, did excellent work in Moscow. What is her view now of that work, which will not continue because of the expulsion?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right that the British Council did extremely good work. As she will know, the Russians have taken action against the British Council. In a few minutes, I will mention one or two other things that might be of interest to her.

We are building up our defences against Russia's cyber-threat more broadly, investing almost £2 billion in our national cyber-security strategy, and have opened a new National Cyber Security Centre, which is actively working with international partners, industry and civil society to tackle this threat. We are also working with our European partners to support the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, in Helsinki. We are calling out Russia's malign behaviour in cyber-space, as we did last month, when, together with the US and other allies, we attributed the NotPetya cyber-attack to the Russian military.

We are investing millions of pounds in countering Russian disinformation efforts, including more investment in public service and independent media operating in the Russian language through projects in the Baltic states, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and through reinvigorating the BBC Russia service as an independent source of news for Russian speakers.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Prime Minister is being very generous in giving way. Given the misinformation being spread by Russian television stations and stations that Russia has a hand in, would not this be a good time to increase our funding of World Service television output, so that we can give our own correct and democratic messages?

The Prime Minister: We do, of course, look at the resources that are provided to the BBC World Service; obviously, the BBC World Service television is on a slightly different basis. It is important that we reinvigorate the BBC Russia service, as it can provide an important independent source of news for Russian speakers.

As the House knows, we already have the largest defence budget in Europe and second largest in NATO, meeting the 2% standard and set to increase every year of this Parliament. As I mentioned previously, we have also commissioned the national security capability review, which will report shortly, and the modernising defence programme, to ensure that our defence and security capabilities are optimised to address the threats that we face, including those from Russia.

Following the incident in Salisbury, we have of course taken further measures. We are dismantling the Russian espionage network in our country and will not allow it to be rebuilt. We are urgently developing proposals for new legislative powers to harden our defences against all forms of hostile state activity—this will include the addition of a targeted power to detain those suspected of such activity at the UK border—and considering whether there is a need for new counter-espionage powers to clamp down on the full spectrum of hostile activities of foreign agents in our country.

We are making full use of existing powers to enhance our efforts to monitor and track the intentions of those travelling to the UK who could be engaged in activity that threatens the security of the UK and our allies. This includes increasing checks on private flights, customs and freight and freezing Russian state assets wherever we have the evidence that they may be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals or residents.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am grateful for the position that the Prime Minister is laying out. She has my wholehearted support, particularly on private flights, which is an area that covers many sins. Will she also talk a bit about the media here? Some media organisations are acting as state assets, even though they claim independence. They are not journalists at all, but agents of propaganda and information warfare.

The Prime Minister: As I am sure my hon. Friend will know, the question whether there are certain media outlets such as broadcasters operating here in the UK, and the licence under which they operate, is a matter for Ofcom as an independent body.

We are also cracking down on illicit and corrupt finance, bringing all the capabilities of UK law enforcement to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites, neither of whom have any place in our country.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Prime Minister clearly knew that I was going to intervene the moment she mentioned finance. May I suggest two things that she could do which I think would make a dramatic difference and that so far the Government have been reluctant to do? The first of those is a full review of the tier 1 investor visa whereby £2 million has merely to be handed over and is not necessarily checked to get residency rights in the UK. The second is making sure that the register of beneficial ownership of trusts, which many Russians use to hide their finances in this country, is public.

The Prime Minister: As I indicated in the previous debate on the statement, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is looking at the question of the tier 1 investor visa and its operation. The hon. Gentleman refers to some of the specific work that we have been doing. As he will know, we have already taken, and are taking,

some steps that are world-leading in relation to some of the registers and their transparency, particularly in relation to property. Of course, we continue to look at any further steps we can take in this area.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

The Prime Minister: I would like to make just a little more progress.

We have given our law enforcement agencies new powers in the Criminal Finances Act 2017, and we will table an amendment to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill to ensure that the UK cannot be a home for those who trade illicit finance or commit human rights abuses.

Crucially, because this threat from Russia is an attack on the whole international rules-based system and the collective security of the UK and its allies, we must continue to work closely with all our international partners—including through the new security partnership we want to build with the European Union as part of our new relationship after we have left. As I said in my speech in Munich, when we leave the EU, it is right that the UK will pursue an independent foreign policy, but around the world the interests that we will seek to project and defend will continue to be rooted in our shared values. Nowhere is this more true than in standing up to Russia's hostile actions and refuting its attempts to undermine the international rules-based order.

As President Macron said on Friday, Russia's actions in Salisbury were an act of

“aggression against the ...sovereignty of an ally...which demands a reaction.”

As I set out in my statement earlier, the EU and its member states have already taken some immediate actions, including withdrawing the EU's ambassador from Moscow. As I announced today, 18 countries have announced their intention to expel more than 100 Russian intelligence officers, including 15 EU member states as well as the US, Canada, and Ukraine. I repeat that, as I said earlier, this is the largest collective expulsion of Russian intelligence officers in history.

If the Kremlin's goal is to divide and intimidate the western alliance, its efforts have spectacularly backfired. Today's actions by our allies clearly demonstrate that we all stand shoulder to shoulder in sending the strongest signal to the Kremlin that Russia cannot continue to flout international law and threaten our security. As I argued at last week's European Council, we must reappraise how our collective efforts can best tackle the challenge that Russia poses. But we must and will proceed on a rigorous and legally sound basis, which is why the Council mandated Foreign Ministers to consider how best to proceed and to report back ahead of the next Council.

Chris Philp: Given the catalogue of outrages that the Prime Minister has outlined, could she confirm to the House that the measures to be considered by Foreign Ministers in due course will include the possibility of sanctions either against the wider Russian economy or against individuals close to the Putin regime?

The Prime Minister: We have asked Foreign Ministers to look at what steps they think it is important for us to take. We, as the UK, have already been at the forefront

[The Prime Minister]

of the economic sanctions that have been put in place in relation to Russia following the illegal annexation of Crimea, and of course the European Council will want to be looking at those sanctions for the future.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I agree entirely with the approach that my right hon. Friend has adopted. She highlighted the absolute need for our response to be lawful. Does she agree that that is why the collective response that she has achieved across our allies will be so important—because otherwise the temptation will always be that we cannot resist this kind of unlawful assault without resorting to methods of our own that would be unacceptable—and why the alliance that she has forged on this is of the greatest possible importance for us?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right about the importance of the alliance, both in the strength of the signal that it sends but also in the very clear message that we are not resorting to any sort of, as he says, unlawful methods. We are actually acting in full sight of and in accordance with the law.

As I have made clear before, we have no disagreement with the Russian people who have achieved so much through their country's great history. Indeed, our thoughts are with them today, especially the friends and families of those who died in the awful shopping centre fire in Kemerovo in Siberia. Neither should we wish to be in a permanent state of perpetual confrontation with Russia. Many of us, as I said in answer to an intervention, looked at a post-Soviet Russia with hope. We would much rather have in Russia a constructive partner ready to play by the rules. But while we should continue to keep open this possibility, we must also face the facts. President Putin's regime is carrying out acts of aggression against our values and interests within Europe and beyond.

The challenge of Russia is one that will endure for years to come. As a European democracy, the United Kingdom will stand shoulder to shoulder with our allies in the European Union and NATO to face down these threats together. We will defend our infrastructure, our institutions and our values against attempts to undermine them, and we will act to protect our national security and to keep our people safe. I commend this motion to the House.

6.6 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): We must start with the events in Salisbury. What happened to Sergei and Yulia Skripal on 4 March was an outrageous act committed with callous indifference towards the wider community in Salisbury, including those brave police officers who had to respond to and investigate the incident. Our first thoughts must remain with Mr Skripal and his daughter as they continue to fight for their lives in an NHS hospital, and with Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey as he continues his recovery.

Based on the analysis conducted by Government scientists, there can be little doubt that the nerve agent used in this attack was military-grade Novichok of a type manufactured by Russia. Since that analysis was revealed by the Prime Minister two weeks ago, the Russian

state has had every opportunity to offer a plausible explanation as to how a nerve agent stock of this type came to be used in this attack. It has offered nothing concrete in response except denials and diversion. Indeed, the only solid assertion that it has offered so far in its defence was that all stocks of nerve agents were destroyed many years ago—an assertion that has been contradicted by intelligence reports. That suggests that just over a decade ago Russia invested in the use of nerve agents and developed new stockpiles of Novichok to that end. There is clear evidence that the Russian state has a case to answer, and it has failed to do so. We can therefore draw no other conclusion than that Russia has a direct or indirect responsibility for this.

We have supported actions taken. We have also condemned the Russian Government for including in their tit-for-tat retaliation a totally unnecessary and counterproductive decision to close the British Council offices in Russia which have done so much to promote better understanding and closer relationships between our two countries. It is a matter of deep regret to all of us that on issue after issue, and not of our making, UK-Russian relations now stand at such a low ebb.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition has condemned Russia's retaliation, but he has not yet clearly and unequivocally condemned the attempted murders themselves. Will he now take this opportunity, without further caveat, to absolutely condemn the Russian Government's involvement in these attempted murders?

Jeremy Corbyn: I have very clearly condemned what happened and those who perpetrated this attack.

On 14 March, the Prime Minister said:

"there are other measures we stand ready to deploy at any time should we face further Russian provocation."—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 857.]

Does she consider the expulsion of 23 British diplomats and the closure of the British Council a further provocation?

In the light of the poisoning of the Skripals and the murder of Nikolai Glushkov, what advice and support are the police and security services giving to high-profile Russians living in Britain, or indeed any other Russian national living and working in this country?

What plans does the Prime Minister have to publish and table the Government's version of Labour's Magnitsky amendment to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill which was blocked in February? We have been assured that that will deliver all the powers that we were demanding—including by my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor in his response to the Budget and the Finance Bill—even before the Salisbury attack, to punish Russian abusers of human rights, but we are still waiting to see it published.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The people of the United Kingdom will want to know: does the right hon. Gentleman hold the Russian Government responsible for this—yes or no?

Jeremy Corbyn: I have already made that very clear.

I am asking for a clear commitment from the Government that the Magnitsky powers will be introduced and will be supported by Conservative Members. In that spirit, I also urge the Government to look again at Labour's proposal to target the laundering of money

through secret tax havens and undisclosed assets, as practised by many of the London-based Russian oligarchs, on whom so much of Putin's power depends.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: For the last time.

Vicky Ford: I am trying to listen very hard to what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. Can he confirm that he agrees that there is no other plausible explanation than the Russian state being responsible for the chemical attack on British soil?

Jeremy Corbyn: I made it very clear earlier in my speech what my position was, and I hope it is not the case that the hon. Lady—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot have both sides of the House shouting at the Leader of the Opposition. He must be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: I hope the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) is not trying to divert us away from a discussion about oligarchs' money in London and the need for a Magnitsky amendment.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Before more Conservative MPs stand up and ask their pre-prepared questions, they should listen again to what my right hon. Friend said in his opening remarks. He said that given the failure of the Russian state for the past two weeks to provide any evidence to the contrary, he accepts that the Russian state was responsible for the Salisbury chemical weapons attack—end of story.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention and for the serious and close interest he takes in all these matters.

I was talking about Russian oligarchs and their power. As the Prime Minister will know, it is not just the Labour party pressing for action. Alexei Navalny, a Russian opposition party leader who was barred from standing for the Russian presidency and has faced down intimidation of him, his family and his supporters at the hands of the Russian state, has made clear that the most important thing the UK could do to curb the power and punish the actions of Vladimir Putin is to hit his billionaire allies in their pockets. I hope the Prime Minister will listen to that advice.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): There are a lot of people out there who are very grateful that my right hon. Friend has called on the Government to follow due diligence and the guidelines set out by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Has he noticed that the Government have quietly heeded his advice?

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I will discuss that organisation further on in my speech.

In welcoming the expressions of co-operation and solidarity from our international allies, including the withdrawal of the EU ambassador to Moscow and the

co-ordinated expulsion of Russian diplomats, we must continue to build further, concrete multilateral actions to send a clear message that the Russians' actions are not acceptable. As I said previously, it is by building alliances that we strengthen our approach and the action we take.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: To that end, we applaud the Government's decision to ask the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to conduct its own independent analysis of the nerve agent used in the attack, to verify the tests conducted here in Britain, as we proposed two weeks ago. We are certain that those results—

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Leo Docherty: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will give way when he decides to do so.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We hope that that will make it easier for the Government to strengthen the resolve of our allies around the world to strengthen the co-ordinated response. To that end, I wonder if the Prime Minister could tell us later when she expects—*[Interruption.]* Well, then the Foreign Secretary will be in a position to reply to us, with his normal due diligence and care, about the results of the OPCW tests being undertaken at the moment. If he could give us the answer later on this evening, after my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) has spoken, I would be very grateful. Does he agree that this attack serves as a stark reminder of how important it is to properly enforce the chemical weapons convention and to ensure that the OPCW has all the resources it needs, both political and financial, to do its job effectively?

Chris Bryant: I commend the Leader of the Opposition for what he said earlier today. One of the horrible ironies of the way that the Russians have done their business over recent years is that they have sought the soft underbelly of British society—the strengths of fair play, the rule of law and all the rest—to try to target the way we do our business in this country. I met Marina Litvinenko last week, and she said, "One of the most sensible things you could do if you can't get a proper trial," which is what we would all want, "is some kind of judicial inquiry into the events in Salisbury." Does my right hon. Friend support that?

Jeremy Corbyn: That is a very helpful suggestion. Again, my hon. Friend has taken a long-term and serious interest in human rights issues in Russia and the large sums of Russian money that have turned up, particularly in London.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

My question to the Foreign Secretary is: what are the Government doing through the United Nations to make sure that the OPCW has the resources and support that it needs?

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share the concern of my constituents about the fact that significant sums of Russian money are donated to the Conservative party in exchange for political influence—including, we understand, a lot of money for a game of tennis with one Conservative Member?

Jeremy Corbyn: I understand that it was an incredibly expensive game of tennis with the Foreign Secretary. All I can say is that I am not going to bid for a game of tennis with him.

It seems a matter of fact that, as well as violating international law on the use of chemical weapons, the Salisbury attack represented an extraterritorial violation of human rights. Have the Government considered initiating or supporting a case in the European Court of Human Rights to examine that, which a number of Members have called for?

Let me turn from the Salisbury attack to the wider security issues raised by these actions. It is striking how far we have come in the past two years, not just in understanding the threat of cyber-warfare but in experiencing its reality. In the last two years, we have seen those dangers proven. We have seen Russia, among others, using social media to disseminate fake news in this country and disrupt the democratic process. We have also seen the attempt to interfere in our elections—thankfully, according to the Foreign Secretary, without any success. In the WannaCry attack on the NHS computer network last May, we saw the ability of overseas attackers—in that case, it was blamed on North Korea—to paralyse critical UK public services and infrastructure, so such organisations need the resources required to be able to defend their systems and services.

These developments fundamentally challenge the traditional definitions and norms of conflict. Whether we can adequately respond to these challenges is likely to be the crucial test of our defence policies in this country. On that note, while I know the Prime Minister will not want to go into details, will she at least reassure us not just that preventive measures and contingency plans are in place across our critical national infrastructure, but that simulation exercises have been conducted across all key sectors to test their state of readiness and identify any required improvements? The NHS and many other services depend on computer systems that can be hacked into, with all the obvious dangers that brings to everyone's daily lives.

Let me turn from the threat to Britain to the threat posed to allies in NATO, eastern Europe and the security of the world as a result of rising tensions in recent years. Now more than ever, it is vital that we stress to our European counterparts that their support is important in the wake of the Salisbury attack, that we wish to work with them to maximise the power of collective sanctions against violations of international law—whether from Russia or any other state—and that our commitment to such collective action will not be diminished by Brexit. Similarly, now more than ever, it is vital that the

UK and all other NATO members make it clear to all our allies in the Baltic states and elsewhere that we want to protect peace and security on the borders, without ramping up tensions unnecessarily, and that such a commitment is not conditional on their levels of defence spending.

At the same time, we would all do well to listen to the words of the outgoing chair of the NATO military committee, General Petr Pavel. Although he is a fierce critic of Russia's actions in Ukraine, he made it clear earlier this month that, during the tensions of recent years, the only incursions of Russian planes into NATO airspace or vice versa had occurred because of human error. That makes it all the more vital—[*Interruption.*] I am citing the outgoing chair of the NATO military committee. That makes it all the more vital that channels of communication remain open to avoid tensions rising unnecessarily as a result of misunderstandings. More broadly, General Pavel stressed how vital it was to maintain a “constructive dialogue” between NATO and Russia.

Two weeks ago, I said I favoured a “robust dialogue”. I have been a robust critic of the actions of the Russian Government for more than 20 years. I opposed the abuse going on in Chechnya by Russian forces, the manipulation of elections, the oppression of LGBT rights, and the dodgy laundering of money through London by Russian oligarchs.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I was not intending to intervene, but I cannot let that remark go by. I have been sitting here reading my right hon. Friend's article in the *Morning Star* after Russia annexed part of Ukraine. The strongest criticism he makes is:

“On Ukraine, I would not condone Russian behaviour or expansion. But it is not unprovoked”, and then he goes into the usual criticism of the US and NATO, and of UK policy. It is just not true.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for his usual helpful intervention—thank you very much. [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The Leader of the Opposition must be heard. Questions have been asked of him, and he will now answer them.

Jeremy Corbyn: Abuses of human rights anywhere in the world are wrong. On a delegation of all-party human rights group members to Moscow at the time of the end of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Russia, a whole group of us made it very clear, across party lines, what we thought about attacks on LGBT people, what was going on in Chechnya, and the denial of the right of civil assembly by people in Russia. I have continued to support such calls.

Where dialogue must take place for the protection of global security and the sake of the world is on the question of nuclear proliferation. Just three days before the attack in Salisbury, President Vladimir Putin gave an update boasting of his ability to strike at any part of the planet. We should not be about to mark the 50th anniversary of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty this June while its two key signatories, Russia and the United States, are behaving as though it no longer applies to them. It was a Labour Government who, in 1968, promoted the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

We urgently need the other signatories to that treaty, including the United Kingdom, to take a lead in insisting that Russia, the US and all other nuclear powers return to the negotiating table and to the principles that underpinned that very important treaty in 1968.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jeremy Corbyn: I hope the Prime Minister will take a lead on such a global initiative, which must happen—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman can choose from whom he wishes to take interventions; it is his business and no one else's. However, it is my business to make sure he is heard—and he will be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: In case Conservative Members did not hear, let me repeat that I hope the Prime Minister will take a lead on the global initiative to get everyone back around the table, to give teeth and powers to the non-proliferation treaty, and to see what can be developed for the rest of the world. It is equally essential, however unpalatable it is in the current climate, that we maintain a robust dialogue with Russia on three other issues of crucial geopolitical importance.

Mr Francois: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way so that we can have a robust dialogue on that point?

Jeremy Corbyn: No.

The first issue is climate change. The Russian Government have clearly taken the view that if the United States no longer needs to abide by its commitments under the Paris agreement, Russia need not do so either.

Mr Francois: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You are of course quite right that the Leader of the Opposition can decide to whom he will or will not give way, but how can he become the Prime Minister of this country if he is too frightened to take a single intervention from Conservative Members?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is certainly not a matter for me. I intend to make sure that this House and those who are paying attention to the proceedings in this Chamber can hear the important speech by the Leader of the Opposition, and we must now have some decorum to allow him to finish.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The second issue I want to raise is the nuclear deal with Iran, of which Russia is a signatory and, indeed, a strong supporter. At a time when it is more under threat than ever from those now in charge of Donald Trump's foreign and security policy, we will need a united front to defend that very important deal with Iran, which was promoted by President Obama and others. Whether we like it or not, Russia must be part of that process.

Leo Docherty *rose*—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not going to give way. The third issue is of course—

Mr Francois: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: No, I will not give way.

The third issue is, of course, the war in Syria, where Russia stands accused of supporting and committing war crimes in its backing for the Assad regime, in what is now the seventh year of that desperate war. It remains the inescapable truth that there can be no military solution in Syria, but an alternative political solution will never succeed without Russian agreement. Also included must be Iran, Turkey and the United States. All foreign forces will eventually have to be withdrawn to bring about peace in Syria. So, again, the international community does need an ongoing dialogue with the Russian Government if we are ever to achieve a political solution—a permanent peace for the Syrian people, hundreds of thousands of whom have lost their lives, so many of whom have been driven into exile, and so many of whom are living in desperate poverty and danger.

It was surprising that any democratic leader saw fit to congratulate Vladimir Putin on his election. I hope the Prime Minister will show the same consistency this week by refusing to congratulate President Sisi of Egypt on his sham re-election to office. President Putin's re-election has been preceded in the past year not just by the abuses that we have already discussed, and that the Russian state has committed or abetted overseas, but by blatant abuses at home as well. According to Human Rights Watch, the number of individuals punished for violating Russia's regulation on public gatherings was two and a half times bigger in the first half of 2017 than in the whole of the preceding year.

However, for all the punishment beatings meted out to student activists, for all the horrendous state-approved homophobia against the LGBT community, and for all the intimidation and banning orders against political opponents, one central, inescapable fact remains: President Putin will be the Russian President for the next six years, and we cannot afford to pretend otherwise or to wish that away. On all the issues I have discussed—diffusing tensions on Russia's borders; avoiding accidental conflict; preserving international agreements on climate change and Iran; reaffirming the nuclear non-proliferation treaty; securing a political solution in Syria; and even demanding the protection of human rights in Russia—we will have to engage with that Government and maintain what General Pavel of NATO called for: a constructive and robust dialogue, wherever that is required.

One area where that dialogue is immediately required with the Russian Government is regarding the protection, safety and security of the thousands of English football fans who will be travelling to the World cup this summer, as well as of the thousands of Arsenal fans travelling to next month's CSKA Moscow match. What arrangements are in place for policing the leg to be played here, and what advice is there for fans travelling to Russia? I hope that the Foreign Secretary will be able to answer those points when he speaks later this evening.

There are many in this House, including on the Benches behind me—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but I could hear something that sounded like a whistle. That will not happen in this Chamber—*[Interruption.]* Order. It will not happen; I do not care what it was meant to be—it will not happen in this Chamber. We will now have some decorum and allow the right hon. Gentleman to finish his speech.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

There are many in this House, including on the Benches behind me, who would prefer that the World cup did not take place at all or was relocated elsewhere. My own view at this late stage is that such a decision would be impossible, and that such a gesture from England alone would be pointless. However, may I urge the Government to do something that could ensure that these battles are not lost in future? Is it not time, as part of the international concern that the incident in Salisbury has caused for the global political community, to urge FIFA, the International Olympic Committee and other global sporting organisations to amend their criteria for awarding major sporting events and demand that bidding countries meet a much higher standard than at present in terms of the protection of human rights and compliance with international law?

I believe that we are essentially in agreement on many aspects of the approach that must be taken to Russia in the wake of the Salisbury attack. As we hold this general debate on Russia, we have strong and deeply held views, rightly expressed in this House, in terms of our collective anger at the Salisbury attack and our strong, united support for a response. However, we must also remember that we once stood as allies with the Russian people, millions of whom died in a mutual struggle for survival against the Nazis during the second world war. If we can come through this era of division and hostility, we can, I am sure, be allies again. If we want to live in a world of peace, security and respect for human rights, we must continue to hold on to that hope.

So let us send a clear message today in support of action to challenge Russia that is robust and hard-hitting, and that commands the widest possible support. But let us also resolve that we will keep working in the years ahead for a better, more peaceful future—for the safety and security of all of us on this planet.

6.36 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, particularly when we have had such a demonstration of moral relativism—such an apologia, in many ways, for a regime that has really done nothing to justify the explanations that have been permitted it.

May I welcome the clarity that you have brought to this debate, when all that we have had from some parties is very much the opposite? We have had obfuscation, deception and dissimulation. We have had all the tricks and all the terms that we are used to when we talk about a regime that has institutionalised lies, deception and dishonesty not, as Churchill put it, as vanguards for the truth, but instead of the truth. These are attempts not to build a better world, but to destroy one that is trying to serve the people of these islands and our allies and friends.

I am privileged to be speaking today about security. We have heard—and no doubt we will hear more—about how security is built on military hardware, and Members will not, quite understandably, hear me resile from that point. However, security is, of course, not built just on military hardware. It is not built just on the training teams that, even now, are helping the Ukrainians to defend themselves against the Russian tanks that are in Donetsk and in the Donbass, and that care about the overflights over Ukraine. It is not just about the British

battalion that is, even now, in Estonia, demonstrating to the Russians that the NATO commitment is real. Those British troops are not there just because they are capable, but to demonstrate that an attack on one is an attack on all.

Leo Docherty: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to consider the fact that the Leader of the Opposition is on record publicly as stating his belief that NATO should be closed down? Does my hon. Friend agree that that sends a deep signal of alarm across these Benches?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but he is slightly limited in what he said. He should have said, quite accurately, that it sends a deep signal of alarm across this House, and I look here even at friends in the Scottish National party and at many on the Labour Benches, who will remember, of course, who it was who built NATO: Clement Attlee. Who was it who built the independent nuclear deterrent? It was the Attlee Government, who recognised that the United Kingdom had a role to play as a force for good in the world. That was an era when socialism loved Britain and did not hate it. That was an era when socialism respected the west and did not hate it. That was an era when socialism stood for something and did not stand for nothing.

Chris Philp: The Leader of the Opposition, in his speech a moment ago, made reference to the 1930s and 1940s. Does my hon. Friend agree that the one lesson those unhappy decades teach us is that appeasement does not work?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, although he will forgive me if I do not join in the comparisons between Russia and Nazism. They are not accurate. Nazism was a hateful ideology that sought the death of millions. It deliberately sought to persecute and murder thousands, hundreds of thousands and millions of people, including Jews, gays and Gypsies. We are not dealing with that in today's Russia. We are not dealing with an ideology; we are dealing with a kleptocracy. We are dealing with a simple thieving regime under the leadership of one man who has enriched himself beyond the dreams of Croesus or avarice. He has made sure that even his cellist, a man none of us has ever heard of, has, according the recent Panama papers, earned more in his short life and professional career than any musician we have ever heard of. He has, apparently, over \$2 billion in assets. Who can dream of such wealth? Certainly none of the musicians we could name. Perhaps I should have stuck with those lessons, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We are dealing with a very real threat, which is why I particularly welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is here to lead the debate herself. She has demonstrated, not only through her premiership but through her time as Home Secretary, how seriously she takes these matters and I am grateful for her leadership.

Mr Simon Clarke: Had I had the opportunity to ask the Leader of the Opposition a question in an intervention I would have asked him whether he supported the continuation of our nuclear deterrent. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is absolutely critical and the lynchpin of western security?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend will not be at all surprised to hear that I am not only very glad that we have maintained our nuclear deterrent but that I voted in favour of renewing it. I was very glad that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister used the words she did at the Dispatch Box when she was asked if she would use that terrible weapon. The answer has to be yes, not because she wishes to, but because the point of the nuclear deterrent is that, yes, it should never be used, but it will only deter if it might be. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

This is a debate on security and we have focused, more than I would have perhaps chosen, on the military aspect. I would like to turn to the diplomatic aspect and pay tribute again to the Government for their success. Indeed, I pay tribute to Members from all parts of the House who have used the past two weeks to speak to friends and allies across these islands, across the continent and around the world, and to speak up and remind people why it is that we have called for aid at this moment, why it is that we have cited the attack in Salisbury as particularly important, and why now is the time for them to stand up.

I remember very clearly a conversation I had only a few days ago with a Minister in the French Government when the Select Committee was in France. I pointed out to her that she must be under no illusion, as she talks about European defence co-operation, that as far as we see it this is a moment for that defence to be shown real and for that alliance to be proved true, so that we can move forward and build on it. I am delighted to say that there was no divergence in the Committee, which is made up of Members from Labour, my party and the Scottish National party. There was complete unity. I was very pleased with the message we were able to convey: that the British people are united as one. Whatever our divisions on other issues, we are united on this being an attack on the British people and not just an attack on two people in a park in Salisbury.

This matter is not just about diplomacy either. Too often our intelligence services are overlooked. In the security service, the secret intelligence services and the Government communications headquarters, there are people who are working even now in secret and in silence to keep us safe, and to ensure we are prepared and ready—indeed to ensure that we never know about the next attack because it will not happen. That is so hard to measure, but it is the most essential element of our defence. Without it, we are blind. Without it, we are deaf. Without it, we cannot speak. Like the three wise monkeys, we would be left merely as an ornament and not as an actor.

Britain is nothing if not an actor on the world scene. We have been so because we have played our part in the last 70 years in building the international order that has kept us safe. In the post-war era we have been instrumental in building the United Nations, an organisation with many flaws but without which we cannot imagine modern life. We have been instrumental in building NATO, another organisation that asks for many improvements but still guarantees that we can sleep safely in our bed. We have been absolutely fundamental in writing some of the rules that underpin it, including—I know that on this I do not have the universal support of my hon. Friends on the Conservative Benches—the European convention on human rights, which has reflected British law around the continent.

The tragedy is that throughout that journey—well, most of it—we have been partnered by the Russians. In the 1940s, the Russians were part of building that new world order. They were a part of writing the universal declaration on human rights. The Soviet diplomats at the UN were not our friends—they were already rivals—but they understood that the rules-based international order was something for all of us. In it was the guarantee that we could all have a future and that we could all have a safe idea of where we were going. They challenged us on what that future would be—their view of the future was actually Soviet despotism—but they still understood that there were rules that had to be applied.

What we see today is the reverse. What we see today is a Russia that does not believe in the rules. In fact, it actively believes in no rules. What it is doing is seeking out every tie that binds, every alliance—everything that we hold dear and true—and trying to break them. That is why the repetition of lies by useful idiots, the propagandising of untruths by adjuncts, is not just a foolish thing to do and not just unwise but is actually and actively harmful. That is why we stay away from Russia Today and Sputnik: not because they show an alternative vision, but because they deliberately undermine the truth.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful speech with which I fully agree. When we were putting sanctions on Russia after it annexed Crimea, I was privy to information on discussions with the European Commission about how the octopus arms of the Russian state were all over the energy sector across the European Union and how it was using devious means to get its way. May I therefore invite him to take on the logic of his speech that we use not just military but diplomatic means, so that we can use energy policy to take the money away that is fuelling Mr Putin's military and intelligence?

Tom Tugendhat: The right hon. Gentleman will know that I of course agree with him. Energy policy is essential to playing our hand properly. From this House, I urge my German friends, as I have done face to face, to not bow to the Russian idea of a pipeline straight to Germany. That would effectively remove the diplomatic and political leverage that countries to the east otherwise have. It would weaken Germany and it would weaken all of us, because we are stronger when we stand together and weaker when we are divided. We must look at eastern Europe not as a sphere of influence, and not, as some do, as an area in which the west has provoked Russia, as though the Ukrainian people are some sort of slave adjunct to the Russian empire. That is not true. They are free people, as we are free and as any country is free, and they have the right to determine their own future. Energy policy is being used as a weapon against them.

I must make some progress. I hope the House will forgive me as I speed through and point to a few of the violations and the lies that have been used. We have heard Crimea cited—the first time a border has been changed by force since the second world war. We have heard about the occupation of Georgia—I wish that Her Majesty's Government would refer to it as such, because it is one—and we have heard time and again about the attacks in Montenegro, the lies in Berlin and the fraudulent electioneering in France and possibly even in the United States. We have heard again and again about these deceptions, and we must now hear

[Tom Tugendhat]

much more actively about the response. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out some good starts and very strong ideas and I welcome them, but I now want to see them being used.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said the other day in the Committee that he was looking forward to seeing the Magnitsky Act being used, but that it was not a political tool. Technically, he is right: it is a legal tool and therefore for the police, but it will demand that our embassy staff, our intelligence officers and others put forward the cases, so that the police know who the human rights abusers are and who the people are who should be caught up in this. It will also require the tools of our diplomats and intelligence officers, so that we know who the oligarchs are who are part of the Russian/Kremlin/mafia-controlled kleptocracy. We need to know them and identify them, and by doing so, we need to act against them.

If I may, I will ask for one last thing: that we look at Russian sovereign debt being traded here in London even now. We hear again and again about the importance of London's capital markets, and they will find few greater supporters than me, but through the London clearing house—an absolutely essential element of world trade that underpins in so many ways the debt markets that allow us all to prosper—we have links around the world. One of them is to Russian sovereign debt. The Russian Government, unlike other Governments, do not use Russian sovereign debt merely to finance themselves; they are now using it to sanctions bust. They are using their sovereign debt to refinance and capitalise organisations that have otherwise been banned. One of them is VTB Bank, which we heard about a little while ago—it has been reported on and I must pay tribute to Emile Simpson, who has done extraordinarily well to expose so many of these issues. We can use sovereign debt here too, as a tool and a weapon, because we are being fought on every single level in a cross-spectrum battle by an organisation that does not work for the Russian people, but feeds off them. It does not work for prosperity, but feeds off it, and it does not work for stability, but destroys it.

I welcome what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has set out, and I look forward to supporting her as she enacts those policies.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, we have a great many speakers this evening, so after the speech by the leader of the Scottish National party, I will impose a time limit of eight minutes.

6.52 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The events that took place in Salisbury are a defining moment for our relationship with Russia. With that state-sponsored act of terrorism, Russia crossed a line. We should be gratified to see the response of our friends and allies across the world and recognise the seriousness and importance of the events that took place two weekends ago. I was saddened to hear the Prime Minister's update on the condition of the Skripals. Our thoughts are with

them and all those who have been caught up in the terrible events in Salisbury. They have our best wishes.

At a time like this, we need cool heads, but we also need to deliver a clear message to Russia that the activities that took place two weeks ago cannot and will not be tolerated. Russia cannot commit such acts with impunity. We have seen the co-ordinated response from our European and other allies today of the diplomats that are being sent back to Russia. That sends a very clear message by saying to Mr Putin, "This is an opportunity for you to recognise where you are going with the acts that have taken place." The world is saying in a unified voice, "You must change, but we are extending the hand of friendship to the people of Russia. There must be change in the way that Russia behaves."

We on the Scottish National party Benches welcome today's opportunity to debate national security because many unanswered questions remain and the UK must address its defence weaknesses, including the reckless way in which Scotland's coast has been left vulnerable to Russian encroachment both by submarine and aircraft. There is no doubt that Russia has form in ignoring international law and undermining state sovereignty. Russia has also denied that it was behind a chemical attack on Alexander Litvinenko in November 2006. He died after drinking a cup of tea that was laced with radioactive polonium-210. A public inquiry into the killing concluded that the Kremlin probably approved his assassination.

Across Europe, we see flagrant disregard for international law. After Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia signed association agreements with the EU in 2013, Russia saw those countries' aspirations of closer ties with the EU as a threat to its influence in the region. That is in addition to Russia's ongoing occupation in Georgia. The conflict has been prolonged and at times heightened as Russia carries out the illegal process known as "borderisation". The illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 and the evidence that Russia supported separatist fighters in the east of Ukraine triggered an international crisis, but now we see Russia taking the lead in high-profile cyber-warfare—a 21st century threat that the UK Government need to recognise and be able to fully respond to.

US intelligence agencies described Russia as the world's leading source of cyber-threats in 2015, and the trail of destruction is pretty telling. Russian hackers are accused of the September 2016 attack on German political parties and parliamentarians. In May 2017, they managed to hack into and leak email accounts linked to Macron's presidential campaign. There is an ongoing investigation in the US on the role of Russian interference in the presidential election campaign of 2016. University of Edinburgh research has revealed that more than 400 Russian-run Twitter accounts that had been active in the US election had also been actively posting about Brexit during the EU referendum. The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) confirmed in November 2017 that the Intelligence and Security Committee here in the UK would investigate Russian meddling in both the 2016 EU referendum and the 2017 general election. These are serious events that have taken place, and they deserve an appropriate response not only from us, but from our allies.

The Russian threat is clear and Scotland's pivotal place in the high north is a critical point for UK national security. In January 2018, the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Nick Carter, warned that the UK is trailing Russia in defence spending and capability. He noted that failure to keep up with Russia will leave the UK exposed, particularly to unorthodox, hybrid warfare of the kind practised by Russia and other potentially hostile states. Over the past 10 years, Russian air and marine activity off the coast of Scotland has significantly increased. Russian jets are regularly pressing on the Scottish coast—RAF jets were scrambled only in January—while Russian submarines are also regularly pressing on the Scottish coast; recent sightings include those in November 2017.

Dr Andrew Foxall, director of the Russia studies centre at the Henry Jackson Society noted:

“Russia’s submarines, which lurk off naval bases in Scotland, seek even more sensitive information: the ‘acoustic signature’ made by the...Vanguard submarines”.

It is an absolute disgrace that there have been no maritime patrol aircraft since the last Nimrod aircraft left service in 2012. Instead, Scotland, a maritime nation in a strategic position, relies on NATO allies deploying maritime patrol aircraft.

The UK Government have been well aware of the threat but have failed completely to do anything. The former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), whom I see in his place, told the Defence Committee in October 2017 that there had been an “extraordinary increase” in Russian submarine activity in the north Atlantic.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Does my right hon. Friend lament the fact that far too often we have to rely on countries such as Canada, France and Norway to pick up the slack and that our NATO allies are concerned that, for all our projectionism around the world, we are not even looking after our own backyard?

Ian Blackford: That is exactly the point. We have lacked that maritime protection since 2012, and we have to deal with that as an absolute priority. We should not be relying on others to provide that maritime surveillance, particularly when we know that Russian aircraft and naval vessels have been coming up to the coast of Scotland. I call upon the Prime Minister to restate her Government’s commitment to purchasing all nine of the promised Poseidon P-8 aircraft to be based in Lossiemouth and, further, to give a firm date when we can expect these aircraft to be in place.

It is critical that the UK redouble its efforts to work with EU partners and the international community in response to Russia’s chemical attack in the UK. We in the SNP are concerned that the UK is isolating itself through Brexit, when working with our European friends is more important than ever. I call on the Prime Minister to have the UK remain a member of the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council post Brexit, given the obvious necessity for us to work together on matters of foreign affairs.

The SNP has led calls for UK Government action on tackling Russian money laundering and strengthening financial sanctions. We welcomed the Prime Minister’s statement on Wednesday 14 March and want real action taken on both the Magnitsky amendments and tackling the use of Scottish limited partnerships as a legal means

to facilitate organised crime, money laundering and tax evasion. We are not against the existence of SLPs, which were introduced by statute in 1907, but it is stunningly obvious that the process of registration—the fact that one does not need to pay tax in the UK or publish accounts—should shame us. We need to correct the fact that we have made it too easy not just for Russians but for other criminals and those wishing to launder money to do so through the vehicle of SLPs, and we must unite as a House and make it clear that we will work collectively to drive out from this country those who want to use the UK to shelter ill-gotten gains.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I see some looks of surprise on the faces of Government Members. Does my right hon. Friend agree it is important to appreciate that the regulation of SLPs is a reserved matter for this Parliament to sort out and that the Scottish Government have no power to do anything about it? It is up to this Government.

Ian Blackford: My hon. and learned Friend makes a very good point. I appeal to the Government. We are in their hands and wish to work with them. We have all inherited this system and we all collectively have this responsibility. Will the Minister commit to introducing legislation in a timely manner, post the review the Government are doing, so that we can go after those who seek to launder money through the UK?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I can confirm that the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) is absolutely right that this is a reserved matter and that the Government fully appreciate the seriousness of this issue. We understand not only how SLPs are improperly used but the importance of their being properly preserved for their original purpose. As the right hon. Gentleman knows—we met last week—we are determined to work closely with him to find a solution to this definite problem.

Ian Blackford: I thank the Minister for that response. He knows that I commit the SNP to working constructively with the Government if and when they bring forward legislation. It is important that we make this a priority.

The SNP will use all means possible to support organisations and communities in Russia working to build a better and more representative democracy. Support for Russia’s increasingly isolated civic society is more important than ever. We in the SNP are proud of the long-standing relations between Scotland and Russia. I pay tribute to broadcaster Billy Kay, whose BBC Radio Scotland series “The Scots in Russia” so perfectly highlighted the historical roles played by Scottish people in Russia.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. On the matter of cultural and historical ties between Scotland and Russia, does my right hon. Friend agree that prizes such as the Pushkin prize—a literary prize in memory of Alexander Pushkin, whose great-great-granddaughter lives in Scotland—which I won just over 20 years ago, as a result of which I spent some time in Russia, are very important and that the ties of friendship between people on the ground in both our countries must not be lost or severed?

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that important point. We need to extend that hand of friendship. Our enemies are not the Russian people; our problem is with a regime that is acting irresponsibly and in contravention of international law. The people who are really suffering from the Russian regime, however, are the ordinary people, and we must do all we can to strengthen the ties and bonds we have over the longer term. It is regrettable that the Russians have decided to close the offices of the British Council in Moscow. It is very much a retrograde step. We need to find a way through this crisis. We need to show to Russia that we are resolute, but resolute to get to a better place. I recall during the cold war the Edinburgh conversations established by Professor Erickson that were so vital in finding a way forward to perestroika. Let us not lose that hope. We have to challenge the wrongdoing, but we must find a way out of this to normalise our relationships with Russia and its people.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) back from a very useful and engaging trip last week to Ukraine. The SNP will continue to work with communities who suffer under the watch of the Kremlin, regardless of where they are. Duma laws have systematically tried to stamp out grassroots organisations in Russia. A 2012 foreign agents law made it harder for the country's non-governmental organisations to work with foreign donors. Any NGO receiving foreign funding is called a "foreign agent". In 2017, there were 89 NGOs on the foreign agents list. The country's discriminatory legislation on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is used to harass the community and disrupt pro-LGBT events, while the authorities largely fail to prevent or prosecute homophobic violence. Human Rights Watch has pointed out:

"The current human rights situation in Russia under President Putin is the worst it has been since the fall of the Soviet Union". The UK Government must redouble their efforts in engaging with NGOs on the ground in Russia, and the SNP will push for the UK to remain part of EU cultural programmes that help to that end.

7.8 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I begin by paying tribute to my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench. They have met the challenge of Salisbury clearly, firmly and deliberately. The response of the international community today simply underpins the resolution they have shown in dealing with this crisis.

The strength of our response, however, only underlines how our policy towards Russia has not worked. Yes, it was well intentioned, yes it was rational—we wanted to see Russia as a partner and a part of the rules-based international system—but it has not worked like that. Our actions have not deterred Russia from repeated misbehaviour. After Georgia came Crimea. There were sanctions. After those sanctions, thousands of Russian troops were deployed in the Donbass, and we had the shooting down of MH17, including the murder of 10 of our own citizens. Our response to the murder of Litvinenko clearly did not deter the attempted Salisbury murders. So we have to do more.

I note and welcome that the Government have reserved the right to deploy other measures beyond the expulsions—measures that must surely include making it more difficult for those close to the presidential Administration to do business, raise funds or buy property here in London.

Let me offer the House four thoughts, none of them particularly original. First, we must rise to the challenge of fake news: the ability of sophisticated enemies like Russia to obfuscate what should be clear, to foster conspiracy where none exists, and to tell blatant lies when they are pushed into a corner. It is the speed with which Russia is able to do that, using propaganda, social media, the "bots" and all the rest of it, that requires our response to be so much quicker. We need to deploy faster truth. I appreciate the difficulties of revealing or sharing intelligence, but when we have photographs of a mobile launcher that brought down an aircraft, and when we know that an agent as powerful as Novichok could only be developed in the highest-grade, most technically advanced state laboratory, we need to get those facts out far, far more quickly.

Secondly, this was an armed attack on a member of NATO. Under article 3 of the North Atlantic treaty, which is not quoted in the Chamber as often as article 5, NATO members agree

"to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack".

NATO must now renew its focus on the Russian threat. It must use the July summit to modernise its decision making, to make possible much more rapid deployment of troops and planes across NATO's internal border, and, above all, to beef up its strategic communications, which are so often much less than the sum of their parts. We need a faster and more coherent response from NATO.

Thirdly, whether we in the House are remainers or Brexiteers, we need to come together now to support the security partnership that the Prime Minister described so well in her Munich speech. One obvious way in which to reinforce the security of what continues to be our continent is to help to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas, which means—even as we leave the European Union—supporting the fledgling European energy market. I was delighted to note a reference to that in the Prime Minister's earlier Mansion House speech. It means helping to increase diversity of supply across our continent, encouraging dual flows and shared coding, promoting more interconnection, and using our technology and our regulatory experience to continue to play a leading part in making the European energy market much more resilient.

Finally, we need to strengthen our defences. Yes, the Prime Minister was right to remind the House that we have had a rising defence budget since April 2016, and yes, we do meet the 2% target, but Russia is not spending 2% of its GDP on defence; it is spending more than 5% of its GDP on defence.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Does the former Secretary of State for Defence consider that spending 2% of our GDP on defence is not enough?

Sir Michael Fallon: That is precisely the point that I am about to address. Russia is spending 5% of its GDP on conventional weapons, nuclear weapons, cyber and hybrids, and, as we now know, on a completely illegal chemical weapons programme. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, the NATO 2% is a minimum and not a ceiling. I think the House should consider this—and I do not make the point in a party political way. In the last year of the last century, the Blair Government were spending 2.7% of GDP on defence. That was before 9/11, before Daesh terrorism, before Kim had his nuclear

weapons, before cyber-attacks on our own Parliament, and before Russia became more malignant again. I was in the House in 1999, and I do not recall anyone suggesting that our armed forces were overfunded then.

If we want to continue to lead in NATO, on the ground in the Baltics, in the air over the Black sea, and in the North sea and the north Atlantic in anti-submarine warfare, if we want to go on playing our part in the counter-Daesh coalition, if we want to prop up fragile democracies in Afghanistan, Ukraine and Nigeria, if we want to go on contributing to United Nations peacekeeping in sub-Saharan Africa, and if we want to maintain a presence in the Gulf and recommit ourselves to protecting international trade routes in Asia-Pacific, we must will the means to do so. That means that, along with the modernisation programme that I know my right hon. Friends are now considering, we must now set our minds—and this is the answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh)—to a higher defence target. I have said publicly that I think we should commit ourselves, under the next spending review, to meeting a target of at least 2.5% of GDP by the end of the current Parliament.

If there is one thing that Salisbury has taught us and we have learnt all over again, it is that what Russia really understands is weakness—countries that will not stand up for themselves, will not protect their people, and will not protect their values and the freedoms that they enjoy. We have never been such a country, and Salisbury should remind us all that we never should be.

7.16 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly commend everything that the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) has just said, not least his final point that Russia only respects strength. In all honesty, I think that that could be made a bit more personal: I think that President Putin only respects strength. Indeed, when President Obama tried to press the reset button with Russia, he got absolutely nothing out of it, because President Putin simply took everything that he had and gave nothing back. Now we see that President Putin seems to be committed to some kind of arms race with the west as well. Indeed, he announced that just before what he calls a general election, although it is not really a general election in the sense that any of us would understand.

I think that we need to set this whole debate in the context of everything else that is true about Putin's Russia now. The human rights abuses are endless. I find the murder of so many journalists in particular deeply offensive, especially when there have been absolutely no attempts to pursue those responsible. The most famous name is Anna Politkovskaya, but there are many others as well. There is also the repeated use of excessive force, whether it is in response to the Beslan siege in the school or the Moscow theatre siege, or in response to other abuses and political dissidents in Chechnya. Putin's immediate response is excessive violence, and I think that that is what we saw on the streets of Salisbury as well. There are also the rigged elections.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is not just excessive violence, but excessive dishonesty? The instinctive response of the Russian regime was to lie about the invasion of Ukraine, just as it lied about MH17, and that is of particular concern.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In relation to Ukraine, however, what angered me more than anything else, in a sense, was the fact that the whole point of the Budapest accord was that all who signed up to it, including Russia and the United Kingdom, were guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Ukraine so that it would surrender its nuclear weapons. I suspect that if that had not happened, Putin would not subsequently have gone into Ukraine.

That is precisely the sort of long-term, deliberate pattern of lying and territorial ambition that I think is characteristic of the man—let alone the murder of political opponents such as Boris Nemtsov, and the trials that, in so many instances, do not even attempt to pretend to be fair. I went to Mikhail Khodorkovsky's second trial, which was clearly being run by a martinet of a judge who was simply taking orders directly from the Kremlin. Most extraordinarily, the criminal justice system is now being used in Russia to prosecute Sergei Magnitsky after his death. I sometimes think that those in the Putin regime want to believe that they are in a satire, because that is a way of cocking a snook at the rest of the world just to point out how much centralised power the regime has.

But even more disturbing in a sense for those who care about Russia and her people is the state of the economy: there have been dramatic cuts to the salaries and pensions of public sector workers in recent years; the average wage has fallen; and as for the death rate, people are dying younger now than they used to, which is an extraordinary phenomenon in a modern economy. The Russian economy was proclaimed some 10 years ago as one of the BRIC economies that was going to be the future of the world, growing and all the rest of it, but it is now stagnating, because it is to all intents and purposes a “monogorod”, an economy based on a single industry: petrocarbons. Russia's economic growth rate is languishing at 1.2%. We might be having growth of only 1.2%, but an economy at its level in the world needs to be on 5%, 6%, 7% and 8% if it is not going to completely stagnate as a country and gross inequalities are not going to get worse.

What the Russians should have done for the last 10 years was build on their phenomenal human capital, because Russia is one of the most educated countries in the world, and tackle the corruption. Unfortunately, they have instead built on the corruption and tackled the education, so there is now a massive brain-drain of clever Russians leaving for elsewhere, and Russia has fallen further down the transparency list, as one of countries around the world with increasing corruption.

I personally find one of the most bizarre elements of the whole Putin charade his personal and his regime's utter obsession with homosexuality. For a man who seems to like taking his shirt off more than any other political leader, that strikes me as phenomenally bizarre. *[Interruption.]* I gather he also likes Abba; what can I say?

What should the British response be both to this present situation and also to everything we have seen over recent years, as this is part of a pattern and should be seen as such? Some say we should tackle the Russian money that is swashing around in Britain, much of which might be dirty, and some say we should adopt a more robust political and defence posture. I think we need to do both. I know some are reluctant to tackle the financial

[Chris Bryant]

issues and some are reluctant to tackle the defence issues, but we must do the two in harmony, which is in essence what the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks was saying.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On the defence side of what can be done, will the hon. Gentleman back the calls of myself and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) that we should ask our allies to stop allowing the Russian fleet to refuel in their ports?

Chris Bryant: Yes, and, indeed, one of the first things I did when I knew about the incident in Salisbury was check with the Spanish ambassador whether Spain is maintaining its posture of refusing to allow Russian boats to refuel in Ceuta, and indeed it is; it has been very strong on this and is absolutely resolute with us, as it has been for the last 10 years.

Turning to some of the financial aspects, earlier in the debate I asked the Prime Minister about the tier 1 investor visa. This has to all intents and purposes acted as a magnet for some Russians who want to place their money, beyond the grasping hands of others in Russia or in other domains, in the UK, and hardly any questions have been asked. I hope the Government will now do a full review of the tier 1 investor visa.

Secondly, trusts in this country and in the dependent territories are used as a means of obscuring from public view the real owners of major assets including land and property. That needs to end. I am happy for the trust system to remain, because in many ways it is a strong element of our financial system, but it must be fully transparent because otherwise it is far too easy for Russians to hide their money. I hope the Government will review this matter. They have been asked time and again whether they will consider making the beneficial ownership of trusts a public register, rather than one that is only available to the authorities. That would be valuable, because the public and journalists in this country have done a phenomenal job in recent years of managing to wrinkle out additional financial information that others might not choose to bother looking at.

We also need to bring in full financial transparency in the overseas territories. I know that the Minister who is going to be closing the debate agrees with this policy, and I hope this might be an opportunity to twist their arms a little further up their backs, because otherwise it is too easy for someone like Mr Deripaska to buy a property in London, only not really buy it but buy it via a trust based in the British Virgin Islands and have it completely obscured from view. Some of us were taken on the kleptocracy tour last week, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who is sitting on the Labour Front Bench, and one of the interesting facts is that quite often Russians are now buying houses in the UK deliberately for grossly inflated prices as a means of laundering their money via a third party. I hope the authorities are investigating that.

Turning to the more defence-related elements that we need to address, we must have properly sceptical investigation by the police and all the authorities—if necessary, the counter-terrorism authorities as well—of the 14 deaths of Russians in the last few years which

have been suspicious, and not just those in the last couple of weeks. It seems unlikely that anybody would choose not to investigate, but it still seems possible that that might have happened. We also need full-spectrum readiness—more counter-intelligence, and more cyber-security—and we must also stand very strong with our NATO allies and, as the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks said, we need to devote more than 2% of our national income to defence.

We can see this through, but we will only do so by being robust and firm and steady—rather than by flip-flopping.

7.26 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Near the end of the second world war, the joint intelligence sub-committee of the British Chiefs of Staff, as it was then, produced a report entitled “Relations with the Russians”. From years of experience of working with Russia against the Nazis, the JIC concluded that Russia would respect only strength as the basis for any future relationship. That mirrored Lord Palmerston’s view of almost a century earlier:

“The policy and practice of the Russian Government has always been to push forward its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy or want of firmness of other Governments would allow it to go, but always to stop and retire when it met with decided resistance and then to wait for the next favourable opportunity.”

Not much has changed. Alexander Litvinenko died in London on 23 November 2006. Four days later, the BBC News website published an article headed “Russia law on killing ‘extremists’ abroad”. It is worth quoting it for the record:

“A new Russian law, adopted earlier in the year, formally permits the extrajudicial killings abroad of those Moscow accuses of ‘extremism’...In July, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament—the Federation Council—approved a law which permits the Russian president to use the country’s armed forces and special services outside Russia’s borders to combat terrorism and extremism.

At the same time, amendments to several other laws, governing the security services, mass media and communications, were adopted.

The overall result was to dramatically expand those defined as terrorist or extremist.

Along with those seeking to overthrow the Russian government, the term is also applied to ‘those causing mass disturbances, committing hooliganism or acts of vandalism’.

Much more controversially, the law also defines ‘those slandering the individual occupying the post of president of the Russian federation’ as extremists”,

so those who insult the President of Russia can legally be killed overseas according to this law. The BBC report concluded that

“the Russian law is very specific in that it permits the president—alone, and apparently without consultation—to take such a decision”,

so at least one hon. Member will not be on Vladimir Putin’s Christmas card list after his speech today.

If anyone had doubts about Russia’s responsibility for the Salisbury poisonings, its contemptuous failure to respond to the Prime Minister’s 24-hour deadline should swiftly have dispelled them. An innocent regime would have rushed to explain how a nerve agent that only it produced could have been acquired and employed by anyone else. We should also have been spared sarcastic suggestions in the Russian media that the United Kingdom was an unsafe place for “traitors” to settle, as well as the

ludicrous claim that we ourselves were behind the attack. That was a charge straight from the playbook of those who blame the Jews for 9/11 and US intelligence for the Kennedy assassination.

Vladimir Putin is a product of the KGB schooled in the suppression of captive countries, steeped in the culture of communist domination and filled with regret that the Soviet empire imploded. According to him, its break-up was the greatest disaster of the 20th century—a revealing and curious choice when compared with the millions killed in two world wars, the Russian civil war, the forced collectivisations, the mass deportations and the hell of the gulag.

Until the Bolshevik revolution, there was some chance of Russia evolving along democratic lines, but then the cancer of Marxism-Leninism gave psychopaths and dictators their ideological excuse to seize total control. Their opponents were denounced as enemies of the people and put, or worked, to death with no semblance of due process. Now the ideology has gone, but the ruthless mindset remains. Russian leaders no longer claim to be building a workers' paradise, but they still believe that western capitalists will sell them the rope with which to be hanged.

For 40 years from 1949, two factors ensured the containment of Russia and the maintenance of peace: the deterrent power of western nuclear weapons; and the collective security provided by article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty. No longer could an aggressor attack small European states without the Americans immediately entering the war. Yet such preparedness did not come cheaply. In the early 1960s, UK defence spending accounted for 6% of our GDP—the same percentage as welfare. The current welfare budget is six times the size of the defence budget. In the mid-1980s, defence constituted 5% of our GDP—the same percentage as education and health. The current education and health budgets are respectively two and a half and four times the size of the defence budget. In the changed strategic situation, this downgrading of defence cannot be allowed to continue.

Since 2016, the Defence Committee has been making the case for a defence budget target of 3% of GDP, which is what it used to be in the mid-1990s, even after the cuts following the collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the cold war. The former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), has called for a 2.5% target by the end of this parliamentary term. His successor is squaring up for a battle with the Treasury, and that fight has to be won for the safety of us all and for the security of our country.

Sir Edward Leigh: Does my right hon. Friend the Chairman of the Defence Committee think that the way to defeat a modern Russia is the same as the way in which we defeated the USSR? Reagan crushed the USSR's economy through what was in effect an arms race between a strong and vibrant American economy and a weak Russian one. Does my right hon. Friend think that that could be a way forward?

Dr Lewis: I would certainly say that it is part of a way forward.

I will use the generous extra minute that I have been given to say that I am a little concerned about the fact that while the Government are right to recognise the existence of new threats, such as cyber threats, digital

threats and intensified propaganda threats, including through the abuse of social media, and that we will need to devote resources to meet those new threats, that does not mean that the old threats or the old remedies to them have gone away. I do not like the conflation of national security budgets with defence budgets because that means that if we add more to the national security budget, we have to take more away from the defence budget, unless we listen to the warning from my right hon. Friend the former Defence Secretary, among others, that spending 2% of GDP on defence is not enough.

In my last few seconds, I cannot resist appealing once again to the Foreign Secretary—I am pleased to see him back on the Front Bench to hear my speech—to save the BBC Monitoring service at Caversham, which we are supposed to be going to visit. It costs £25 million a year to keep it going, but it is going to be decimated and absorbed into a wider system that will not be as effective as the dedicated teams at Caversham. If it was true before that we need to save it, it is even more true now, after all that has happened in recent days.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Speaking of generous extra minutes, I am afraid that after the next speaker, I shall be reducing the time limit to seven minutes.

7.36 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I was glad that the Prime Minister started this debate by articulating the fact that this Parliament's argument was not with the Russian nation or the diversity of its peoples. I am sure that the Foreign Secretary will forgive me for saying this, but some of the comments from Government Front Benchers over the weekend were perhaps unnecessary as we try to promote dialogue at this extremely difficult time.

We must acknowledge that there is still no definitive proof that the Salisbury attack was carried out by the Russian regime. There has been no admission of any culpability and nor are we likely to receive any. However, there is no doubt in my mind that it fits a clear pattern of behaviour and threat escalation not only here in the UK, but in a host of other European states, particularly those on the post-Soviet periphery. This is most worrying, especially in a broader geostrategic context, as it has coincided with a defence industry modernisation programme in the Russian Federation that has led many, myself included, to fear that we could be about to enter a new and unwelcome arms race in Europe, which would be in no one's interest.

Let us not forget that in President Trump's first call with Vladimir Putin after his inauguration, the then new President of the United States called the New START treaty, due to last until 2021, one of the worst deals signed by the Obama Administration, saying that it favoured Russia. Let us be clear: if the New START treaty falls, a whole host of other arms control treaties and agreements will begin to unravel. This is, of course, a treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation, but the consequences for our own security are immense.

The evidence suggests that the UK is in a period of unprecedented weakness in terms of its ability to understand and interpret Russian strategy. Whether we like it or not,

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

understanding Russia and its motivations is a fundamental duty of any Administration, yet I would contend that successive UK Governments have made a strategic decision to dismantle infrastructure, to disinvest from the necessary skills and people, and to divert funds that had previously been allocated to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the intelligence services and the Ministry of Defence to allow those agencies to understand the Russian Federation and the old Soviet Union, and to help the Government to make informed policy decisions.

I will give one example of how this capability has been systematically dismantled. The Soviet Studies Research Centre was Sandhurst's in-house think-tank on Russian military policy. It became the Conflict Studies Research Centre in 1992, but was then changed to a tri-service capability and moved to Shrivenham, with a resultant loss in capacity, in 2005. It then became the Advanced Research and Assessment Group in 2007 before finally folding in 2010. All that remains of the Army's in-house capability, with its 40-odd years of institutional knowledge, is the Russian military studies archive, which is still based at Shrivenham and is itself struggling for long-term funding.

Mr Seely: There is one gentleman—one Russian speaker—who mans that centre. I occasionally see him when he comes down from Scotland, and he is still going through the archives, which are effectively nothing more than a hugely understaffed glorified library. I agree that it is a great shame that ARAG was done away with just a couple of years after its most useful report into the Georgian war.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The hon. Gentleman's intervention highlights some of the issues around knowledge of the Russian Federation, and I also hope to meet that gentleman very soon.

Going back to the timeline of the Russian Federation, over the past decade or so we have had the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, the invasion of Georgia in 2008, Putin's return to power in 2012, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. I cannot help but come to the conclusion that, as the need to understand Russia's growing assertiveness has increased, Governments of every colour have decreased the UK's ability to get to grips with it. Quite simply, the UK's inability to meet the upcoming strategic challenges that the Russian Government pose should cause us all concern. As we begin to contemplate a new era of increasing turbulence in global arms control, and as the prospect of a new arms race looms, we should all be scared.

In that context, the multiple examples of Russian donations to UK political parties seem particularly misjudged, and I hope that those parties would consider returning them. The ill-gotten gains from the stolen wealth of the Russian people has flowed through this city for far too long. It has entered into the bloodstream of politics. It has purchased property and greased the wheels of the financial sector. That that has happened while Governments have run down their understanding of Russia not only is complacent, but must finally be seen as an abdication of responsibility.

We must begin preparations for the post-Putin era, but who are the potential successors? It is likely that they will be of a generation that did not know the Soviet

Union like Putin did. They will probably not come with the same KGB baggage that he did. That will be a huge potential opening, with the possibility of not repeating the past mistakes, made by both sides, that have led us to this profound point. That type of thinking cannot be done on the cheap, and I fear that a diplomatic service consumed by the difficulties—that is me being diplomatic—of Brexit will be unable to find the resources to do it.

Let me end by saying that while the horrific attack carried out against Sergei and Yulia Skripal may be a new low in our relations with the Government of the Russian Federation, we must not only push back firmly, as the Prime Minister indicated, but use it as a wakeup call. The potential for future misunderstanding and miscalculation is great, but let this violence not be in vain.

7.42 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak in this debate, which is well timed following the appalling and outrageous events in Salisbury barely three weeks ago. The question that must now be asked is whether Russia poses a threat to the national security of the United Kingdom and its allies. I believe that it does and that we are now entering a new period of Anglo-Russian relations. If not quite a cold war like we had in the last century, it is at least what I would call a "cool war" characterised by the aggressive actions of a Putin-led Government in Moscow and our strained relations with that Government as a result.

Assessing a threat classically involves an examination of both capabilities and intentions, so perhaps we should begin by taking a look at the development of Russian military capabilities in recent years. President Putin's rather bellicose state of the union address, just prior to his re-election, contained references to new, ultra-long-range nuclear cruise missiles. Some of them can be launched by submarine or even underwater drones, he claimed, and are therefore capable of evading America's limited ballistic missile defences. Analysts currently differ about the existence of such weapons. However, we know that the Russians have already developed a long-range, nuclear-capable cruise missile, the Kh-101, which is already being fitted to the strategic bomber aircraft of Russian long range aviation. In addition, the Russian strategic rocket forces deploy around 1,200 warheads in silo-based and road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles. The Russians have an active modernisation programme under way for their strategic nuclear forces, which aims to replace all the old Soviet-era ICBMs by 2020, with many of the new missiles having multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles or MIRV warheads.

Russia's strategic triad is completed by its ballistic missile submarines or SSBNs, including three new vessels of the Dolgorukiy class, armed with the new SS-N-32 ballistic missile. All the Russian submarine-launched ballistic missiles can reach their targets from their home ports, and those in the northern fleet are more than capable of reaching the United Kingdom. In recent years, Russia has also made considerable strides in quietening its submarines, especially the new class of Severodvinsk nuclear attack submarines, which are now entering service. In addition, many of Russia's submarines are now armed with the Kalibr land attack cruise missile, which is believed to have already been used in the conflict in Syria,

where Russia has targeted civilian hospitals without mercy. Russian submarines have increased the tempo of their operations in recent years and have been frequent visitors to our home waters, and Russian submersibles have also apparently spent considerable time reconnoitring the transatlantic cables that carry so much of our financial services business between Europe and the United States. Last year, a Russian surface task group, including their Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier and Peter the Great battlecruiser, sailed through the English channel en route to Syria.

Russia is also upgrading its ground forces. According to the previous vice-chief of the defence staff, General Sir Richard Barrons, during the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, two Ukrainian mechanised infantry battalions were located by a Russian surveillance drone and were effectively destroyed in under 15 minutes using rocket artillery. Russian long range aviation maintains over a hundred nuclear-capable strategic bombers including the Bear, Blackjack and Backfire aircraft, and a new fifth-generation fighter, the Su-57, is due to enter service in around 2020. Russian bomber aircraft now regularly encroach into our airspace and are regularly intercepted by our quick reaction alert Typhoons.

All of that adds up to a considerable increase in capability in both nuclear and conventional forces as part of a 10-year strategic armament programme, running from 2011 through to 2020. According to the United States Defence Intelligence Agency, Russia spent around 3% of its GDP on defence for much of that period, increasing to 4.5% of GDP last year. Russia's ability to inflict violence on us and our allies has therefore increased considerably in recent years.

Discerning Russian intentions is in many ways more difficult, but we can certainly look at the actions of Russia over the past few years to try to get some hints of what might lie in Russian minds in future. It is clear that Russia has been prepared to use military power, allied with information warfare, to achieve its political objectives on the European landmass. There was the invasion of Georgia in 2008—I travelled to Georgia with David Cameron to support the Georgians—the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the effective invasion of eastern Ukraine, and the annexation of some of the eastern provinces. Pressure has also been put on the Baltic states, including a particularly virulent cyber-attack on Estonia in 2007.

In response to all that, we certainly need to maintain and upgrade our nuclear deterrent, as approved by an overwhelming vote in this House several years ago. We also need to upgrade our conventional defences, as we did in the 1980s when faced with the threat of the Soviet Union. Bluntly, that means spending the money to do so. It is not often that I agree with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), but he and I are right on this one.

The attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia seems primarily to have been intended as a signal to other potential Russian defectors to think again. Nevertheless, it represented a chemical weapons attack on British soil, which seriously injured a police officer, and led to some 30 other UK citizens requiring at least some medical attention. People who do that are not our friends.

As long as Putin remains in government, it seems that we must accept the reality of entering into a “cool war” with Russia for the foreseeable future. However, working

with our NATO allies, we successfully deterred the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and the wall came down. We may now have to do it again.

7.50 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. I am from a generation that was born as the cold war ended. I am also from a generation that does not want another to begin.

Let me be clear: it is an outrage that nerve agents have been used on the streets of a British city, in clear contravention of international law. It is appalling that people have been left fighting for their lives, including a policeman, Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey. I am sure that the whole House is relieved by the recent news that he has been discharged from hospital and was able to return to his family. We are lucky that other members of the public, who could also have been killed or injured, were not. If the evidence is clear and incontrovertible that the Russian state organised the attack, the measures that the Government have taken are commensurate with what any Government should do in such circumstances.

We need to send a clear message that banned nerve agents cannot be unleashed in this or any other country without robust consequences. However, the often hysterical, ill-informed and plain infantile attacks on my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition for calling on the Government to follow due diligence, and particularly the guidelines that the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons set out, are not only disgraceful but have not helped our case in the court of international opinion. I note that the Government quietly heeded my right hon. Friend's advice.

To call for due diligence makes absolute sense. My generation is old enough to remember the so-called dodgy dossier that was used to take us into what many believe was an illegal war in Iraq. Politicising intelligence and turning it into propaganda is not the sort of activity that a democracy such as ours can ever be comfortable with. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was right then, just as he was right on apartheid, Chile, Afghanistan and Libya. One would think that some Members of this House, who have been far less prescient, would have learned to show a little more humility towards someone who so often found himself on the right side of history.

My question today is: what sort of future relationship will Britain and indeed, Europe have with Russia in the longer term? If it is to be one of ever-growing suspicion and hostility, where could that lead? What sort of relationship does President Putin truly want with our country and with Germany, France and the other European countries that are important for future trade, development and peace?

Chris Bryant: I have been thinking about what my hon. Friend says about due diligence and due process, and of course he is right. However, President Putin presumes that we will do everything we can to ensure that there is proper process, a fair trial and so on in this country, but that would not be available to anybody in Russia. We have to face that. Having gone through the whole Litvinenko process when I was a Minister, I know that the worse thing for Marina Litvinenko was that it was impossible to have a proper trial because the Russians

[Chris Bryant]

simply would not co-operate. We very slowly ended up with a judicial review and inquiry. We may end up having to do exactly the same thing this time, but we need to walk into this with our eyes wide open.

Dan Carden: I do not disagree with anything my hon. Friend says. The UK's role as a beacon and a light of hope in international law is as important as any other role we play.

At some point soon, it will be important to have a grown-up debate, beginning with some of Russia's closest neighbours, which have the most to lose and gain from all this. At that point, we may also ask whether the Defence Secretary, who told Vladimir Putin to "shut up and go away", has matured enough to take part in it. The policies that were played out in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union ultimately failed, and have helped contribute to where we are now. Russia has seldom helped itself either, even as some close to the Conservative party were helping themselves to some of its oligarchs' rotten roubles, not least to help fund the Conservative party.

At some point soon, we will all have to step back from the brink and reset relations with Russia. This House can take pride in the work that this country has undertaken historically with the United Nations and others of destroying chemical and nerve weapon stocks, and bringing about international agreements designed to ensure that they are never used again. The world has been rightly appalled when chemical weapons have been used against civilians in Syria, and that is why the world is at one with Britain now over the use of nerve agents here.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I hope that the hon. Gentleman recognises what happened to America in its relationship with Russia when President Obama pressed the reset button: absolutely nothing. President Putin grabbed the opportunity and moved on with his own policies. When the hon. Gentleman talks about agreements to end the use of chemical weapons and nerve agents, I stress that we have heard it all before from Russia, and I plead with him not to take at face value what the Russian state says.

Dan Carden: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman about taking things at face value, but I believe that there will be a day when we and the political leaders of this country and of other European countries seek to press the reset button again. Whether President Putin is there or not when that happens, we shall see what sort of success we have then.

The message is clear: we must bolster international law, working in co-operation with our international allies; put human rights at the heart of an ethical foreign policy; support and strengthen the United Nations, and use diplomacy to expand a progressive, rules-based, international system—rules that must apply to the strong as much as the weak.

7.56 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The barbaric attack in Salisbury marks a new low in relations between our nations. That is sad, but right. Chemical weapons are vile because of the appalling suffering they cause and

their indiscriminate nature. Whoever planted the nerve agent knew fine well that whoever came to the aid of those suffering was likely to be seriously injured. Completely innocent people—children going about their business—could have been affected.

The point has already been made, but we should make it crystal clear that our dispute is not with the Russian people. We mourn with them those who lost their lives in the shopping centre fire in Kemerovo. We acknowledge the courage and fortitude of the Russian people, particularly during what they call the great patriotic war, in which more than 20 million died. We pay tribute to what I believe can be described fairly as the genius of the Russian people. Russia produced Pushkin, Solzhenitsyn, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Chekhov and so many others. We do not besmirch their reputation.

Our quarrel is with the Russian regime, which has shown itself to be unwilling or incapable of complying with the international rule of law and furthermore has demonstrated a worrying escalation in its behaviour. We know about Alexander Litvinenko and the downing of MH17, which caused appalling loss of life, especially among Dutch nationals. We know about the invasion of Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and plenty more. We have heard a little about cyber-attacks in Estonia, and now we know that it is highly likely that Russia is responsible for the attack in Salisbury.

So much of that is characterised by what the Russians call "maskirovka", or deception—political and military deception. In plain English, it is a worrying instinct to lie, dissemble, deceive and disguise. The Russian Defence Minister described information as "another type of armed forces". Moscow TV said that a three-year-old boy had been crucified in eastern Ukraine for speaking Russian. It soon emerged that that was completely untrue, but it is an eloquent example of the weaponisation of information. When several soldiers without insignia, referred to in the west as "little green men", marched into Crimea, Vladimir Putin called them "local self-defence units". That was plainly false, not least because he afterwards gave medals to Russian journalists who had clearly misrepresented the evidence in Crimea.

Then, to make matters worse, we have heard that the statements on this case that have come from the Russian embassy have been laced with sarcasm, scorn and contempt; most bizarrely of all, it has suggested that somehow the British could be involved. It is that instinctive recourse to dishonesty that is so concerning.

We should respond with cool heads and firm resolve. I respectfully commend the Prime Minister for her sure-footed and calibrated response; the expulsion of 23 diplomats was absolutely right. But let me say that in responding to Russia, which shows this instinctive willingness to go beyond the international rule of law, we should not abandon our commitment to integrity in the rule of law, but instead redouble it.

When we have in our sights individuals who may—it is suggested—have been involved in money laundering, it is for an independent Serious Fraud Office or an independent Crown Prosecution Service to weigh the evidence and consider fairly whether there is sufficient evidence to prosecute and whether it is in the public interest to do so. When such charges come before a court, it is for independent courts and independent juries to decide, without political interference, whether the charge has been made out. Decisions about whether

things should be on our media—on our radio and on our television—should be the independent decisions of Ofcom, taken without political interference. By restating those principles, we mark ourselves out and apart from the brutal and very often dishonest Russian regime.

We should also calibrate our response on the basis of facts and not perception. Russia is of course a huge country, spanning 11 time zones, but it has always leveraged that geographical size to mask an underlying frailty. We should not forget that its economy is only about 60% of the size of the UK's; that average life expectancy in Russia is a full 10 years less than that in the UK; that its economy has stagnated for a considerable time; and that it is only by spending more than 5% of its GDP on defence, at a great cost to health, education and social care in that country, that it can project the image of strength.

We in the UK must respond with sanctions, as we have heard, and by redoubling our efforts to go against the dirty money. We should also consider strong defence, and I invite the Government to listen carefully to suggestions that we need to increase our defence expenditure. However, in the time available, I just invite the Government to think carefully about cyber-warfare, and I say that as the Member for Cheltenham. It seems likely, does it not, that if there is to be an escalation in the future—let us hope that there will not be—it could be in the world of cyber-warfare? We need to ensure that we have the best individuals in places such as GCHQ ready to defend our country and, if necessary, to exercise our sovereign offensive capability. That does mean resourcing it and ensuring that we have the resources to attract the brightest and the best. In short, let me say that in the face of this threat, and with apologies to Theodore Roosevelt, we should speak softly, speak wisely and carry a big stick.

8.3 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): May I start my remarks by repeating the welcome I gave to the Prime Minister earlier for the efforts the Government have undertaken to secure this impressive level of solidarity and support from our European friends and others? I welcome any personal role the Foreign Secretary played in that. This shows that they certainly have no doubt of Kremlin culpability, and I am sure they would have been given access to information that most Members have not had access to, which has helped them arrive at that conclusion, along with the clear evidence from Porton Down and elsewhere.

I warmly welcome the clear statement by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition that he accepts Russian culpability. I deprecate the barracking he received from some Government Members, most of whom are no longer here, having just popped in to barrack him. They have never been here for debates on Russia before and they did not even listen to what he had to say. That was deplorable behaviour, and I want to put that on the record.

I have been raising my concerns about Russia for many, many years. Indeed, when I first started raising concerns about 18 months ago about Russian interference in our democracy, I was treated as a bit of an eccentric, a crank and a conspiracy theorist. I started raising those concerns because of the evidence of what had happened in the United States presidential election. Having expressed those concerns, I found myself to be the recipient of a

great deal of very interesting information, some of which has since come out. I have to tell hon. Members that a great deal more that is very serious is still to come out. I shall confine my remarks to my concerns about Russia's propaganda and interference in democracy as part of its hybrid war against the west. This is not just about the direct interference in elections or electoral systems; I want the Government to take seriously the attention paid by the Kremlin to political parties, think tanks and our educational establishment.

First, on elections, we know from the US about the extent of Kremlin interference in its presidential election and there is growing evidence here. I have to commend the Chair of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for the work he and his Committee are doing to look into what happened here in terms of social media. I hope that when the Intelligence and Security Committee commences its work, it will look into that in even greater detail. I first raised this issue in a question to the Prime Minister in December 2016, and I wonder whether the Foreign Secretary could tell the House what action the Government took in response to my raising those concerns. Did they just leave the matter to the ongoing investigations of the Electoral Commission, or did they make their own inquiries and take up their own responsibilities for ensuring that our electoral systems are safe and secure?

Mr Dominic Grieve: I just want to give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that it was the Committee's intention to look at the full spectrum of Russian activity.

Mr Bradshaw: That is extremely good news, and I very much welcome the fact that the right hon. and learned Gentleman's Committee is doing that.

I would also like the Foreign Secretary to comment, if he can, on what the Government and their agencies are doing to take down Kremlin operations that seek to influence and infiltrate our political parties. He has a particular responsibility in this area, for example, to have satisfied himself that all those who have donated to his political party and to individual Conservative MPs, including some wealthy Russians here who give the impression of being Putin opponents, are in fact as stated. I hope that the Foreign Secretary and the agencies that serve under him are working very hard to make sure that he can feel confident on that.

I invite the Foreign Secretary to task the agencies to investigate the United Kingdom Independence party—this is much more serious. We already know that there are close political ties here involving Farage, who has been named as a person of interest in the Mueller investigation; that Aaron Banks is also under investigation by the Electoral Commission; and that of course Jim Mellon, the co-founder of Leave.EU, has extensive business background and current investment interests in Russia. So I would be grateful if the Foreign Secretary confirmed that as part of their investigations to counter criminal activities in this country, the Government are looking at some of the allegations that have been made around UKIP. Again, I first raised these concerns months and months ago.

Also, about 10 months ago, I highlighted concerns I had picked up about collusion between the leave campaign and these others bits of the leave campaign, such as BeLeave, to get around our strict electoral spending laws.

[Mr Bradshaw]

At the same time, I also raised concerns about the role of Cambridge Analytica, and we have now seen the most extraordinary and shocking revelations this week from *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Channel 4 News” and others. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will tell us whether the Government took the concerns I raised back then seriously and what they did about them.

Of course the other concerns that many of us have expressed was about the huge donation to the Democratic Unionist party for the leave campaign, whose source we are not allowed to know because, shockingly, the Government did not make the transparency of political donations in Northern Ireland retrospective. I hope that they will think again on that. The Electoral Commission has asked them to make that decision retrospective. It is always open to them to bring another motion to this House, so that we can do that and so that we can know and have confidence in the source of that huge donation. Again, a lot of that was spent on this digital advertising and digital work.

The United States has a powerful judicial investigation into Russian interference, under special counsel Mueller. Compare that with the farce this week of the Information Commissioner trying to get a warrant to search Cambridge Analytica’s office, which she finally managed to do late on Friday evening, having been trying all week. That clearly shows that our Electoral Commission, independent Information Commissioner and Select Committees do not have the powers they need to tackle this problem adequately. I hope that special counsel Mueller’s investigation will come up with more evidence and that the Foreign Secretary can reassure the House that all the various investigations into Russian interference in Britain are getting the full co-operation and support of all the Government’s agencies, because I have been told in the months past that that was not the case. I have since been reassured by Ministers that it is happening now, and would be grateful if the Foreign Secretary assured the House that he, the intelligence services and our other agencies are helping the Electoral Commission, the Information Commissioner and the Select Committees and providing them with anything that they ask for.

I could say a lot more on this subject, and I wanted to say more about the role of educational institutions, so I hope that the Foreign Secretary takes that on board. I have had a frustrating time trying to get some sense out of our universities—for example, those that employed Professor Mifsud, who has disappeared since being exposed in a Mueller indictment.

Let me say one more thing. On the issue of money, Bill Browder gave 12 other countries the dossiers that he has given to the British authorities. Those 12 other countries have prosecuted the people responsible; will the Secretary of State find out why that has not happened here and have a word with his fellow Ministers, to make sure that they act on the evidence with which they are provided?

8.11 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Since marrying my half-Russian wife 34 years ago in the Russian orthodox cathedral in Gunnersbury, I have made it my business to try to understand Russian culture and Russian people. They certainly respect strength and people standing up to them.

It is a bit of a mystery why this murder was carried out in the way that it was. I think that it was carried out as it was to make it obvious that Russia had carried it out. There has been speculation that it was designed around the Russian election; I think that it was designed to make it absolutely clear that traitors will not be tolerated.

Let me talk a bit about the Russian mindset. When we think of people like Philby and Maclean, we look at them with amused contempt. The Russian views traitors with absolute hatred, because they have betrayed the motherland. I pay tribute to the Russian people, Russian culture and Russian literature. In Russia, there is a deep sense of victimhood, which arises from the second world war and its losses in that war. Our losses pale into insignificance compared with the losses suffered by the Russian people. That sense of victimhood is still there.

When I was last a delegate to the Council of Europe, I attended the previous Russian elections. There was no doubt that those elections were deeply flawed—Russian elections are deeply flawed—but also no doubt about the popularity of Mr Putin. Had he allowed a fair election, he almost certainly would have been elected, because the ordinary Russian felt that he was restoring some sort of pride to Russia.

There is a deep sense of despair and victimhood about how we treated Russia during the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I do not for a moment condone, defend or accept the annexation of Crimea, but the ordinary Russian remembers that there was an independence referendum in 1992 in which Ukraine voted more than 90% for independence and that there was an independence referendum in Crimea in which more than 90% voted for independence from Ukraine. In their view, Ukraine has always been part of Russia and is largely Russian, although they overlook the suffering of the Tatar people. All those facts are very strong in the Russian psyche, as is the attempt to detach Ukraine—which means borderland in Russian—from mother Russia.

Mr Seely: My hon. Friend makes a series of important points and I am glad that he is making them. There are counter-arguments to them that I shall not go over now, but does he believe that one problem is that the Russians simply cannot imagine an independent Ukrainian identity that is separate from Russia? That is one of the driving factors behind the issue.

Sir Edward Leigh: No, they cannot imagine that because Kiev is the source of the Rus’ people and the thousand-year-old history of the Russian Orthodox Church, to which Kiev is as much an integral part as Canterbury is to the Anglican communion. They cannot understand Ukraine as an independent entity.

None of this is to condone or in any way defend Russia. What are we going to do about this situation? First, as I said to the Prime Minister, we need to create a coalition of peace through security. Russia would not have been too concerned about the expulsion of 23 diplomats—that is tit for tat—but it would have been very concerned about the fact that the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have made alliances throughout Europe, that we have been listened to and that these expulsions have been going on today. Russia will be extremely concerned about that.

Secondly, we should not seek to copy Russia's methods or attack it in the way that it attacks. We should be careful. I know that some Members want to close down RT. I do not defend RT in any shape or form, but we should leave it to Ofcom. We should leave it to due process, not political interference from this place. We should also be careful about what we do in respect of the City of London. It has a reputation throughout the world for fair dealing. We act on evidence. If there is evidence of criminality and dirty money, we must act on it, but we cannot attack Russians who invest in our country and in the City of London simply because they are Russian. That would be a mistake.

What do we do? We make alliances, which we have done, and we expel the diplomats. The point I have been making again and again, with the Chair of the Defence Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who went way back and quoted Palmerston, is that Russians historically respect strength. We currently have just 800 men in the Baltic states. We have 150 in Poland. It is simply not enough. Surely, history proves to us that in dealing with Russia, words are not enough. Russians want to see action on the ground.

Why did we defeat the USSR in the cold war? It was not with words, but with solid determination to spend what needed to be spent on defence. We have heard the former Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), and we know the stresses on the defence budget. The Foreign Secretary should echo the words of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who said in the estimates debate not three weeks ago that spending 2% on defence was not enough. We should make a solid and real commitment to the Baltic states. That is what will concern Mr Putin: the determination to put troops on the ground. I know about all the pressures on the Government that are arising from health and many other things, but unless we are prepared to make that commitment—to do what Mrs Thatcher and President Reagan were prepared to do to bring down the Soviet Union—we will never counter the Russian threat.

Russia is not a natural enemy of our country. It is sometimes difficult to say that in this Chamber. We have had speech after speech condemning Russia. We are two powers at either end of Europe. From the days of Queen Elizabeth I, we have traded together. Russia is not and should not be an existential threat to this country. There has been a lot of talk about cyber-warfare. I have no doubt that Russia is attempting and engaging in cyber-warfare, but I do not believe that it could seriously affect our democracy. We should be proud of our democracy and determined that it is resilient. We must not indulge in Russophobia. We must be proportionate and determined, and we must be prepared to spend on defence what we need to spend.

Mr Grieve *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh: I was going to conclude, but I shall take my right hon. and learned Friend's intervention before I sit down.

Mr Grieve: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend and think I share many of his sentiments, but the evidence of Russia's behaviour in cyber-space is of the

most extreme recklessness. It is totally outside the international rule of law and raises some very difficult challenges about how we deal with it.

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course, I would not want for a moment to disagree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee. He knows what is going on and I echo what he says: the Russians are indulging in some attempt to destabilise our values. I make no defence of what they are doing; I just think that we are a sufficiently robust economy and democracy that we can weather it and that they will not change things fundamentally in our country. We should be aware of it, but we should have confidence in our self-reliance.

It is terribly important that we are serious about this subject. There is absolutely no point in our having this debate and attacking President Putin, only for all our attacks to completely wash off the Russian people, who do not want to be an extension of western Europe in their values, economy or anything else. What will have an effect on them? Is it words in this Chamber, or actions on the ground? Are actions on the ground enough? There may be no absolute real and present danger to our country, but there is to the Baltic states, not least because of their very sizable Russian minority.

Mr Seely *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh: I must finish now.

There is a very sizable minority of people in those states who are not that well treated. Many Russians believe fervently in their soul that those minorities are not well treated and that President Putin has the right to interfere. We have NATO. The Baltic states are not Ukraine. We must not allow what happened in 1940 to happen to the Baltic states. Therefore, words are not enough. We must will the means. We must spend more on defence and put the troops into the Baltic states.

8.20 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I spent last weekend at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly gathering for the spring session in Vilnius. There was a statement from the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). We then discussed the attack that had taken place in the UK. I take great pleasure in telling Members that, from across political parties and across the nations of the Parliamentary Assembly, there was complete unanimity in condemning the attack and in recognising the source of the attack as coming from Putin's Russia. The solidarity of the NATO alliance was wonderful to see.

This is not the first chemical weapons attack in the UK. We know of at least one other, and, yet, here we are again, deliberating on how we will look at our defence and security in the light of such attacks from Russia. We must understand that these attacks are part of ongoing hybrid warfare—not peace, but not war. They are a challenge to NATO states, and a threatening message to those within the Russian dissident community that their lives are at risk if they oppose the Putin Government.

This is Russian hybrid warfare in action. The aim is to sow insecurity, distrust and disinformation, to influence, to confuse, and to demoralise. According to Russian defence doctrine, this practice is called IPb—information

[Mrs Madeleine Moon]

confrontation. Its aim is to provide both information and psychological effects, neutralising political opposition and diffusing recognition of Russia's interference in business, banking and politics. Typically, the information contains a mixture of true and false information. The majority of the information is true. That builds a trust in all of the message, which means a vulnerability to the lies and the influence messages being sent out. The messages often fit with the pre-existing world view of the intended audience, so they are easier to accept. We know that this is happening, and I cannot say how much I disagree with the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) in his belief that we are immune to such attacks; clearly, we are not.

Across the alliance, we have seen a growth of cyber-enabled psychological operations, compromising networks gathering intelligence information that can be used to embarrass, discredit or falsify information that is leaked to the media. German troops serving in Lithuania have had phone calls, telling them that their wives are having affairs. Those calls are an attempt to destabilise those troops defending Lithuania.

NATO parliamentarians have received phone calls from apparent friends asking them for their views and opinions on political matters. The voice sounds just like their colleague, but, in fact, it is someone impersonating their colleague. The conversation is then relayed on Russian media.

Since 2010, Russia has been building what it terms "information confrontation"—a holistic concept ensuring information superiority both during peace and war. It consists of hacktivists and CyberBerkut—false persona carrying out denial-of-service attacks against NATO, Ukrainian, German, US and Estonian sites, among others. These people leak documents to demoralise and embarrass. Trolls are online commentators who seek to change the narrative of a story to turn it in Russia's favour. The Russian Internet Research Agency blogs and tweets on behalf of the Kremlin. Bots are automated pushers of content on social media. They drown out unwanted content or push a specific message, sometimes overwhelming the information space, drowning out real information and facts.

Interestingly, Russia does not believe in a free internet for its own subjects. It has laws curbing domestic media and increasing control of technology and content; it bans websites; monitors online activity and limits news media ownership. During a Defence Committee visit to Russia, we took evidence about the intimidation and murder of journalists and the constant harassment and intimidation of political figures.

We must wake up. The west is being attacked. Systematic information warfare is being waged against us. We should not see the attack in Salisbury as simply a chemical attack; it is part of a concerted attack. I urge the Government to establish an independent Russia commission to examine the role that Russia is playing in our social media and in our financial, business, political and legal spheres. We need to educate our public, as the Lithuanians have done, in how to recognise these cyber-enabled psychological operations.

The public needs to know that there is a campaign to destroy and disrupt NATO command, control, communications and intelligence capabilities. This is all

very real to the 800 British soldiers heading up the forces in the enhanced forward presence in Estonia. They are there to protect Estonia and to enhance Euro-Atlantic security. The men and women of the Royal Welsh are providing the alliance's combat-capable infantry force. Estonia is now Britain's eastern border, so an attack on the Baltic states is an attack on Britain. We must recognise that and understand that our forces are now our frontline.

Distrust, disinformation and disregard sum up the Russian approach towards the latest, and arguably most serious, situation we are witnessing towards our country and our allies. Our allies and our people require us to stay strong and to acknowledge the threats that are being sent in our direction.

8.27 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon).

Without sounding too dramatic, the most important thing that we can do is to avoid conflict with the Russian Federation. Everything that I say is predicated on that simple point. It is also predicated on the fact that our adversary is the Kremlin, not the Russian people. Having said that, I will focus in my brief speech on three things, which are that we need to accept, to understand and to act.

First, we need to accept that we are in a new cold war with the Russians. I know that some people do not like using that term, but I think that it is valid and honest. We need to accept that President Putin is trying to undermine the current state system, that he is trying to break it, and that he may well try for a more aggressive gamble in his final term. When we have troops on the Russian border ourselves, it is complacent to say that there is not a potential existential threat—and I say that with great respect to those who have argued against that point.

Secondly, we need to understand. We need to understand the nature of Russia's new warfare and, in general, the global threat that authoritarian states now pose to free societies.

Thirdly, we need to act, not in a shouty, finger-pointing, stick-waving kind of way, but in a consistent and robust manner. We need to relearn the art of deterrence and, frankly, the art of strategy.

We are in a new cold war. The definition of a cold war is a state of political hostility between countries that is characterised by threats, propaganda and other measures short of open war. This is not the cold war, but it is a cold war. It has probably been ongoing—although we have not wanted to recognise it—since about 2007, it was probably announced by President Putin in his Munich security speech and it has probably been in the planning since 2000. But those who were in Moldova, Georgia or such places in the early 1990s, as I was, would have seen the initial revisionist push by the Russian state or by elements within the security services—siloviki—back in the late 1990s as the Soviet Union was collapsing.

Hybrid war is one of, I think, about 25 terms that have been used thus far. It is broadly a sophisticated and integrated form of state control based on multiple forms of state power, used in a highly co-ordinated and coercive fashion. It is basically the old active measures of KGB warfare—disinformation, proxy political and

armed groups, and assassinations—around which have been gathered the full spectrum of state power. The research that I have been doing in the past few years shows that there are at least 50 tools. Indeed, the first characteristic of Russian contemporary warfare is what Russia calls the integrated use of military and non-military tools.

What we see as hybrid war—trolls, hackers and gangsters, although we get the Bear bombers so there is a military aspect as well—is the useable element of a full spectrum that includes nuclear weapons, nuclear theory and conventional weapons, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) mentioned earlier. It is important for us—especially people who are not favourable to this argument—to note that many, although not all, of the Zapad western exercises conducted every year end with a nuclear strike. Now, as anyone who has participated in military exercises knows, they are not planned for fantasy scenarios. They are planned for the most likely or the most dangerous course of action. If the Russians plan the use of nuclear strikes on cities in eastern Europe as a gambit or a tactic, one has to take that seriously. They are not doing it for a laugh; they are doing it because they are testing and looking at options.

Russian power tools can be divided into six: politics and political violence; governance; economics and energy; military power; diplomacy and public outreach; information and narrative warfare. That is all wrapped around command and control, which in our world is surprisingly short and goes up to Putin in not very many stages. That is rare compared to the west, where there is an endless chain of brigade, division, command and control before it gets to a political level. This is a highly political—Clausewitzian, I think, is the term—form of warfare.

We need to act. Russian warfare is holistic and full spectrum. Our response should be too. On top of the good things that this Government have already done, I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Bridgend that we need a commission. Back in the 1980s, the Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence did wonderful work, methodically exposing Russian disinformation. We need Parliament or the Government to establish a working group or organisation of some kind with a UK and global remit to look ruthlessly into Russian full-spectrum warfare and expose it. We can then tell our own people what we are doing. We can tell the Greeks, people in Cyprus and people in France. We can tell the world. This is important. I have suggested this before and it would be wonderful to get some traction with the Secretary of State.

On the financial authorities stuff, we should just adopt Transparency International's list, but I will not touch that because I know that we are doing good work there. Let us introduce a named list for agents of Russian influence in the UK, including Members of the House of Lords, some of whom I understand have been working for some very questionable oligarchs.

The US is this week bringing in a counter-propaganda Bill that puts a health warning on authoritarian broadcasters operating in the west. We need that. The Russians may well respond in kind. I do not care. We need to protect our democracy and our elections. The time to realise that our elections are being meddled with is not mid-way through a campaign; it is before.

Vicky Ford: On misinformation, does my hon. Friend agree that money spent on negative messaging is much more damaging than efforts that we can counter with positive messaging? Negative messaging undermines the voter and is much more difficult to counter with the positive.

Mr Seely: Yes, my hon. Friend makes a good point. The Russian tactic is not to build up brand A as opposed to brand B; it is just to destroy brand B. That is what the Russians did with Hillary Clinton. They were not really concerned about being nice to Donald Trump. They wanted to destroy any opposition. I suggested in one of the Sunday papers that the Russians might break into the servers of both political parties and ruthlessly leak the information in as damaging a way as possible from one, and they would do that in the weeks and months before an election campaign. That is a bit of a *modus vivendi*.

We need to work with the US and NATO. It is great having a few hundred troops in the Baltic, but it is entirely negligible in the great scheme of things, frankly, especially when the Russians are building up missile dominance, tactical nuclear weapons dominance, and conventional dominance. We need to think about what sorts of things NATO is doing to counter this. If we counter and block off the Russian threat, we are more likely to get them to talk, and my fear is that they will not do so.

We need to offer a grand bargain to Ukraine. The Prime Minister mentioned some money being sent to Ukraine—£42 million in total. It is about very small amounts of money. The weaker Ukraine is, the more likely that we will have great instability in eastern Europe. We need to block the Russians in the Balkans—and soon, before they export the “managed conflict” model there. We need to properly fund the BBC World Service and boost the BBC Russian Service more than is being done, although there has been good work so far. Finally, we need to look at the visa regime to allow ordinary Russians to come here and prevent dodgy oligarchs from doing so, rather than the other way round.

8.35 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It has been a pleasure to listen to the real insight and knowledge that the new hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) brings to the Chamber on this subject, in particular.

It does feel as though we are now in a significant place, particularly as a result of the co-ordinated expulsions. I will be frank: I did not have full faith that the Government were actually going to be able to get to this point and convince our allies to go as far as they did. Clearly, difficult months—and potentially years—are ahead, and they are made more difficult by our exit from the European Union, but we should acknowledge what has happened today. It is a level of co-ordinated action that I do not think the Russians will have expected, and it ought to make a significant difference in the necessary pushback against them.

It was interesting to listen to the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), a former Defence Secretary, because what I took from his speech was a pretty thoughtful recognition and admission that the Government have not got their strategy against Russia

[John Woodcock]

right in recent years. Their laudably aimed overall strategy of resolutely turning the other cheek to transgression after transgression has partly left us in this situation today. A greater level of resolve has been needed from the UK and others to counter that, but it is good to see it now. We must never get back to the situation we were in before.

That is why it is important to reinvestigate the 14 deaths that have been highlighted—all those where there is any existing suspicion. All of us in this House are looking intently at the criminal investigation into Nikolai Glushkov's death which, as I said to the Prime Minister earlier, took place only eight days after the Salisbury attack. This was the death of a man who was clearly also in President Putin's sights. The conclusion on this must not be allowed to slip away, as I fear has happened in previous instances over recent years.

So what is needed now? There have been many excellent suggestions from hon. Members on both sides of the House; let me briefly add a few. When Bill Browder came to the House to brief Labour Members on the Magnitsky Act in the US and the need for such powers here, what he said was deeply persuasive. It is important that the Government do not shy away from a full-blooded translation of that principle into UK law.

The defence budget has rightly been mentioned by many Members. Of course it needs to rise beyond 2% of GDP. It also needs to rise beyond a genuine 2%, not the fiddled 2% that has been accepted by Ministers—I recognise that they have been in a difficult situation, but we have to get back to genuine accounting. It has to rise significantly, including in the battle for the submarine space.

It was crazy that we ever got close to debating whether boat seven of the Astute class SSNs could be scrapped after so much money was spent on it. The damage that that would have done to our underwater capability is frightening, even if we were looking at the status quo; of course, we are not doing that. We have heard from many people that the Russians are pouring in money, particularly for submarine technology, so the SSNs need to be kept on track.

The Dreadnought programme must be given the money needed for up-front spending, rather than funds being salami-sliced over years in a way that will make the programme inefficient and could mean that we lose our continuous deterrent capability for the first time since its launch in the 1960s. We also have to accelerate future capability funding. That has been going on in dribs and drabs for some years, but its significance has greatly increased, given what we are facing.

Many people have talked about cyber-deterrence. We will have to be clearer about the capability that has been developed in the UK and our potential to use it in retaliation. In the same way in which we seek to maintain the nuclear deterrent but never use it, that has to be a credible threat to deter the kind of state attack that we must now fear could come to UK shores.

In the minute I have left, I will briefly say something about due process. It is really important that the UK is at the forefront of showing that we follow due process, uphold the rule of law and are more transparent than Russia will ever be. There will always be endless threads

to tug that are suggested in various ways by the Russian Federation, but we must not go down those routes. The idea that it was in any way credible to send the Russians a sample of the Novichok so that they could decide whether it was theirs was ludicrous. We should have confidence in our values and in the country. If we do that and stay the course, we will be able to prevail.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We will have to go down to a six-minute limit on speeches to accommodate everybody.

8.42 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Three weeks ago, Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were attacked in the heart of our country. All the evidence overwhelmingly points to the nerve agents coming from Russia, and most probably being administered on behalf of or on the orders of the Russian Government. Once again, despite the means, the motive and the express intention of the Russian President in the past, the only response to those attempted murders on the streets of England has essentially been a Russian, "It wasn't me."

That cannot come entirely as a surprise. We have seen it before. Twelve years ago, Alexander Litvinenko was killed with a chemical agent in one of our cities in Britain. Sir Robert Owen found in his inquiry:

"Taking full account of all the evidence and analysis available to me, I find that the FSB operation to kill Litvinenko was probably approved by Mr Patrushev and also by President Putin."

Yet the Russian Government still deny any knowledge or involvement, and they parade those accused of direct involvement in the murder, including in fact one of their parliamentarians, on television. President Putin seems to believe that he can act with impunity whether with direct killings and attacks in our country, or less prominently through cyber-warfare and covert operations. The only thing that is not clear is whether he believes that Russia will not be found responsible, or if he just does not care.

The truth is that it is not only in the United Kingdom that Russia is posing a direct and immediate threat to security. During my time as an alternate Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I have had the opportunity to speak to parliamentarians from countries around Europe who see the impact of Russian aggression and expansionism on their own nations. In 2008, there was the invasion of Georgia and the annexation of South Ossetia. In 2014, there was the invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. During the past couple of decades, there has been the constant destabilising effect of the Russian state in Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite posing as an intermediary or arbiter, Russia's impact has consistently been to try to keep the region as unstable as possible, because it has very much been in the interests of the Russian state to keep Armenia and Azerbaijan in a state of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Today's co-ordinated action is extremely welcome. As has been said, it is likely that it was not expected by the Russian Government—I am not sure it was entirely expected by all Members of this House—and that probably multiplies its effectiveness. It is precisely because we want to minimise the risk of armed military conflict that we must maximise the effectiveness of our diplomatic and security response.

It has been heartening to see such broad support from Members of all parties across the House, which is why what we heard from one Opposition Member about the attempted murders here in Britain is so disheartening. That Member, who is no longer in the Chamber, has described as enemies those who have chosen to speak in support of effective action—not those who have carried out the attempted murders, but Opposition Members who have dared to support a Conservative Prime Minister in standing up for British security, and for effective action to safeguard people in this country.

The many Opposition Members who have backed an effective response will sooner or later have to decide whether they trust their own leader—on the basis of the decisions he has taken and the instincts he has shown over the past few weeks—to manage Britain's security by ever putting him into No. 10 Downing Street. If the first duty of the Government is to protect the security of this country, I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has demonstrated over and over again the fundamental strength of character that makes her so suitable for the role. I am not sure that the same can be said for the leader—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

8.49 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I know this has been said by others, but it is worth repeating that Russia is a great country, and its people have contributed so much to the international community and to broader human civilisation. I think about the close connections historically with the United Kingdom, such as those between Peter the Great and the dockyards at Chatham, but also about those with Scotland—about the educators of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, and about educators and authors such as Lermontov, who had Scottish ancestry.

The first victims of what has happened in Russia are the Russian people themselves. The appalling inequality and poverty we have seen over the years have had a devastating impact on those people and are a direct consequence of the actions of the Russian Government. We look at the mothers of Russia who stick up for the rights of the young men and women who have served in the Russian armed forces, as well as at human rights activists, Opposition politicians and journalists. Russia is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist, a human rights activist or an Opposition politician.

As the hon. Members for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and others have rightly pointed out, the behaviour we have seen from Russia in recent times is part of a pattern. In Georgia, we saw the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia over 20 years ago, and we have seen very similar patterns in Ukraine recently. In Chechnya, we have seen disappearances, and Grozny is one of the most bombed cities in the whole of Europe. We have seen there what President Putin is capable of doing to those who sit under his jurisdiction and to his own people, and that is something we should reflect on—they are the first victims.

However, today's debate is on national security, and one issue I hope the Foreign Secretary will pick up on in his remarks is the high north strategy. *[Interruption.]*

It is very important to the Foreign Office, as the Foreign Secretary is clearly intimating. However, the high north strategy opens up security challenges as well as opportunities. With the busyness of the northern sea routes, we see trading opportunities but also challenges, as has been demonstrated in the Moray firth and elsewhere, and we have had Russian aircraft carriers just off the coast of Scotland, with a 24-hour response time from the Navy. The high north strategy is increasingly important to our European partners, but it must also become increasingly important to the United Kingdom Government. We should be further developing close links with our partners in the Baltic states as well.

Talking of which, it is noticeable that, in recent times, Russia's neighbours, the Baltic states, have looked towards their relationship with the United Kingdom and others. We have seen planes scrambled from Lossiemouth, but we have also seen the important role that Leuchars in my constituency played for many, many years. I see the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), and I hope he does not mind me referencing his constituency in that regard.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight was right to point to the western Balkans and to some of Russia's recent actions there. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will also refer to the commitment to the security of the western Balkans in his summing up, because it should be important to us all.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Do the complex challenges that my hon. Friend is laying out, and the different, complex responses that are needed, not show even more the folly of the blunt instrument of investing all this money in Trident, which is increasingly irrelevant in responding to those challenges?

Stephen Gethins: As usual, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

John Woodcock: You don't believe it.

Stephen Gethins: We absolutely believe it. In these times, we should be investing in our security infrastructure and in our relationship with our European partners. Let us look at the rebuilding of Bosnia: it has taken 25 years, and it is an ongoing project. If we look at security and areas where we have taken our eye off the ball—let us look at Libya, where we took our eye off the ball—we see that no amount of nuclear weapons will protect us and add to security in those areas. However, investment in the long-term security of our partners, not least in the western Balkans and the former Soviet sphere, is something we should be committed to. I acknowledge that that is something that Members on both sides of the House are committed to as well.

Dr Julian Lewis: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that now is not the time or place to renew the old debate about nuclear weapons, particularly as the issue has been settled by a vote in this House, but can we not agree on a cross-party basis with the proposition that 2% spent on defence is not enough?

Stephen Gethins: What I will say to the right hon. Gentleman—this is why this debate is important—is that £160 billion, at a time when GDP is due to go down the plughole, is money we can ill afford. *[Interruption.]* "Says who?" says an hon. Member from the Treasury

[Stephen Gethins]

Bench. Says your own Government figures. Remarkable! Courageous indeed from the Government Front Bench, but I respectfully disagree. That £160 billion is money that could be better spent on security and on securing our eastern borders.

The values we share with our European partners and our commitment to human rights are incredibly important. I know that Members across the House do not agree with the Scottish National party on remaining part of the European Union, but I think we can agree—this has been touched on—that we must remain vigilant when faced with a challenge such as the one we face from the Russian Federation. The best way to respond is through a commitment to human rights, a commitment to development and a commitment to an equal partnership of democracies across Europe. We must be vigilant and we must speak truth unto our friends in places such as Poland, Hungary and, dare I say it, Spain. Europe has been important for our security and it will continue to be important for our security. This is a time for friends.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) made an excellent point about finances and I raised Scottish limited partnerships with the Foreign Secretary in Committee. I hope he will, in a bit more detail, touch on the financial measures that should be taken. I think he has cross-party respect on that issue.

8.56 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The horrifying events that recently unfolded in Salisbury, just a short train ride from my constituency, seem all too close to home. You may think it inappropriate to mention Taunton Deane in this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, but just this weekend I met a 19-year-old constituent with a great future ahead of him who expressed to me how fearful the incident, together with other recent terrorist attacks, made him feel. That shocked me and brought home to me how important it is that our Prime Minister is taking a very important stance in dealing with the Russian threat.

I am pleased that the House has come together in condemnation of the Salisbury incident and in condemnation of Russia's violation of international law. I am pleased to support the Prime Minister's strong leadership on this issue, signalling this country's deep concerns and outlining the measures being put in place to keep us safe. I hope that this will demonstrate to my 19-year-old constituent that he need not fear, because we cannot live like that.

Mr Skripal and his daughter were not simply the targets of an unlawful attack on UK soil. They were attacked with a Russian-made military nerve agent, an indiscriminate weapon that poisoned the first police officer on the scene, Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, and had the potential to harm a further 130 people going about their daily lives. Let us have a look at the nerve agent, Novichok. Such nerve agents stop the victim's muscles from relaxing, painfully seizing them. I am told that soon after exposure the victim becomes nauseous and loses control of their bodily functions. Their eyes and lungs will blister and burn, and this is followed by epileptic seizures. I find it shocking that

such a weapon, which is designed to kill its victims in such a painful and audacious way, could have been unleashed on UK soil. Incredibly, Russia has failed to explain how a Russian nerve agent was deployed on British streets. The Prime Minister outlined today that no other country has the capability to carry out such an attack and that it is the unanimous view of the European Council that that is the case.

The Prime Minister's clear and decisive action in the face of the Salisbury incident is to be commended. Her true strength, I truly believe, shone forth, not least in the bold decision to dismantle Russia's espionage network by expelling 23 Russian diplomats from the UK. We heard the news today that a large number of other countries, 21 in total, are following suit and expelling a further 100 Russian diplomats. That is to be commended. It clearly demonstrates that we are not alone in our actions, and that we do indeed, as the Prime Minister said, stand shoulder to shoulder with EU and NATO colleagues and are all tackling this global security issue together. I will not go into the raft of proposals that the Government are putting in place to help with this security threat, because those have all been touched on today, but like other Members and colleagues, I reiterate that we do not have an argument with the Russian people. The Prime Minister's response is not based on Russophobia, as suggested by Moscow and various Russian television stations. The good, law-abiding people of Russia are always welcome here.

I want to touch on the misinformation that is being spread about the UK in relation to the Salisbury incident. These preposterous contradictory theories, spread through fake videos and fake graphics by Russian television and other broadcast outlets that it has a hand in to detract from Russia's violation of international law, are absolutely appalling. I venture to say that increasing the reach of our trusted World Service would be beneficial, and that there is a very strong case for a World Service television broadcasting platform in addition to the highly professional World Service radio platform, so that good, sound democracy—and all that it stands for—and trusted information are transmitted much more widely, especially in the Baltic regions. In addition, I venture to suggest that Ofcom needs to look closely at media outlets that are allegedly broadcasting Russian propaganda from our own shores.

To wrap up, I am fully behind the Prime Minister's efforts to work with our international partners to defend our security, to make a stand for our values and to send a clear message that any reckless act against the UK and assaults on our fundamental values will not be tolerated. This is the kind of action that will ensure that my 19-year-old constituent, with his whole life ahead of him, will be able to live safely and securely.

9.2 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate the debate that we are having today on this very important issue. I was a bit disappointed, but not surprised, by the slightly shrill tone from Government Members during the speech of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, but I must say that the tone has greatly improved. I commend my right hon. Friend for his response to these attacks. It has often been misinterpreted—I hope not deliberately, but one can never judge that totally—but it has been about

proportionality and ensuring that we do not get ahead of ourselves and refrain from unnecessarily inflaming language such as, “Shut up and go away.” It is also worth noting that few have worked harder in this place than the Leader of the Opposition on peace, the protection of human rights and the rule of law.

I remember being asked in St Petersburg by the Minister of Education in the Russian Government at the time to leave that city after I condemned them for their ongoing human rights abuses. I wonder how many MPs in this Chamber can say that they have stood up to a Russian Minister and been asked to leave the country. I suspect very few, so it is important that we also respect the different ways in which many of us wish to express condemnation of ongoing human rights abuses in Russia without suggestions that some of us are traitors or without us having to face other horrible things that have been said in the media.

Diplomacy works, of course, as we have seen in this case—and the Government should be applauded for securing co-ordinated multilateral action and making a show of strength—but is that not exactly what the Leader of the Opposition called for when he said he wanted our action to be co-ordinated? It is welcome that the Government listened.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: But does the hon. Gentleman agree that it was at least a tad naive to call for a sample of the nerve agent to be sent to the Russians? Was that not a mis-step by the Leader of the Opposition?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The important point was that a sample should go for independent verification and through all the appropriate processes. Whether it needed to go to Russia or The Hague was, of course, for The Hague to determine.

Diplomacy must, however, be backed by strong financial sanctions, and of course corruption is rife in many of our companies that channel Russian money. That is why we need stronger anti-corruption and money laundering laws. Several of us suggested amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill that would have allowed the Government more easily to shut down brass-plate companies used in sanctions busting and money laundering. It would have been welcome had the Government accepted them, but they rejected them in the other place, because, they said, they could have infringed the human rights of sanctions busters. I hope they will reconsider.

We suggested sensible changes under which the burden of proof on sanctions busting and money laundering would not have had to come from the UK. Brass-plate companies tend to use the UK as a front, of course, and do not do the illegal or nefarious activity here, so a criminal bar for shutting them down will never be acceptable; we will always need an intelligence-led solution. Transparency around beneficial ownership will be vital, too, if we are to follow the money and hurt people who hurt our country where it matters—in their pockets.

That is the kind of robust leadership we can expect from the Labour party and which we could expect from a Labour Government—one who works within international frameworks, shuts down loopholes and brings our allies along with us, even if that means pausing and waiting a few moments. While Labour has called for cool heads, some Government Members have not, but I am delighted

that we have now moved forward with co-ordinated action. There are, however, other things to do. Members have talked about the ongoing IT security threat that Russia poses. We must consider investing in security technologies based on crypto-graphics and tackling the real danger that Russia poses in systematically using social media—not illegally but not alone—to determine fake news. It is not the first time, of course, that Britain has had the media seek to infiltrate elections, and it will not be the last, which is why things such as Leveson and other media regulation inquiries are so important. That is why Leveson 2, which would have looked at standards in our media, much of which, of course, is also owned by foreign interests, would have been an important step forward.

There are things that we can continue to do—shutting down the corruption in our City would be one of them—but we must applaud both the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister for keeping level heads and we must not refer to people as “traitors” or “enemies”. We are in this together.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes to get everybody in.

9.9 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The disgraceful chemical attack in Salisbury—which I believe is a slightly longer train ride from East Renfrewshire than from Taunton Deane—is a particularly shocking example of the Russian Government’s habit of acting without respect for national borders or international rules and norms.

Russia has acted in this way for a long time, growing bolder, escalating, and interfering further and further beyond its own borders. The threat that it poses to our national security can be seen in its treatment of its neighbours. In both the Yeltsin and the Putin eras, Russia has interfered in those countries with impunity. It is now nearly 10 years since its aggression against Georgia in 2008, when it illicitly invaded Georgian territory and launched a full-scale occupation of two so-called breakaway republics. That led to the expulsion of ethnic Georgians from parts of their own country. However, the interference and aggression go back much further. In the early 1990s, it was Russia that interfered in Georgia and helped to establish those false republics in the first place, and that led to the ethnic cleansing of Georgians in the separatist-controlled areas.

According to a census conducted by the separatists, just 46,000 Georgians remained in the Abkhazia region in 2011, more than 80% fewer than in 1989. In South Ossetia, there has been a reduction of more than 85% since 1989. Houses belonging to ethnic Georgians in the Russian-occupied areas have been razed to the ground. The ethnic Georgians who have remained in those areas have been denied access to education in their native language, denied freedom of movement within the rest of Georgia, forced to change their names and ethnic identity and compelled to register as “foreigners” in their own land. The Russians’ objective is clear: to dramatically change the demographics of those regions by force, to reduce and remove the Georgian population and to undermine the status of the regions as integral parts of Georgia.

[Paul Masterton]

Georgians are a proudly independent people who want to be free in their own country and to make their own way in the world without being controlled by Moscow. The Georgian Centre in Scotland, which is based in Glasgow, helps to support the small but vibrant Georgian population, promoting their unique culture and their history and intertwining their new lives in Scotland with their roots.

Successive Russian regimes have sought to suppress Georgia's right as a sovereign state to rule its own territory and pursue a pro-western, pro-NATO policy. When, 10 years ago, Georgia's Government sought to move against ceasefire-breaking separatists, Russia seized its opportunity. It occupied the areas claimed by the separatists and, temporarily, several towns and cities beyond those lines. It recognised, and established military bases in, the separatist republics, which remain rightly unrecognised by the United Kingdom Government and by the overwhelming majority of the international community.

Since then, the separatist republics have become more and more integrated with Russia. Both republics are wholly reliant on Russia for trade and financial support. Their so-called militaries are supplied by Russia and have even been partially merged into the Russian armed forces. The people who still live there largely use Russian passports as a result of illegal and forceful mass passportisation. On 18 March, the Russian presidential elections were held in the occupied territories, and 33 polling stations were illegally opened. The Georgian embassy in the United Kingdom said:

"With such actions the Russian Federation fully disregards the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, and blatantly violates the fundamental norms and principles of international law".

Let us be under no illusions. Russia is occupying sovereign Georgian territory, just as it is occupying sovereign Ukrainian territory in Crimea and Donbass.

While I am glad that the United Kingdom, like most of the world, has criticised Russia for its actions in Georgia, it has not, as far as I am aware, formally recognised them as an occupation, and it should do so tonight. We should vocally and forcefully oppose what is happening in Georgia as strongly as we oppose Russia's occupation of parts of Ukraine. Ten years on from the aggression that intensified this occupation, we must redouble our support for Georgia, its independence and its territorial integrity. We cannot allow this issue to slip down the international agenda and let Putin off the hook. We must demand human rights for all people, especially ethnic Georgians, in the Russian-occupied areas, and that includes access to those areas for international human rights monitors, which is currently being systematically denied. The territories that are being occupied by Russia are integral parts of Georgia, and they should be returned to Georgia.

Putin's disrespect for international norms does not stop a certain distance from Russia's borders. The Salisbury attack, and all his attempts to interfere in the west, come from the same mindset as the occupation of Georgia, and we ignore that at our peril. If we are to stand up to Putin, stand up for peace, freedom and international norms, and stand up for ourselves and the security of our nation, we must also stand up for Georgia and for all victims of Russian expansionism.

9.14 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to be called in such an important debate, and I want to start by putting on record my abhorrence at the attempted murderous acts committed on the streets of Salisbury. All who reside in or visit the UK must have the confidence that they can live their life in peace without fear within our borders. We hope that, as Mr Skripal and his daughter fight for their lives, there is a real breakthrough in their recovery this evening and in that of Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey as he now recovers at home. We must praise our outstanding NHS for its work at this time and its staff for the risks they put themselves through in treating the sick and, of course, the police as they seek to bring the perpetrators to justice.

We should never see such crimes on our soil again, and we must ensure that all who are working to counter such actions, particularly GCHQ, are given the resources to enable us to remain a safe haven. However, it is right that all questions are asked at this time, not least about Russia, and we, as the official Opposition, will ask all questions; that is our role and our duty. I commend my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition for his strong speech today clearly stating and calling out what needs to be done, and I was ashamed at the political interference from the Conservative Benches on such a serious matter.

We recognise and regret that we live in volatile times, and therefore we must address the real threats that face us, whether from state actors or lone actors. We must ensure that we have the right intelligence and solutions, and as the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy continues with its Government's national security strategy review, it must ensure that we address cyber, and nerve, chemical and biological agents as they are ranged against us.

In spite of Brexit, we must work closer than ever with our European friends and neighbours to defeat the causes of risk and protect our borders. Now is the time not to disrupt or dilute our collaboration, but to strengthen it, for when we build bridges, when we maintain dialogue and when we engage in strategic diplomacy, we have the best chance of protecting ourselves and advancing the cause of peace. The Prime Minister must ensure that our future capability is not diluted as she negotiates our way forward.

We have seen over the last few days serious mistakes being made, not least by the Foreign Secretary; hurling insults achieves nothing, but causes tensions to escalate. It is right that we are critical of all violations of human rights and call for justice to be done through the correct channels, but we cannot sustain a Foreign Secretary who is loose with his language time and again and escalates risk by his actions. With foreign policy, the question lacking on all sides is how each action taken is contributing to the de-escalation of tensions and risks. It is dangerous to create a soundbite that lasts a fleeting moment, when the long-term consequences are not considered and when the objective of peace is not the prime focus. It takes time to build a bridge, but an instant to pull it down. Political intervention must be about human rights and the longer-term objectives, and the smart politics must be about global co-operation for peace; and when one party falls short, legal mechanisms must be utilised to address that.

I ask the Government what they believe has been achieved over the last two weeks, with the closure of the British Council and the expulsion of the 23 Russian diplomatic staff and whether further action will follow in the days to come. It is vital that diplomatic channels are maintained to bring about a de-escalation of tensions, to ensure that there is dialogue about how we advance human rights and how we address other global situations with Russia, not least at this time of its involvement in the war across Syria. And of course the big question of where the money is flowing to must also be addressed, and our call for the Magnitsky amendment must be implemented.

Finally, it is vital that the UK highlights the urgent need for reforming the United Nations, to ensure that it is seen as the first port of call when abhorrent actions occur or diplomacy fails and that it is effective and responsive. I therefore further ask the Government to ensure that every action taken de-escalates tension and enables justice to be served through the correct channels, for the sake of our long-term security.

9.19 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I spent last weekend with a group of British and German MPs discussing, among other things, Russia and global security. We face from Russia a new and growing threat, teetering on the edge of outright hostility, and it is not in our interests to have unstable or rogue states on the borders of Europe. As well as an angry Russia, we have an unpredictable North Korea and a changing face in China. We cannot address all these threats to our national security by acting alone. Our allies are important, and I congratulate the Prime Minister on her immense leadership in gathering the world together to take collective action and on securing such detailed support from all our EU friends last week.

I want to talk about four issues: hybrid warfare, cyber, energy and space. I shall start with hybrid warfare. Time and again in recent years, friends from many different countries have told me their experiences of how Russian sources have been linked to false news stories, negative propaganda or funding support for extremist political groups. There are many stories, but they all have a common thread. Their action is to sow seeds of disillusion to manipulate the psyche of the voter, leading to distrust of traditional politicians and thus destabilising legitimate democracies. When looked at one by one, the incidents are often dismissed, but when we consider them together, we realise how significant their impact might have been and how deliberate the strategy appears to be. We in the UK should not try to deal with such incidents in isolation. We must counter them with collective actions. I therefore congratulate the Government on ensuring that, in the announcements last Friday, the EU27 states made the decision to bolster their capacity to address hybrid threats.

The EU27 also said that they would look at cyber. After the last general election, I took over the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cyber-security. The Government are to be congratulated on prioritising this issue, on establishing the National Cyber Security Centre and on investing nearly £2 billion in capacity. We are in a digital revolution. The WannaCry cyber-attack, using ransomware with source code from North Korea, stopped our NHS in many places, and it should have been a wake-up call. Again, we need to work internationally, because the digital world is a borderless world and

international co-ordination is needed. As members of the EU, we have been part of the ENISA network, which was actually set up by a Brit. It brings together stakeholders to look at risks, to examine resilience, to make strategic plans for key infrastructure and to develop standards. Britain plays a key role in the network, and other countries need us. It is in the interests of the EU and the UK to find a way to co-operate on cyber-security after we leave.

On energy security, many European countries, including Germany, are highly dependent on Russian gas. In the recent cold snap, we in Britain also needed to rely on gas imported from the continent. Recent stress tests have shown that if all countries were to co-operate, consumers would remain connected even in the event of a six-month disruption to Russian gas imports. However, that involves working together. It is important for our own energy security that we stay well connected, both physically and politically. Across Europe, there is a gas connect co-ordination group known as the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Gas—ENTSOG. It simulates disruptions, identifies risks to supply and agrees preventive measures. My latest discussions with energy suppliers suggest that we risk being cut out of that network, but that is not in Europe's interests and it should stop threatening us with that.

Finally, on space, this morning's *Financial Times* carried a story saying that the EU is considering cutting the UK out of Galileo, which is Europe's answer to GPS. It is a €10 billion system of satellites that will provide accurate positioning and timing data. That is key for civilian safety and national security. Britain paid for those satellites, and we help to develop them and deliver them. Europe should not threaten us with cutting us out of that programme. If Europe is serious in wanting EU-UK co-operation on foreign policy and on security and defence policy, it should look at the detail and work with us on cyber, energy and space.

9.24 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The first priority for this country has to be the safety and security of its people. When I was growing up in the '70s and '80s, the backdrop was one of the cold war, with the threat and fear of nuclear weapons. In today's climate, the threats range from cyber-attacks and chemical weapons to armed warfare and nuclear weapons. Parliament's Joint Committee on the Government's national security strategy is currently looking at the national security capability review. It is clear, as we have heard from the Prime Minister, that international co-operation on security matters is key to an effective response to aggressive action by another nation, which is why we need to ensure that we have that support from EU partners after Brexit.

Globalisation and reliance on international trade were supposed to have made the world safer by ensuring that one nation does not attack another due to the impact on trade between the two. Incidentally, that was the whole purpose behind establishing what later became the European Union. The attack in Salisbury was despicable and a reckless act of violence, causing serious harm to Sergei and Yulia Skripal and Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey. My thoughts and wishes are with them and their friends and family.

While some Government Members have unwisely chosen to use high-octane rhetoric to attack Russia following the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats, we should

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

note that there are significant UK business interests in Russia. According to the Office for National Statistics' "UK Balance of Payments, The Pink Book: 2017", the UK exported £5.339 billion-worth of goods and services to Russia in 2016, including those of top law firms and numerous multinationals, such as BP, Shell, BAT and Unilever. There are also a number of British-based funds with significant investments in Russian assets. Many of the UK's allies also have close business interests with Russia. For example, trade between Russia and Germany continues apace and, despite EU sanctions regarding Crimea, Germany sold €19.7 billion-worth of goods to Russia last year alone. Germany also relies on Russia for 40% of its gas. US President Donald Trump has had well-documented links to various property investment possibilities since the mid-1990s, and when his former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, was chief executive of ExxonMobil, he was awarded Russia's Order of Friendship by President Putin in 2013. With that in mind, it is clear that any international response to Russia will be limited to strong words and diplomatic measures, such as the expulsion of Russian diplomats. What is missing is a financial response.

As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said earlier, we have heard little from the Government about the introduction of a Magnitsky clause amendment to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill to tackle human rights abusers, and I hope that the Government will adopt such an amendment on Report. Closing off access to dirty money is another area about which we have heard little from the Government. When I spoke at the Second Reading of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill last month, I talked about the need for greater transparency and for beneficial ownership registers to be introduced for offshore companies operating in British overseas territories. Why are the Government dragging their feet?

There are several other questions that we need to ask. How much money that has been plundered from the Russian people has been used to buy property in the UK? Do the Government plan to use their powers to freeze the assets of Russian oligarchs until they explain the source of their London property wealth? How have Russian oligarchs been allowed to roam freely and acquire status and respectability in the UK? Are the Government aware of the allegations in the current edition of *Private Eye* that eight Moscow parliamentarians and officials own substantial property in London? Unless measures are taken to target corrupt finances, the Government will be turning a blind eye to certain areas and restricting any meaningful and effective action against those responsible for the Salisbury attack.

9.28 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I am exceedingly grateful for this opportunity to speak. This is a timely debate, and I am much saddened that we are having to address this serious issue. My contribution will be short, as I fully support the steps that the Government are taking to protect our national security, especially after the terrible events we have recently witnessed in Salisbury.

You may be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have worked closely with our military personnel since my election, and I am pleased to stand here once again to

thank them for the exceptional job that they do to maintain our national security. However, my time working with the armed forces parliamentary scheme has also shown me that the threats we face as a country are ever changing, and I firmly believe that it is imperative to continue to invest in defence to counter those threats. It will therefore come as no surprise to colleagues that I welcome the Government's commitment to increase the defence budget every year and to ensure that the NATO pledge of spending 2% of our national income on defence will be met for the rest of this decade. If Ministers are listening to this debate, there should also be a substantial increase in spending.

It is also right that the Government will spend £178 billion on new equipment for the military in the coming decade. However, we must not ignore the increasing threat to our cyber-security. As a member of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I have seen worrying evidence of attempted influencing of our elections and referendums through the spreading of fake news. I believe that in future we will come under further and more devastating attacks in that arena. That should not be underestimated.

Although it is clear to me that the Government will ensure that threats to this country are met with sufficient force, I continue to be concerned by the threat posed by Russia, which, according to our national security adviser, Sir Mark Sedwill, has become troublesome more quickly than anticipated. Russia continues to rearm itself, even during a period of economic hardship. Moreover, its military forces continue to probe at our boundaries, at a cost to its state and ours. Those are not the actions of a rational state with a stable leadership, and neither was the reckless and unprovoked attack in Salisbury earlier this month. Given the continued provocations, I agree with the Government that we must send the strongest possible message to the Russian leadership.

Of course, as the Prime Minister said earlier, we have no disagreement with the people of Russia, who have been responsible for so many great achievements throughout their history. However, I believe we now have an unfortunate and profound disagreement with their leaders, due partly to the extraordinary reaction to the almost universal condemnation they received. One of their television presenters said:

"The profession of a traitor is one of the most dangerous in this world... traitors or those who simply hate their country in their free time: don't choose Britain as a place to live."

He added:

"Something is wrong there. Maybe it's the climate, but in recent years, there have been too many strange incidents with grave outcomes there."

Those words are chilling indeed. I would call that playground bullying if it were not so sinister and serious.

I say all that with some regret, because, like many people throughout the country, I viewed post-Soviet Russia with hope. I grew up with bombs pointed at me; I got used to that when I was a young man in the '50s and '60s. I was all too aware of the destructive forces pointed at us. That is why I am so concerned that the Russian state continues to act in an unstable manner. I do not want another generation to grow up in the shadow of those weapons, due to the reckless actions of a state such as Russia which makes thinly veiled threats and acts more like a bully boy in the playground than a responsible member of the international community.

In the face of such hostility, it is right to deploy a range of tools from the full breadth of our national security apparatus to counter the threats. I am pleased that our allies clearly support that course of action, and I am grateful that that will be maintained in the future. Even after Brexit, the UK is unconditionally committed to maintaining Europe's security, and the Government want to ensure that Europe remains strong, prosperous and capable of defending itself.

Russia, acting as a reckless bully, with no qualms about making threats against people in this country, is clearly an obstacle to a peaceful and prosperous Europe, of which we want to be part. I fully support the steps that the Government have taken to hold Russia to account. Let us not forget Litvinenko, Georgi Markov and countless others.

Mr Speaker: The winding-up speeches should begin at 9.40. I call Alberto Costa.

9.33 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will be very brief. I want to put on record my complete support for the Prime Minister's robust and measured statement today about our national security and Russia.

I think all hon. Members, including the Leader of the Opposition, would agree that it is a tragedy that we are having this debate today. Twenty-eight years ago, when the Soviet Union crumbled and Russia existed once again as a sovereign country in its own right, we all had high hopes that we would forge a good friendship economically, culturally and politically with Russia. In the past 28 years, particularly since Putin became president in 2000, what has happened is nothing short of a tragedy. The west has repeatedly tried, most notably with Hillary Clinton's pressing the reset button, to realign Russia with western values.

The appalling events in Salisbury a few weeks ago were a brazen, pernicious and dreadful attack on not only the UK's sovereignty, values and citizens, but on all western allies. This sort of attack, which has happened similarly before, can happen in any of our allies' countries, and it is right that the Prime Minister sought co-operation from our friends and colleagues across Europe and the wider world. I am pleased with the Prime Minister's strong leadership, and this is where there is a difference between her and the Leader of the Opposition. Strong leadership requires strong action, and the Prime Minister took that strong action only two weeks ago. It was distressing, to say the least, that the Leader of the Opposition chose not to give his backing to the Prime Minister, when the leaders of the other Opposition parties did the right thing in putting party politics aside and backing the Prime Minister of our country.

As the MP for South Leicestershire, I, like many Members, seek regular assurances as to the safety of my constituents. In that regard, I thank the Prime Minister once again for her statement today, emphasising the steps being taken here in the UK to protect our citizens. It is imperative that Russia is not allowed to act with impunity and break the laws of this country, and indeed offend the rule of law globally. That is why I was very pleased to note the international response to this incident today. As we have heard, the UK has taken the step of expelling 23 Russian diplomats, with some of our European

allies and the United States also taking steps. Despite our leaving the European Union, it is clear that our shared security is just as strong as it ever has been, and long may that continue.

I wish to end by making two quick points for the Prime Minister. Earlier today, I met the Greek ambassador and the Greek deputy Foreign Minister here in Parliament, in my capacity as chairman of the all-party group on Greece. Greece gave its support to the Prime Minister a few days ago, but Greece has also asked me to remind the House that when our friends and allies give us their support it is also important that, wherever possible, we give them our support on their security needs. I mention briefly the arrest of two Greek soldiers by Turkey and the ongoing problems we have there, and I ask both the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister to use their platform in the European Council and related meetings to encourage and pressure Turkey to act appropriately in such matters.

The second and final point is the one I raised with the Prime Minister last week—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry but the hon. Gentleman has run out of time. We are immensely grateful and thank him warmly for his contribution. I call Emily Thornberry.

9.38 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. May I also thank the Government for holding this general debate in their time? As the Leader of the Opposition made clear earlier, we agree with all the key points made in the Prime Minister's opening speech, and we agree unequivocally with all the measures the Government have taken in response to the Russian attack. It has been clear throughout this debate that there is clear consensus across this House on the need for a strong, united response to Russian aggression—this is exactly the response we would expect from this House when our country has been attacked and exactly the response Russia needs to hear. So in summarising some of the key contributions made in this debate, I will cite Members from all sides.

Before I do so, let me note that last week marked 75 years since the battle of Rzhev—15 months of horror on the eastern front that left the Russian army with up to a million dead. It is a reminder that despite the grave differences that exist between the two countries today, we must always remember the critical role Russia played in defeating the Nazis in Europe and never forget the horrific losses they suffered to that end. Indeed, as we reflect on the struggle that our people shared 75 years ago, forever symbolised by the heroes of the arctic convoys, it is all the more harrowing that relations between the two countries on issue after issue now stand at such a low ebb. That is most immediately and shockingly illustrated by the monstrous and reckless act of violence committed by the Russian state in Salisbury.

As, among others, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said, what happened to Sergei and Yulia Skripal on 4 March was a vicious act of violence. As the Leader of the Opposition has said, what characterised the attack was not just the insidious brutality of that assault on the Skripals, but the sheer indifference that the

[Emily Thornberry]

perpetrators showed to the inevitable wider consequences for the public and the emergency services, including Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey.

As the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said, we have seen exactly the same indifference in the three weeks since, in the complete failure of the Russian state even to try to offer any plausible alternative explanation as to how the attack could ever have taken place, other than the one that is so glaringly obvious and is now so clearly proved by the intelligence and chemical analysis, which we assume will soon be confirmed by the OPCW. My hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) rightly outlined the importance of the OPCW's independent verification of that analysis.

The Government's response is fully justified. As many Members, including my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle)—perhaps the only Member of Parliament to have been, as we learned tonight, chucked out of Russia for standing up for human rights—and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) have made clear, the Government will have our full support for going further in cracking down on money laundering by Putin's billionaire allies here in London, as called for by the pro-democracy campaigners in Russia.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said in his brilliant and eloquent speech, we stand by the pro-democracy campaigners, LGBT activists, students and journalists who have been so dismayed by the re-election of President Putin. It is truly baffling that any world leader—whether the President of the European Commission or the President of the United States—could have seen fit to congratulate Putin on that victory. As my right hon. Friend the leader of the Labour party has said, we hope that the Foreign Secretary will criticise them equally for doing so, and by the same token make it clear that he will not congratulate President Sisi of Egypt in the coming days.

Despite the lapses of judgment from Brussels and Washington, we all applaud the co-ordinated action that they and others have taken in response, in terms of today's diplomatic expulsions which, as the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, will have resonated loudly in Moscow. We hope to see further resonant, multilateral actions in support of the UK in the months to come.

On the wider threat posed by Russia to British national security and democracy, we heard powerful contributions on the dangers of disinformation and cyber-warfare from the hon. Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), and on the risks of electoral interference from my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who, as he reminded us, has for too long been a lone voice on many of these issues. He is a lone voice no longer.

It is genuinely welcome that there is now such a strong consensus in all parts of the House on the need to deal with these new and real threats. As the Leader of the Opposition asked earlier, will the Foreign Secretary reassure us that preventive measures and contingency

plans are in place across our critical national infrastructure, and that simulation exercises have been conducted to test the readiness of each key sector and identify any required improvements?

Beyond the threat here at home, we have heard many powerful contributions on the wider Russian threat to the security of our allies and the wider world. In that context, it is so important that the House has sent such a strong message today—most vividly expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling)—about our commitment to article 5 of the NATO treaty. In addition to our military commitments, it is vital that we stress to our European counterparts our commitment to continue to work with them to maximise the power of our collective sanctions against any future Russian aggression, and to assure them that that will not be diminished by Brexit.

On the wider geopolitical threat posed by Russia, both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition spoke of their anger at President Putin's bellicose, boastful presentation on Russia's nuclear capabilities three days before the attack on Salisbury. It was almost as though Putin had seen Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un trading barbs about the size of their nuclear buttons and, rather than dismissing them as overgrown toddlers, had decided to join them in the ball pit. On that issue, as on climate change, Syria and Iran, it is vital that we recognise the global danger. If Russia retreats increasingly, almost willingly, into the role of rogue state—when it is so essential to resolve all those issues—we need to keep it round the table. Of course, if we have to continue negotiating with Russia, there is not a single person in this House, or any right-thinking person in this country, who would not wish that we were not negotiating with Vladimir Putin.

I must say one single point in Putin's defence. Here, I find myself in rare agreement with the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee—despite his outrageous slur in his speech that socialists in this House do not love their country—that, for unleashing the second world war and for killing 6 million Jewish men, women and children, Adolf Hitler deserves to stand alone in the innermost circle of hell, and comparing his crimes with any other individual alive today, especially a Russian individual, is grossly offensive.

Tom Tugendhat: I am delighted that the right hon. Lady has very kindly allowed me to reply to her slight. Does she agree that Nazism did not start with the camps and the horror of war, but that it started with the images of hatred that built up over the years and poisoned the minds of people—those images that have been approved by her leader, whom she has so obviously backed? Is that not the hatred that she claims to stand against? Is that not the action that socialism fought?

Emily Thornberry: The hon. Gentleman is right about how racism and hatred develop, which is why it is always important to be completely clear in one's condemnations. Any time a mistake is made, an apology and a withdrawal must be made, and that, as I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand if he looks into this properly, is exactly what the leader of my party has done.

I was talking about the grossly offensive, so I will move on. It takes me back, finally, to my opening remarks about the end of the battle of Rzhev and to remember a

time when we stood as allies with the Russian people. It is sadly true that, both literally and figuratively, we are 75 years away from that today.

As we speak with one voice today in supporting robust action against the Russian state for its attack on Salisbury, we must continue to send a message to the Russian people, as the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) said so well in his contribution, that we long for a day when we can stand as friends and allies again.

9.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): This has been an extraordinary day when, across the world, Britain's allies have proved that if it was the Kremlin's goal to intimidate us, to divide us from our friends, to make an example of Britain and to deter other countries from matching our robustness, its strategy could not have boomeranged in a more spectacular fashion. Tonight, there will be amazement in the Kremlin at the sheer weight of international opinion that is represented by those countries that are willing to stand with us and take the risk of expelling their own diplomats in response to the assassination attempt against Sergei and Yulia Skripal, and the reckless endangerment of members of the British public.

There are plenty of countries that have joined us in issuing powerful statements, and plenty are taking action in other ways. I will read out the list of countries that have today decided to expel diplomats whose presence, they have reason to believe, is no longer conducive to the public good: Albania, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, the United States and Macedonia—22 countries in all, and more than 100 diplomats expelled altogether.

Rebecca Pow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a pity that some Opposition Members—notably the hon. Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle)—did not recognise the fact that it is this Government who have brought together that amazing list of 22 countries in condemnation of Russia's appalling act of violence on these shores?

Boris Johnson: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I should stress that those countries that have chosen to expel Russian diplomats have consciously placed themselves at risk of the Kremlin's retaliation. I know that I speak for not just my hon. Friend but every Member of the House when I offer my profound thanks to those countries for what they have done today. It is worth our asking why the global reaction to the outrage in Salisbury has been so much more pronounced than that which we saw in 2006 with the murder of Alexander Litvinenko. The reason, of course, may be that those countries have feelings of affection and respect for, and a desire to support, the United Kingdom. That is true—or, at least, that is possible. But it is not primarily about us. Today the world has shown that it agrees with the analysis of the United Kingdom regarding the threat posed by the Kremlin.

Mr Bradshaw: I am one of those who has congratulated the Government on their achievements with this coalition, but does the Secretary of State share my deep regret at the explicit refusal by the Austrian Government,

whose leading party has a direct relationship with Vladimir Putin's party in Russia, to expel any diplomats? That is extremely disappointing. Next time the Secretary of State is speaking to his Austrian counterpart, will he make Britain's displeasure extremely clear?

Boris Johnson: I respectfully say that the right hon. Gentleman's criticisms might be directed elsewhere.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who has shown with devastating effect in the course of this debate what an astonishing thing it is that 22 other countries have gone further in their condemnation of Russian actions than the Leader of the Opposition. That is a sad state of affairs. As speaker after speaker has said—I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat)—what happened in Salisbury was part of a pattern of reckless behaviour by the Kremlin. Some have called it a new cold war. Some have drawn attention to the annexation of Crimea and the pattern of cyber-attacks against Ukraine. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) spoke well and movingly about the suffering of the people of Georgia. We have seen the hacking of the German Bundestag, interference in foreign elections and attempts to conceal the use of poison gas by Syria's tyrant. I note that Ukraine—the country that is suffering directly at the hands of the Kremlin—has expelled 13 Russian officials today.

John Woodcock *rose*—

Boris Johnson: I give way with pleasure to the hon. Gentleman.

John Woodcock: The list of allies that have expelled diplomats is indeed impressive. Has the Secretary of State seen that, during the course of this debate, Iceland has announced a similar diplomatic boycott of the World Cup to that of the United Kingdom? Does he welcome that, and does he hope that more of our allies in NATO and the EU will follow suit?

Boris Johnson: I am aware of Iceland's action. If we think about this action in the round, there has never been a collective diplomatic expulsion or action like it across the world. I therefore hope that this episode will mark a turning point. We do not want this to be a bilateral confrontation between Britain and Russia, as many hon. Members have said.

Like many on both sides of the House, I have been very careful to make the distinction between our quarrel with the Russian state and our position with the Russian people. I echo the heartfelt sympathy voiced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister about the horrific fire in the shopping centre in Kemerovo in Siberia, which claimed the lives of scores of people, including children. It is vital to state that our differences have never been with the Russian people, whose artistic, cultural, literary and musical achievements are matchless. Our quarrel, as I say, is with the Kremlin, whose approach is to conjure up the spectre—the turnip ghost, if you like—of foreign enemies to cement domestic support. The idea that Russia or the Russian people are ringed by enemies is totally implausible and untrue. Far from being surrounded by foes, the Russian people are surrounded by friends

[*Boris Johnson*]

and admirers such as ourselves who want nothing more than to live in peace with them on the basis of the very international rules that, tragically, their leaders have made it their project to subvert or overthrow.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) said, the Kremlin has tried to respond to its actions in Salisbury with the usual tactic of concealing the needle of truth in a haystack of lies and obfuscation. The Russian state media have pumped out no fewer than 21 separate theories so far, including some of almost sublime absurdity. They have claimed variously that Britain launched a nerve agent attack on its own soil in order to sabotage the World cup, that America did it to destabilise the world and, most sickeningly and cynically of all, that Sergei Skripal attempted suicide and apparently tried to take the life of his own daughter with him.

Leo Docherty: Conservative Members will welcome the Opposition's somewhat tardy acceptance of Russian culpability for the crimes in Salisbury. What, in the Foreign Secretary's judgment, has brought about that change of heart?

Boris Johnson: At this stage of the debate, all of us on both sides of the House will welcome as much unanimity and accord on this matter as we can find. We do not seek to make windows into men's souls and to try to establish exactly how or why the Opposition decided to change their mind, but we welcome it. I listened very carefully not only to what the Leader of the Opposition had to say, but also to the explanation from the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). I welcome what the Leader of the Opposition said.

Chris Bryant: The most important thing in all this process is for us to be able to establish a unity of purpose not only in this country, but across all our alliances in NATO and in the European Union—and in the Commonwealth. I noticed that only one Commonwealth country, I think, was mentioned in the Foreign Secretary's list, and I wonder whether he hopes that more will be signing up at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

Boris Johnson: Suffice it to say that I am very impressed with the level of support that the UK has got and is getting around the world.

Dr Julian Lewis: With all these diplomats expelled, we will have to keep a much closer eye on Russia than ever before. Will my right hon. Friend therefore spend £25 million a year to save the BBC Monitoring Service?

Boris Johnson: We will be doing more to tackle disinformation in all sorts of ways, including by making sure that we monitor the output of the Russians properly. We will be hardening our defences, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) rightly recommended. We will be going after the money, as the hon. Member for Rhondda, the right hon. Member for Exeter and many others recommended. As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has said, we are unconditionally committed to the defence of our Baltic friends and, yes, we will continue to spend more than any other major European country on defence. Tomorrow all that work goes on, but tonight we mark what I hope will be a watershed moment and a turning point when after all the lies, all the clouds of deceit and all the deployment of Russia's wearying and sarcastic intercontinental ballistic whoppers—after all the outrage and the provocation that we have had from it—the countries of the world have come together, in numbers far greater than Putin can possibly have imagined, to say that enough is enough.

We want to be friends with Russia and we want to be friends with the Russian people, but it is up to the Russian Government to change, and to change now. I am proud that it is the British Government who have been in the lead, and I thank Members on both sides of the House, including those on the Opposition Front Bench, for the clarity and moral certainty with which they have spoken today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered national security and Russia.

Cable Standards: Fire Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mims Davies.)

Mr Speaker: I am about to call the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth). It seems to me quite inexplicable that significant numbers of Members are leaving the Chamber, but if they feel inclined to do so—[*Interruption.*] It is no good the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) chuntering that he has been here for several hours; he could stay here another half an hour and indulge the right hon. Member for Knowsley. If people wish to leave the Chamber, they should do so quickly and quietly, so that the rest of us can attend to the intellectual oratory of the right hon. Member for Knowsley.

10 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I will try to live up to your splendid introduction, Mr Speaker.

Last year's Grenfell Tower tragedy was, without doubt, one of the most shocking and disturbing building safety failures in living memory. As we know, the likely cause was a shocking failure of our building control regulations, and as a result, the Government established an independent review of building regulations led by Dame Judith Hackitt. A long-overdue national debate about buildings and safety has been taking place alongside the review. In her interim report, Dame Judith rightly stated that Britain's building regulations are "not fit for purpose".

I would like to place on record my thanks to the Safer Structures campaign, Electrical Safety First, the Association of British Insurers, the Fire Brigades Union and the Merseyside fire and rescue service for providing me with a briefing for the debate.

The focus for Grenfell Tower is on the specification and installation of the cladding used on the building. This debate concerns the need to eradicate substandard cabling from the market, because there is an overwhelming argument that our existing regulation is too weak and, as a consequence, exposes structures and those who live and work in them to unacceptable levels of risk.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this salient debate. Does he agree that, with electrical fires being the cause of 20,000 fires in United Kingdom homes per year, we have a duty to ensure that people are able to check their cabling and understand how to do so to ensure that it is safe, for not only the people themselves but the councils, which have responsibility?

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I will be giving some statistics that exemplify what he just said.

According to the Approved Cables Initiative, more than 27% of all electrical fires are attributable to faulty wire and cables, and there are serious concerns about the risks in our built environment that need to be urgently addressed.

A related concern is that current regulation is not being sufficiently well enforced. For example, in October 2017 the BBC published evidence from an investigation it carried out which exposed the fact that a now-defunct Turkish cable manufacturer, Atlas Kablo, has sold

11 million metres of cable to the UK that pose a deeply concerning fire risk. The Health and Safety Executive, which labours under severe resource restrictions, decided against a compulsory recall of all 11 million metres of that cable. Consequently, as far as I am able to ascertain, so far only 7 million metres has actually been recovered. That poses a real fire safety threat in cases where that cable is still being used.

Interviewed by the BBC, Sam Gluck, the technical manager at the electrical fire consultants Tower Electrical Fire & Safety, said that this approach had

"planted a bomb in the system".

Mr Gluck added that

"if it overheats, it will ignite anything that touches it. If it's against a plasterboard wall that will ignite".

Dr Maurizio Bragagni, chief executive of Tratos—it has a factory in my constituency—and a founder of the Safer Structures campaign, added that

"it could be in any shopping centre, any venue, any building".

Even where cable regulation is properly enforced, the standards are too weak. By way of background—the Minister will be aware of this—on 1 July 2017, the European Union introduced the construction products regulation. As a result, all cables sold in the EU now have to adhere to common standards, which should result in safer, more consistent building regulations and much improved public safety. The EU, however, has not been prescriptive in specifying which classification of cable performance should be used for buildings and infrastructure in each country. Instead, it is the responsibility of each EU member state's regulator to decide this, and in the UK, this is the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

At present, the Department has not specified which class of cable should be used for buildings, and instead requires all electrical installations in buildings to comply with British standard 7671—a minimum requirement equivalent to European class E. This means that flames can spread through a cable to 3 to 4 metres in under five minutes, and the fire will continue to propagate at the same rate, while at Euro class C, for example, the fire growth rate is limited to below 2 metres. On the range of Euro classes A to F, the A standard is virtually fireproof. Adoption of a higher standard at Euro class A, B1, B2 or C would lead to much greater resistance for permitted cables. In short, it would mean much improved levels of fire safety.

The official statistics on domestic fires make for sober reading. In 2016-17, 14,821 primary fires were caused by electrical distribution, space heating appliances and other electrical appliances. These three categories resulted in 44 fatalities and 1,353 non-fatal casualties. Another cause for concern is the electrical safety of white goods such as dishwashers, tumble dryers and fridge freezers, which are a major cause of electrical fires. In 2016, 1,873 fires were caused by domestic electrical white goods.

As you will recall, Mr Speaker, on 1 November 2017 there was an excellent Westminster Hall debate on the subject of product safety and fire risk in residential premises, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I will not go over that ground again, other than to say that this is a serious problem and it needs to be addressed urgently.

[Mr Howarth]

Analysis by the Fire Brigades Union indicates that the number of fires and fire deaths is increasing. In the year ending September 2017, there were 346 fire-related fatalities compared with 253 in the previous year, which is a 37% increase—and it was even up by 9% if the tragic deaths at Grenfell Tower are not included. An improvement in standards must, by definition, lead to reduced fire deaths, less property damage and lower demands on already overstretched fire and rescue services. We should bear in mind that, since 2010, more than 11,000 firefighter jobs have been cut across the UK, and that represents one in five frontline firefighter jobs.

There are, as I have highlighted, genuine concerns about buildings such as Grenfell Tower and fire safety. I also have serious concerns about the growing private rented sector, which is far too lightly regulated. Electrical Safety First recommended that properties in the private rented sector should be subject to mandatory five-year checks and the fitting of residual current devices. This would enable substandard cabling to be identified, rather than, as at present, leaving it undetected until it causes serious property damage, injury or even death.

The post-Brexit landscape for regulation and compliance must, at the minimum, maintain the current protections afforded to consumers. There should be no deregulation of the product safety standards currently implemented. Following our exit, the UK should continue working closely with European friends to ensure that products entering the UK market are safe, and dangerous products are intercepted and reported.

One further point I want to make before I move to a conclusion concerns regional variations. Merseyside had 53% of its fires recorded as being electrical in origin, which is below the national average. During the same time, Manchester had 61%, and Norfolk, the Isle of Wight and Cornwall had in excess of 70%, of dwelling fires recorded as electrical. Of the 628 incidents defined as electrical fires on Merseyside, 133 were deemed to be “structural/fixtures/fittings”, and cables would fall into that category.

To conclude, I ask the Minister to consider the following questions. First, Dame Judith Hackitt’s review of building regulations must inevitably go through all the evidence thoroughly, and I accept that that will take time. However, in the case of cabling, would the Minister consider introducing immediate measures to properly regulate cable standards along the lines I referred to? The evidence is already there.

Secondly, will the Minister consider providing the resources to enable the Health and Safety Executive to identify the remaining 4 million metres of Atlas Kablo cable so that it can be recalled? Thirdly, will she undertake to see what further action can be taken on white goods to more fully identify the risks and any action that could be taken to eradicate those risks?

Fourthly, will the Minister carry out a review of the regions most prone to electrical fires to identify the common characteristics and what more can be done to deal with the problem? Finally, following our exit from the EU, will she commit to ensuring that there is no deregulation of cable standards in the UK?

I hope the Minister will accept that this is a very serious issue and that it is in need of urgent attention

from her Department. I hope she will inject some energy into the work the Government need to do to combat it.

10.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) for raising the important issue of cable standards and fire safety. He has spoken about the Safer Structures campaign. Ministerial officials met representatives from the campaign last week to discuss issues around cable fire safety, and I hope that dialogue can continue.

Any debate about fire safety is of course overshadowed by the terrible events at Grenfell Tower last June. We must ensure that an event such as that cannot happen again. The public inquiry is looking at the circumstances of the fire, and we have commissioned an independent review of building regulations and fire safety to ensure that we have a regulatory system that is fit for purpose to deliver safe buildings.

When considering the fire safety of cables, there are three main aspects. The first is cables continuing to provide power to life safety systems in the event of fire. This is known as fire resistance of cables. Secondly, is the way in which cables burn, including how much smoke they produce. This is different to fire resistance and is known as reaction to fire. The third aspect is cables collapsing in a fire and preventing people from evacuating the building or hampering emergency services. I will set out how each of these aspects is controlled within the current system.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to European legislation. He was referring to the construction products regulation, which governs how construction products are placed on the European market, including those in the UK. The regulation works by requiring that products covered by a European harmonised standard must have a declaration of performance against key characteristics and must be CE marked. The European standard for cables, EN 50575, came into effect, as he said, in July 2017. This means that all electrical cabling should be tested for their reaction to fire and assigned to a performance class, which should be set out in the declaration of performance. It is up to member states, exactly as the right hon. Gentleman said, to determine whether they wish to set a minimum performance class through, for example, their building regulations. I would like to set out the ways in which our current regulatory system controls the safety of electrical cables in buildings.

The Government set standards for fire safety in buildings through part B of the regulations and approved document B. Approved document B contains guidance for the minimum fire resistance of electrical cables to ensure that life safety systems, such as fire alarms and emergency lighting, can operate during a fire. Also in approved document B are standards that attempt to prevent the spread of fire within a building—for example, in concealed voids where there may be large concentrations of electrical cables. Guidance states that physical barriers should be present to prevent fire and smoke spread within the void and throughout the building.

There are further standards for cables in electrical safety standards. The building regulation part P and the electricity at work regulations set requirements for electrical

safety of work in homes and workplaces respectively. In both cases, the approved way to comply is to follow the British standard BS 7671, commonly known as the IET wiring regulations. BS 7671 is a long-standing and well-respected document, which sets a high standard for the electrical safety of installations, as the right hon. Gentleman said. Providing good-quality electrical work, in compliance with BS 7671, is the best way to reduce the risk of electrical fires starting in the first place. An example of BS 7671 improving standards is in requiring fire resistant supports for cables to prevent the cables collapsing in the event of a fire. This has been in the standard since 2015.

The BS 7671 standard also sets requirements for the reaction to fire from cables, equivalent to class E in EN 50575 under the construction products regulation. I am aware that BS 7671 is due to be revised in July 2018 and my officials have been working closely with the technical committees responsible for its contents. It is my understanding that the approach to reaction to fire is not due to change in the new edition, although there will be some further clarification on fire resistance supports for cables and a new reference to the requirements of the construction products regulation. I will be asking my officials to review the 18th edition of BS 7671 when it is published in July, and considering how we might reference the updated standard in our approved documents in future.

I understand that parts of the electrical cable industry think that the standard for fire reaction of cables should be higher. I am aware that there are differences of opinion on this matter within the industry technical committees and between different cable manufacturers in the UK. Some parts of the industry favour setting cable performance in response to the risk, which is how the existing system works, while others are asking the Government to set a blanket standard for all cables. I mentioned earlier that we have commissioned an independent review of building regulations and fire safety, as the right hon. Gentleman said, which is being led by Dame Judith Hackitt. Dame Judith's interim report was published in December. In it, she identified product testing and quality assurance as one of the key areas she will focus on as she drafts her final report.

Jim Shannon: How can the Minister encourage electrical contractors to adhere to the new conditions to ensure that cables are sound and homes are safe?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his second contribution tonight—the usual high standards for Strangford. The important thing is that BS 7671 in its 18th iteration will have that at its heart, because what we all want is safe cabling for the future for all our sakes.

I mentioned the independent review of building regulations. Dame Judith's interim report was published in December. She is looking at identifying product

testing and quality assurance as one of the key areas that she will focus on as she drafts her final report. I believe that that will answer the fifth question—I think—from the right hon. Member for Knowsley.

Dame Judith is due to produce a final report in the spring, after which the Government will consider her recommendations, including any specific recommendations concerning product testing and safety. I am happy to tell the right hon. Gentleman that as part of our consideration of Dame Judith's recommendations, we will review the evidence of risk associated with electrical cabling to consider how we should respond. If he or other hon. Members have evidence that it would be useful for us to consider, please send it in to the Ministry.

In conclusion, a system of regulation is in place that controls the fire safety of cables. We do this through a number of regulations that work together to consider the fire performance of cables in the context of the building and to manage the risk appropriately. However, we recognise the importance of the issues that were raised by the right hon. Gentleman and the Safer Structures campaign. We await the recommendations of Dame Judith Hackitt's review.

Mr Howarth: I am trying to reconcile a couple of statements that the Minister has made. On the one hand, she recognises that there is room for improvement, but on the other hand, she seems to be saying that everything is okay. They cannot both be right. Does she accept the point that I made in one of my questions, which was that this really does need some energy behind it if we are going to reach a constructive and better system?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for repeating his question. The difficulty is that there is not agreement in the market. He has one producer in his constituency and he is doing a grand job of standing up for them, but the market is not in agreement on this matter, which is why we have to look at all the evidence and take it forward from there.

Mr Howarth: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: No, if the right hon. Gentleman does not mind, I am just going to conclude. We await the recommendations of Dame Judith Hackitt's review. In the light of those, I am happy to confirm that we will work with the industry to review the evidence base for enhanced cable fire safety performance. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to our attention.

Question put and agreed to.

10.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 26 March 2018

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

GCSE English Literature Exams

4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 200299 relating to GCSE English literature exams.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

The more perceptive among us will remember that we have been here before. We debated this issue just before the general election. I think it was on the last full day of business. Understandably, the debate was rather rushed and the Petitions Committee did not have time to do any public engagement on the matter.

When we received a new petition in this Parliament, we therefore decided to schedule it for debate and to conduct some public engagement. We had a huge response, showing that people believe that how we examine and test pupils' knowledge is not just a technical matter; it says much about the things we think are important—the skills and knowledge that we value. People are also increasingly worried about the mental health of our young people. I will come to that later.

There are many exam systems throughout the world, and they do not necessarily relate to the success or failure of the education system. On the one hand, there are systems such as those used in Singapore and Hong Kong, where there is rigorous and frequent testing. Those are very good at some things—there is no doubt about that. However, when I was in Singapore some years ago, people asked us how to teach creativity, because they thought they had ironed that out of their system. On the other hand, in Finland nobody sits an exam until they are 16 and it is viewed as one of the best education systems in the world—on some measures, the best. I do not say that because I think Ministers can import exam systems from elsewhere. In fact, over the years we have had far too much of Ministers going abroad and trying to bring in a system from a completely different cultural background. I am simply saying that how we examine is a choice—one choice among many.

It is clear from the feedback that both parents and teachers are worried about the impact of frequent testing and the type of testing we have on young people's mental health. Way back in 2016, what was then the Association of Teachers and Lecturers did a survey of its members. Over half of the respondents said that they knew one student who had tried to self-harm. One of the teachers said that there had been

“a huge increase in physical symptoms of stress and incidents of self-harm.”

On the other hand, the chief inspector of schools has told *The Times Educational Supplement* that it is a “myth” that children in England are over-tested. It is difficult to know who to believe: the teachers who are on the ground every day or a chief inspector with no

teaching qualifications at all, whose nomination was rejected by the Select Committee on Education. I will leave people to make their choice.

It is true that there is a lot of mental ill health among young people today. The charity YoungMinds published figures showing that one in four children and young adults displays symptoms of mental ill health, and that one in 10 children and one in five young adults has a diagnosable mental health disorder.

When we did our public engagement on this subject, we found that mental health was an issue for many people. We carried out some public engagement with pupils from Christ the King Catholic High School in Preston, to whom we are very grateful. Our staff used those responses to design an online survey for students, teachers and parents. There were extra boxes for teachers to allow them to make comments. We had more than 16,300 responses. Of the students involved, 54% said that they thought about exams most of the time and 53% said that they were stressed most of the time because of their exams.

Interestingly, that was not the prime reason for people wanting a change in the system. The main reason was that they felt exams tested memory rather than understanding—77% of students and 84% of teachers told us that. That gives people like me pause. I grew up in a system—like most people here, I suspect—where memory was important. We had to remember lots of things for exams. I was lucky: I did not find it particularly difficult. However, we need to ask not what was suitable for us, but what is suitable for the next generation. We need to ask ourselves, is it really necessary to have so much emphasis on memory in a society where information is available at the touch of a button? That question hardly ever gets asked in our system.

We are often dependent—this has happened under both political parties—on the whims of whichever Secretary of State for Education happens to be in office at the time. We all remember the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who decided that history should be “our island story”, ignoring the fact that that story is probably seen very differently in different parts of these islands and by different communities within them. He also took a sudden dislike to “Of Mice and Men” being on the curriculum. I do not know why—perhaps he was hit over the head with a Steinbeck novel when he was small and has been traumatised ever since.

Because of that, we have seen frequent changes to our exam system. We had the English baccalaureate. We had tiering, which came and went. We had coursework and then the abolition of coursework. Then we had linear courses with exams at the end. It is no surprise, therefore, that the current Secretary of State has had to promise teachers that there will be no more changes, in an attempt to woo people into the profession. Frankly, I am surprised there are any teachers left. In all this noise, what does not get asked is, what do children need to learn and how do they need to learn it to fit them for the society that they are growing up in, rather than the one that we grew up in?

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have a terrible memory problem. I can barely remember one thing from one day to another. The reason for the change we have made is to try to raise standards. Has the hon. Lady considered the impact of this change on standards?

Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point and I will come to it later. I do not think that there is any evidence that that change raises standards per se. In an exam, we measure certain things. The question is, are we measuring the right things?

In saying that, I am not at all an advocate of dumbing down. When I taught English, my students studied Shakespeare from when they came into secondary school, they read “Beowulf”—in translation, I hasten to add; I was not trying to teach 12-year-olds old English—and they read Chaucer, even when they were not in the exam. Ironically, the evidence we are getting from a lot of teachers is that the emphasis on drilling people for an exam, and the tyranny of that, is sucking creativity out of the system and narrowing people’s focus, rather than widening it. While I do not believe that any great literature is inaccessible if it is taught in the right way, I am an advocate of asking the right questions. An English degree teaches one to do that. That cannot be expressed in monetary terms, in the way some people would have it, but it is a useful skill.

One question is whether what children learn and the way they are tested is the right way forward. At the moment, they have to study a Shakespeare play—I do not think anyone would argue with that; Shakespeare is our leading dramatist—and 15 poems, with most teachers thinking there is a reasonable selection that engages children. They need to study a 19th-century novel. That gives me pause for thought—why the 19th century? It was not when the novel began or when most of the experimentation was done. They then study another text—a modern text or a play—and they have to do unseens as well. We test them on all that literature at the end of the course. There is no coursework or interim exams. We have to ask whether that is the right way forward.

When this system was first mooted, Ofqual said:

“We do not believe there are any skills in the draft content for English literature that could not be validly assessed by written exam, set and marked by the exam board.”

No doubt that is true of what is in the curriculum, but the issue is whether that is the right thing to be testing. From what they have said, the Government seem to have what I can only describe as a rather strange approach. At one point they said:

“Students should not be misled into believing that they will get good marks simply by memorising and writing out the poems or texts they have studied.”

I hope not—that has never been the case in any English literature exam. However, they went on to say:

“Students will not need to learn and remember the exact words of poems or texts by heart.”

I am afraid that misunderstands the subject. In great literature, the exact words are important. Great writers choose words with precision, rejecting alternatives. An approximation will not do, because it does not have the same levels of meaning. When studying English literature, or any literature, the exact words matter. To suggest otherwise is to downgrade the subject. It shows what the Government say they do not want: a lack of academic rigour. In this exam, are our young people facing a test of memory or of understanding?

All literature exams involve some feat of memory. Students have to get to know the text well; they have to read it, re-read it and internalise it. Nor can we take the

stress out of exams completely. In fact, some stress is good for us. We have to face stress in life and learn to deal with it. The young people who responded to our survey recognised that. Many suggested that they should have more education in how to deal with stress. Nor is all stress that our young people suffer because of exams. There are lots of stresses in modern life that impact on young people and create a toxic environment for them. I am not by any means suggesting that here, but I am suggesting that unnecessary stress is caused because of the emphasis on memory.

The teachers who responded to our survey were very clear that the exam is in large part about memory. One said:

“The argument that students do not need to quote is simply untrue”.

Another said:

“I have found it to be more of a memory test for my pupils.”

One teacher pointed out that to analyse the language in a text, students have to remember it. They have to be able to remember the rhyme schemes in poems to compare them, and doing so is in the mark scheme. The fear among many teachers was that this was sucking the joy out of the subject. As one said:

“We are systematically sucking the love of literature and poetry out of students.”

Another said:

“We are killing their love of English.”

In the current system, we have an examination that imposes unnecessary stress—as I said, some stress is inevitable—on students; that relies largely on memory, rather than on understanding; and that, according to many teachers who responded to us, is not fostering a love of literature at all, but killing it. If, in an exam, students are going to analyse character in a novel, compare two poems or contrast two scenes in a play, they have to remember them. On the other hand, if there are open-book exams with clean texts, more questions can be asked. Contrary to what the Government think, it is arguable that open-book exams test higher levels of skill. We could actually start to ensure that questions are designed to bring out the best in the brightest students. The Government seem to want to do that, hence their new grading system, but are unwilling to will the means.

An open-book exam allows students to evaluate, analyse and synthesise knowledge, rather than simply remember it. Many teachers who responded to us felt that the current system, far from what was intended, does not allow their brightest students to display what they can do sufficiently well. Open-book exams are far from an easy option. A lot of work still has to be done on the text beforehand. At a very basic level, the students have to know where to look in order to finish on time. Most of the teachers who responded thought that it was a better system. One said that

“open book exams allow for questions that explore deeper understanding of ideas, historical context, inference and themes”.

By contrast, one teacher who recently retired, but had 37 years’ experience teaching English, which should be respected, said that the current curriculum

“narrows and stultifies their thinking—and their lessons”.

Arguably, open-book exams would not only ask more demanding questions of students, but put them in a situation that is closer to what they will experience in

real life. No academic writes a paper without reference to anything else, purely from memory. No one writes a business report or prepares a submission like that. We all have access to texts and information while we do such things. I do not even think that the exams prepare our young people properly for employment. Interestingly, one of our respondents told us:

“As an employer as well as a parent, the skills I’m seeking in employees are the ability to analyse, to infer, to construct an argument and so on, not whether they can remember entire texts.” Of course, students are not asked to remember entire texts in the exam, but they are asked to remember a large part of them.

With respect to the Government and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who talked about standards, we would be able to test higher levels of ability better with a different kind of examination. When I was teaching, I noticed that it was possible for my best students not to do as well in their GCSE exams as they would do at A-level, where they were allowed to do much more analysis on their own. The Government are falling into a trap of thinking that what we have done in the past is the best way for the future.

When I was training to be a teacher, everyone knew a story about the sabre-toothed curriculum. It was about a tribe that taught its children to hunt sabre-toothed tigers, trap little woolly mammoths and fish in the river, until the ice came and the sabre-toothed tigers moved away, the little woolly mammoths died and the river iced over. But the tribe still taught its children to hunt sabre-toothed tigers, trap little woolly mammoths and fish in the river. One day, an iconoclast among the tribe said, “Why are we doing this? There aren’t any sabre-toothed tigers, little woolly mammoths or fish in the river.” The elders said, “We don’t do it because we want our children to hunt sabre-toothed tigers, trap little woolly mammoths and fish in the river. We do it because it is character building.” The tribe carried on doing that, and died.

The lesson for examinations is simple. We need to look at what will equip our children for the future, not for the past. I hope the Minister will think seriously about that, because the evidence from people trying to work in the system is that it is far from satisfactory.

4.50 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, but it is a surprise to be called quite so early. As the debate is about GCSE English literature and I am a Member of Parliament from Scotland, I do not plan to speak at great length, but I will give some thoughts. I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her eloquent and detailed introduction. She covered the vast majority of the issues to be considered, of which there are many, such as rote learning, mental health, the difficulty of examining and the examination system.

I will begin with the mental health issues and the pressures on young people. There is no doubt that young people who undergo state exams suffer from mental health difficulties. Many schools have mental health support systems in place, where young people can go to take time out and discuss their issues. During the many years in which I was a teacher in Scotland, the curriculum underwent a transformation. We went from a situation where everything depended on the final

exam to having an element of continual assessment, and finally to both playing a part with a chunk of continual assessment that counted towards the final exam.

John Howell: I want to pursue the mental health issue, because I am a bit confused by the debate so far. We accept that students have mental health issues, which include a lot of mental health stress, but that is not entirely related to examinations. Is the hon. Lady aware of any work that has subdivided out mental health stress and tried to assess where it comes from? Otherwise, it is impossible to say, “This bit relates to exams and this bit does not.”

Carol Monaghan: Of course, unless the stress is examined in great detail, it is difficult to see where it is. When we examine the number of instances of mental health problems that young people experience at different stages of their school career, we see that young people in early secondary school have fewer issues than those who are at the point of taking national exams. There are definite links between the examination regime and young people’s mental health. There are a vast number of other contributing factors, including poverty, family background and social standing—many different things—but there is increased incidence of poor mental health among young people sitting state exams.

What I saw—this is anecdotal, and comes without a background of evidence—was that when young people had an element of continual assessment and a final exam, they understood the parameters under which they were operating. We saw more difficulties when there were constant submissions, deadlines to be met throughout the year and different deadlines in different subjects that meant that young people faced continual pressure that culminated in a final exam. Continual assessment can increase mental health difficulties.

The hon. Member for Warrington North questioned whether it was necessary for young people to retain a huge amount of information in their head when they can readily google it and click on the relevant page. In Scotland, in 2004 or 2005, it was decided to provide young people with a relationship sheet, which was basically a bunch of formulae, because it was realised that many had difficulty memorising them. In physics, we are not trying to examine young people’s memory but how they apply formulae, whether they can problem solve and whether they can think outside the box. It was considered that the sheet would be helpful, although there was a huge amount of scepticism among physics teachers, who thought that it was dumbing down.

In fact, giving young people the formula sheet allowed them to be more creative and to think about different examples. It also allowed us to introduce open-ended questions in exams, which were not just about young people showing that they had remembered a formula, sticking the numbers in and getting an answer. It allowed us to examine them more deeply on their physics knowledge, and the exam was improved greatly as a result. We saw great increases in critical thinking—their ability to evaluate and to discuss different experimental set-ups. It was a huge success.

Data sheets or formula sheets are still used in physics exams in Scotland. They are always given out at the start of the exam in the form of a booklet. Importantly, they come from the exam board—the Scottish Qualifications

[Carol Monaghan]

Authority—which administers them at the start of every exam diet. When they are given out with the exam paper, they are pristine and untouched—there is no way to tamper with them. After that, they can be taken away and used in departments. New ones must be used every year to ensure that they cannot be interfered with.

To relate that to English, I have a great deal of sympathy for the petition and I understand the points behind it, but I worry about the volume of information that would have to be taken into the exam. There are 15 poems and a number of texts, so how many pieces of information would young people take in?

We have heard that the exact words matter when we are talking about English literature—and they do. Simply shoehorning in a quote to try to make a point does not always work if there is not a degree of understanding behind that quote. There has to be a deep understanding of the text, but that can be shown without quoting directly, or with possible differences or slight mistakes in the quote. Having said that, Burns, who is part of the Scottish curriculum, famously said:

“We’re bought and sold for English gold—

Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!”

Would that have meant the same if he had said, or if a pupil quoted in an exam, “a bunch of sell-outs”? I am not sure that it would.

On the issue of practicality, how can we set an open-book exam where young people do not have to memorise all those texts and where the invigilator knows that the information is clean and untampered with? How big a desk and how big a space would be required? All those things are important. If we did as in the physics exam in Scotland and had a short booklet with lists of quotes, that would stifle creativity far more, because we would be telling the young people which quotes were important. I question whether that is what is required, or indeed desired.

In addition, open-book exams take longer. If young people are given a dictionary in a modern language exam, it takes them longer to look through it than to just get on with it. How much additional stress will we cause young people by extending exams to hours and hours, rather than there being a finite time in which they have to produce quotes? There is some merit in having quotes to which young people are able to refer, but I question whether having an open-book exam for something such as English literature practically can become a reality.

5 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her leadership on the Petitions Committee and for her excellent speech. Her clear pedagogical knowledge shone through, as did that of the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). They are both, like me, former teachers.

The new structure of the GCSE English literature closed-book exams raises issues for students and teachers. It is not simply about the subject being made more difficult than it needs to be; it is about the very reason schools teach English literature in the first place. It is an

incredible achievement that the petition received 160,000 signatures; that shows that Parliament is being held to account by people who are interested in the subject.

Literature enlightens us. When the matter was last debated in the House, my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) referred to the popular quote:

“Life depends on science but the arts make it worth living”.

That is a powerful quote. Literature is not science and it does not make sense to test it in this way. All we create by doing so is a memory test, a test of the ability to parrot quotes, not to truly understand their depth and meaning. I was hoping to challenge the Minister to quote some of his English GCSE, A-level or degree-level literature, but then I thought that he might be able to challenge me back. We have to be careful. Politicians are always being asked to recite their times tables live on national television—or not, as the case may be.

English literature at its best is a way of understanding our world and learning the skills to engage in it. It teaches us research and writing skills, to express ourselves better and be analytical in our thinking. It helps us to build arguments, analyse, probe and read between the lines—skills used exceptionally well by many Members of this place every day. What a place this would be if we all memorised our speeches and parroted them out as pre-learned text. Nuance, banter and humour would be lacking, and the heat and passion of debate would be entirely lost. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North is probably one of the finest speakers in the House. She can speak at some length without referring to her notes—eruditely, I quickly add. We are not expected to memorise every word we say here, nor should we be, so why do we expect pupils in our schools to do so? Why do we want students to remember up to 250 quotes? What does that tell us about our students other than that they have a good memory?

Closed-book examinations for GCSE English literature encourage the business of learning by rote, which brings to mind Victorian classrooms with students at rows and rows of single desks parroting lines back to the austere teacher, cane held aloft, at the head of the class. I am trying to use metaphor and imagery, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North did with the sabre-toothed tiger story, using repetition as a fine oral tradition. As a former teacher, I know that children repeating back to me memorised text tells me absolutely nothing about their ability to think critically, analyse and understand meaning. Will the Minister therefore explain how remembering quotes is the best way of ascertaining a student’s ability? To me, that is an exam technique that can be mastered, especially by those who can afford private tutors—something most pupils up and down this land cannot. It has also been disregarded by many universities. They do not examine their literature students in that way because they know that rote learning is not a sign of intelligence or original thought. What universities want to know is that their students can analyse a text, understand it and apply critical thinking. That is, rightly, what undergraduates are tested on.

The Government must stop ignoring the advice of teachers, who say that this way of examining pupils is not fit for purpose. Those teachers speak from a place of knowledge and experience on the frontline, one that aims to get the best out of our students. The Government must listen to teachers and industry experts who say

that open-book exams place the emphasis on higher-level learning, whereby students can focus on analysing, evaluating and synthesising knowledge—or are the Government determined not to listen to those who are tasked with teaching the new GCSEs?

As has been pointed out, GCSE examinations are a very stressful time in a young person's life. When students are more stressed than ever before, and teachers and school leaders are struggling to respond to years of what can only be described as chaotic chopping and changing in the curriculum and the school system, the Government should be asking serious questions about the impact of any changes to assessment. Poor mental health in teenagers is a growing issue, and child and adolescent mental health services are hugely overstretched as a result of the neglect. The Government need to be more mindful of the impact that examination changes have on students' wellbeing and achievement.

The requirement to learn 15 poems, two plays and one novel could be a stretch for the most able students, never mind those who struggle academically. A memory test of that sort is not fair on any student, but the Government appear to have failed to acknowledge the difficulties that it could cause for those with special educational needs. We in this House know that the texts pupils are expected to read frequently contain, as one teacher put it,

“complex and often ambiguous language”.

The expectation that those with SEN will understand the texts well enough to analyse them in the first instance, and then memorise quotes, is simply unfair.

Teachers pointed out in a letter to the former Secretary of State for Education how the reformed English literature GCSE will discriminate against pupils with dyslexia and special needs, describing the Government's “breathtaking ignorance” of those conditions. I ask the Minister to respond to those concerns and address how they will be dealt with in exam conditions. What provisions, other than extra time, have been put in place to ensure that the exam is fair for pupils with SEN? We need a Government who understand what works and does not work for children, a Government who take advice and work with professionals to do things better when needed, not a Government who are wedded to the educational ideas of the 1950s, of divisiveness, rather than inclusivity. We need a Government who are interested in teaching children how to pass exams and in creating social mobility, so that all children can reach their full potential.

We want children who are instilled with a lifelong love of learning and who recognise the value of education, not children who are prevented by the system from succeeding. That is why I join my hon. Friends, teachers and many others today in asking the Government to reconsider their position on this issue.

5.9 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve, for what I think is the first time, under your chairmanship of one of these debates in Westminster Hall, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on arranging the debate and on opening it with such articulate and strong content.

This Government came to office determined to raise standards in our schools. That has been the driving force behind all our educational reforms. We want to

close the attainment gap between those from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers, and our reforms are beginning to show results. More schools are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. Some 1.9 million more pupils are now in those schools, benefiting from a higher quality of education than they would have done in 2010. Thanks to our phonics reforms, we are rising up the international league tables for the reading ability of nine and 10-year-olds. We have risen from joint 10th to joint eighth in the progress in international reading literacy survey. The attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more affluent peers has closed by 10% in primary and secondary schools.

However, many if not most of our reforms were opposed by the Labour party, and today's debate is just one more example of that opposition. When we came into office in 2010, we began the process of reforming the national curriculum and GCSEs and A-levels in response to concerns about grade inflation in our public exams and concerns from employers, colleges and universities about academic standards in our schools. We went through a long process. We appointed an expert panel. We worked with the exam boards in drafting subject content, and we consulted widely on that content. The exam boards went through the process of providing exam specifications. The first exams in English and maths were ready for teaching in September 2015, more than five years after the reform process began. Our determination was to ensure that our public exams were on a par with qualifications in the countries with the best performing education systems in the world. We changed the objectives of Ofqual in the Education Act 2011 to ensure that.

By ensuring that all pupils receive a rigorous core academic education up to the age of 16, we are preparing them for education and employment later in life. Whether pupils choose to take A-levels, the new T-levels when they are ready, or an apprenticeship, we know that a broad core academic education pre-16 is the best preparation. That is why we overhauled a curriculum that was denying pupils that core academic knowledge, and why we reformed the examination system, restoring rigour and confidence to our national qualifications. That included introducing revised subject content; replacing modules with end-of-course examinations; using non-exam assessment only where knowledge and skills cannot be tested validly in an exam, such as for art; and using tiering only when a single exam cannot assess pupils across the full ability range.

The reformed GCSEs consistently assess the knowledge and skills acquired by pupils during key stage 4. In English, that reform means a wider range of challenging texts, with no tiering or controlled assessment. It also means answering questions in the exam on some unseen texts. Many more pupils took English language and literature GCSEs in 2017. More schools entered pupils for the exam, and schools on average entered a higher number of pupils. That arose from a combination of changes to the performance measure progress 8 and the withdrawal of the combined English language and literature GCSE. Crucially, attainment in the English literature GCSE last summer was broadly stable across the grade range, and any small changes can be explained by changes to the cohort taking the qualification, which was significantly larger.

[Nick Gibb]

Pupils responded well to the demands of the new, more challenging qualification and scored highly in the new exams. For the largest exam board in the subject, AQA, pupils needed to score 88% for a grade 9 and 40% for a grade 4. We want all young people to develop a love of literature by reading widely for enjoyment. [Interruption.] Does my hon. Friend want to intervene?

John Howell: I wanted to intervene simply because I did not study English literature; I studied Latin and Greek, but there are some similarities because they are textually based. We did not have texts in the exam hall. We were not encouraged to quote extensively from the texts, although the fact that I can remember so much of Catullus probably owes a lot to the erotic content, rather than anything else. Are we getting confused over the issue of having to quote large quantities of text? I do not think that is part of the exam.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to the specifics of that later.

Through reading, pupils develop cultural literacy—my hon. Friend is an example of someone with great cultural literacy—and the shared knowledge that connects our society. Reading also helps to create shared bonds. From understanding references to a Catch-22 situation to sharing knowledge of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol", literature contributes much to the underpinning ties that hold us together.

It is important that pupils have the opportunity to study a range of high-quality, intellectually challenging and substantial texts from our literary heritage. The new and more rigorous GCSE in English literature requires pupils to read and understand a wide range of important texts across many eras. Under the old GCSE, pupils were examined on four texts at most. Some were examined on only three: two texts and a poetry anthology or anthologies. There was no requirement for pupils to be asked questions on texts they had not previously studied—unseen texts—although exam boards could use them if they wished. The remaining texts were covered through controlled assessment, which is a form of coursework. Ofqual decided that new GCSEs in the subject would be assessed entirely by exam, as that is a more reliable and fairer method.

The new English literature GCSE requires pupils to study a range of high-quality, challenging and substantial texts, including at least one Shakespeare play; one 19th-century novel; a selection of poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry; and fiction or drama from the British Isles since 1914. The requirements for poetry and a novel from the 1800s are new and add more breadth and rigour to the qualification. There is also a requirement for pupils to study no fewer than 15 poems by at least five different poets with a minimum of 300 lines of poetry in total. That element is designed to ensure that pupils gain a deep understanding of literature and read widely throughout the course. As my hon. Friend said, pupils are not required to learn the poems by heart. Instead, the purpose of studying a wide range of poetry is to develop an appreciation of the form and to support pupils to understand the importance of literature across the ages.

Helen Jones: Will the Minister explain how pupils can analyse language in the exam without remembering the language used?

Nick Gibb: Pupils may wish to cite a quote in their response to a question, but not every question in an English literature exam is about the choice of language. Other concepts and principles may be being tested. An understanding of the themes behind a piece of literature may well also be the purpose of the question. Where the question is about the use of language, students will score higher marks if they can cite the precise language or word being used. That does not mean that they are required by the syllabus to memorise vast tracts of text as part of the course and the preparation for the GCSE English literature exam.

Carol Monaghan: I am torn in this debate. Is the requirement not to quote large chunks of text properly communicated to those marking the exam scripts?

Nick Gibb: Those things are made very clear by the exam boards and Ofqual. If there is an issue of communication, that is between the exam boards and the schools and the schools and the pupils, and that is something we will take up. In responding to concerns that Members from across the country have raised in correspondence about constituents, that point has been made extensively.

What the introduction of closed-book examinations means in practice is that in the examination pupils are not provided with full copies of the novels, plays or poems that they have studied during the course. The expectation is that pupils will have read and studied those books and texts at school, and that will best prepare them to answer the questions in the exam. Having read widely means they will be able to answer questions on unseen texts as well as the ones they have studied.

It is important that pupils are not misled into believing that they will get good marks simply by memorising and writing out the poems or texts that they have studied. Pupils will not be marked on their ability to learn and remember the exact words of poems or texts by heart. They may gain extra marks through the intelligent use of textual references and quotations, perhaps using approximate language on occasions. Pupils are assessed on their interpretations of the text, which they may choose to do with reference to short quotations or important passages.

Each individual exam board will have guidance for their examiners, which is a better answer for the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), for each specification that covers expectations of the marking scheme, including how examiners should approach textual references and quotes.

Although having access to full texts is not permitted, Ofqual does not prohibit access to all texts during an exam. Exam boards may give pupils extracts from, for example, a novel, a scene from a play or a poem that they have studied as part of the exam materials, which pupils can use to support the argument they are making in their answer to the exam question. To ensure that pupils are familiar with what is expected of them and the types of additional material that the exam boards may provide, exemplar materials are provided to schools.

To earn good marks, pupils need to be able to show that they are familiar with the texts that they have studied and, in some questions, that their understanding is sufficiently developed to be able to compare them

either with one another or with unseen texts that have been given to them in the exam. Pupils will need to write about a poem that they have studied which is not given to them in the exam, but that does not require them to reproduce the text in full. It requires pupils to recollect aspects of the poem, such as themes, issues or the way in which language is used to create particular effects—not necessarily using exact quotes—so as to compare it with the one provided in the exam. Thanks to a literature-rich diet throughout their schooling and a careful study of the core GCSE texts, pupils should be well prepared to write confidently about poems and other relevant material without recourse to long quotations.

In the past, pupils have been able to take either annotated or clean copies of the studied texts into the exam. However, that risks undermining the requirement for them to have studied in detail the whole text as part of their course. That requirement is important and is particularly relevant in poetry, since if pupils know they will be given access to the whole text of a poem as part of their exam, they may feel that they do not need to study the whole poem as they can just read it during the exam. That would, of course, take up valuable time during the exam and mean that they would not necessarily have covered the whole curriculum.

Additionally, if pupils have the text available to them, it will shape the expectations of the exam. For example, if pupils could refer to the text, exam questions and their mark schemes would expect a much more detailed and extensive use of highly relevant quotes and references. Pupils could spend a large proportion of their examined time merely copying out quotations, rather than showing that they had understood the subject matter. As it is, questions and mark schemes for the new qualifications are written in the knowledge that pupils will not have access to the text, and expectations are moderated accordingly. The same position relates to questions where extracts are provided. For example, if an extract from a novel or a play by Shakespeare is provided, clear and detailed references and quotes may be expected and papers are marked accordingly.

The petition notes that in addition to quotes pupils are expected to remember

“how to analyse them, plus remembering the whole plot, themes, characters and quotes from another book.”

Although that is true, it is not clear that providing a copy of the text will be of any advantage to a pupil. If the pupil is not aware of or able to recall the plot, themes and characters in the texts that they have studied, having a copy of the text with no notes or annotations will not help them.

Indeed, Ofqual has pointed out that pupils might in fact be disadvantaged if they were provided with the text. A comparatively short exam does not give time for pupils who are unfamiliar with or who have forgotten the themes or structure of the text to use the text in the exam to demonstrate the understanding expected. Additionally, even if pupils have a good understanding of the text prior to the assessment, there is a risk that they might spend significant portions of the exam searching for quotes or references in the mistaken belief that that will secure them high marks. Again, unless the text is provided, the mark schemes for the reformed qualifications do not expect extensive textual references or quotes from memory.

Finally, the practice of pupils taking copies of texts into the exam creates practical problems for exam boards and centres. The majority of text editions come with an introduction, notes and glossary. Those annotated texts are very helpful in the classroom and are the most obvious choice when schools are deciding which books to buy. However, such texts would not be appropriate in the exam room, and schools would need to purchase an extra set of texts free of textual additions. Not only might it be difficult to source text-only editions, but it would be a major expense and would ensure that schools did not vary the choices of text that they wanted their students to study.

I hope that hon. Members are reassured that to pass the new English literature GCSE pupils are not required to memorise vast amounts of texts, and therefore pupils will not be disadvantaged by a closed-book exam. The new English literature GCSE introduces pupils to some of the key works of English literature. It is an excellent preparation for A-level and helps to introduce pupils to our society’s shared cultural literacy.

5.26 pm

Helen Jones: There have been interesting contributions to the debate. I particularly commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) for talking about the higher-level learning that can be tested in open-book exams. That is perhaps what the Minister missed when he responded to the debate.

All of us want to see standards rise, but to equate rising standards with a particular form of examination is to confuse two different things. The question is always about what we are testing. I note that the Minister said pupils do not have to use quotes, but then said there will be extra marks for the intelligent use of text and quotes, which is precisely why teachers need to teach their children to memorise a lot of the text—because they want them to get high marks.

We could do much better by our children. That does not mean abandoning a shared cultural heritage. Teachers are telling us that they are seeing fewer children applying to do A-level English because they have been put off by what is now expected of them in GCSE English literature.

The Minister illustrated the importance of the exact words when he referred to our understanding of things such as *Catch-22*. When Heller wrote the book he first called it “*Catch-14*”. When he was asked why he changed it, he said that 22 was funnier than 14, which illustrates exactly why the exact words are important.

If we are to test students at a higher level to enable our best students to show what they can do, we should move away from making our exams so much a test of memory and towards encouraging our children to do more analysis and evaluation of the text and to develop the skills that they will need in their future lives.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 200299 relating to GCSE English literature exams.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 26 March 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Policy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): In a written ministerial statement of 11 January, the Government set out their two-fold strategy for Euratom exit. This strategy included a commitment to put in place all the necessary measures to ensure that the UK can operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state upon the UK's withdrawal from Euratom, at which point the UK will be legally responsible for its own nuclear safeguards regime.

These measures include the negotiation of bilateral safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These new agreements—a voluntary offer agreement and an additional protocol—will replace the current, trilateral, safeguards agreements between the UK, the IAEA and Euratom.

We have made good progress in these negotiations. Both the UK and IAEA are clear that the new agreements should follow the same principles and scope as the current trilateral agreements. We will continue to offer a comprehensive facilities list to the IAEA, enabling them to designate and inspect their chosen sites for the purposes of international verification.

In order to ensure continuity for the nuclear sector, on 22 March the Government notified the IAEA that the UK will be taking legal responsibility for its own nuclear safeguards regime in the long term and started the process of seeking formal IAEA agreement to a new voluntary offer agreement and accompanying additional protocol for the UK. We expect these agreements to undergo UK ratification later this year. The agreements will only come into force once existing agreements no longer apply.

We will continue to seek a close association with Euratom, including the possibility of future co-operation on nuclear non-proliferation and safeguards, and any potential role for Euratom in supporting the establishment of the UK's own domestic safeguards regime.

The written ministerial statement of 11 January included a commitment to report back every three months about overall progress on Euratom to keep Parliament updated. I am pleased to confirm that the first such update has today been provided to Parliament. The paper is being placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The next update on progress is scheduled for June 2018.

[HCWS586]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Fire Reform

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to announce that I have approved proposals from the Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) for Cambridgeshire (Jason Ablewhite), Staffordshire (Matthew Ellis) and West Mercia (John Campion) to take on governance of their local fire and rescue services.

I have carefully considered each proposal, taking into account representations made by the public, police and fire personnel, and relevant local authorities in response to each PCC's local consultation. In each case I obtained an independent assessment of the PCCs' proposal, carried out by the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accounting (CIPFA), which I have had regard to and today publish in the interests of transparency. A copy of each of the independent assessments will be placed in the House Library and published on www.gov.uk shortly.

Having had regard to this material, I am of the view that in each case, a transfer of fire governance to the PCC is in the interests of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and that there is no adverse effect on public safety.

These PCCs will join Roger Hirst of Essex, who became the country's first Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner in October 2017. My officials will now prepare the necessary statutory instrument to give effect to these proposals in the coming months.

As directly accountable leaders overseeing both fire and policing, each PCC can increase efficiency and effectiveness, maximise available resources and improve the service delivered to the public. I look forward to seeing the benefits this will bring to each area.

[HCWS585]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Plan Intervention

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): On 16 November 2017 I made a statement to the House with an update on local plan progress. Up to date plans, including local plans, are essential because they provide clarity to communities and developers about where homes should be built and where not, so that development is planned rather than the result of speculative applications. I made clear that a lack of progress will no longer be tolerated.

The Government have abolished top-down regional planning. But a locally-led planning system requires elected local representatives to take the lead, listen to local residents and business, and set out a clear framework to build new homes, support the local economy and protect the environment. Local plans also provide the framework within which groups can prepare neighbourhood plans to shape development at local level. Most councils have seized the opportunity that localism provides; a small minority have not.

I wrote to 15 local planning authorities to commence the formal process of intervention in areas that had either recently failed the duty to co-operate or failed to meet the deadline set out in their local development schemes, the public timetable that all local planning authorities are required to put in place.

Local authorities had until 31 January 2018 to put forward any exceptional circumstances, which, in their view, justifies their failure to produce a local plan under the local planning regime, as amended by the Localism Act 2011 and the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

I have now considered these responses. I am pleased that since my letter of 16 November, four local authorities, Liverpool, North East Derbyshire, Runnymede, and York have published their draft local/plans. In Basildon,

Bolsover, Brentwood, Calderdale, Eastleigh, Mansfield and St Albans, while I have not been persuaded that there are exceptional circumstances to justify the failure to get a plan in place, I note some progress has been made to get their plans in place and at this time do not consider that intervention would have the greatest impact in accelerating their plan production. We will monitor these areas closely and any further significant delays in meeting their published timetables will inevitably give rise to considerable doubt over the ability of these authorities to make the necessary progress on their local plans. If there are further significant delays I will reconsider my decision not to intervene. In Northumberland I am asking the council to produce a clearer timetable and to accelerate plan production.

In three areas, Castle Point, Thanet and Wirral, I am now particularly concerned at the consistent failure and lack of progress to get a plan in place and have not been persuaded by the exceptional circumstances set out by the council or the proposals they have put forward to get a plan in place. We will therefore step up the intervention process in these three areas. I will be sending a team of planning experts, led by the Government's Chief Planner, into these three areas to advise me on the next steps in my intervention.

I have a number of intervention options available to me which I will now actively examine. As it may prove necessary to take over plan production, subject to decisions taken after the expert advice I have commissioned, my Department has started the procurement process to secure planning consultants and specialists to undertake that work so it can commence as quickly as possible. My Department will also be speaking to the county councils and combined authority with a view to inviting those bodies to prepare the local plan in these three areas as well as exploring the possibility with neighbouring authorities of directing the preparation of joint plans.

[HCWS580]

JUSTICE

Justice Update

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I have today signed a Justice Devolution Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with London Councils and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC).

This agreement will fundamentally change the way the criminal justice and offender management systems interact with local partners in London. We are moving towards a model where greater local influence is seen in a number of key delivery areas, including victims and witness services, future probation services, innovative use of electronic monitoring technologies, and specialist services for young offenders and women in the criminal justice system. We have also committed to explore jointly more ambitious options, such as budget devolution for certain groups of offenders in custody.

This is a crucial area of focus for the Government. Spending on criminal justice in London is significant, estimated at £3.3 billion per annum across at least 14 different organisations at a national, regional and

local level. Reoffending costs £2.2 billion in criminal justice costs alone. London accounts for almost 20% of offenders and reoffenders, at 76,000 and 19,000 respectively, and has a prison population accounting for a similar proportion but which is spread across 40 institutions nationally. Crime and the impact of crime is not felt equally across London, with the most vulnerable wards having three times as many victims of burglary, robbery and sexual offences as the least vulnerable wards.

In summary, the MoU covers the following areas:

Victims and witnesses

Work will aim to improve the experience for victims and witnesses from the point a crime is reported to the criminal conviction and beyond. Our ambition is to establish a more integrated service for victims and witnesses in London where victim support would be provided by a single person rather than several agencies. To help ensure a more seamless service for victims and witnesses before trial, we will devolve commissioning of support for witnesses at the pre-trial stage to MOPAC by April 2019.

We will also use the findings from the MOPAC-commissioned review of compliance with the victims' code of practice and the provision of victim services in London to improve accountability and to inform local, regional and national policy and commissioning.

Reducing reoffending

This section of the MoU commits my Department to working with local partners to ensure that the right interventions are in place to reduce reoffending in the capital. This will include delivery of a joint review of probation services in London, and testing the co-commissioning of 'through the gate' services.

Further to this, the MoJ, MOPAC and London Councils will undertake a joint programme of work around robust community sentence options, including considering opportunities to co-commission and better integrate services for the most complex, violent and persistent offenders, and developing a London strategy to make the most effective use of electronic monitoring.

A new approach to managing vulnerable cohorts

More women are sentenced to short custodial sentences in London than in the rest of the country, and the overall London youth reoffending rate of 47.5% remains stubbornly higher than the rate for England and Wales, which is currently 42.6%. This section sets out how we will work in partnership to address the complex needs of these vulnerable cohorts.

The MoU sets out a specific commitment to work collaboratively to align priorities and budgets on female offenders within London, exploring the scope for co-designing credible alternatives to custody. On young offenders, the MoJ will facilitate joint analysis with an aim of improving outcomes, with particular focus on addressing BAME disproportionality across the system. MoJ, MOPAC and London boroughs will pursue joint work programmes in relation to resettlement provision, transition to the adult estate, and the opportunities to co-commission a secure school for London.

Financial devolution

Finally, we are seeking, in the longer term, to foster a whole-system approach to offender management where powers, resources and decisions are better aligned and early intervention and prevention is incentivised.

The MoU sets out our intention to work with MOPAC and London Councils to explore ways in which financial models can incentivise greater investment in preventative services which reduce demand on the CJS, particularly considering opportunities with specific cohorts, including female offenders and 18-25 year old offenders.

This summary covers the main commitments of the MoU, which is available in full at:

<https://www.london.gov.uk/mopac-publications-0/memorandum-understanding-london-cjs>.

Work will begin now to ensure we jointly deliver these commitments as quickly as possible.

[HCWS584]

TRANSPORT

High Speed Rail (West Midlands-Crewe) Bill: Additional Provision

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I would like to inform the House about the introduction of an additional provision to the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill, which is currently before the Select Committee.

The additional provision proposes a number of changes to the powers in the Bill for the Select Committee's consideration. Those directly and specially affected by these changes may petition against them, and once any petitioners have been heard, the Committee will decide whether the amendments to the Bill should be made. The petition period, set by the Chairman of Ways and Means, finishes on 27 April.

One of the changes in the additional provision relates to a minor change in the alignment of the Phase 2a route near Stone. Other changes relate to ongoing design discussions with utility companies, to highway works on junctions to address traffic and safety issues, and requirements for additional land for environmental mitigation works. In some cases, these changes affect land some distance from the line of route.

Full details are shown in the plans and sections deposited alongside the additional provision. Affected landowners will receive formal notification this week, including information on how to petition against the changes if they should decide to do so.

Standing Orders require that an estimate of expense be prepared, to a prescribed format. This sets out the gross costs of the land and works in the additional provision. However, the costs of works and land avoided through these amendments is expected to produce an overall reduction in the costs of the scheme.

I am also publishing an environmental statement setting out any likely significant effects from the changes in the additional provision, alongside a supplementary environmental statement reporting new environmental

information relating to the scheme. In accordance with Standing Orders, there is a public consultation on these documents which will run until 14 May. The documents will be put in the Libraries of both Houses, and will also be made available in locations open to the public in all local authorities and parishes affected by changes.

[HCWS581]

Maritime and Coastguard Agency Business Plan 2018-19

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am proud to announce the publication of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's (MCA) business plan for 2018-19. The MCA does vital work to save lives at sea, regulate ship standards and protect the marine environment. The Agency affects not just those working on the coast or at sea, it upholds the legacy of our great maritime nation.

The business plan sets out:

- the services that the agency will deliver and any significant changes it plans to make;
- the resources the agency requires; and
- the key performance indicators, by which its performance will be assessed.

This plan allows service users and members of the public to assess how the agency is performing in operating its key services, managing reforms and the agency finances.

The business plan will be available electronically on www.gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS583]

Motoring Agency Business Plan 2018-19

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I am pleased to announce the publication of the 2018-19 business plans for the Department for Transport's Motoring Agencies - the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA), the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) and the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA).

The business plans set out:

- the services each agency will deliver and any significant changes they plan to make;
- the resources they require; and,
- the key performance indicators, by which their performance will be assessed.

These plans allow service users and members of the public to assess how the agencies are performing in operating their key services, managing reforms and the agency finances.

The business plans will be available electronically on www.gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS582]

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**not later than
Monday 2 April 2018**

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National Security and Russia [Col. 551]
Motion—(Prime Minister)—agreed to

Cable Standards: Fire Safety [Col. 621]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
GCSE English Literature Exams [Col. 253WH]
General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 25WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
