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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 23 July 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

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Homelessness

1. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness. [906570]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Tackling homelessness is a key Government priority, and we are spending more than £1.2 billion through to 2020, including committing more than £2 million of funding to Torbay. We are also committing a further £279,000 this year through the rough sleeping initiative. We will announce more on the rough sleeping strategy shortly.

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Work supported by his Department to look at ways to end street homelessness has produced a recommendation that Torbay should adopt a Housing First approach. Is he happy to meet me to discuss whether Torbay could be the next pilot area for such an approach, which has already happened in three major urban areas?

James Brokenshire: I am sure the Minister for homelessness, my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further, but, as he highlights, the Government are supportive of the Housing First approach and are investing £28 million in a large-scale pilot in three main regions of England.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Latest departmental figures show that 6% of rough sleepers in London are aged between 18 and 25 and that more than 120,000 children are living in temporary accommodation in England. Young people are suffering as a result of the Tory housing crisis. Why does the Secretary of State think that the number of homeless children fell under Labour, but has risen under the Tories?

James Brokenshire: This Government are committed to tackling homelessness. That is why we have committed £1.2 billion to do so, pledged to end rough sleeping by 2027 and changed the law so that councils can place families in private rented accommodation. That is action by this Government to deal with this important issue.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I very much welcome the £28 million to trial or pilot Housing First and the £192,000 to my local authority for a micro-Housing First project. Given that we know this approach works, in particular for rough sleepers with very complex needs, what steps can my right hon. Friend take to accelerate the roll-out across the United Kingdom?

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend for his work on the all-party parliamentary group for this important issue. As he highlights, we are piloting in three areas, but we are reflecting carefully on the issue of complexity and the challenges that those who are rough sleeping face in getting accommodation, and we will propose further measures as we bring forward our rough sleeping strategy.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has to do so much more, especially on the rough sleeping crisis. We see that in particular in the warmer weather, and it is very visible in all our cities, including in Nottingham city centre. The issue is particularly related to the massive fall in the number of mental health overnight beds, with 6,000 fewer than in 2010. Will he give a commitment to speak about this with his opposite number at the Department of Health and Social Care?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will welcome the £420,000 committed to Nottingham through the rough sleeping initiative, which underlines the practical steps we are taking, including the £30 million that has been committed. We will bring forward further proposals through the rough sleeping strategy. He is right that this is an important issue: this Government take it seriously, and I take it seriously personally. That is why my first visit as Secretary of State was to a rough sleeping charity to see the work it is doing. We will be coming forward with more work.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend's immediate predecessor was very familiar with the work being undertaken by the Mayor of the West Midlands to eliminate rough sleeping and homelessness. Will my right hon. Friend pick up the reins and visit Andy Street to see what the west midlands is doing on that?

James Brokenshire: That first visit that I referred to was to the west midlands, where I met Andy Street to see some of the very good practical work taking place in Birmingham, and I commend that work. Equally, I commend some of the work we are doing around the west midlands through the Housing First pilots.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Shelter England said this morning that 33,000 people living in temporary accommodation in England are in work, which is up 73% since 2013. Shelter believes that that is down to expensive private lets, the housing benefit freeze and a chronic lack of social housing. How does the Secretary of State respond to that?

James Brokenshire: I agree with the hon. Lady that everyone deserves a safe and decent place to live, and we are providing more than £1.2 billion so that all those left homeless get the support they need, but the broader issue she raises on social and affordable housing is

germane. That is why the Government have increased the funding around that. There is now up to £9 billion to deal with affordable homes.

Alison Thewliss: The Secretary of State missed the point entirely, which was about people who are working but unable to afford accommodation and a roof over their head. Is it not the case that under this Government work no longer pays?

James Brokenshire: No. As I have already highlighted, I recognise the issues of supply and of affordability. That is why we have invested more heavily in this and, indeed, given councils additional borrowing flexibilities of about £1 billion in England. Yes, of course, we recognise the challenge, and that is why this Government are responding.

New Homes

2. **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of his Department's progress on delivering more new homes. [906571]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): In 2016-17, we added 217,000 homes to the housing stock in England—the highest level in all but one of the past 30 years. We have set out an ambitious package of reforms to create a housing market that delivers 300,000 homes a year on average by the mid-2020s.

Mrs Badenoch: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. A recent report by the think-tank Onward proposes that more of the land value created by housing development needs to be captured for the community, not just by developers. Does he agree?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an important point in that developers should be held to account on, for example, delivering their commitments on infrastructure and affordable homes for communities. That is why we are proposing a new approach to viability assessments in the revised national planning policy framework, and we have consulted on further reforms to developer contributions.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I help the Secretary of State? The fact is that every part of the country is not like Maidenhead. May I tell him that if we want new homes for people in this country who do not have a home, we need homes that are the right homes for the right people? We need social housing and housing for the elderly. We do not just want a large number of houses built in places such as Maidenhead; we need them in real towns and cities up and down this country.

James Brokenshire: I agree with the broad thrust of what the hon. Gentleman highlights about the range of homes that our country needs. Indeed, our ambition is to deliver 300,000 homes by the mid-2020s, looking at all the different sectors of our communities, and we have been consulting on that in the national planning policy framework to help to deliver it.

21. [906593] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): How can we speed up planning without offending against the proper discretion of planning authorities?

James Brokenshire: If my right hon. Friend looks at the draft national planning policy framework, he will see that it is about plan policy: setting the high-level objectives and then allowing local areas to form their plans. I hope that when he sees the final NPPF he will recognise that.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): While the new homes are being built, will the Department consider looking at a requirement on all local authorities to place families within a reasonable distance of schools, as so many children in temporary accommodation are travelling for over two hours to get to their schools?

James Brokenshire: I acknowledge the broad point that the hon. Lady highlights. That is why we are very firmly committed to providing infrastructure around new homes, and schools are very firmly a part of that.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Further to that question, in east Hertfordshire we recognise the need for more homes, but they must be matched by additional investment in infrastructure and public services. What are the Government doing to make sure that this investment in these vital services is directed to areas where housing development will be at its greatest?

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend will know, the Government have provided a £5 billion housing infrastructure fund to ensure that more homes mean better, not more stretched, local infrastructure. The draft national planning policy framework does make it clear that local authorities should ensure that the necessary infrastructure supports developments that they approve.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): So many people's dream of buying their own home has been dashed, yet the number of new low-cost homes built for first-time buyers has halved since 2010. Why?

James Brokenshire: I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that we are dealing with what has been a broken housing market—something that has existed over many years, with that lack of investment—which is why this Government are committed to investing £44 billion on the home building agenda in the coming years. That is about transforming life chances, and actually delivering the homes that our country needs and such opportunities for generations to come.

John Healey: This Government have had more than eight years to do the job, and what they are doing is not working. Home ownership rose under Labour, but has now hit a 30-year low under the Conservatives. We cannot just stoke prices with tax cuts and home-buy loans; we need to build more low-cost homes to make home ownership more affordable. More than three years on from the Government promising 200,000 cut-price starter homes, why is the total number so far built zero?

James Brokenshire: Last year, we saw the homes that are being delivered at a high, and that has not been any greater, other than in one year, over the last 30 years.

The right hon. Gentleman glosses over Labour's record, but what did we see when Labour was in power? House building—down by 45%. Homes bought and sold—down by 40%. Social housing—down by 400,000. However, there was one thing that kept going up: the number of people on the social housing waiting list. It is this Government who are determined to deliver.

Planning Viability Assessments: Council Houses

3. **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What assessment has his Department made of the effect of the use of planning viability assessments on the number of council houses being built. [906572]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Local authorities have built 12,340 dwellings since 2010, up from 2,920 over the previous 13 years. However, we recognise that viability assessments can be used to reduce contributions towards affordable housing. That is why we are introducing a new approach to viability, through changes in the national planning policy framework.

Neil Coyle: The current framework means that last year the number of affordable homes provided under section 106 agreements was only half the 32,000 peak in Labour's last year in office. Despite that, Southwark's Labour council has built 535 council homes in just four years, with over 1,000 more in the pipeline. However, the waiting list is 11,000, so will the Minister tell us whether right to buy will now be banned for those seeking not a home to live in, but a cash cow to rent out? Will he also say how the imminent Green Paper will empower Southwark to build the genuinely affordable council homes that local people need?

James Brokenshire: The right to buy has been a powerful and important initiative in ensuring that people have places that they can call their home. We will set out an approach in the new NPPF that will reduce delays from the use of viability assessments to negotiate developer contributions by front-loading that. The Government are taking steps to speed up home delivery, which is something the hon. Gentleman should welcome.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the number of council houses, and indeed any other houses, being built would be greatly improved if the Government insisted on a far higher standard of design and layout? Will he therefore favour, in planning applications for council houses and all other houses, developers who insist in those plans on the highest possible standards for the design and layout of those houses?

Mr Speaker: A Chartwell standard, perhaps.

James Brokenshire: I do agree with a lot of what my right hon. Friend highlights about the importance of design and style to ensuring that we create homes for the future that we can be proud of. This is something that we are considering carefully as we finalise the national planning policy framework. We will publish that shortly, and I hope he will see that in the final version.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): At a time of national housing crisis, as developers continue to exploit the viability loophole, a staggeringly small 2.5% of homes completed last year were for social rent—the lowest number since the second world war. The Government continue to disregard this place, particularly on housing, in failing to deliver the revised NPPF, along with a raft of other documents promised before the recess. Thousands of people who desperately need social housing are being abandoned, as this Government entirely pull out of social housing, so will the Secretary of State tell us whether he will change his draft NPPF explicitly to include social rented homes in the official definition of affordable housing? If he will not, any warm words of support for social housing will ring hollow.

James Brokenshire: I entirely reject the hon. Lady's characterisation of the Government's approach to dealing with affordable homes and social housing. She will see that from the funds that we have committed to secure for the homes agenda. Under this Government, we have seen 1.1 million additional homes delivered since April 2010. Over 378,000 of those are affordable homes, including 273,000 affordable homes for rent. This Government are delivering and we will continue to do so.

Children in Temporary Accommodation

4. **Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. [906573]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): Temporary accommodation provides an important safety net and ensures that no child is left without a home. In 2011, we changed the law so that councils can place families in decent and affordable private rented homes. This now means that homeless households should not have to wait as long for settled accommodation and should spend less time in temporary accommodation.

Danielle Rowley: A constituent of mine is living in temporary accommodation with her children, aged two and seven, opposite a nightclub. The noise keeps her children scared and awake at night. Shelter Scotland says that 13% of homeless households spend over a year in temporary accommodation, and that those with children tend to spend more time in temporary accommodation than those without. What does the Minister think the long-term impact is on children who spend a long time in temporary accommodation?

Nigel Adams: First, I acknowledge the work the hon. Lady did before coming to the House, working for Shelter Scotland, which is an organisation we work with very closely on wider homelessness, most recently on our rough sleeping strategy. We acknowledge there has been an increase—a 2% rise in the latest figures to March 2018. No one wants to be in temporary accommodation too long, especially children. However, there are good examples of local authorities leading the way in ensuring families spend less time in temporary accommodation. One such example is Barnet Council, whose targeted approach to support has seen the number of children in temporary accommodation reduce by 11%.

12. [906584] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese** (Slough) (Lab): Will the Minister commit today to devoting more funds to local authorities specifically to resolve the issue of families living in temporary accommodation?

Nigel Adams: We are committing an enormous amount of money—£1.2 billion over the spending period—and we expect local authorities to follow the example of councils such as Barnet, which has managed to achieve that reduction. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to talk to his local authority and perhaps to approach Barnet to see an example of best practice.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Local authorities are ignoring circulars from the Department and housing children in temporary accommodation many miles from their place of education. What can my hon. Friend do to enforce circulars and make councils take into account educational requirements when housing children and their families?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a superb point. I can be absolutely clear from the Dispatch Box that local authorities must take account of circulars. It does seem nonsensical that councils are taking this approach. Youngsters are being taken away from their local areas and their schooling is being affected.

Leasehold System

5. **Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle unfair practices in the leasehold system. [906574]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): The Government want the leasehold system to be fair and transparent so that a person feels their home is their own. We will legislate to ban the sale of new leasehold houses and to reduce ground rents to a peppercorn as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Gillian Keegan: I thank the Minister for his answer. This Parliament and this Government are the first in over 15 years to seek justice and to offer the prospect of help to vulnerable residential leaseholders. Action is welcome on fair terms for new leases and to promote commonhold. However, how and when will there be beneficial steps for current leaseholders, including the many in retirement who suffer a reduction in capital values because of high event fee charges?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. I congratulate her on her work, with her colleagues, on an ongoing campaign in this area, not least via the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform. We will shortly announce our response to the Law Commission report on tackling event fees to help those in retirement housing. The Law Commission will also consult on how we can make it easier and cheaper for existing leaseholders to buy their freehold or extend their lease.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Law Commission report, because for too long leaseholders have been dealt a very, very poor hand. When looking at the report and developing a

response, will the Government for once put leaseholders at the front of their mind, rather than the freeholders who only seem to rip off leaseholders?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. We also welcome the Law Commission proposals, which include recommendations to ensure that we make leaseholds cheaper and fairer. The Government will continue to work with the Law Commission to ensure that this practice continues and we get a better outcome for leaseholders.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I speak as a contented leaseholder in my constituency. Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), will the Minister say when we might expect private leaseholders in tower blocks to hear that the cladding problems are going to be paid for by the developers, insurers or others, and not by them? They are always told that they are tenants and yet have to carry all the costs for everything.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend raises an absolutely important issue. Leaseholders are facing massive bills over cladding following Grenfell. Families are going to lose their homes and are faced with enormous bills; we should be helping them and are determined to do so. In the private sector, remediation costs will fall naturally to the freeholder. Where they do not, we have urged those with responsibility to follow the lead from the social sector, and private companies are already beginning to do the right thing. They should not be passing on these costs to leaseholders.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): In response to my written questions, various Ministers in the Department have confirmed that the majority of developers have agreed not to use Help to Buy loans to finance the purchase of leasehold properties in future. However, they have admitted that not all developers have agreed to do that, so what are the Government going to do to stop any taxpayers' money being used in this way?

Nigel Adams: Of course, certain contractual obligations are already in train. We have made it absolutely clear that no more public money will be used in such a way.

New Homes for Social Rent

6. **Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of new homes available for social rent since 2010. [906575]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Since 2010, we have delivered over 378,000 new affordable homes, including 129,000 for social rent. We are investing over £9 billion in the affordable homes programme to deliver over a quarter of a million new affordable homes, including at least a further 12,500 for social rent.

Fiona Onasanya: In the Housing Secretary's council area of Bexley, 270 social rented homes were built in 2010, but not a single one was built last year. There is a housing crisis in his area, just as there is in Peterborough and across the country, so would it not be better for his constituents and mine if he reversed the huge funding cuts that this Government have made to social housing?

Kit Malthouse: I do not know if the hon. Lady heard my initial answer to her question; I pointed out the enormous amounts of money that are being invested in the provision of affordable homes. Pleasingly, the area that she represents has responded with some alacrity, putting in place some significantly ambitious targets—100,000 new homes over the next 20 years, of which 40,000 will be affordable. It is to be congratulated on doing so. She is right, though, that there is some pressure to be brought to bear particularly on councils to bid into the extra borrowing allowance that we have made available to them for the provision of social rent. I will meet them at my earliest opportunity to understand when and why they will do so.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Between 2012 and 2017, Labour-controlled Redditch Borough Council failed to build a single home for social rent. Does the Minister therefore welcome Conservative-controlled Redditch Borough Council's intention to build more homes for social rent, because we believe that everyone should have a decent home of their own, whatever their income or background?

Kit Malthouse: I am sure that there are many in Redditch who breathe a sigh of relief that the Conservatives are in control of that particular part of the country, championed by such a wonderful Member of Parliament. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is still the case that more affordable homes have been delivered in the last seven years than were delivered in the last seven years of the previous Labour Government.

National Trust Housing Stock

7. **Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab):** If he will meet the National Trust to discuss the potential effect on levels of housing need in local authority areas of that trust's proposals to increase rents to market levels on all its housing stock; and if he will make a statement. [906577]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I will be more than happy—in fact, it would be a pleasure—to meet the National Trust.

Siobhain McDonagh: My constituent, Maria Bentley-Dingwall, has lived in her rented National Trust property for the last 12 years. She pays rent of £850. This is now going to increase to £1,450 per calendar month, which will be considerably in excess of the local housing allowance. As she is a disabled person, when she is eventually evicted for rent arrears, she will become the responsibility of the local authority, quite apart from the personal distress that that will cause her. Does the Minister agree that he should intervene with the National Trust to find out what it is doing and that, as a much loved body, it has a greater responsibility than tearing out the maximum amount of rent from its properties?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady makes a strong case for her constituent, as we would expect, and as I say, I would be more than happy to meet the National Trust. I know that it is reviewing its property policies generally and has decided to overcome the problems created by the modern ground rent regulations that are affecting many of its tenants. It is, however, a charity and it has to balance its legal obligation to maximise its income against its charitable obligation to those it cares for.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Earlier this year I met the Charity Commissioners to discuss the issue of ground rents and the National Trust on the Killerton estate, a National Trust property in my constituency. I am very pleased that the National Trust has agreed not to increase the ground rent of long-standing tenants, but I hear what my hon. Friend says about it. I am a member of the trust, which is, as it has just been described, a much-loved body. Does my hon. Friend—another much-loved body—agree that he should meet its representatives and encourage them to meet Members with National Trust properties in their constituencies to discuss how the trust can be a better neighbour and companion and conform with the Government's housing agenda in the future?

Kit Malthouse: I have absolutely no doubt that the National Trust's shifting its position on modern ground rent was due to the pressure exerted and the highlighting of the issue by many Members, not least my right hon. Friend himself, on behalf of his constituents. As I have said, I should be more than happy to meet representatives of that august body and discuss its property policies generally.

Public Services: Local Authority Funding

8. **Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the viability of local authority funding for the maintenance of acceptable levels of public services. [906578]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Our local government finance settlement will increase resources for local government over the next two years because we recognise the pressures on local services, but it is right for decisions about funding priorities for individual local services to be made by local area representatives.

Chi Onwurah: The Cabinet has followed your example by visiting Newcastle today, Mr Speaker, but rather than giving its members the welcome that they deserve, I came here to hear the Minister's totally out-of-touch answer. Central Government funding for Newcastle has halved since 2010. The number of looked-after children has increased by a fifth since 2014, and the number of vulnerable adults has risen by the same proportion in the last year alone. Given a funding gap of £300 million in 2020 just to keep services running, how does the Minister think Newcastle can deliver good public services?

Rishi Sunak: As we have discussed before, the hon. Lady's local authority actually receives more funding per household than the average local authority similar to hers. Today of all days, I was hoping that she would welcome the meeting of the Cabinet in her area, the extra £1 billion for the northern powerhouse, and the continuing success of the Great Exhibition of the North, chaired admirably by my constituent Sir Gary Verity. In her area, the sun is shining, the visitors are pouring in, and the local economy is booming. It is a good time to be in the north-east, and that is being delivered by a Conservative Government.

Mr Speaker: I hope that one of those Ministers, in the course of this away day—which I am sure is a meeting of the utmost importance—will take the time to visit Newcastle University, which is a most admirable

institution. They could benefit greatly from a visit. I mean that the Ministers could benefit, as much as the university.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to a fair funding formula, and I thank the Minister for meeting me and representatives of Leicestershire County Council. Will he confirm that the review that is under way will look at the balance of funding between districts and counties? After all, it is the counties that are bearing the burden of a growing older population and the growing burdens on children's social services.

Rishi Sunak: I can confirm that I have met representatives of my hon. Friend's council regularly to discuss this topic, including just the other week at the local government conference. We received more than 300 submissions to the recent consultation on fair funding. That is one of the topics raised, and the Department is considering all responses with a view to replying later this year.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): There is a great deal of concern in local government about the financial cliff edge that is facing a number of authorities. The Public Accounts Committee recently asked the Department to do two things: to explain by the end of September why it believes that local authorities are sustainable in the current spending round; and to agree with local authorities within 12 months a definition of financial sustainability and a methodology for assessing risk. Those are both important requests. Will the Minister ensure that his Department complies with them?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the Chair of the Housing, Communities Local Government Committee for his question. As he knows, the Department is considering the Public Accounts Committee's report as we speak. As for his broader question, the Department is constantly evaluating local government sustainability, and in the upcoming meetings, and ahead of the spending review, the topics that he has raised will of course be closely scrutinised.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): How does the Minister justify an emerging system of negative rate support grants under which councils that have made themselves financially self-sufficient are now being told to make net contributions to the Government?

Rishi Sunak: I am pleased to tell the right hon. Gentleman that the Government will be launching their consultation on negative RSG very shortly, and I look forward to his contribution.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Last week the *Municipal Journal* reported the Minister as saying that councils will be unhappy with the outcome of the fair funding review, so can he clarify just how unfair his review is likely to be and which types of council will be hardest hit?

Rishi Sunak: What I can confirm is that the fair funding review will be a bottom-up fresh look at how we fund local government in this country. It is long overdue, as the current formula is 10 years out of date with over 120 different indicators. It is right that that

formula is fair, transparent and objective, and I am sure all councils will have a fair crack at persuading me of their case.

Mr Speaker: I am very glad that the Minister is in such a good mood; he really is a very cheery, upbeat fellow who positively exudes optimism about all things and all around him. We are delighted to see him.

Andrew Gwynne: But it will not wash, Mr Speaker. The Tory-led Local Government Association is warning that the funding gap for councils is now due to grow to £8 billion and the Public Accounts Committee has damned the financial capability of the Ministry to sort out this mess. With Northamptonshire the first broken shire and other local authorities of all types teetering on the cliff edge, when, rather than managing down expectations about fair funding, is the Minister going to stand up for the sector and demand the resources our public services so desperately need?

Rishi Sunak: If the hon. Gentleman had been at the local government conference just the other week he would have heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State describe to the sector exactly what this Government are doing to support them. We acknowledge the pressures on local government over the past few years; they have done a commendable job of maintaining high-quality public services in a difficult environment, and we will ensure that they continue to get the backing they need from this Government to deliver for all our local communities.

New Housing: Leasehold

9. **Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): What the timetable is for his Department bringing forward proposals to prevent the sale of new houses by leasehold. [906579]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): The Government cannot see any good reason for new-build leasehold houses other than in exceptional circumstances. Earlier this month the Secretary of State announced that no new Government money will fund them. We intend to consult over the summer on how a ban on new leasehold houses will be implemented.

Ruth George: Last year the then Secretary of State promised that by the summer the Government would make concrete proposals for banning the sale of new leasehold homes, yet they are still being sold in my constituency. The buyers thereof are unable to sell their homes and are also unable to afford to buy out their freehold at the extortionate rates being demanded by the freeholders. How and when will the Government fix this?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady raises an important point, and that is why we are acting: we are introducing legislation to stop the development of new-build leasehold houses and will restrict ground rent to a peppercorn. We are also planning to fix the loopholes in the law, to increase transparency.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): With more problem leaseholds being sold, what is my hon. Friend doing to determine the scale of the problem and inform householders of that problem?

Nigel Adams: That was why I mentioned the issue of transparency. It is very important that leaseholders get as much information as is practically possible. We are currently working with the Law Commission on how best to support current leaseholders because we want to make buying a freehold easier for people going forward, but we also want to ensure that those with leases are helped out.

New Homes

10. **Lee Rowley** (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to build new homes. [906580]

18. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to build new homes. [906590]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): New homes should be built out as soon as possible once planning permission is granted, and under this Government net additional dwellings are at their highest since 2007-08. We are building on progress made so far by revising the national planning policy framework and diversifying the market to increase the pace of development, and I have commissioned my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) to lead a review of build-out rates.

Lee Rowley: One of the councils in my area has been without a local plan since 2005 and is currently consulting on a draft plan that over-inflates housing need and unnecessarily builds on the green belt. Does my hon. Friend agree that one way to speed up house building is to put in place local plans that have the confidence of local people?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend fights hard for his constituents' interests, as he does at all times. He is right to say that a local plan is vital not only to progress housing in an area but to protect residents from the predations of speculative developers. I find it astonishing that authorities can be so dilatory in producing such plans.

Mary Robinson: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential that we build the homes that the country needs, and that we build the right homes in the right places, which means protecting the green belt and investing in the infrastructure that we need to accommodate those homes?

Kit Malthouse: With her usual perspicacity, my hon. Friend has put her finger on the button and enunciated the cocktails required for successful development, with the omission of one, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) mentioned—namely, design. If we can put all those things together, we will create the houses that people need.

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex enjoyed the reference to cocktails.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I did, Sir.

Mr Speaker: And that is demonstrably apparent.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The building of new homes is being choked off in Nottingham by the refusal of the Department to remove the cap on the housing revenue account. I put this to Ministers on 12 March, and was told that if Nottingham stepped up and made a strong case, it would be looked upon favourably. Such a case has been made, but it has not been looked upon favourably. Why not?

Kit Malthouse: As a person who is new in post, I am happy to look at the specifics of that matter, but we have obviously given an extra £1 billion of funding to local authorities to bid into, and we are inviting bids at the moment for housing revenue account expansion. I would also point out that, across the whole piece, local authorities already have about £3.6 billion of headroom, and I am at a loss to understand why they are not using it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The people who come into my surgery are looking for social rented housing, and we need to speed up the building of those homes. This Government inherited a £4 billion social housing building programme, but the Chartered Institute of Housing says that that has now gone down to less than £500 million, which represents a cut of nearly 90%. How does the Minister intend to increase the supply of social housing that people in my constituency so desperately need?

Kit Malthouse: We are committed to a vibrant housing market with tenures of all types, and for all types of people. In particular, we have emphasised that housing for social rent should be an area of growth. As was stated in an earlier answer, we are targeting a further 12,500 social rent housing for provision in the next few years, but if the hon. Gentleman has any ideas about where, when and who I need to push, prod or harass in order to build more, I will be more than happy to do that.

Local Government Funding Allocation

11. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure fairness in the allocation of funding to local government. [906583]

14. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure fairness in the allocation of funding to local government. [906586]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): We are undertaking a fair funding review of local authorities' relative needs and resources to address concerns about the fairness of the current system, and I am pleased to say that we are making good progress in collaboration with the sector in order to introduce a simple, fair and transparent funding formula.

Nigel Mills: Councils across Derbyshire have suffered under the previous funding formula, and I welcome the consultation and the fact that Derbyshire is one of the business rate retention pilots. Does my hon. Friend agree that local councils could achieve a double whammy by encouraging local growth and creating more jobs, and also by raising their own funds through the increased business rates?

Rishi Sunak: It is refreshing to hear my hon. Friend talk about growth in the context of local government funding. Economic growth is the only sustainable way to ensure the vibrancy of our local communities and to raise the vital money that we need to fund our services. I am delighted to tell him that the Government are committed to implementing further retention of business rates, so that his local authority, like all others, will have both an incentive and a reward when they drive growth in their local areas.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to the Minister for those replies, but recent work by the County Councils Network has found that, despite additional funding provided to the last funding settlement at the beginning of the year, county areas including Suffolk will face £3.2 billion-worth of funding pressures by 2020. What can the Government do, in advance of the fair funding and comprehensive spending reviews, to ensure that councils are able to meet the essential needs of their residents?

Rishi Sunak: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work on representing counties in this place, and I am delighted to have met him to discuss this topic on multiple occasions. I agree with him that county councils have done a tremendous job of maintaining services in this climate. I recognise the pressures that he identifies, and I can confirm to him that, in the short term, the Government will soon be publishing a technical consultation for local government finance in the upcoming settlement. As I said to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), we will be including a consultation on the issue of negative revenue support grant, and I can also confirm that there will be a new round of business rate retention pilots.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Since early 2015, the Government's troubled families programme has contributed funding to help with early support and preventive support for priority families in Nottingham, which is vital given the high levels of deprivation and the pressures on children's services in our society. By intervening early, family support workers have helped to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour, helped parents to get back into work and reduced the need for care proceedings. Will the Minister meet me and my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) to discuss his plans to support councils working with families when the programme funding ends in 2020?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I completely agree with her on the importance of this vital programme, especially with regard to prevention work. I am pleased to say that recent reports show that the incidence of children on the programme has declined by 13% as a result of intervention work by councils such as hers, and I would be delighted to meet them to learn what they are doing on the ground.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has the Minister made of the length of time it takes to reach a decision on business improvement district appeals, such as that of the Harborne BID in my constituency?

Rishi Sunak: Like the hon. Lady, this Government believe that business improvement districts can be a fantastic asset for local businesses to ensure that their area remains a vibrant place to trade. She has strongly supported the application from her area, and I am pleased to tell her that a reply will be sent to her imminently after questions.

Support for Local Government

13. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his Department's support for local government. [906585]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Over the spending review period, councils have received more than £200 billion for local services, and the 2018-19 settlement sees an increase in resources to local government over the next two years, increasing to £45.6 billion in 2019-20.

Giles Watling: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but can he set out how his Department will support local councils to regenerate valuable coastal communities such as Clacton, which is positively Caribbean at the moment?

Rishi Sunak: I am pleased to say that the Government have spent £174 million through a fund to support local communities over the past few years. I pay tribute to the great progress made by the Jaywick Sands coastal community team in my hon. Friend's constituency in bringing forward its proposal for a new coastal village. He has been intimately involved with that proposal, which is a model for others to follow.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Local councils, including Bath and North East Somerset Council, are facing a funding gap of £2.2 billion for adult social care. What measures is the Department taking to incentivise preventive services to reduce the burden of adult social care on councils such as ours?

Rishi Sunak: Work between the NHS and local authorities through the better care fund is addressing the issue that the hon. Lady mentions. I am pleased to say that the most recent statistic shows a 37% fall in delayed transfers of care relating to social care, which shows that the approach we are taking is working, and local authorities should be commended for delivering that.

Social Care Funding

15. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the allocation of NHS funding for social care. [906587]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has many conversations with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and most recently they have been discussing the fact that effectively targeted

NHS spend can reduce the need for social care, just as effectively targeted social care spending can reduce pressures on the NHS.

Mohammad Yasin: Bedford Borough Council has the country's lowest rate of delayed transfers of care. Instead of being congratulated, the council has been told that it will now be penalised if it fails to meet zero delays, when other authorities have much more generous allowances. Does the Minister agree that he should be supporting Bedford Borough Council to be the best in the country, instead of making that as difficult as possible through the delays in funding and the unfair targets?

Rishi Sunak: I am happy to look into the specific issue that the hon. Gentleman mentions, but I join him in paying tribute to the work that has led to Bedford delivering a fantastic performance on delayed transfers of care.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential that both local authorities and the health service work more closely together to provide a seamless combined service? That requires a change in culture at local level, similar to the one in Gloucestershire, where we have an excellent joint commissioning board.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is right about that and right to highlight the work of his local authority, which is a pioneer in collaborating more closely with the local NHS. That is showing tremendous results on the ground in reducing delayed transfers of care, which are stopping people from getting into the NHS in the first place. I hope that others can learn from Gloucestershire's example.

Homelessness

16. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in homelessness since 2010. [906588]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): This Government are serious about tackling homelessness, which is why we have allocated more than £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness to 2020. We have implemented the most ambitious legislative reform in decades: the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. We have also committed to halving rough sleeping by 2022 and to ending it by 2027, and we will shortly be publishing a strategy that sets out our plans to do that.

Christian Matheson: Homelessness has doubled nationally since 2010, but the increase is greater in the north-west. Why is that?

Nigel Adams: I know how seriously the hon. Gentleman takes this issue, and I am very encouraged by the work he is doing collaboratively with his local authority and organisations such as Chester Aid to the Homeless and Share. They will welcome, as I am sure he does, the £1.15 million that has been recently provided to help on this issue. Like me, he will be encouraged by the latest figures, which show a 9% fall nationally in statutory homelessness acceptances in the past year.

First-time Buyers

17. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Help to Buy scheme and the reduction in stamp duty on the number of homes purchased by first-time buyers. [906589]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): A total of 128,317 first-time buyer households have purchased a home through a Help to Buy equity loan from its launch in April 2013 to December 2017. Some 69,000 first-time buyers have benefited from stamp duty relief between its introduction in the autumn Budget 2017 and the end of March 2018.

Robert Courts: One of the greatest concerns raised by young people in West Oxfordshire is whether they will ever be able to afford a home in their town or village. I welcome the stamp duty cuts, which have helped people across the country. Can the Minister tell us how many have benefited from our changes?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is well known for his championing of young people and their causes, particularly in his constituency, and he is right to point out that this move will benefit young people in particular. The stamp duty relief will help 95% of first-time buyers who pay it—that will be more than 1 million households over the next five years. Between the relief's introduction and the end of March, 69,000 first-time buyers have already benefited. I would also point out that we are at an 11-year high in the number of first-time buyers, which stands at 363,000.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am keen to get through the Order Paper today. I call Nigel Huddleston.

Midlands Engine

19. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to deliver economic growth through the midlands engine. [906591]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): A thriving midlands is essential to our economic success. The Government are committed to delivering the midlands engine strategy, including through £392 million for local growth projects to create more jobs and prosperity, and a £20 million midlands skills package.

Nigel Huddleston: Does the Minister agree that infrastructure investment is key to the success of the midlands engine? Will he therefore tell me what conversations he is having with the Department for Transport to improve key arteries such as the A46?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. I am having a number of conversations across government about the delivery of that infrastructure. He highlights the A46 corridor. Initial work has shown that 700,000 jobs could be created by improvements. The case for individual schemes on the route is being developed.

Home Ownership

20. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of (a) trends in the level of home ownership since 2010 and (b) the opportunities available for council and social housing tenants who wish to buy their homes. [906592]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Home ownership has been stable over the past four years at about 63%. The right to buy has helped more than 86,000 council tenants into home ownership since 2012, under the reinvigorated scheme. This summer we launch a major pilot of the voluntary right to buy for housing association tenants.

Diana Johnson: Since 2010, we have seen home ownership levels fall to a 30-year low, while homelessness has doubled. If we want to end this dual failure to meet housing need and aspiration, and put choice in the hands of the many, not the few, should we not invest in building and renovating enough council and affordable homes to rent and buy, without taking away the rights that council tenants' have had for 38 years under the right to buy scheme?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is definitely right to say that the solution to everybody's housing problems is to build more homes—as many as we can—across those parts of the country that need it.

Private Landlords Regulator

22. **Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): Whether he plans to introduce a regulator of private landlords; and if he will make statement. [906594]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): We are determined to crack down on the small number of rogue landlords—that includes banning the most serious offenders from letting properties. The database of rogue landlords and property agents supports local authority enforcement action. We have committed to requiring private landlords to join a mandatory redress scheme.

Phil Wilson: I have an indirect interest in this question, as my wife is a private landlord. Selective licensing schemes are good as far as they go, but a side effect is that they force bad landlords elsewhere. Therefore, whether we have a regulator or not, the answer, as outlined in my private Member's Bill, is a national register of private landlords and licensing scheme to ensure that they provide the good-quality homes that people deserve. I know from working with Ron Hogg, Durham's police and crime commissioner, of the effect that rogue private landlords have on local communities. Will the Secretary of State meet us both to discuss the need for a more robust approach to registration and licensing, both locally and nationally?

Kit Malthouse: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issues he raises, but I carefully suggest to him that this House has to strike a balance between bureaucracy and regulation—the two are often very different.

Topical Questions

T1. [906595] **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government are taking steps for a more inclusive economy and society, and promoting local growth. With that in mind, we have today announced our attention to lay legislation to make the £600 million North of Tyne devolution deal a reality.

Following significant and sustained progress, I can also confirm to the House that I am minded to remove commissioners from Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and hand back remaining executive functions. That follows positive reports from the commissioners and important steps forward in delivering children's services.

Tonight, I will address the Tell MAMA parliamentary reception, where I will underline that racism and xenophobia, in whatever form, have no place in our society and should be confronted in the strongest terms.

Mary Robinson: Will the Secretary of State consider how the sale of public sector land could be used to get homes built more quickly?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend rightly raises the issue of releasing public sector land, which is a priority for this Government. The land for homes programme aims to release centrally held land for 160,000 homes over the coming years. We are also supporting local authorities to release land for a further 160,000 homes.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): We have all seen the shocking impact of police cuts and rising crime, but that has to be put together with real-terms cuts of 59% to crime reduction, 85% to community safety and 33% to CCTV monitoring, plus very deep cuts to youth services and community development. Does the Secretary of State believe that any of those cuts have had an impact on the increase in crime and antisocial behaviour?

James Brokenshire: Yet again, Labour fails to understand the reason why we have had to make savings—because of its public service delivery failures when in government. Steps such as this Government's troubled families programme are about preventive work, as we heard earlier, and they are having an impact on our communities.

T2. [906596] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to champion housing construction sector innovation across the United Kingdom, and will he meet me to discuss opportunities to champion such innovation through city deals in Scotland?

James Brokenshire: I am certainly willing to meet my hon. Friend, who is right to champion innovative ways in which we can build and innovative techniques within the construction sector. That is why we have the £3 billion home building fund to provide loan finance to builders

using those methods, as well as our modern methods of construction working group looking at ways in which that can be advanced.

T4. [906598] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just talked about councils' role in prevention. Given that they are now responsible for public health and the Local Government Association claims that public health cuts of £600 million mean that they are unable to deal with unforeseen outbreaks of sexually transmitted diseases, is he concerned that we have the highest rates of syphilis since the end of the second world war, and strains of gonorrhoea that are resistant to treatment?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting those particular cases, the details of which I am not intimately familiar with. I would be happy to look into the matter. She is absolutely right to highlight the important role that local authorities play in prevention, particularly when it comes to public health. As we approach the spending review and the fair funding review, I would be delighted to talk to her to see how we can best capture the role that local authorities play in delivering that.

T3. [906597] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is extremely good news that the Government have allocated a record amount of funding for new housing in London. Could my right hon. Friend then explain to the House why it is that new housing starts are going up in England but, in London, they are going down?

James Brokenshire: The Government are clear that the Mayor can and should do more to increase housing delivery and it is vital that the new London plan provides the strategic framework to achieve that. The Mayor must show strong and proactive leadership and take responsibility for creating the right conditions for development, but it is also about Labour councils in London. It is notable that, in Haringey, it appears that the council has put left-wing ideology in the way of 6,400 more homes. It is really concerning that Labour appears to be putting politics ahead of people.

T6. [906600] **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): In tune with the comments by the Housing Minister during these questions that he thinks that the answer to the housing crisis is to build more homes, can he tell the House whether he will be accepting my amendment to the national planning policy framework to build on ungreen green-belt land within 10 minutes of a London train station?

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I am hesitant to anticipate the release of the new planning framework that will be released, hopefully, shortly, but the hon. Lady will know that there is significant commitment by this Government to the green belt and, when that plan emerges, I will be more than happy to have a conversation with her about her plans.

T5. [906599] **Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): Given that some planning inspectors' reports are inadvertently undermining opportunities for people who want to build their own homes, despite new statutory

obligations under the Self-Build and Custom House-Building Act 2015, will the Secretary of State ensure that inspectors pay sufficient regard to the legislation and enable the right to build taskforce to offer training so that inspectors are more familiar with the law in this new area?

James Brokenshire: I am very happy to look into the point that my hon. Friend has raised. I know that his commitment to self-build is second to none. We believe strongly in, and are committed to, self and custom house building, and I will certainly look into the issues that he has highlighted to the House today.

T7. [906601] **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): Today, the Met Office with Public Health England has issued a level 3 amber heat health alert. The Environmental Audit Committee has been holding an inquiry into heatwaves and we have heard that it is children, older people who live alone and those with heart, lung and kidney conditions who are at the highest risk of illness and death during this hot weather. However, there are currently no building regulations to prevent new homes, hospitals and schools from overheating. What plans does the Secretary of State have to change building regulations and the national planning framework so that we ensure that the nation's buildings and cities are resilient to warmer summer temperatures?

James Brokenshire: I will certainly look into the point that the hon. Lady has raised. We have obviously published some guidance around some of the building regulations and a revised simplified version of some part of that in the last week, but I will certainly reflect further on the point that she has raised.

T10. [906604] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the effect of the Help to Buy scheme and stamp duty relief on the number of first-time buyers in Northamptonshire?

Kit Malthouse: The Help to Buy equity loan scheme has helped more than 3,000 buyers in Northamptonshire, a part of which my hon. Friend ably represents, to purchase their first home. The action undertaken by this Government has led to an 11-year annual high in the number of first-time buyers across the UK.

T8. [906602] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the effect on the long-term financial viability of councils of the use of reserves to fund adult social care?

Rishi Sunak: It is important that each local council makes those decisions itself. It was the responsibility of the statutory officer to decide on the appropriate level of reserves. I am pleased to see that, in the hon. Gentleman's own local authority, non-ring-fenced reserves are up 30% in the past six years. I am sure that his council will use those reserves prudently as required.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what progress has been made to select sites for HS2 garden villages in the east midlands, especially around the Toton hub?

James Brokenshire: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we will publish a prospectus in the summer inviting ambitious, locally supported proposals for high-quality new garden communities at scale. We are keen to assist as many as we can in locations where there is sufficient demand for housing, and I look forward to continuing that conversation with her and others.

T9. [906603] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all social and private new-builds are as energy efficient as is practicable and what grants are there to help developers to achieve those goals?

James Brokenshire: The Government intend to consult on strengthening building regulations' energy efficiency requirements where it is cost-effective, affordable, safe and practical to do so. We do not provide energy efficiency grants. Developers should bear the costs, which is why we need to ensure that the proposals are cost-effective and do not compromise housing viability.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Would Ministers look into the considerable length of time nationally-set local government officer disciplinary procedures are taking, so that they can be reviewed and fairness can be appropriately balanced with the cost to local council tax payers?

James Brokenshire: I recognise my hon. Friend's point and I will certainly look into these matters. I could write to her with some of the details, if that would be helpful.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): In the last year, just 12% of homes delivered by housing associations—the very organisations set up to deliver affordable homes—were built for social rent. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the social housing Green Paper will acknowledge that the combination of viability assessments and a completely broken definition of affordability is letting down communities across the country that desperately need new social homes to rent?

James Brokenshire: I do expect the social housing Green Paper to be wide-ranging and to deal not simply with issues of supply, but with issues of stigma for those living in social housing; I expect it to confront that very firmly. I remind the hon. Lady that we have delivered more council housing than in 13 years of a Labour Government, and we are committed to all forms of tenure.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The recent conclusion of the Greater Grimsby town deal was a welcome boost to the economy in Cleethorpes and Grimsby. A further boost could be provided if a way could be found to revive the failed Greater Lincolnshire devolution deal. Will the Secretary of State meet me and fellow Lincolnshire MPs to discuss a way forward?

James Brokenshire: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we can support local growth in Lincolnshire. As I have highlighted, this is a priority for the Government. I look forward to talking to my hon. Friend and other colleagues.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, to discuss the impact and implications of his Department's integration strategy for refugees?

James Brokenshire: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the issue of the integration strategy. As she knows, we have been consulting on this over recent weeks, and I am considering next steps in that regard. If there are specific issues that she wishes to flag in relation to refugees, I will be pleased to hear them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As the Secretary of State and the Minister for Housing know, I have requested that they call in a planning application passed by Bradford Council to build 500 houses on the green belt in Burley in Wharfedale in my constituency. Since then, Bradford Council has accepted that it does not need to build as many houses as it first thought and has actually allowed a building development in Bradford city centre that was earmarked for hundreds of houses to be turned into a car park, so will the Secretary of State agree that there is now clearly not an exceptional case to build those houses on the green belt and will he call in this application? When can my constituents expect a response?

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend will know, it is difficult for me to comment on issues in respect of individual planning applications because of the quasi-judicial function of Ministers, but I note his comments.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Half of the residents made homeless in the Grenfell Tower fire are still in temporary accommodation. Is the Secretary of State embarrassed by that? If he is not, why did he sneak out at the end of last week two pages of waffle on Grenfell as a written ministerial statement, instead of making an oral statement to the House when his predecessor said that we would be kept updated in that way?

James Brokenshire: We have sought to update the House on a regular basis on the progress in seeing that those involved in the Grenfell Tower disaster are rehoused. Two hundred households have accepted temporary or permanent accommodation, and I can say that 97 households have now moved into permanent accommodation. I want to see this speeded up and I want to see progress being made, because it is important that those families are in permanent accommodation and the homes that they deserve.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Despite a new road being built between Bexhill and Hastings, in part to house new developments, the developers have failed to build any of the houses. What more can the Government do to incentivise developers, perhaps by charging them council tax from the time that a planning application is delivered, and allowing local authorities to compulsorily purchase land and build on it themselves if developers will not?

Kit Malthouse: I commend my hon. Friend for the urgency with which he requires more housing in his constituency, which I know his constituents will appreciate. He is right that one of the issues that this country faces is that the structures that we have put in place have

created more of a land speculation industry than a house building industry. We will be looking at a number of solutions to address that problem.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): My local authority, Westminster, has indicated that it would rather give up £23 million from mayoral funding than hold a ballot on a scheme in Church Street that involves the demolition of 700 homes. Will the Minister have a word with the council and encourage it to involve and consult its communities on major regeneration schemes?

Kit Malthouse: I have already been in communication with the leader of Westminster City Council about this issue, which is alarming. I understand that there is a dispute about whether or when a ballot was held. I understand that, with regard to the Church Street regeneration, a ballot has been held in the past. One has to wonder why the Mayor would seek to withhold £23 million from one of the most deprived areas of the city that requires this regeneration.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Two recent planning appeals were won in my constituency on the grounds that planning permission should not be given

“where a planning application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan”.

Will the Minister ensure that this is the rule for the future?

Kit Malthouse: Like my hon. Friend, I bear the scars of just such a number of decisions. In particular, there was a decision in my constituency—in Oakley, in my patch—where the planning inspector allowed a development seven days prior to the referendum on a neighbourhood plan. I am determined, however long I am given in this job, to make sure that neighbourhood plans are landed extremely well and are adopted by as much of the country as possible, and that local people know they can rely on them to make sure that planning is done with them and not to them.

Mr Speaker: I know that the shadow Secretary of State wanted to raise a point of order, which he has promised to do with commendable brevity.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have just had over an hour of oral questions on the day before the long summer recess, yet we have had no update from the Secretary of State on a number of promises he made about when important policy announcements would be made. On 9 May, he said:

“The Government will bring forward a Rough Sleeping Strategy in July”.

It has not been published. On 11 June, he said:

“we’ll be publishing a Social Housing Green Paper by recess.”

It has not been published. On 9 July, he said that he would come forward with the finalised national planning policy framework before the summer recess. It has not been published. What assistance can you give me and the House to make sure that, when promises are made by Ministers, they are honoured, and that important policy announcements are not dribbled out over the recess when this House is not sitting and cannot scrutinise them?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his attempted point of order. I do not wish to treat it with levity because it is a matter of the utmost importance. He seeks assistance from me and asks what I can do. I suppose I ought to begin by saying what I cannot do. I cannot delay the summer recess; the summer recess will be a fact. It is not entirely without precedent for Ministers to issue policy announcements during periods of recess. The Secretary of State is in his place and will have heard with crystal clarity what the right hon. Gentleman said. If the Secretary of State wants to give any earnest of his good intentions in this matter, he can do so, but alternatively he can remain—and apparently is remaining—glued to his seat, from which the right hon. Gentleman, Sherlock Holmes-style, must make his own deductions.

Foreign Fighters and the Death Penalty

3.43 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to make a statement on the Government's policy on the rendition of UK citizens who may be subject to capital punishment.

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government take their responsibility to protect the public seriously. We have been consistently clear, where there is evidence that crimes have been committed, that foreign fighters, for example, should be brought to justice in accordance with due legal process regardless of their nationality. The specific process followed will always be dependent on the individual circumstances of the case.

The case of Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh is ongoing and obviously sensitive. In handling this case, the Government and Ministers have complied with the European convention on human rights and with due process, and we must be mindful to protect the integrity of the criminal investigation. In this instance, and after carefully considered advice, the Government took the rare decision not to require assurances in this case. It would be inappropriate to comment further on that specific case. Foreign fighters detained in Syria could be released from detention without facing justice. We have been working closely with international partners to ensure that they face justice for any crimes they have committed.

I can provide little further detail to the House beyond what the Government have already outlined in previous statements, but I can reassure the House that our long-standing position on the use of the death penalty has not changed. The UK has a long-standing policy of opposing the death penalty as a matter of principle regardless of nationality and we act compatibly with the European convention on human rights. In accordance with the Government's overseas, security and justice assistance guidance, we have taken into account human rights considerations. The OSJA provides that where there are strong reasons not to seek death penalty assurances,

"Ministers should be consulted to determine whether, given the specific circumstances of the case, we should nevertheless provide assistance."

On Guantanamo Bay, again our position has not changed. The UK Government's long-standing position is that the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay should close. Where we share evidence with the US, it must be for the express purpose of progressing a criminal prosecution, and we have made that clear to the United States. We have planned and prepared for the risk posed by British nationals returning to the UK as Daesh is defeated in Iraq and Syria, and we are using a range of tools to disrupt and diminish that threat in order to keep the public safe. Each case is considered individually to determine which action or power is most appropriate.

I cannot say more about individual cases in this circumstance, but the Government have set out the extent to which these tools have been used in our annual transparency report. We will also be introducing new offences in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security

Bill, which is being debated by parliamentary colleagues and which will strengthen our terrorism legislation to increase our ability to prosecute returning foreign fighters.

Ms Abbott: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

The whole House is united in condemning terrorism and the work of ISIS, and anyone found guilty of terrorism should face the full force of the law, but in an increasingly dangerous and unstable world, one of our strengths as a country is our willingness to stand up unflinchingly for human rights. It is a key aspect of our soft power. The Minister will therefore understand the widespread concern that the Government seem willing to abandon their long-standing, principled opposition to the death penalty in this case.

Ministers claim that the decision in this case does not reflect a change in our policy on assistance in US death penalty cases generally or the UK Government's stance on the global abolition of the death penalty, but I put it to Ministers that they cannot be a little bit in favour of the death penalty. Either we offer consistent opposition, or we do not. So let me remind the Minister: capital punishment is not the law of this country; we do not extradite people to countries where it is potentially a sentence for the crime; the death penalty is outlawed under the Human Rights Act 1998; and it is in breach of the European convention on human rights.

Successive Governments have always sought assurances that those who face justice in other countries will not face the death penalty. Extradition is expressly prohibited where the subject could face the death penalty under the Extradition Act 2003. The UK is a signatory to the United Nations convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and extraordinary rendition is unlawful under this convention, but in his letter to the US Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, of 22 June, the Home Secretary reportedly wrote:

"I am of the view that there are strong reasons for not requiring a death penalty assurance in this specific case, so no such assurances will be sought."

Can the Minister explain why the Home Secretary did not come to Parliament to disclose this change of policy, what his strong reasons are, what advice he has taken, whether the Law Officers have been consulted, what assessment has been made of the impact of extradition arrangements with third countries where capital punishment is outlawed and what steps he has taken to ensure there has been no torture in this case, unlike in the more than 200 cases of abuse of detainees identified by the Intelligence and Security Committee in its report of 28 June?

The Minister will be aware that the mother of one of the cell's victims has said that she is "very against" the use of the death penalty. Diane Foley said:

"I think that you just make them martyrs in their twisted ideology...I would like them held accountable by being sent to prison for the rest of their lives. That would be my preference."

This decision to abandon our principled opposition to the death penalty is abhorrent and shameful, and I call on Ministers, even at this late stage, to reverse the decision.

Mr Wallace: I have listened carefully to the right hon. Lady's statement, and I agree with much of what she said. It is not a matter of extradition, as she will know if

she has read the news reports; it is a matter of whether we were going to accept a request by the United States to share evidence on individuals not within the United Kingdom and not within the European Union, but abroad. No one is extraditing anyone in this country, and we are not talking about UK citizens, so the premise of her question in the first place is, I am afraid, skewed.

However, I will try to answer the questions the right hon. Lady has put to the House. First, she asked why the Home Secretary did not come to the House to announce a change in policy. That is because he has not changed the policy of the United Kingdom Government. The overseas security and justice assistance guidance clearly states

“that there will be cases where, as an exception to the general policy and taking into account the specific circumstances, Ministers can lawfully decide that assistance should be provided in the absence of adequate assurances”.

That has been the policy for many, many years. All Ministers have done is consider, in response to a request from one of our allies to seek evidence on individuals detained elsewhere, whether we should share that evidence and whether we should seek assurances in doing so.

I notice that the right hon. Lady mentioned Mrs Foley. I heard that interview this morning, too, and Mrs Foley also said that she thought it was right that these people face justice in US courts. Who are we to deny that to those victims in the United States, if the United Kingdom holds some of the evidence that may make it possible? The United States has the rule of law and due process, as do we in this country. In our many mutual legal assistance requests—there are more than 8,000 a year among countries and police forces around the world—we do it on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the law. Throughout the process, other Ministers and I consulted lawyers. We constantly checked with existing guidance and the policy.

We should not forget that the crimes we are talking about involve the beheading, and videoing of the beheading, of dozens of innocent people by one of the most abhorrent organisations walking this earth. It would be bizarre to say that if we were unable to prosecute them in this country, we should simply let them be free to roam around the United Kingdom so as not to upset the right hon. Lady. Not to share our evidence with the United States would be simply bizarre and would not be justice for the victims.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Daesh/ISIL is a proscribed organisation still committed to waging acts of terrorism against this country. On the wider point, if it is still too difficult to prosecute here at home those who have gone to work for or to assist Daesh/ISIL abroad, and if that is because of some obligation under the European convention on human rights, is it not time to take back control?

Mr Wallace: I hear my right hon. Friend. I do not believe it is necessary or right to withdraw from the European convention on human rights. I believe it is incredibly important that we all follow the rule of law—both our obligations under the ECHR and United Kingdom law—and that is what we have done in this case. Where we have gaps in our statute book, we are seeking to fill them. The Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill is passing through this House to make it

easier to prosecute and to ensure we are able to do so, and it includes changes to extraterritorial legislation so that our offences reach such places. In this case, however, it was decided—because of the horrendous crimes being alleged, with victims on both sides of the Atlantic—that it was important to seek the most appropriate jurisdiction. When the request came in for sharing the evidence, this Government took the decision, rare as it is, to share that evidence without seeking assurances.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It goes without saying that we all condemn terrorism and that we all believe terrorists should be brought to justice, and it really is not good enough for the Minister to imply that any of us in the House is against terrorists being brought to justice. The issue is why and in what circumstances the UK Government are departing from their long-standing policy of opposing the death penalty “in all circumstances”. In using those words, I am reading from the UK Government’s death penalty strategy. Curiously, it was not of course renewed when it was due for renewal in 2016, so will the Minister tell us when it will be renewed?

Not only Members of Parliament but the public are getting increasingly frustrated by the failure of Ministers in this Government to answer questions at the Dispatch Box. I will give him another chance: what are the strong reasons that the Home Secretary says exist for departing from the policy? I have another question for him: what requests were made by the Trump Administration with regard to the waiver of our long-standing policy? Was the decision to waive our long-standing policy on the death penalty signed off by the Prime Minister, and will the Minister tell us whether the waiver will happen only in relation to the United States, or will it happen in relation to other countries and allies, such as Saudi Arabia?

Mr Wallace: The hon. and learned Lady is a wise and knowledgeable barrister in her own right, and she will know that coming to this House to discuss individual cases that are subject to ongoing investigations does two things: it puts the investigation and the potential to bring charges at risk; and it could undermine the likelihood of those individuals getting a fair trial if we comment on it. I am sure that she, as a student of justice, would not wish that to happen. I will therefore not comment further on the cases involving these individuals. As we have said, it is incredibly rare in the first place that such issues are brought to the House or discussed in it.

There was no request from the US Administration for us to vary our assurances. That decision was taken within the United Kingdom by Ministers, and the Prime Minister was aware of that decision.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend, who is a distinguished former soldier, would have shot these two people had he engaged them on the battlefield, but these are not comparable circumstances and there are important and long-standing conventions in play. Will he bear in mind that, on human rights, we cannot distinguish between good and bad people? Human rights are indivisible and belong to everybody.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, I would not just have shot such people on the battlefield; I would have acted within the law and with

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the powers I was granted by Parliament and by the Government of the day, as he and I did under emergency deployment. We acted within the law, and just being a soldier on the battlefield did not exempt us from the law or human rights obligations.

I totally agree with human rights, and that is why Ministers have acted in line with our legal obligations and, indeed, taken advice in relation to the European convention on human rights. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) mentioned rendition, but no one is rendering. The UK Government fundamentally oppose rendition and will continue to do so.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The whole House would agree that those who commit barbaric crimes should be locked away for the rest of their lives, but what the Minister has said is a contradiction of the long-standing abolition of the death penalty strategy—No. 10 have reaffirmed these words today—which says:

“It is the longstanding policy of the UK to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle.”

In this case, the Home Secretary seems to have unilaterally ripped up those principles on a Friday afternoon in the summer. What does the Minister think “principle” and “all circumstances” mean if somehow these circumstances are not “all circumstances”? Is he not actually saying that principles mean nothing to the UK Government any more?

Mr Wallace: No, I am not saying that, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did not rip up anything unilaterally. My right hon. Friend followed the advice, as did other Ministers, of the OSJA—the guidance that has been in existence for very many years—which does allow Ministers to sometimes seek the ability to share evidence where there is an absence of assurances. That is what the OSJA has done, as part of the guidance for the Government, and it has been there for many years.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The UK is a proud member of the Council of Europe, which has made the abolition of capital punishment one of its main priorities. It has been fighting for 30 years to outlaw the death penalty, and it now wishes to extend that to countries with observer status at the Council of Europe, including Japan and the United States of America. Will the Minister confirm that he will support that policy of the Council of Europe and say whether he is convinced that the actions relating to these two men are compatible with our membership of the Council of Europe and the priorities we put on its activities?

Mr Wallace: In answer to my right hon. Friend, yes and yes.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister just referred, in quoting the code, to the absence of assurances. What the Home Secretary wrote in the letter to the US Attorney General was that he was not even going to seek assurances. Therefore, the question that has been asked by many Members still holds: why have the Government decided to breach a long-standing policy

against the death penalty in all circumstances in this case? We all want these individuals, if there is evidence, to face justice, but it is precisely because of the barbaric nature of the crimes of which they are accused that we as a country have to show that we are better than them and what they did. That is why there is so much unhappiness, I suspect in many parts of the House, about what the Home Secretary has done.

Mr Wallace: I am not going to take a lecture about being better from a right hon. Gentleman who sat in a Government when people were being rendered from Libya and across to Libya. I think that is outrageous. As I have said to other Opposition Members, I cannot go into the exact details of this case because it is currently under investigation and to do so would risk undermining the operation. The OSJA is the guidance that Ministers have followed in the past and will follow in future. That is absolutely the case.

The right hon. Gentleman asks questions about the semantics of the letter and whether we asked or did not ask. We have said in this case that it is the judgment of Ministers, based on the operation, the investigation and the evidence before us, that we will not seek assurances in this matter.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It was my understanding that it was a policy decision of the United Kingdom Government—which I do not criticise in any way—that we would not seek the return of these two individuals to the United Kingdom for public interest reasons, and indeed have deprived them of their UK nationality. However, is it not the case that to move on from there to facilitate their going to the United States to face trial for capital offences is a major departure from normal policy, if we are doing so by providing evidence under a request for mutual legal assistance? When was the last time that we departed from these principles—I am not aware of this ever having happened before—and why have we not asked for an assurance when it would be perfectly proper to do so? Those are the two key questions, and until they are answered, I have to say to my right hon. Friend that this issue will continue to haunt the Government.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. and learned Friend, having produced plenty of advices in his previous role as Attorney General to Her Majesty’s Government, will recognise the challenges that Ministers face in balancing the need for making the decision about trial—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members chunter from a sedentary position. The reality, as my right hon. and learned Friend said, is that we all desire these people to face trial. If Ministers are faced with the prospect of not being able to try them in the United Kingdom but an ally seeks evidence that could lead to them being tried, Ministers have an obligation to the citizens of this country to balance that request and the likelihood of trial with the extent to which they will seek assurances, if we think that is important for keeping people safe in the United Kingdom. In this case, Ministers have made the decision that we are not going to seek assurances, because we do not think we have the evidence here to try them in the United Kingdom and we hope that a trial will be carried out in the United States. That is the balance. My right hon. and learned Friend may disagree with the balance we have chosen to take, but that is the

responsibility of the Ministers holding the onerous task of trying to keep us safe, while balancing that with human rights.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Why did Ministers not seek death penalty assurances?

Mr Wallace: Because we are interested in seeking criminal justice in line with international law and our law. Where we feel the assurance might get in the way of being able to do that—[*Interruption.*] No, no; if the right hon. Gentleman faced the choice of either having to see these people go free and potentially wander around his constituency or go to trial, he might take a different view. In this case, Ministers looked at the request before them and, acting lawfully and in line with the OSJA, chose to take that decision.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend, at the beginning, stated Government policy. I agree with the Government policy, and I am glad that the Government do as well. Will the Minister confirm that people accused of murdering British nationals can be tried in this country if there is evidence, even if they are not UK nationals?

Mr Wallace: Yes. Citizenship is not a factor. If we have the evidence and we can try them, we will. However, the point was made earlier about rendition and so on. It is one thing to share evidence with an ally or international partner, but the question arises about how you bring them back. The individuals we are talking about, and foreign fighters in general, are currently being held by non-state actors in Syria. How those people are brought back is a big challenge for all European states—and indeed the United States.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Government have quite rightly tried over the past year to persuade China, Russia and Pakistan to suspend the death penalty. Is that not going to look like arrant hypocrisy if we adopt a different standard when it applies to the United States of America's request? Will the Minister now please answer—if he does not have the detail now, will he write to all of us?—the question that the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) asked: when did the Government last choose not to seek such assurances?

Mr Wallace: In my time as Security Minister, they have not. I will write to hon. Members and let them know on how many occasions we have done that. It will be for their summer reading.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Amid this whole debate, is it not absolutely essential that the perpetrators of these crimes should be brought to justice and punishment? That is the most important issue in all of this. Does the Minister not agree with that?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right. There are countries around the world that we recognise have due process, the rule of law, separation of powers and values we agree with. That is why we share intelligence with some of those powers and why, in the 8,000 mutual legal assistance requests a year, we often share evidence that leads to prosecutions in court. We will always do

that where we think it is about seeking justice and the best place for that justice to be delivered. In this case, we felt the best place was the United States of America.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Everybody in this House agrees that the crimes being talked about are abhorrent and that there is a desperate need for justice, but no straw man should conceal the fact that that should never come at the loss of our principled opposition to the death penalty. If the Minister is so confident that this is the correct decision, will he publish the legal advice that he and other Ministers have had that confirms they do not even need to ask the question for this country? On that point, he says that the Prime Minister is aware of this decision. Does she agree?

Mr Wallace: On the first point, the hon. Lady will know that it has been the policy of numerous successive Governments not to publish legal advice. On the second point, the Prime Minister was aware of the decision. The decision was made between the Home Office and the Foreign Office, and she agrees.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I remind my right hon. Friend that the United States shares English law with us. A particularly ridiculous point was made by the SNP spokesman, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), when she mentioned Saudi Arabia, which patently does not. I also tell the House that there are widespread reports in the press that these people were responsible for beheading 27 western hostages with a serrated knife. If the evidence is not available in the United Kingdom but is available in the United States, I tell my right hon. Friend that it is absolutely right that they be tried there, because the last thing we want is these people being tried here, and then, through a lack of evidence, being found innocent and allowed to roam free in this country.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. At the end of the day, this is about the security of our country and about justice being delivered where that can be done. For all the stories about the United States of America, it has a robust judicial system, a lot of which is based on English law, and for that reason we should not fear that sharing evidence with the United States is somehow comparable with sharing it with some other states that have been mentioned, or indeed that justice will not be done and that these people will not be given a fair trial if a trial is to happen. That is why I have said repeatedly from the Dispatch Box that I cannot comment in too much detail about these individuals.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The point about a principled opposition to capital punishment is that it exists in all circumstances—not just in areas where there might be a miscarriage of justice, but in the most hideous, heinous crimes of the kind we are describing, where very clear evidence is available. Will the Government tell the House whether, when they spoke to the American authorities, the American authorities told them that no such assurances would be given if the Government sought them?

Mr Wallace: In this particular case, much of the potential for a trial was based on a comparison of the United States' statute book and ours, and whether

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the US had the suite of offences that would achieve a conviction and we did not. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), that is why we are bringing in some new offences in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill, which is currently going through the House.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the great shames in this is that we have not brought a charge of betrayal against these people? Fundamentally, what they have done is not just to bring violence against people in Syria but to undermine community cohesion in this country. That betrayal against our own state—that sense of wrong done to the citizens of this country—is a crime in itself and should be tried as one.

Mr Wallace: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that throughout the whole process of this and many other cases that we have to make decisions on, we try to keep in balance the security of the nation from people who pose such a threat, whether they betray our values or betray their nation. We do that all the time and work incredibly hard to try to make sure that where we achieve justice, we do not do it by cutting corners and breaking international law, which we have seen happen in this House previously. The consequences that flowed from that are significant, which is why I can say, and said earlier, that the Government's position on Guantanamo Bay is not as was reported in the media this morning. We absolutely oppose its existence. We wish it to be closed down and we would not, and will not, share information with the United States if individuals were going to end up in Guantanamo Bay.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am baffled as to which of the many questions running through my head to ask. I could ask why the Minister had no answer for the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), because surely precedent is extremely important in this case. The Minister does not even seem to know when the country last made such a serious decision not to seek reassurances. May I press him to commit himself to finding out those reasons, and to expressing at least some understanding of why it baffles so many of us, on both sides of the House, that he will not seek those reassurances in this case, given that he has just said that he would have done so if there had been the possibility of a prisoner's going to Guantanamo? It makes no sense.

Mr Wallace: First, I have given that commitment. I will find out how many times this has been used in the past, and, as I have said, I will write to Members. As for the seriousness, the reason the Government oppose Guantanamo Bay—as, indeed, do the Opposition Front Benchers—is that it is not an institution that follows due process. It is set outside the bounds of international law. It is not in compliance with nearly everything that this country stands for. That is very different from the justice system of the United States.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Like, I suspect, the majority of my constituents and those in the country as a whole, I am perfectly comfortable with the position of the Home Secretary. These people are not United

Kingdom citizens, and they are owed nothing by this Government. May I urge my right hon. Friend to ensure that the unrepresentative grandstanding that we have seen from some today will not knock the Government off its course of assisting the United States in the prosecution of these murderous terrorist scum?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right to point out that it is our constituents who face the consequences of not getting this right. The last thing on my mind at night and the first thing on my mind when I wake up in the morning is the balancing of risk—the balance between people who we know pose a risk, trying to plot to bomb us and kill us every single day; and the needs of my constituents and the constituents of the United Kingdom. The duty of Ministers is to balance that risk, and to try to get that balance right.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Like other Members in all parts of the House, I am proud of the role that successive UK Governments of all political persuasions have played in fighting against the death penalty. Is there any evidence that the Minister can give to challenge the assertion quoted in *The Times* this morning, from a “ministerial source”, that the Home Secretary's decision

“is contrary to all government policy, and negates over a decade's unequivocal FCO statements and DFID programme spending principles”?

Mr Wallace: I do not think that I need to guide the right hon. Gentleman not to quote from a ministerial source on any day of the week, and I would advise any colleagues against doing so. That ministerial source, whoever it may be, is wrong.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is a vital strategic priority of our Government to work as closely as possible with the United States on a range of national security issues, and to assist us in our fight against international terrorism and extremism to help to keep our people safe?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend has made an important point. Every week, the United States and our European allies share evidence and intelligence that keep us safe. They are our friends in this ever-unstable world. It is incredibly important that we stay close to all our allies and continue in partnership both to prosecute people where they pose a threat—if it is here, then here, but if it is not, elsewhere, in the countries that share our values—and to share intelligence in order to make sure that all of us keep safe.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): In the case of Abu Qatada, the Prime Minister, in her former guise, secured a special guarantee that evidence gathered through torture would not be used against him. Whatever these people are accused of, will the Minister give the House an assurance that there are the same guarantees for Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh?

Mr Wallace: On the basis of all the evidence that the United Kingdom holds, we would not hold evidence that we knew resulted directly or indirectly from torture; nor would we share that evidence if we had it.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Having taken the mood of the House this afternoon, will my right hon. and gallant Friend ask our right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to reconsider the action that he has taken, given the specifics of this case?

Mr Wallace: No.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am glad that the Minister intends to write to the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) to answer his question, but can he confirm, as he was unable to answer today, that no precedent played any part in the decision made in this case?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is correct. As I said in answer to a question from the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), all cases are taken on a case-by-case basis, and that will be the case in the future as well.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the key human right in this case is access to a full and fair trial, and that the UK Government must do everything they can to make sure that is possible? If UK agencies and authorities were to withhold evidence they have in their possession, it would put that fundamentally at risk?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right that it is very important that anyone detained on suspicion of being a foreign fighter faces a full and fair trial in accordance with our values and laws and international law, and that is what we are trying to achieve.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Last week the Foreign Office confirmed the Government's position that the death penalty undermines human dignity and that opposing it was in all circumstances a matter of principle. So that confirms what I think the Minister has said, which is that this is an individual decision by this Home Secretary. But the only reason the Minister seems to have given for why the assurance was not sought is that that would not facilitate trial in the United States, so has the US imposed a condition that that assurance is not sought in this case?

Mr Wallace: No, I did not say that. This is a Foreign Office-Home Office-led decision of the two Ministers, so quoting from the Foreign Office I would say that the true guidance for the policy is in line with the OSJA guidance.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): One of the biggest challenges we face today as a society is countering violent extremism. What is my right hon. Friend's Department doing to strengthen the sentencing framework for terrorism-related offences?

Mr Wallace: The new Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill increases some of the maximum sentences available. On the wider area of my hon. Friend's point about prevention, that is why we embrace and promote the Prevent policy in Contest.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): These terrorists sneaked out of the UK to join a bunch of murderers who were at war with this country, and they then publicly boasted about beheading and torturing innocent hostages. Does the Minister not agree that it would be a betrayal of their victims and of this country if he did

not supply information to the United States which would enable these people to be brought to justice and held to account, and that our only concern should be that that is what happens and that the US courts hand out whatever sentence they believe these people deserve?

Mr Wallace: It is of course a general policy and principle that we will do what we can to help acquire or share evidence with our allies to bring to justice people who have perpetrated violence through terrorism or any other offence against citizens, whether our citizens or those of other countries. I will not talk about this individual case and the United States, but the reality is that we should, of course, work to make sure that people face justice, but that justice must be in line with international law and our values, and with the due process that should be awarded to people who are innocent until proven guilty.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that any trial under any circumstance should always be fair and transparent because the relatives and friends of the victims deserve the best?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Often in all of this—and, indeed, often in the media reporting—people forget that there are victims. The right place for the victims to see what is going on and understand the full picture is at a trial. That is why sometimes leaks in the media do not help anyone. Victims can certainly be upset when all these details come out in trials, and that is what we are trying to help by the sharing of evidence with the United States.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): A number of us mourned the death this month of Cardinal Tauran, who told us that the conflict with radical Islam would be an intergenerational struggle that would require education, dialogue and, yes, force. Does the Minister not agree that facilitating vengeance in the judicial system via the use of the death penalty will make our world a much less safe place?

Mr Wallace: I do not believe that the death penalty is something that this country should have. I do not think it is what the public, or indeed this House, would support. However, I also respect the will of a number of countries around the world, including the United States, that have decided to have the death penalty in certain circumstances. As an ex-soldier, I am also aware that all states, including those that oppose the death penalty, use lethal force when they have to do so to keep themselves secure. We risk being seen as hypocrites if we say that we will never make an exception for assurances, while being prepared to use lethal force on the battlefield to kill people without due process. That is the balance that we always have to strike. It is not easy, but we do it to try to keep people safe.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): While I understand the concern of those who oppose the death penalty, I also understand the concern of my constituents that if this country has information or evidence that is not passed on to our closest ally, the United States, that will send out a very wrong signal indeed when this House calls for more action in countries where there is a war that directly impacts my constituents. Will the

[Huw Merriman]

Minister confirm, in order to reassure us all, that if advice has been taken and if decisions have been overreached in terms of ministerial responsibility, they will of course be subject to the courts?

Mr Wallace: Yes, my hon. Friend is correct. All Ministers took these decisions in line with the law. They were acting lawfully, within international law and within our domestic obligations.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Sending people to face the death penalty is unacceptable, and to be party to doing that undermines our own credentials. The Minister did not answer the question put by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). When will the Government renew their own policy on the death penalty? When will that be brought before this House?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady makes one fundamental mistake. The two individuals in question are not under our control. They are not in our jurisdiction. We have no contact with them whatsoever. The reality is that this is based on a request from the United States Government to share evidence so that those individuals can potentially face trial in the United States.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his comments so far. Those two men are not UK citizens. If the evidential base is as strong as the media suggest, they will be charged and tested in the US courts for the murder of two Americans. Is it not right that it should be the US courts that deliberate on those horrific murders?

Mr Wallace: There are American victims of this crime, and whoever the right people to face the consequences of that are, they should of course face justice where those victims are, as should be the case in relation to British victims here. It would have been good if we could have done that, but in this case, the decision was reached that the United States was the best place for those individuals to face justice, in the United States criminal system.

Pairing

4.28 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury if he will make a statement in relation to Government policy and practice with regard to pairing arrangements, especially as they relate to Members on maternity, paternity or adoption leave.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I want to start by reiterating without reserve the apology for the error that was made last week in respect of pairing with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson). Both the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith)—the Government Chief Whip—and the Minister without Portfolio, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), have apologised publicly, and I acknowledge that that apology was accepted by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) during questions to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House last week.

The Government's policy on pairing remains that these are long-standing informal arrangements between business managers in different political parties in this House, co-ordinated through the usual channels. That has been the position of successive Governments of different political compositions, and this Government have no plans to change those underlying arrangements. Indeed, it is worth noting that almost 2,000 pairs have been agreed since the general election in June last year. Of those, the overwhelming majority have worked as intended, with the Government actually having a better record of upholding pairing arrangements than most other parties.

During the passage of the Trade Bill last week, seven of the eight pairs remained in place, including two other pairs provided for two Members on maternity leave. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said in response to the urgent question last week, there are clearly questions and different opinions in the House on whether and, if so, how changes should be made to our current voting arrangements.

The Government have therefore confirmed that there will be a general debate on proxy voting in September, following the debate's cancellation earlier this month for an urgent statement on the Amesbury incident. That will give Members the opportunity to consider the various questions arising from the recent report of the Procedure Committee into proxy voting. In particular, as came through from the exchanges following the Leader of the House's business statement last week, I know that Members have questions about whether such arrangements should be extended beyond maternity, paternity and adoption leave to those who, for example, have been bereaved or who have caring responsibilities for close relatives. It is important that the House be given time to debate those questions as, from my experience, such changes are made most effectively when they command consensus across the House.

The Government remain committed to providing a pairing system with Opposition parties, and I reassure the House again that the errors of last week will not be repeated. I hope the House will look forward to the

debate in September as a chance to discuss in greater detail what changes might be made to ensure that Members on both sides of the House are supported through periods of absence.

Mr Carmichael: Thank you for allowing this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his answer. I mean no disrespect to him, but I am disappointed that he is at the Dispatch Box today and not the Chief Whip.

There are serious questions still outstanding about the events of last Tuesday evening, and the only person who knows the truth about them is the Chief Whip himself. There is a serious lack of confidence today in the system by which we run our business, and the only person who can restore that confidence is the Chief Whip.

I understand the convention that the Chief Whip does not normally speak in this Chamber except to move a by-election writ. Under normal circumstances I would see that as a sensible protection for the office of Chief Whip, but the House should not lose sight that there is an important distinction to be drawn between a protection for the office and a protection for the holder of that office.

When I was first made aware of the presence of the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) in the Division Lobby last week, I was quite relaxed about it. We all know these things happen from time to time and, in a system that relies on the best of faith, these things should not be the source of excitement. My view started to change, however, when I learned that any mistake was made not by the right hon. Gentleman but by the Chief Whip himself. It may have been a mistake to cancel the pair, but it was not an inadvertence; it was a deliberate act. We now understand that the instruction to the right hon. Gentleman that he should vote came from the Chief Whip himself. The explanation from the Chief Whip that he did not know this was, as he terms it, a “pregnancy pair” neither clarifies nor excuses what is a *prima facie* act of bad faith. A pair is a pair, whatever its purpose. If the system is to work, it should be honoured and not broken at the 11th hour.

The House should be aware that I gave the Minister advance notice of these questions. When was the decision made to cancel the pairing arrangements for the votes on new clauses 17 and 18, and when was the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth informed of this? Did the Chief Whip inform either the Liberal Democrat or official Opposition Whips Office that the pairs would be broken? My information is that neither office was informed. Was the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth aware that he was paired with my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire for the day’s votes? Was the decision made to cancel pairs taken in consultation with the Prime Minister or the Leader of the House? When were the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House informed that the pairing arrangements would be broken? Crucially, was the Prime Minister informed of the Chief Whip’s decision to instruct Conservative MPs to break pairing arrangements before she told the House at Prime Minister’s questions that it was an honest mistake? Do these repeated references to an “honest mistake” refer to the decision to break the pairing across the board or specifically to the decision to break pairing with a maternity/paternity leave MP? If it is the latter, is it now Government policy that the breaking of pairing arrangements at the insistence of the Chief Whip for non-pregnancy-related pairs is acceptable?

There is an old truism that there is no smoke without fire. In fairness to the Chief Whip, we see no flames today—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are a lot of people in the Chamber and quite a lot of people probably want to take part—we will make an assessment of that. Meanwhile, the right hon. Gentleman will be heard. No attempt to shout him down is going to work and therefore it is just a waste of breath.

Mr Carmichael: I had said, “In fairness to the Chief Whip”, so perhaps that was what got them excited, Mr Speaker. In fairness to the Chief Whip, there is no flame apparent today, but there is surely enough smoke to fill the sky.

Mr Lidington: First, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth, as the Minister without Portfolio, is a member of my ministerial team in the Cabinet Office, so I think it is perfectly appropriate that I should be answering the urgent question from the right hon. Gentleman.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a number of specific questions. First, let me say that my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth was not at any point aware that he was paired with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire. Indeed, that is the normal state of affairs when a colleague is paired: they do not know with which particular Opposition Member they happen to be paired. That is a matter dealt with by the usual channels, through the respective Whips Offices. My right hon. Friend was asked to vote shortly before the Divisions that have caused this particular controversy. As has been said both by him and by my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip, he should not have been asked to vote. An error was made within the Government Whips Office, for which my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip has taken responsibility, hence his public apology to the right hon. Gentleman, as Liberal Democrat Chief Whip, and to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire. Every other pair that evening was honoured, so the error meant that the right hon. Gentleman was not notified beforehand, because there was not some sort of deep-laid plot to deny the pairing arrangement. Neither the Prime Minister nor the Leader of the House were consulted about the matter. The Government policy remains, as I said earlier, that pairing is an informal and voluntary arrangement between the political parties. We do take the issue of pregnancy pairing particularly seriously, for the very reasons that have led both the business Committee and then the Procedure Committee to highlight this as something that the House ought to address. That is why we will be taking forward the debate on proxy voting in September.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the broken pair did not alter the result of the vote and the Government would have still won the vote? Will he confirm that when these things happen the House has to learn lessons from them, but it must be wary of trying to scrap the whole system, as that would mean that Select Committees in this House would not be able to work and a lot of the work that takes place outside the confines of the Chamber would be impossible to continue?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend speaks with considerable experience. It is true that what happened last Tuesday did not actually affect the outcome of the vote. It is worth pointing out that, of the 66 pairs that have been broken since the general election, 14 were broken by the Government and 52 by the Opposition.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on successfully bringing another Cabinet Minister to the Chamber to answer a question about breaking a pair. It clearly shows the seriousness of the political situation facing the Government Chief Whip that the deputy Prime Minister has to come to answer the urgent question, to try to avoid another damaging Cabinet exit. Clearly, the Government Chief Whip decided to phone a friend, and it was not the Leader of the House.

The deputy Prime Minister said that the Government had a better record on pairing. Could he explain what that means because a pair is twice—you have two pairs? The issue is simple: it comes down to the integrity of the word of a member of Her Majesty's Government, the Government Chief Whip. You will recall, Mr Speaker, that a former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, demanded a rerun of a vote—and got it—from a Labour Government.

The answers in the statements made by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House on 18 July confirmed that the Government Chief Whip was less than candid with his fellow Ministers, including the Prime Minister, by not declaring that he actively instructed Conservative MPs to break pairing arrangements. It is clear that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House have unwittingly misled the House by characterising the Government Chief Whip's action as an "honest mistake". This is a serious breach of the ministerial code.

Does the Minister for the Cabinet Office believe that the Government Chief Whip's integrity is above reproach? We are asked to believe that the breaking of the pair for the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) was an "honest mistake", while he admits that he ordered others to knowingly break their pairs. Can the Minister confirm that that is the case? Can he confirm that the Government Chief Whip rang those who refused to break their pairs to demand an explanation as to why? If that was the case, that in itself is a clear breach of a number of the Nolan principles, such as integrity and honesty, that form the basis of the ministerial code.

In her foreword to the latest version of the ministerial code, the Prime Minister states that it

"sets out the standards of behaviour expected from all those who serve in Government...In abiding by this Code, we will show that Government can be a force for good and that people can trust us".

I reiterate our offer on Wednesday, following the previous urgent question, to discuss implementing a system of baby leave today without the need for a vote. How do the Government think that the business of the House—including Select Committee visits, international delegations, important ministerial negotiations, and even having a baby—can proceed when they admit that, under this Government Chief Whip, no one can or should trust them?

Mr Lidington: I have to say that when the hon. Lady complained about my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip not being here, I glanced across at the right hon. Member

for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) and wondered why he was not at the Dispatch Box instead of her. I suspect that, when he whispers in her ear afterwards, he might suggest to her that trying to apply the Nolan principles to the inner workings of any Whips Office over recent decades would raise a number of difficult challenges.

I will address the serious points made by the hon. Lady. First, only one pair was broken last Tuesday. That was done because of a genuine error in the Government Whips Office, for which the Chief Whip has publicly apologised. Despite that breach having taken place—it ought not to have taken place—the outcome had no effect on the decision that was taken by the House in the particular votes on which the controversy centres. Had that breach not taken place, the Government would still have lost the first vote and would still have won the second vote last Tuesday evening.

We are more than willing to talk to Opposition parties and indeed to Back-Bench Members across the House about how to forge a consensus on the way forward on parental and perhaps other forms of absence but, as I said earlier, exchanges in the House already have indicated that this is not necessarily a straightforward matter. Finally, I have full confidence in the integrity of my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The key is that this is an informal arrangement and it will always remain so. Mistakes will be made on both sides of the House—that is what happens. I was not allowed to have a pair for my father-in-law's funeral. My duty was to be here to vote and I stayed here, notwithstanding the fact that I would have liked to have been at his funeral. A lot of nonsense is being talked at the moment. May I also say that the Chief Whip is doing an excellent job?

Mr Lidington: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The whole issue of this pairing arrangement stinks to high heaven, and we still have not had an acceptable explanation as to why the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) observed some whipping arrangements but not others on much more critical votes. The Chief Whip needs to come to this House to explain himself fully because, with all due respect to the Minister, all we are hearing from him is what the Chief Whip has told him. After all of this, surely the Chief Whip should be considering his position today.

We in the Scottish National party are just so grateful that we have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with this broken pairing arrangement. The more we learn about the insidious workings of this broken arrangement, the more pleased we are that we have nothing to do with it. Members of the public are watching with increasing alarm and horror as this House is being dragged into the gutter and into disrepute once again. What we need is a total review of all our broken voting arrangements in this House. Will the right hon. Gentleman commit himself to that today, to make sure that we can conduct ourselves fairly and equitably and end this nonsense in this House?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman seems to be working himself into a lather of indignation about an informal practice that he says that he and his party have no

intention of participating in. I suspect that that question was an intentional distraction from the recent publicity on the dismal attendance and voting record of SNP Members in this House.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This is, of course, more about Parliament versus Government than anything else. I absolutely accept the assurance of the Chief Whip and the chairman of my party that they made a mistake. The problem is that, until I came to the Chamber today, I had no idea that there had been 2,000 pairs since the general election. The arrangements are made behind closed doors and in secret. If this pairing system was public, and if, each day, the people who were paired were listed or perhaps even removed from the possibility of voting, this would never occur again. What we need is transparency, and I hope that the deputy Prime Minister will look into this matter.

Mr Lidington: I understand the case that my hon. Friend makes and the arguments for greater transparency, but I ask him also to reflect on this point. In my experience in this House, Whips Offices in all political parties exercise a very important pastoral role. As in any large workplace, there are often Members who are going through periods of ill health or great family and personal stress, and in those circumstances it is not always right for the pairing arrangements to be made public in a way that might draw attention to the predicament of those Members. I do think, despite what he says, that it is best for these matters to be left to informal agreement between the usual channels.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): We know things are bad for the Government when they send out their wisest head and safest pair of hands, but unfortunately the Minister for the Cabinet Office has been sent out to defend the indefensible. In addition to the very serious questions that still surround the pairing arrangements for the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), it is clear from comments made by Conservative MPs to national newspapers that the Chief Whip ordered them to break their pairs. It is only because of their honour and integrity—and the Chief Whip's misjudgement and inability to orchestrate a proper stitch-up—that that did not happen. Does the Minister for the Cabinet Office understand the damage that this has done not just to our confidence in the pairing system and with its impact on Members' welfare, but to the integrity and public perception of this place? What are the Government going to do to repair the reputation of Parliament and to accept that, because they did not win a majority at the last general election, they have to win votes by argument rather than by stitching things up behind closed doors?

Mr Lidington: At the risk of repeating myself, the breach of pairing that took place last Tuesday did not make any difference to the outcome of either of the Divisions in question. My right hon. Friend the Chief Whip has undertaken to use the summer recess to carry out a review of the internal arrangements within the Government Whips Office to try to make certain that this type of error, which should not have occurred, can be prevented in the future. I would just say to the hon. Gentleman that perhaps I am getting somewhat cynical over the years, but I do tend to take with a pinch of salt reports in the newspapers about what my colleagues are alleged to have said.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I feel that I must fess up. I am a pair breaker. I have done it once—by accident. I was told off by the Whips very quickly. The event that I was due to attend had been cancelled and I simply forgot, so honest mistakes do happen. But this whole incident proves two things: first, that this is a process issue that interests the Westminster bubble, but certainly does not interest my constituents; and secondly, that this system, which has existed for a very long time, generally works. I urge my right hon. Friend to be very careful in changing a system that, despite the odd breakdown here and there—most of which have been committed by the Opposition in recent times—generally works. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The very fact that we are talking about 66 pairs having been broken for one reason or another since the general election, out of a total of around 2,000 agreed pairs, tells its own story.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Allegations have been made and it is clear that there was a "misunderstanding about the pairing and voting arrangements"—[*Official Report*, 22 June 1976; Vol. 915, c. 1361.]

Those words were uttered in 1976 from the Government Dispatch Box by the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, during a similar controversy. He and the then Leader of the Opposition agreed that the only way to resolve matters was for the Chief Whips to meet and the vote to be rerun. Precedent has been set. When will the Government show the integrity that I know the Minister for the Cabinet Office and many Government colleagues possess in abundance?

Mr Lidington: The difference between the incident in the 1970s that the hon. Gentleman cites and what happened last week is that the majorities—both against and for the Government—in the two Divisions were completely unaffected by what happened over pairing.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I have probably not always been the blue-eyed boy of the Whips Office, but I have found that this Chief Whip and his predecessors have always behaved with the utmost honesty and integrity. Confected anger and attacking my right hon. Friend does not help the House—in fact, it does not help anybody—because this system generally works. We should be very cautious about moving towards proxy voting because, had I taken the paternity leave due to me, I can think of no one I would have less liked to have held my vote than the Chief Whip.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, although I have to give him this warning: those who start out not being the blue-eyed boys of the Whips Office usually end up being recruited into it.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) does not exactly look heart-warmed by the prospect that redemption awaits him.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It would be frightfully good for him.

Mr Speaker: Good for him? Well, that's a divisible proposition.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that we should not believe the press reports that we have seen, so can he settle this matter once and for all? Did the Chief Whip also call other MPs and ask them to break the pair alongside the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis)? Because if he did, that is not a mistake, it is a policy.

I say to the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) that this does matter, because if the public cannot trust the Government to organise themselves, how can they trust them to organise a country?

Mr Lidington: Every pair other than that with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire was honoured last Tuesday.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As you will know, Mr Speaker, if I think that someone in government should lose their job, I am not afraid to say so. As you might imagine, I, like my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), have had my fair share of run-ins with the Chief Whip. However, I have always found him, even when we have fundamentally disagreed, to be a man of complete honour, of his word and of integrity. That also goes for the other members of the Whips Office with whom I have had fundamental disagreements. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Chief Whip's integrity should not be questioned in any shape or form, and that anybody who knows him as well as we do would know that to be the case? Is this not really an attempt by the Liberal Democrat Chief Whip to avoid the embarrassment of the fact that he could not get the leader of his own party, or his immediate predecessor, to vote in a Division last Monday that the Government won by only three?

Mr Lidington: I do not know whether that was an eloquent bid to be the beneficiary of future pairing arrangements, but my hon. Friend makes an important point. I think it is true that Conservative Members right across the spectrum, from left to right of my party, have always found the Chief Whip to be someone with whom they can do business and whose integrity and honesty they can completely trust.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): With four Members of the House on maternity leave at the moment, this issue is particularly poignant, and I fear that many of those people will have lost faith in the system as it currently exists. When I was on maternity leave with my first child, the campaigning group 38 Degrees contacted my constituents criticising me for not attending a vote, but at least I knew that I was paired and that it was cancelled out. The right hon. Gentleman says that we will be discussing proxy voting in greater detail in the autumn, and that is welcome. However, when does he expect reform to take place to allow proxy voting, as recommended by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), so that it actually happens and we are not reliant on this informal system?

Mr Lidington: I think that after the general debate on the matter there will need to be, at some stage in the not too distant future, a substantive motion on which the House can take a view. Important questions were raised

in the Procedure Committee report—for example, about the exclusion from a general proposal for proxy voting while on maternity, paternity or adoption leave of particular categories of Division in the House. The Committee discussed various approaches to how a proxy vote might operate in practice. The House needs to consider those things, as well as the points about the potential for bereavement leave or carer's leave that other hon. Members on both sides of the House have raised.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): We know that the system actually works pretty well. The Minister has given the figures that show that occasionally, for a variety of reasons, pairs get broken. In those cases, an apology is required, very quickly, and we had an apology from the two individuals in question that should settle the matter. The reality, though, is that this is the worst system except for all the alternatives.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do worry about what happened last week and about the explanations that have subsequently been given. It is certainly true that, as the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) suggested, sometimes people do, inadvertently, accidentally and without any malice aforethought, break the Whip—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry—break the pair. People frequently break the Whip—that is a common feature on all sides these days. Sometimes people break the pair, and then they are always told off by the Whips for doing so, because it is the Whips' own honour that is then in question—that is the point. The difference in this case is that the Chief Whip deliberately—not as an error but deliberately—sought to get somebody he knew to be paired to break that pair. That is a fundamental difference.

I say to the Minister that we need to get this sorted before the autumn, not just have a debate about it. The temperature in politics this year and in this Parliament—as well as the physical temperature—has already been very high, and we really do need to get it sorted. Otherwise we will be putting temptation in the Chief Whip's way every single day of the week, all the way through to 29 March next year.

Mr Lidington: As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said in business questions last Thursday, she is willing and indeed keen to engage with right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House to see whether we can agree, as consensually as possible, a way of addressing these matters in the future.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I declare an interest: I have always had considerable time for the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), not least since we served together as senior Whips in the Government Whips Office during the days of the coalition Government. As he will recall from those halcyon days, occasionally—incredible though it might sound—things in the Whips Office went wrong, and it was usually the result not of a conspiracy but of a mistake. I submit to him and the House that that is what has happened here, and it would be a great mistake on our part to change our well-established procedures because of an unfortunate incident for which both of those responsible have profusely apologised.

Mr Lidington: It is a good principle that hard cases make bad law, and I think my right hon. Friend is right.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What matters for present purposes is that two senior members of the Government conspired to break the rules to win a vote they thought they might lose. If I am wrong about that, can the Minister explain why? If I am right, why are they still in their posts?

Mr Lidington: An error took place. Full apologies have been given.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): This looks to have been a genuine error, for which a sincere apology has been given. My right hon. Friend has made it clear that this type of error has happened not just on the Government side but on both sides of the House, so I find the level of faux outrage in some quarters very strange. The system generally works well, and I would encourage him not to throw the baby out with the bathwater but to work with his counterparts, particularly in the Whips Offices of other parties, to make sure that the system can be looked at and improved on to avoid these types of errors, which are clearly happening on the Government side and in other parties.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend gives good advice that I am sure my colleagues in the Whips Office will wish to follow.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): If the Government are prepared to take advantage of pregnant women and women who have recently had babies, surely we can have very little trust in their integrity. Would a good way to restore integrity not be to circulate something before the recess so that we can have a votable motion when we come back in September to allow baby leave and proxy voting to go ahead?

Mr Lidington: As I have repeatedly said, what happened last week was a genuine error. It ought not to have happened. The Whips Office is taking steps through its internal procedures to try to prevent a repetition, and the Leader of the House is eager to talk to Members from all parties in the House about the way forward to address the points the hon. Lady refers to.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), I served for four years in the coalition Whips Office, including for two years with the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and he and I will remember all kinds of cock-ups, for want of a better term: people inadvertently paired twice, people who thought their pair was transferable, and so on. All these things can and do happen. In my view, this is much more likely to have been a genuine mistake, so does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be a poor decision to base long-term practice on this one case, however high-profile?

Mr Lidington: Yes.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Consciously telling an MP to break a pair is not an error; it is cheating. Was the Chief Whip offered the opportunity by the Government to come to the House today to explain his error?

Mr Lidington: For the reasons I explained earlier, I am responding on behalf of the Government. I ask the right hon. Gentleman to accept what his right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland accepted last week, which was the public apologies given by the Minister without Portfolio, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth, and the Chief Whip.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): With 2,000 pairs granted, does my right hon. Friend agree that mistakes, while rare, are far from unknown? They are even not unknown to the Liberal Democrats.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is correct. Of the 52 pairs broken by Opposition parties, seven were broken by Liberal Democrats. Indeed, four Liberal Democrat MPs have broken pairs, or roughly a third of the party's Members of Parliament.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): So the Government's defence is that this very rare occurrence where a pair is broken happened by accident, but it just so happened that it was on a vote that the Government feared they might lose. Outside the House, that might be described in unparliamentary terms. MPs from the Conservative side have been reported in the press saying that they were rung by the Chief Whip and told to break their pair, but refused to do so. Is the Minister saying those people misinformed the media?

Mr Lidington: All other pairs were duly honoured last Tuesday. The error that took place in respect of the pair with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire had no impact on the result of either Division.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): We obviously work in a not very family-friendly workplace. It is incredibly difficult for new mums and dads to combine that role with voting in the House. I certainly would not expect maternity leave to last up until the age of my youngest child, who is 19, but does the Minister not agree that the Government give an incredibly generous offer with maternity pairs? Unlike the workplace, there is no time limit for new mums to take advantage of the system, within reason. Does he not agree that the system should be welcomed and should continue?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right, and I am grateful to her for acknowledging that while mothers who are Members are rightly at the forefront of our concern, we also have paternity leave. That is one area where I had some fellow feeling with what the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said last week. I can remember being in the delivery suite with my wife for the birth of one of our sons and being interrupted through the night at 90-minute intervals by the Government Whips Office asking when I was going to be available to come into Westminster.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am sorry, but what most people out there are asking is simple: is there any rule that a Minister in this Government cannot get away with breaking?

Mr Lidington: The arrangements on pairing are not rules set out in Standing Orders. They are informal conventions, and it is right that they should remain such.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is clear how easy it is for mistakes to be made in this area, and my right hon. Friend has confirmed that all parties have made mistakes. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) made a mistake and put his own party leader in the news a few days ago. The system works to support colleagues across the House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the system should be maintained?

Mr Lidington: Yes, I do.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that pairing is one of the things that makes this place work? We should keep last week's events in their full context and recognise that, by and large, the system works and should be maintained.

Mr Lidington: Yes.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): This seems to be an honest mistake, for which the Chief Whip has apologised. Of the seven pairs broken by the Liberal Democrats since the general election, is my right hon. Friend aware how many times they have apologised for breaking those pairs?

Mr Lidington: I think that is a question for the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, rather than for me.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The informal ways of working in this place can be both a strength and a weakness. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is quite important every now and again to reflect on the fact that the composition of the House has changed, the world outside has changed and technology has moved on, and we need periodically to look at those informal processes and see whether some of them need formalising?

Mr Lidington: It is certainly right that we review things in the light of changing technology and changing circumstances, and that is what the Leader of the House wishes to do.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend to be cautious about allowing this matter to take the House down the route of proxy voting, which has huge downsides? Quite often, we are asked to consider serious matters in this House, where the debate affects the way people vote because it changes their mind. The solution is surely to improve the pairing system, rather than to ditch it completely.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend's question illustrates why it is important that we have the general debate and seek to obtain as wide a consensus as possible.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): This is a serious matter, but does my right hon. Friend agree that an error was made and has been admitted, an apology

has been issued and accepted, and we should now move on? I have full faith in the integrity of our Chief Whip, but I have less faith in the true motives of the Liberal Democrats in bringing this forward, because it seems to be an attempt to cover up their own woeful record in this department.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend's description of what happened last week and the course of action he now recommends are spot-on.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend given any thought to publishing the pairing performance data that he has mentioned? In that way, people in the country could make up their own minds about the various trends across all parties in the House since the general election.

Mr Lidington: Precisely because these are informal arrangements, I do not think we should be looking for regular statistical bulletins on this matter. The figures I read out earlier in the exchanges make the point that, for the most part, the pairing system works very well.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Having spent more time than I wished with the Chief Whip going through matters that I found very difficult indeed, I can attest to the fact that not only is he a stickler for the rules, but he is very kind and compassionate when it comes to domestic matters. I hope that will be taken into account by Members on both sides of the House when I say that I favour some form of reform. If mistakes can occur, it is important that we as a House look at how to come up with a better system in which mistakes do not occur.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I agree with him.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I benefited from pairing arrangements on a number of occasions last year. I do not have a clue which Opposition Members I was paired with, or whether any of those pairs were broken. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the pairing system generally works very well for many people who need a pair—whether because of serious illness, parental leave or bereavement leave—and most of our constituents, once they know the facts, do actually understand why some of us may miss votes for a period?

Mr Lidington: We all remember when my hon. Friend was seriously unwell and had to be absent from the House for a time. He, like many others in all political parties over the years, has benefited from the informal arrangements that the Whips Offices of the different parties have negotiated on pairing. In the furore over events last week, it is important that we do not lose sight of the important tool that the pairing system offers in relation to effective pastoral care for right hon. and hon. Members.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we hold a unique position of privilege, that on matters of such importance as Brexit legislation our constituents therefore expect us to vote in person on their behalf whenever possible, and that just one high-profile error should not change the system we have in place?

Mr Lidington: The Procedure Committee report on proxy voting and parental absence suggested a number of exceptions that, in its view, should be made to its general recommendation to allow proxy voting, so my hon. Friend makes an important point.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I speak with great authority and experience, having been refused every single pair that I have ever applied for. Be that as it may, will my right hon. Friend adopt the principle of Chesterton's fence, namely that reforms should not be made until the reasoning behind the existing state of affairs is properly understood?

Mr Lidington: These are exactly the arguments that we will have the opportunity to debate in September.

Mr Speaker: Will Quince.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; last but I certainly hope not least. I served on your diversity and inclusion panel, and we looked at this hugely complex issue in great detail. It is clear to me that what is proposed as a response to pairing is not a panacea. It is hugely complex and posed as many questions as it provided answers to, so can I ask my right hon. Friend not to rush but to tread very carefully, so that we as a House get this right?

Mr Lidington: I think that rushed procedural changes often leave the House repenting at leisure. I also think that a procedural change to voting such as is now proposed should command as wide a consensus in the House across political parties as it is possible to obtain.

Points of Order

5.16 pm

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and his shadow Treasury team, whose names escape me right now, visited my constituency of Hastings and Rye over the weekend, yet failed to alert me to the fact that they were coming. Could I ask for your advice, Mr Speaker, on how I might encourage Members to come in a personal capacity to the fantastic town of Hastings, which has had record investment since 2010, but to alert me perhaps earlier if they are coming on a political visit?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order. Such points of order are by no means uncommon—in fact, they are very frequent in the Chamber—and it is regrettable that this should be the case. I understand that she has alerted the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) to her intention to raise this point of order. I can confirm readily that it is a well-established and important convention that Members should alert each other to prospective visits to the other's constituency if those visits are of a public or potentially public character. It is in all our interests that this courtesy should be observed. It has to be said that it is frequently observed in the breach rather than in the observance, and by Members on both sides of the House. The right hon. Lady has drawn attention to a breach. I hope that it will not be repeated, and I thank her for what she has said.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I raised in the House the case of my constituent who had his personal independence payment stopped. He has an inoperable brain tumour; he has intractable epilepsy, which means that he could collapse without warning; and he has the onset of Parkinson's disease. On 2 July, the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work mentioned at the Dispatch Box that she would meet me to discuss this case. Despite several attempts by my office to contact her office and arrange that meeting, it has still not been possible to arrange it. I wonder whether you could assist me in expediting this, Mr Speaker, so that I can represent my constituent.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The very short answer to him is that if an offer of a meeting is made, whether in response to a point of order or, as in this case, in an answer to an oral question, that commitment should be honoured sooner rather than later. If the hon. Gentleman is asking me—[*Interruption.*] Order. Mr Kerr, I am dealing with a point of order.

With the greatest respect, I am usually very interested in what the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has to say, but at the moment I have not got the foggiest interest in what he is burbling about from a sedentary position, because I am responding to a point of order, and I intend so to do. If he is interested in listening, he can listen quietly, and if he is not interested, he is welcome to leave. I do not really care which of those courses of action he follows, but it had better be one or the other.

[Mr Speaker]

In response to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), I would say that the offer of a meeting should be honoured sooner rather than later. If the hon. Gentleman wants an idea of a broad rule of thumb, I should have thought that it was reasonable within 24 hours of an oral exchange for contact with his office to have been made by a ministerial office, which is a well-staffed office. I would very much hope, particularly in a matter of very great sensitivity and potentially great urgency, that a meeting would be arranged within a week or so.

If the hon. Gentleman is telling me that three weeks later such a meeting has not been arranged and there has been no substantive contact, frankly that just isn't good enough. That would apply whichever party was in power, just as it is not good enough if weeks after a Member has tabled a written question there has been no substantive reply.

There is a Whip sitting on the Treasury Bench, who might as well perform a useful function. One useful function that the Deputy Chief Whip, which I think is his current title, could perform would be to contact the Department concerned and say, "Get it sorted." The right hon. Gentleman, if he is a right hon. Gentleman—I am pleased if he is, and if he is not, no doubt it is a matter of time—should get it sorted today. I hope that that is what will happen.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Four and a half weeks ago, Bishop James Jones published a report on Gosport War Memorial Hospital that indicated that at least 460 elderly people had died inadvertently by infusion of opiates. I immediately wrote to the Prime Minister expressing my gratitude that the relatives had finally got to the truth, but expressing their desire and demand for justice. I invited the Prime Minister to implement a criminal inquiry. Parliamentary protocol states that the Prime Minister or No. 10 must respond to MPs' letters within 20 working days. Mr Speaker, it is now 22 working days and I have yet to hear anything. I ask your advice on how I could pursue this matter, so that No. 10 responds to my letter.

Mr Speaker: I must say I am disappointed to hear of the hon. Gentleman's experience. I have always found the Prime Minister to be a person of unfailing courtesy.

That has been my personal experience. I am sorry if he has had a bad experience. In a sense, I think my response to him is not altogether dissimilar to my response to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), who has also just raised a point of order.

By raising this on the Floor of the House in this way, which the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) was obviously loth to have to do, he should elicit a reply sooner rather than later. As we go into recess tomorrow, I would certainly expect that he would get an answer from the Prime Minister's office within the next day or two. If that is not the case, I rather imagine he will be putting down a named-day question, but it should not be necessary for the hon. Gentleman to have to do that.

At one time, there was a considerable improvement in the speed of replies to written questions. It is important that standards are maintained. If standards slip, conventionally it has been the responsibility of the Leader of the House—I know she takes it seriously—and possibly the Whips Office to ensure that those standards are restored. This is not a trifling matter; it is important. I hope the hon. Gentleman will be afforded the courtesy that is warranted.

BILL PRESENTED

CATS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No 57)

Rehman Chishti presented a Bill to require the driver of a mechanically propelled vehicle involved in an accident resulting in injury or death to a cat to stop and give information or report the accident to the police; to require the keepers of certain cats to ensure they are microchipped; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October, and to be printed (Bill 256).

Mr Speaker: I hope that is reassuring to people attending to our proceedings. [Interruption.] A Whip chunters from a sedentary position, "Cat's whiskers." Well, the Bill may cover the matter of whiskers or it may not. We shall have to see. The sooner we learn about the detail of the Bill the better. [Interruption.] I see the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is still enjoying his conservation, but at least he is doing so in an orderly way.

Strengthening the Union

5.24 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I beg to move,

That this House has considered strengthening the Union.

The Prime Minister and the Government have said, time after time, that it is our responsibility and duty to govern for the whole of the United Kingdom. The UK Government are responsible for governing for the benefit of everyone in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but this reality is perhaps easy to forget. Devolution has changed the constitutional landscape of the United Kingdom, and with multiple Governments working across our four nations, it is perhaps easy to forget the value that this concept—this thing we call “the Union”—brings to us all, but the Prime Minister’s words show that this Union cannot and should not be taken for granted. It has always been of profound importance to all of us. It is central to our wellbeing, our security and our prosperity, as well as to who we are, whether we are from Scotland, Wales, England or Northern Ireland. It is a part of our identity as citizens of the United Kingdom, so I welcome this timely opportunity to discuss our Union of four nations.

I have the privilege of travelling regularly across the nations of the UK in my role as constitution Minister—I was also formerly a Minister in the Northern Ireland Office—and I see the strengths of our country. It is clear to me that delivering for all parts of the United Kingdom is—as it should be—at the heart of the Government’s approach. All parts of the UK need to work together to seize the opportunities of, for example, leaving the European Union. Being part of a bigger and stronger UK benefits all citizens in its four nations.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Perhaps the Minister can explain, then, why the former Foreign Secretary described Northern Ireland’s role in the Brexit process as

“the tail wagging the dog”

and sought to dismiss the serious concerns about the prospects of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, or indeed, between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Perhaps she can explain why that was and dissociate the Government from those comments, now that the former Foreign Secretary has dissociated himself from the Government.

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman did the job himself in the final few words of his intervention. I will look forward to some better ones as we go on.

Let me start with a few points on identity. The individual identities of each of the four nations remain strong. We could ask any of the millions of football fans who watched England’s endeavours in Russia about that. Each of us is proud of our distinct history and culture and our different traditions, but we also see this through amazing events such as the Royal Highland Show and the Royal Welsh Show—taking place later this week—which, of course, Cabinet Ministers attend and support.

Although our distinct identities are proudly held, perhaps particularly when we are watching sport, there is another set of values and ideas that unite us all, from Coleraine to Colchester and from Campbeltown to Caernarfon. The values of tolerance, democracy, equality and fairness

are central to who we are as citizens of the United Kingdom. We may disagree over whether we prefer Scotch whisky—I mean whisky. It sounds as if I have already been on the whisky, Madam Deputy Speaker! Let me start that sentence again. I am going to attempt to get through a sentence that compares Scotch whisky to English ale, to Northern Irish scones, to Welsh cakes—I may well get to the end of that sentence with a cheer from the House. Whichever one of us has the better cakes or drink, or the more noble history, we are united in our deeper beliefs, democratic traditions and our long history of working as one to benefit us all. When we come together as one people, we benefit from the security and stability that comes from being one of the largest economies in the world, pooling risks and sharing benefits.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Minister talks about benefiting all, but as she is aware, the UK is the most unequal state in the European Union, with inner London by the far the richest part of the EU while the communities that I represent are among the poorest, yet in Government figures published in the last few weeks, public expenditure per head in London is higher than in Wales. Why is that fair?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman highlights an important point that we will have the opportunity to consider when we look at issues such as leaving the European Union and how we will address, for example, agriculture support across our nation. The point I was making is that we are a larger economy when we are together as a Union, and that means we can do things together in a more effective way for all our constituents.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I speak as a proud Unionist, and I am very much in favour of the Union. The Minister must understand, however, that there are considerable concerns about Brexit and the Government’s long-term plan for regional continued development, which benefits my constituency enormously—structural funding, for example, and agricultural funding. Those uncertainties are not helping to keep the Union together. On direct funding to Wales, she has to accept that cutting electrification to Swansea from Cardiff and not supporting the tidal lagoon does not give us enormous confidence about this Government investing in Wales and its communities.

Chloe Smith: I am sure that we will come on to all those points during the debate. However, the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) were right to raise them, because it is in recognition of such issues that the Government plan to create a shared prosperity fund for the whole of the United Kingdom. We share those goals; we share those opportunities.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I am sure that many Members from all over the United Kingdom will point to the inequalities and the lack of growth in some parts of our economy, but does not being part of the United Kingdom mean that fiscal transfers from parts of the UK that generate more revenue than others help Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and many English regions?

Chloe Smith: That is precisely my point. When we see what we can do as a larger economy—when we see how we can attract the finest and the best across the UK economy—we also see that we are in a position to put that back

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into public services, including the NHS and many other services that are admired around the world, and which work together to make everyone's lives better. That is true throughout the Union.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: I must make a few more moments of progress. We have a full debate ahead of us on the strengths of the Union.

Let me say something about the shared economy and the strong internal market, which is one of our biggest strengths, and which is important for all our prosperity. The UK internal market is, of course, the vital first market of the UK. As one of the largest economies in the world, we buy and sell among our nations, and that creates wealth and jobs for every part of the UK.

As we leave the EU, we must protect the benefits of the UK domestic market. We are a world leader in financial services, defence technology, car production, food and drink, digital technology, energy, music, films and television, and all parts of the UK have their role to play in those world-leading industries. Scotland's exports to the rest of the UK are worth four times more than those to the EU, and 56% of Northern Ireland's external sales are to the rest of the UK. We as a Government are committed to strengthening these links between the economies of our nations. For example, between England and Wales we are abolishing the Severn bridge tolls and investing in cross-border railway links such as the Halton curve. Let us not forget how many people cross our internal borders every day as part of normal life. As the Prime Minister pointed out during her speech in Northern Ireland on Friday, our Union is rooted in both our history and our collective achievements, but it is our future together that is our greatest strength.

Ian Murray: Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I will now.

Ian Murray: I am very grateful to the Minister—and may I compliment her on her rather fine Sean Connery impression earlier in her speech?

The Minister has just reeled off a list of service industries in this country, which, of course, are not covered by the Chequers agreement. What analysis has her Department conducted of how much the UK's GDP will be reduced as a result of that agreement?

Chloe Smith: I do not think the hon. Gentleman can have been listening when I included, for example, car production and food and drink in my list, but the point is that the Chequers agreement seeks to secure the best deal for the whole UK economy, together. That covers both goods and services in different ways—in ways that will complement our strengths—but it also returns us to the key point about the whole UK economy, together.

Let me now say something about the industrial strategy. It is a vital part of the plan set out by the Prime Minister to drive growth across the whole UK, and to create more highly skilled, highly paid jobs and opportunities. It is intended to address the long-term structural challenges that can hold British businesses back, while building on the country's strengths. New sector deals and investment

and research and development will support the industries of the future where the UK has the potential to lead the world, from electric vehicles to biotech and quantum technologies.

It is important that we continue to look to the future. As was announced earlier this month, a £2.5 million grant has been awarded for a spaceport site in Sutherland, on the north coast of Scotland. That the first ever satellite launch from the UK could be from Scottish soil highlights our commitment to investing in all parts of the UK, and there are other launch sites too, such as those planned in Cornwall, Glasgow and Snowdonia, which will also be boosted by a new £2 million development fund. The UK is set to build on its world-leading expertise in aerospace with the development of these spaceports.

On the city and growth deals, we are supporting clusters of cultural and economic strength concentrated in places throughout the UK, and we want to see city and growth deals across the four nations to ensure that prosperity is shared across the UK. We have already seen important investments in a number of deals such as Cardiff, Glasgow and Swansea, as well as investment in other important cultural work such as the V&A in Dundee. Further deals are being developed. We have recently announced the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal, and negotiations have been opened on the north Wales growth deal and with the Belfast city region partners. These deals make a vital contribution to local economies and, as I have said, provide jobs and growth across the UK. There is more, of course. In Cardiff, we have invested in the development of a compound semiconductor industry cluster, and in Aberdeen we opened the oil and gas technology centre with an investment of £180 million, which will unlock the full potential of the North sea and anchor the supply chain in north-east Scotland.

Transport and connectivity are also crucial themes. As we support clusters of growth across the Union we must be connected geographically through our transport and infrastructure links. The expansion of Heathrow will help with this, creating hundreds of additional flights per week from London to the nations and regions across the UK, with new routes emerging to support our economic co-operation. As well as the importance of being connected geographically, the Government recognise that world-class digital connectivity is essential for the modern world; it is essential to people at work and at home and we are committed to improving that across the UK. We are investing over £1 billion to stimulate the market to build the next generation of infrastructure that the UK needs for the future through both the national productivity investment fund and the digital infrastructure investment fund.

Turning to international benefits, the strength in our unity of nations is demonstrated by our common voice on the international stage. We use our seat at the top international organisations to protect the interests of all parts of the UK, to influence issues that matter to people in the UK, and to make the world a better place. When we faced an attack on our citizens, we worked with countries around the world to respond. We use our influence to pursue issues that matter to people across the UK: leading the way on international aid, leading global action to tackle landmines, stopping the trade

in ivory, and combating modern slavery. People across the UK can be proud of the role we can play because we are together in our international approach.

That international standing is also vital to the security of our country. Our UK defence expertise and excellence is joined up across the UK and has been built up across decades, from new radar stations in Shetland and Cornwall, to Scottish-built aircraft carriers based in Portsmouth, fast jet response aircraft in Lossiemouth and Lincolnshire, the SAS in Hereford, GCHQ in Cheltenham and the Royal Marines commandos in Arbroath. This is one very large UK defence network protecting us all at home and abroad. And we are spending across the country to be able to keep the whole UK safe. In the last financial year the Ministry of Defence spent £1.6 billion with Scottish industry and commerce, while a recent review found that defence invests £945 million in Welsh industry. The spectacular fly-past we saw only last month as part of the Royal Air Force's 100th anniversary celebrations reminds us of the work of all our armed forces, who are drawn from, and based across, the whole of the United Kingdom. We saw the same at last month's Armed Forces Day in Llandudno; it was a proud display of Wales's military association, while the Edinburgh Tattoo demonstrates Scotland's strong relationship with the military.

I am also proud that the UK Government recently announced that we will reimburse thousands of military personnel who would otherwise be negatively affected by the devolved Government's income tax increases in Scotland. This protects nearly three quarters of all armed forces personnel liable for Scottish income tax and will help with recruitment and retention for our important armed forces.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May I take this opportunity to congratulate the Minister on the ninth anniversary of her election to this place? Perhaps that is why the whisky and the cake were getting muddled up in her mouth—maybe she has been celebrating early. On the point about the UK Government mitigating the “nat tax” in Scotland, does she agree that it was important for my constituents at RAF Lossiemouth and at Kinloss barracks that the UK Government did something to address the fact that the Scottish National party has made Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, which was having a negative impact on recruitment and retention for our armed forces in Scotland?

Chloe Smith: Yes, that is exactly why the UK Government took those steps, and we are proud to have done so.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): A freedom of information request has just shown today that the Ministry of Defence is not paying 220 people the living wage in Scotland. Why?

Chloe Smith: I confess that I am not in possession of that information, and I am not in a position to give the hon. Gentleman the answer to that question right now. I wonder whether the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), might be able to assist with that a little later in the debate.

I want to move on to the importance of devolution, which is a matter of interest to us all. Our powerful devolved Governments and Parliaments are important

elements of our Union's strength. The Union is best maintained by giving the different nations of the UK the ability to pursue their own domestic policies while protecting and preserving the benefits of being part of that bigger UK family of nations. The UK Government respect devolution as an exercise in better governance and as a way to bring the delivery of services closer to the people who need them, while making use of the benefits of scale across our four nations. Since 1998, the Government have transferred powers to ensure that they sit where they can most effectively be delivered, and the Scotland Act 2016 transferred a wide range of powers to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. The Wales Act 2017 has delivered clarity for Welsh devolution and accountability for the Welsh Government, meeting the commitments that we made in the St David's day agreement. Devolution in real terms makes a difference to people's lives across the UK.

Northern Ireland makes a major contribution to the Union, and also derives great benefits from it. The principle of sharing the economic and political strengths of the Union continues to serve the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, and we are working each day to ensure that that remains so. The principles that define Northern Ireland's place as an integral part of the United Kingdom are of course enshrined in the Belfast agreement and its successor agreements.

Sammy Wilson: Northern Ireland suffered from 40 years of terrorism at the hands of those who wished to overturn the democratic wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. Will the Minister accept that one of the benefits of the Union was that the people of Northern Ireland did not have to stand alone against that terrorist threat but were able to bring to bear all the powers of the security arrangements that were available in the United Kingdom in order to defeat terrorism? Was not that an important benefit of the Union?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I think that is right. The right hon. Gentleman also reminds us of the importance of the principle of consent that is there in the Belfast agreement—namely, that the UK Government govern for the benefit of all communities in Northern Ireland on the principle of consent.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am sure the Minister recognises the contribution of the people in uniform in Northern Ireland. Conscription was never needed, because people volunteered, and Northern Ireland has the biggest levels of recruitment across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We have the largest number of recruits to the Territorial Army reserves of anywhere in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This is a sure example of our contribution to the greater nation in uniform, whether in the Army, the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force.

Chloe Smith: I join the hon. Gentleman and everyone in the House in paying tribute to those who serve this country in uniform. We should never forget them.

Let me return to my point about the Belfast agreement, which was reached 20 years ago and was a landmark moment in the history of our islands. The UK Government's priority is to ensure that it remains as relevant today as it should be, and to restore the devolved institutions at Stormont. All efforts are being made in

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the hope that an accommodation can be reached and an Executive formed, so that Northern Ireland Ministers can take key decisions. Successive UK and Irish Governments, together with all the parties in Northern Ireland, worked tirelessly to bring about the historic achievement of peace. Let us continue that work.

As hon. Members will know, EU exit will result in a further significant increase in the decision-making powers of the devolved Administrations.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): On the new powers that will come to the Scottish Government in particular, it has never been more important that the UK Government, the Scottish Government and all the devolved Administrations work very closely together. What we have seen over the past year, at least in my estimation, is that there are, at times, chasms that divide the UK Government and the devolved Administrations. The machinery to bring those different Governments together seems to be inadequate. Does the Minister agree? Is that something to which the Government will attend?

Chloe Smith: Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have clearly had yet more of that whisky—I keep referring to you as “Mr Speaker.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, my hon. Friend makes two important points. First, he says that we need to be able to come together as a single United Kingdom to make sure that our UK internal market continues to function and continues to bring the benefits that are needed across the internal borders of our country. He also looks ahead to my points about how we can relate to each other in the governmental work we need to do to get people those benefits, as new responsibilities transfer to Edinburgh, Cardiff and, once an Executive are formed, Belfast.

Our commitment to bringing powers closer to people can be seen in the major steps already taken to decentralise governance in the UK, creating new combined authorities in seven city regions, headed by elected Mayors, and devolving to them new powers and budgets. There are Mayors, of course, across England—in Greater Manchester, the west midlands, the Liverpool city region, Tees valley, the west of England, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and Sheffield city—and they demonstrate how local, visible and innovative leadership can be key to building stronger economies and fairer societies.

English votes for English laws, meanwhile, embeds fairness and balance in Parliament’s law-making process, strengthening England’s voice just as devolution has strengthened the voices of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland within our Union. These measures are about accountability, effectiveness and empowering institutions to take action to make things better for the people to whom they are accountable.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Minister has very conveniently skipped over Brexit. Over the weekend we learned that a no deal Brexit is now likely. For Scotland that could mean conditions akin to a state of emergency, with “Protect and Survive”-type leaflets being given to families and businesses. How does that help to strengthen her Union?

Chloe Smith: It is not my Union but the entire country’s Union. It is something we should be proud of; it is something we should cherish and protect; and it is something we should work together to protect. People in all our constituencies do best from the internal market of the United Kingdom, and it is that which we are seeking to protect and cherish as we leave the European Union and as we go out into the world to seek additional trade.

We are committed to ensuring that our system of devolution, which has progressed over the past few decades, serves to strengthen our Union and that a voice is afforded to each part of the United Kingdom. We have worked with colleagues in the devolved Administrations to strengthen the mechanisms for intergovernmental co-ordination and collaboration.

I chair a new ministerial forum, along with my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), with the purpose of providing opportunities for meaningful discussion of the UK’s negotiating position with the EU. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster regularly meets the leaders of the devolved Administrations through the Joint Ministerial Committee on European negotiations.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. There can be no more important document on the current negotiating strategy than the White Paper that was published the week before last. Is it not the case that the Welsh Government had sight of that document only a matter of hours before the British Government gave it to the press?

Chloe Smith: I am not going to comment on individual documents here. The forum I chair, and the JMC structure more broadly, operate on a close working principle. We seek to improve it; we seek for it to be better in the future. We have held a number of very effective meetings in the last while—more than perhaps in the recent period just before that—because we recognise the challenge of these times and we want to have that close working and co-operation together.

The governance of the Union is also about learning from each other. Whether it is the UK Government or a devolved Administration that get policy right, we can all share our experiences, note our mistakes and learn our lessons together; as a Union, we can help each other to serve our people. This Government are fiercely proud of our Union. We will continue to defend it and to strengthen it. We believe that the UK has a bright future as an independent nation outside the EU. This Government will work to invest in all parts of the UK, for the benefit of everyone. By working together, we can help to tackle some of the world’s great injustices and ensure a safer world. As the Prime Minister said on Friday, we are:

“A union not just of nations, but of peoples bound by a common purpose, whoever we are and wherever we are from”.

This Government are working towards

“a brighter future for us all, where we put aside past divisions and work as one to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie ahead”.

I look forward to this afternoon’s debate, which I believe will be an insightful discussion on a very important matter.

5.51 pm

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Today's debate is on "Strengthening the Union", so I am going to start by talking about that concept and the ties that bind our Union together. Working together, our family of nations has achieved great things for the many and not just the few, and when we are once again united in common purpose, under a Labour Government, I know we will do great things again. Our shared history includes wartime courage, facing down fascism, building homes fit for heroes and the creation of the national health service—

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Lady is speaking in glowing terms about our Union. Does she agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray): is she also a proud Unionist?

Lesley Laird: I am indeed a proud Unionist. I am also a very proud Scot. Having supported and competed for my country, I can honestly say I can wear both jerseys with pride.

Our shared history also includes the national health service, whose 70th anniversary we proudly celebrated earlier this year, and the commitment to looking after our people from the cradle to the grave. Sadly, those are not the sort of sunlit uplands some of the parties represented here today are interested in ever leading us to again. Given the recent actions and behaviour of many here today, it is opportune that we are today talking about strengthening the Union. I have to say, however, the irony will not be lost on many that the Tories have initiated this debate. I say that because the nationalist Government in Edinburgh and the nationalist Government here in London are both clear threats to the unity that has historically given this country the strength to work together and which will, under Labour, provide the strength to do so again.

The Scottish National party is explicit in its aim of destroying that Union, but the case for co-operation is greater than any case put forward on separation. The Tories profess to be defending it, while all the time pursuing a narrow, nasty agenda that is tearing us apart. As the late John Smith warned a generation ago, there are two parties

"sawing away at the legs that support the Union".

The people have not changed, but the politics they are being offered has. With so much at stake, why continue to indulge in Punch and Judy politics? We see the posturing in phoney indignation, walkouts and manufactured grievance. We see the undermining of democracy through a pay-per-view deal with the Democratic Unionist party, the not keeping promises on pairing—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: We hear a lot about SNP Members coming up with grievances. When the hon. Lady looks at the state of how the Government govern, is she not as aggrieved as I am at things such as the poverty—the institutional and historical poverty—that cripples her constituency and mine because of this Government?

Lesley Laird: Of course I am absolutely appalled by the levels of poverty, but I also recognise that the Scottish Government have many powers in their armoury to address that, and with cuts to local government of 9.6% there is clearly opportunity for both Governments to improve their track record in that regard.

Brexit is burning and the Tories are doing what they have done for decades: ripping each other apart on Europe, fighting for personal power and getting ready to get rid of yet another Prime Minister who does not suit the Brexiteers. So when the Labour party talks about strengthening the Union, that starts with this nation's biggest asset—its people. It is that higher purpose, that focus on our citizens, that drives our ethos. Across these islands we are united in our abhorrence of the Windrush scandal and the Prime Minister's "hostile environment". Across these islands we are united in our condemnation of the failed austerity agenda, with 1.3 million people forced to rely on food banks. Across these islands we are united in our condemnation of the callous and cruel juggernaut of universal credit, which is flattening communities and breaking hearts and spirits wherever it touches.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. Millions of people in this country are the "working poor" and they suffer as much as anybody else. That goes to show that under the Tories going into work does not pay.

Lesley Laird: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are aware that many studies now show that many people using food banks are in employment. Clearly, with low wages and low flexi hours, we see that this is not an economy that is working for the many.

Across these islands we are united in our disgust at the behaviour of politicians who put fear of losing a Commons vote above respect for an opponent who is ill or on maternity leave. Ultimately, politics is about values and choice, and our choices show and tell what we value. Madam Deputy Speaker, you have to say the Tories have some front in bringing forward this debate. The Tories should be in the dock for aiding and abetting the nationalists' attempts to destroy the common bond that unites working people across the UK. The charge sheet includes the catastrophe that is universal credit, the degrading of the terminally ill with ongoing work assessments, the rising reliance on food banks, the increase in child and pensioner poverty, and the repulsive rape clause. While these policies continue to have a cruel impact on the lives of ordinary people the length and breadth of the UK, it is clear that the Tories are guilty of laying the foundations for the politics of the nationalists, which they will always aim to exploit.

Douglas Ross: Does the hon. Lady not think this is slightly hypocritical, given that her colleagues in the Scottish Parliament voted with the SNP on its continuity Bill, and that the Labour party in Scotland and across the UK would be standing up to strengthen the Union if it did not follow the SNP and vote with it?

Lesley Laird: The hon. Gentleman has missed the point: the reason we stood up and supported the Scottish Government is because of his party's failure to respect the devolution settlement.

Jonathan Edwards: I am glad the Labour party in Scotland has supported the Scottish Government on this issue, but can the hon. Lady explain why the Labour Welsh Government gave in to Westminster and handed over our powers to London?

Lesley Laird: The hon. Gentleman has just illustrated his own point, which is that the basis of evolution allows different parties in different countries to reach different solutions. [*Interruption.*] Where has the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) been all these years?

The charge sheet includes the catastrophe that is universal credit, the degrading of the terminally ill with ongoing work assessments, the rising reliance on food banks, the increase in child and pensioner poverty, and the repulsive rape clause.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): You said that little bit.

Lesley Laird: I did. It was worth repeating. While these policies continue to have a cruel impact on the lives of ordinary people the length and breadth of the UK, it is clear that the Tories are guilty of laying the foundations of a policy of division that the nationalists will exploit. They will promote their holy grail, no matter the turbo-charged austerity that it would unleash on the Scottish people.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lesley Laird: I wish to make some progress.

In recent weeks, we have been presented with the evidence of what the SNP's plans for separation would really cost. The nationalists promised Scotland a growth commission, but in reality they have delivered a cuts commission. The people of Scotland simply cannot afford another wasted decade under the mantra of deficit reduction.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The only political party that has had a cuts commission in Scotland during the past five years is the Labour party. When will the "something for nothing" cuts commission produce its report?

Lesley Laird: The SNP's document speaks for itself; not only that, but there are many commentators who have something to say about it, too. I also note that the SNP failed to consult trade unions on its document—I am sure the hon. Gentleman is extremely disappointed about that.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has made a pertinent point about the economic benefits of the Union to the Scottish economy. Perhaps that was why the SNP ran fleeing from the full fiscal autonomy proposal for the independence referendum—because it entailed significant turbo-charged austerity. Does my hon. Friend also agree that the growth commission's fiscal and monetary proposals would result in an extra £40 billion of foreign exchange reserves having to be raised, which would entail turbo-charged austerity for the Scottish economy?

Lesley Laird: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. Economic analysis makes clear that the sums that the SNP proposes to inflict on the Scottish people simply do not add up.

The nationalists promised a Scotland growth commission, but it was a cuts commission. As confirmed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the cuts commission would

lead to further public spending cuts, with the plans looking remarkably like an extension of the current policy in the UK. The cuts commission claims to offer a "clear sighted analysis of the prospectus for independence",

but it is a prospectus based on a hard decade of public spending contraction, comparable only to the cuts implemented by George Osborne. Then we have the proposal of a £5 billion annual solidarity payment to the UK Treasury, which is not far off the Scottish Government's combined budget for education and justice.

That is a prospectus for independence built not on sovereignty regained, but more accurately on sovereignty lost over policy relating to interest rates, mortgage rates, exchange rates, inflation, money supply and corporation tax. It is based on an economic model that relies heavily on foreign direct investment, large multinational corporations and labour market flexicurity, with no plan to develop the proper industrial strategy needed to provide the high-quality, well-paid jobs that our people desperately require. No wonder the First Minister's commission consulted 20 business organisations but not a single trade union. That is not the kind of future the people of Scotland want. The people of Scotland want the growth problems in our NHS, education, housing and the economy fixed.

Let me be clear: only Labour, just like always, has a plan to provide the investment that will fix the countless problems created by the Tories and that have seamlessly been implemented by the SNP in Edinburgh. It is Labour that will ensure that the fabric of the UK is strong once again, by investing in a society that works for the many, not the few. It is Labour that will protect people in the workplace and create the opportunities needed for young people. People will not get that from the Tories, whose policies have led to an increase in precarious work and zero-hours contracts.

David Morris: Does the hon. Lady accept that the previous Labour Government put us in this financial mess in the first place? The Labour Government she keeps talking about are not for any or for you.

Lesley Laird: That is certainly not the case. Having worked in the financial services sector at that time, I know—and everyone who works there knows—that it was down to mismanagement of the subprime mortgage market. It is a global crisis and the hon. Gentleman should get out a bit more and read about it. It is Labour that will ensure that the fabric of the UK is strong once again, by investing in a society for the many, not the few.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lesley Laird: I wish to make some progress.

It is Labour that will protect people in the workplace and create the opportunities needed for young people. People will not get that from the Tories nor from the SNP, which continues, incredibly, to count zero-hours contracts as a positive destination for school leavers. It is a Labour Government who will ban zero-hours contracts and deliver an industrial strategy to create high-quality, high-skilled jobs. It is Labour that will always respect devolution, unlike the Tories, who at every turn during the Brexit negotiations have simply ignored Scotland's devolution settlement, while the SNP's opportunism has sought to sow division and discord.

Britain needs Labour and our approach, which recognises and respects all the nations of the UK. We will continue to stand up for and protect the devolution settlement, which we, the Labour party, founded.

Pete Wishart: This debate is about the Union and the constitution. I thought that Labour's great innovation was a UK-wide constitutional convention, where Scotland will be a federal part of a new arrangement. Is that still Labour's policy, and if so, could the hon. Lady talk a little bit about it?

Lesley Laird: The hon. Gentleman is right: that was in our manifesto and we will continue to work on it, because we believe it is the next evolution of devolution.

Britain needs investment, and only Labour will deliver. It cannot afford any more of the Tory version of austerity that we have experienced for almost a decade, with millions needing food banks, or SNP timidity, which acts as a conveyor belt for Tory austerity, with millions more cut from Scottish public services without so much as a whimper. It is Labour that has a vision of renewal, transformation and shared prosperity, with an additional investment of £70 billion in Scotland over the course of two successive Labour Governments.

Even on the simple things, this Tory Government cannot get it right. Only last week, Scotland's invisible man in the Cabinet, the Secretary of State for Scotland—I note that he is not here today—missed another opportunity to show leadership and solidarity with the residents and businesses displaced by the fire at the Glasgow School of Art, by failing to push for UK Government assistance. That was an open goal, yet the Secretary of State put the ball over the bar once again, with a mealy mouthed response and, like so many of his colleagues before him, telling local government to take the strain.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and what fills it too often these days is narrow nationalism, petty jealousies and grievance. It is hardly surprising that we are missing opportunities to strengthen our Union when the Tories clearly do not understand devolution, never mind believe in it. And they are sleepwalking into a nationalist trap, because their instinct is to pass the buck, while the Scottish Government's instinct is to draw powers from Whitehall and hoard them in Edinburgh, undermining local government at every turn.

Devolution is a process, not an event, and I am clear that those powers must be devolved all the way to the point where they can most effectively be delivered. To make a difference, politics must be about vision. It must be about ideas and how they can be fulfilled. It must be about the vision of how life can be made better for every household and community in the land.

In our 118-year history, the Labour party has been in government for only a little over 30 years, but every one of those years saw a Government for the many, not the few, and strengthened the Union by giving people hope—hope that, by the strength of our common endeavour, whether it be in Cumnock, Coleraine, Cardiff or Croydon, we achieve more together than we achieve alone. That is the way to strengthen our Union. Labour today, like Labour in the past, has a vision that will benefit all our people—men and women from the north, the south, Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I say respectfully to Government Members: your ineptitude, selfishness and brand of politics have played into the hands of those opportunists on the SNP Benches. Do the Union a favour. Do the country a favour. Do the millions of people whose lives are worse off under this rotten Government a favour and move over and allow Labour to govern and to invest in our people, our communities, our public services and our industries, and in the process, to strengthen our Union via the ties that bind our people together through a vision of sharing, equality and opportunity for all.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is a very well subscribed debate. I would prefer not to introduce a time limit, so if colleagues could speak for less than 10 minutes, we should get everyone in.

6.9 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): It is a real treat to be able to speak in the Chamber. As a Member who is not particularly frightened of his own voice, I have kept remarkably quiet during this term, largely owing to the hard work of the HS2 Select Committee. The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who is in his place, has also been putting his shoulder to the wheel to ensure that that railway line does one thing that strengthens the Union, which is to draw the north and the south closer together. I have plenty of reservations about it, but that, I think, is an outstanding quality.

I am particularly thrilled to be able to speak today, because one thing that I find so powerful about the Union is that it is in our DNA. My grandmother was a Power and was born in an Irish whiskey distillery of that name. My mother is Scottish, and I am very proud to wear the Davidson tartan, particularly the hunting tartan as it makes a very smart tie indeed. My constituency is, of course, how Walt Disney would have portrayed England if he had had the chance: truly beautiful and wonderful in every way. It grows every single crop that UK farmers around the country can produce; Herefordshire is the only county that grows them all. Then, of course, there are my own choices.

Pete Wishart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I hope it is a point of order.

Pete Wishart: We have just noticed that the Government Front-Bench spokesperson has scuttled out of the Chamber without listening to all of the Front-Bench speakers in this debate. It was the Government who called this debate. They could have called it on anything else, but they chose to focus on strengthening the Union. We now no longer have a Front-Bench spokesperson to listen to the Front-Bench speeches. Surely that is not in order; there should be somebody there.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have no idea whether the Minister has gone out temporarily, but there is another Minister on hand. I do hope that we are not going to have this debate interrupted by endless points of order, because people want to contribute; it is not fair.

Bill Wiggin: I quite agree, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was at the critical moment when I was about to discuss my affection for Wales.

[*Bill Wiggin*]

I chose to join that finest regiment in the British Army, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, now more helpfully called the Royal Welsh, when I went to university in Bangor in north Wales. There you have it: a British person through and through—Irish, Scottish, Welsh and indeed English. We make a huge mistake in this place when we divide among ourselves. After all, what did God put France there for? But no, we must stick together. It is our unity and our respect for one another that is most important.

I urge the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) to pay careful attention to this. There are only two types of MP in this House: those who care about their constituents and those who do not. Those who care about their constituents, in whatever part of the Chamber they may sit, are well worthy of the respect that we would expect to have shown to ourselves. They stand up for their constituents, and all we question is how right or wrong they may be. I will defend to the death any colleague who believes in their constituents and in their right to be heard. If ever there is any doubt in Members' minds about how important this place is to the strength of our Union, they should look at the one party that refuses to turn up. Members of that party will not take the Oath and they do not want the United Kingdom united. We should be judged by our enemies, by people who do not turn up, and by why they do not turn up—because this is our place where we can come together, where we can unify.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: To be fair, the Liberal Democrats were here earlier.

Bill Wiggin: Now that is more like a bit of parliamentary humour, but the hon. Gentleman knows exactly who I mean.

In ancient Greek, there is the word “agape”, which means love. It is a different sort of love from that which we may feel for our husband or wife, or indeed for our brother and sister, or for our country, our constituency or some of our more obscure constituents. I argue that having different words for that affection may well increase our vocabulary, but the strength of our language is that one word encompasses everything that we care about. Therefore, it is vital that we defend our country, our Parliament and our relationship with our constituents. For that reason, I urge the BBC to look again at the cuts to the Parliament channel. It is trying to save only £1.5 million, and it would be so much better if it took that from the money that it is giving to local democracy reporting services. Up to £8 million a year is being given to three very large private companies, which have, so far, managed to fill only 115 of the 145 placements. I am asking not for more money from the BBC, but for an opportunity to strengthen the Union by ensuring that our constituents not only see what we do here, but have it explained to them through the various commentaries that the BBC provides.

Locally, the Act of Union that concerns us is not that of 1707, important though it is, but an even older Act of Union—the 1536 Union of England and Wales. On the Welsh borders, a person does not even have to see anything to know when they have crossed over from England into Wales, because the noise from the wheels of their car goes quiet as they move on to the beautiful,

manicured Welsh roads—faultless and pothole-free. This drives my constituents to distraction, because on our side of the border the holes are huge. We need to do a great deal more on that. I have not yet stood up in this House without making an attempt to ensure that Herefordshire gets its fair share, because we have the most roads per capita of any county in the United Kingdom. More must be done. However, when people say that to me, I point out that they would not want to be on a Welsh health waiting list—so much so that people from Wales are popping over the border to secure an English address simply to get life-saving cancer treatment that is not available under the NHS in Wales.

There are great challenges to our country. There are great people in it, including all the Members here who care about their constituents. There is a great love and passion within all of us to ensure that we have the best future not just for our children and grandchildren, but for each part of the Union. I hate it when I hear colleagues bickering among themselves about their bit of the United Kingdom. We are so much greater than that. We do not have to go very far back in history to be reminded of that. I therefore ask Members to respect one another. I am not always innocent in that department. I have been teasing the editor of my local paper, and he has very little sense of humour and responds savagely at every opportunity. However, this is another chance for him to try to heal those wounds.

Let us go forward with a stronger Union as we face the negotiations and as we fight for the best possible outcome for the British people, and let us do that with respect for one another.

6.18 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): First, let me congratulate the Government on being so efficient at managing their legislative programme that they have been able to find a full day for a debate on this issue on the penultimate day of the parliamentary term. I had hoped that, today, we might come and find some new Government statement, some new policy, or something that would demonstrate the Government's desire to strengthen the Union between our countries, or that, perhaps, we might take a moment to reflect on what has happened over recent months and years with the debate on Brexit and the effect that that may have had on the strength or otherwise of the Union, but alas I am disappointed.

I have to say that if there is anyone on the Government Benches who believes that the Brexit process has done anything to strengthen the Union, they are wildly deluding themselves. The manner in which it is being executed has demonstrated a lack of will to engage with other countries on these islands as equal partners. Moreover, the fact of its execution means that it challenges the central tenet on which the Union is based, which is that the people of Scotland will be better able to make their way in this world by hitching their fortunes to those of their large neighbour to the south. That is now in question like never before.

I want to focus on the debate between those who propose a self-governing, independent Scotland and those who suggest that Scotland should remain part of the Union with Britain. I will look at the role that devolution plays in that argument, because it is not straightforward. There are many Unionists who say that devolution is a

means of strengthening the Union and there are others who see it as the thin end of the wedge. There are many people who believe in independence who embrace devolution as a step and a process; there are others who see it as a distraction from arguing for independence. In fact, it has not always been just one party or one part of the political spectrum that has advocated these changes.

In 1853 an organisation called the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights was established, explicitly to argue for administrative devolution within the Union. Despite its name this association was launched by and comprised Conservative Members of the House of Lords and those in academia. It had a small existence of only three years, but the ideas that it raised led directly to the Liberal Government of 1885 introducing the role of the Secretary of State for Scotland and establishing the Scottish Office. That was a process of administrative devolution that was not proposed by anyone in my party or anyone who would have supported those views at the time.

Allow me to cut to the 1920s and to a man called John MacCormick, who is a very interesting character in this story. MacCormick starts life in the Labour party. He then goes on to be what we would probably regard as the architect of bringing together various groups to form what becomes the Scottish National party in 1934, and he serves for eight years as its national secretary. After 1942, he goes on—not once, not twice, but three times—to stand for election to this place as a Liberal candidate at general elections. But MacCormick's greatest contribution to this whole debate was to raise the Scottish Covenant, which proclaimed for the first time ever that there should be an elected assembly in Scotland within the Union. Now, that covenant—signed in 1949 in the General Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland on the Mound in Edinburgh—had attracted in excess of 2 million signatures among a population of 5 million people, but MacCormick found that nobody would present this position to Parliament. In fact, it was left to Unionist party Members of the House of Lords to raise the debate about the covenant and to call for a royal commission to look at the question of devolution within the Union. I am not making this up; this is what really happened.

The amazing thing about the 1950s is the disconnect between those sentiments among the population—2 million people signing the covenant—and the opinions of the Scottish representatives in this place. In fact, in the 1955 election only one Scottish MP out of 71—Jo Grimond, who represented Orkney and Shetland—in any way supported devolution or home rule. Every other Member of Parliament was implacably opposed to it. There was a massive disconnect between what the people wanted and what their representatives were actually saying.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way during his comments about a massive disconnect between what the people want and what their representatives are speaking about. As he knows, Scotland had a democratic referendum in 2014, when the vast majority of people rejected the SNP's separatist agenda, yet SNP Members—in Holyrood and here—continue to speak about what we were told would be a “once in a generation” event.

Tommy Sheppard: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I am coming to that. I was in 1955 just there, but let me jump to the 1960s.

In the 1960s, things change and two things come together. [*Interruption.*] Conservative Members might want to listen and learn. The first thing is that this country—Great Britain—begins a process of rapid decolonisation. It is a new world. Suddenly, rather than the notion of an independent Scotland being something that looks backward romantically to history, it actually becomes something that can embrace what is happening in the contemporary here and now, with the emergence of new nation states throughout the world. The second thing that happens is that those who argue for Scottish independence understand and focus on the need to achieve electoral change at the ballot box, and the thing that kicks off a period of half a century of change is Winnie Ewing's election in November 1967.

Then we have a process of half a century of dissent being manifest electorally, at the ballot box, and the state responding to that at every step of the way. The Kilbrandon report is established in response to the events of 1967. It takes forever to come up with its proposals, but it does so in 1973, suggesting elected assemblies for Wales and Scotland. In 1974, we have the election of 11 SNP MPs, which terrifies the then incoming Labour Government.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I am happy to give way, although I may be getting to the hon. Gentleman's point in a minute.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman is a fine speaker in this Chamber, but I am not quite so sure that he can read my mind. Maybe he can.

Those 11 SNP MPs elected in 1974 voted with the Conservatives in 1979 to bring in 18 years of Conservative government that decimated Scotland. Will the hon. Gentleman get on to that point?

Tommy Sheppard: I was coming to exactly that point, as it happens.

The Labour Wilson-Callaghan Government then introduce the Scotland Act 1978, although it takes them four years to get that Act through, for some unknown reason. We then have the referendum of 1979, in which the people of Scotland vote to set up a Scottish Parliament. But that is frustrated because of an amendment to the legislation by a Labour Member of Parliament that requires 40% of the total electorate to vote in favour, otherwise the decision will not pass.

The Labour Administration, in the midst of economic chaos in the spring of 1979, had the opportunity to go ahead and legislate with the will of the Scottish people expressed at the ballot box, but they declined to do so. Given that the Administration were on their last legs, the SNP MPs decided to withhold confidence from them. In retrospect, I would have done exactly the same thing. SNP MPs did not vote to usher in 18 years of—

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I fear I need to crack on.

Ian Murray: That's fine—crack on.

Tommy Sheppard: I thank the hon. Gentleman. As he said, in 1979 we get the introduction of the Thatcher Government, and we begin a process of polarisation and of nothing happening in this constitutional debate. Meanwhile, people are preparing, organising and advocating the cause of Scottish self-government. In 1989, we have the establishment and the declaration of the claim of right, which I note from our debate in this Chamber two or three weeks ago that every party in this place now supports. That is encouraging because they did not, of course, at the time.

We then have the situation whereby the Labour party essentially adopts the process of devolution. Whereas it had previously been a controversial matter, now it is what John Smith calls the “settled will” of the Scottish people, and Labour pledges to bring in devolution if elected. Then we have the process of devolution, with the Scotland referendum in 1997, the Scotland Act 1998 and the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999.

Now, there will be some people in this debate who will wonder why that was not enough. They will say, “Well, that was game over,” and think that we have done what we came here to do. They will ask, “Why now—20 years later—are people still complaining that this is not enough?” Well, two things happened after the creation of the Scottish Parliament. First, it actually worked quite well, and people in Scotland began to appreciate that their local representatives having control over matters made a difference. New things were put into play. Despite the opposition of the Conservative party to the creation of the institution, it was embraced by the Scottish electorate to a much greater extent than this place ever has been.

The second thing that happened, of course, was the Blair Government and their increasing unpopularity. As in England and most of the rest of Britain, the traditional Labour electorate of Scotland had nowhere to go in response to Tony Blair’s decision to remove the Labour party from supporting them. In Scotland, the electorate had a ready-made alternative, and they began in numbers to join the alternative party on the left—the Scottish National party. We then have a situation where, by 2007, the first SNP Scottish Government are elected. What is the response to that? It is the Calman commission and the promise of further powers.

We go on to 2011, when we see a majority SNP Government having the opportunity to put before the electorate their central promise of giving people the opportunity to decide on their own future. *[Interruption.]* I will talk about the referendum a little bit, but I do not want to go into detail. The result of the referendum, of course, was the Smith commission and the promise of further powers. So all the way along the past 50 years, we have seen additional powers given to Scotland—more control given to the Scottish people over their own lives—because of the state’s reaction to the rise of the sentiment for self-government and for national self-determination. That is the fact of the matter; that is anybody’s analysis of history.

Much as Scottish Conservative Members may dislike this fact, the Scottish referendum in 2014 did not, I am afraid, settle anything at all. Many people, when they look at this from afar, misunderstand some of the things that were happening during that referendum. In particular, many commentators on the liberal left in England completely get it wrong when they say that what was

going on was some sort of assertion of identity. That was not the case at all. If ever a country had a surfeit of symbols of identity, it would be Scotland. Scotland has all the identity in the world; what it does not have is empowerment of the people who live there to control their own lives. That was the spirit of the 2012 to 2014 referendum campaign.

Stephen Kerr: Let me remind the hon. Gentleman of the result of the September 2014 referendum, where, by a substantial majority, the people of Scotland chose to remain part of the United Kingdom family that we are all so proud to belong to.

Tommy Sheppard: The result was 45:55. When the referendum campaign started, the split on the question had been about 75:25, so during the period of a two-year campaign, three quarters of a million people decided to vote for Scotland to become an independent country who did not feel that way when the campaign started. That was really quite a remarkable achievement.

Since the referendum campaign people have suggested that SNP Members do not accept the result of the 2014 referendum. I said in my maiden speech, and I say again today, that I do respect the result of the 2014 referendum. The people of Scotland decided to remain in the United Kingdom at that time. But, as I said in my speech in the claim of right debate, sovereignty is not just for 18 September 2014. Sovereignty, if we believe in it—the claim of right, if we believe in it—has to be for all time, so in a democracy people have the right to change their minds.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Like my hon. Friend, I accept the referendum result, but is not the point that the minority have rights too? The Union can survive only if those who believe in it are really going to make the argument for it, for as long as they want it to live. Does it not ill become those same people then to scream in the face of yes voters, “You lost—get back in your box”?

Tommy Sheppard: It does indeed.

Democracy must allow people to exercise their right to revisit a decision if the options that were presented to them beforehand substantially change.

Douglas Ross: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: No, because that really could not have been a controversial point.

Douglas Ross: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Tommy Sheppard: Okay, on that point.

Douglas Ross: Would the hon. Gentleman then say that his leader in Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, was wrong, ahead of the referendum, to stand in front of a poster that said, “One opportunity”?

Tommy Sheppard: No. I wish I had not given way now, because the hon. Gentleman was not wanting to comment on the point that I was making at all.

When Alex Salmond or Nicola Sturgeon talked about “once in a generation”—it was actually said very rarely—they were doing so not as a promise or a qualification, but to remind those who were campaigning for this opportunity that they might only get one chance to do so. The truth of the matter—*[Interruption.]* I will allow Scottish Conservative Members to intervene if they wish, if they will please let me at least—

Douglas Ross *rose*—

Tommy Sheppard: No, the hon. Gentleman has had his say.

The truth of the matter is that if one changes the proposition, people have the right to revisit the decision, do they not? I would have thought that that was reasonable. If somebody buys something in a shop that promises one thing, and they get it home and open the box and it is not what was promised, they can take their goods back. Well, we should also be able to take our goods back.

I would like to go on for a lot longer, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I know you do not wish me to do so. I will come back to where I started and talk about the relationship of Brexit to this debate on the strength or otherwise of the Union and to Scottish self-government. What has been happening over the last period has substantially weakened the Union because it weakens the devolution settlement that arguably could have given it some strength 20 years ago. This is happening in three ways. First, for the first time in our history, the UK Government are determined to ignore the Sewel convention and to legislate for matters that relate to the devolved Scottish Parliament without obtaining its consent. *[Interruption.]* That is a regrettable fact, but there is no point in Scottish Conservative Members trying to deny it.

Secondly, if powers are brought back from Brussels, one would expect that they would go to Holyrood, but Holyrood is being given a list of responsibilities, not powers. At the same time, it is being told that it will be able to exercise Executive authority in those areas only if it does so as part of a United Kingdom framework through a series of joint arrangements. UK Ministers have made it quite clear that these joint arrangements will bring together representatives of the four countries within the United Kingdom—but the question arises, who will speak for England in that discussion? Because of the asymmetrical devolution that we have had, and because of the refusal of successive Governments in this place to properly address democratic regional government in England, the only body that speaks for England is this place.

Therefore, Westminster Departments will advocate the cause of English farmers or English fishermen, or whatever, in these joint arrangements. The problem that arises is that in the event of a dispute, they will also sit as judge and jury on what happens. That makes the farmers and the fishermen of Scotland, of Wales and of Northern Ireland subservient to those who operate in the majority area of the country. That drives a coach and horses through the spirit and the actuality of the Union settlement.

There are dark days ahead. We do not know where the Chequers agreement now stands. We do not know what relationship we will have with the European Union, or what the status of a common European Union

rulebook will be and what bearing that will have. We do know, though, that time is running out to sort these things. We also know that in the midst of the chaos that this Government have created, the people of Scotland have an alternative and have a choice. They can decide to become a self-governing country—to take back control of their own affairs and get rid of the mess that is being created while they remain part of the United Kingdom.

6.38 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). I do not agree with all his conclusions, but I enjoyed his speech, which was a passionate tour de force. I will speak from a text, so I will be sharper and a bit more focused, I think.

I am very pleased that we are having this debate. It can be quite tempting for the media who report on Parliament to assume that nothing important happens in the final days before the House rises, but the question of how best to strengthen the Union is absolutely the kind of debate that it is useful to have at this point in the parliamentary year.

Worrying about the state of the Union is a perennial occupation of British politics. It was not a new idea in 1601, when we had the Union of the Crowns. It has to be remembered that that was achieved by the King of Scotland becoming the King of England. I will come on to unhelpful narratives about the Union later, but suffice it to say that the myth of English domination does not really bear scrutiny.

In the corridor outside my office, there is an extract from *The Illustrated London News* of 10 August 1895. By that point, the Union had begun almost three centuries before, and one would be forgiven for thinking that it was relatively secure. But, even then, people were worrying about the Union.

“What does Unionism really mean?”,

two ladies ask their kindly Victorian vicar. “It means”, he replies:

“union of a mighty nation, union of national interests and, ladies and gentlemen, union of hearts”.

One hundred and twenty-three years on, that seems as good an explanation of why we have the Union and how it works and binds us together as any we may find. I encourage colleagues to have a look at the extract. It is conveniently located just off the Committee Corridor, and—I am pleased to say—a very short walk from the SNP offices.

Today also happens to mark the end of my time on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, three days short of eight years of continuous service. I would like to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) and for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for their chairmanship and friendship, and to all colleagues past and present I have had the pleasure and honour of working with over the last eight years.

I am not presenting my absence on the Committee as an especially great threat to the strength of the Union, but it does give me pause to consider the situation in Northern Ireland today. There remain too many of what we euphemistically term “legacy issues”, violence is too quick to flare up and there remain a number of people well-trained, well-equipped and motivated to cause serious

[Jack Lopresti]

disorder and loss of life. The legal status of the soldiers and security personnel who kept Northern Ireland and all the UK safe by fighting terrorism remains in question, while the Executive and the whole question of power sharing have been suspended for 18 months.

Unionism means we cannot just look at these problems as if they were distant from and unconnected to us. If Unionism is to mean a union of national interests and of hearts, as I believe it does, we should apply ourselves to these questions as if they were within our very own constituencies. I welcome the fact that the Government have taken direct action to ensure that good governance and public services continue. Again, if Unionism is to have any real meaning, the British Government, in the absence of a devolved Administration, must be willing and able to do the right thing.

The answer to the question, “How can we strengthen the Union in Northern Ireland?” is self-evident, and has been repeated time and again in this House: there needs to be a power-sharing Executive restored, an Assembly back in action and a lasting commitment to devolved government. While people from across the UK should support both sides in the process of restoring the Executive, we should all be equally clear that narrow, partisan, party political games are unacceptable.

Nevertheless, we must not allow the challenges facing Northern Ireland to blind us to the real strength of the Union, both there and elsewhere. Devolution is continuing apace in Wales, with the Assembly transformed into a fully-fledged legislature with responsibility not just for spending taxes but for raising them. The strength of devolution, though, and the reason it is good for the Union, is that devolution does not mean separation. I am proud to have both the Great Western line and the second Severn crossing in my constituency, which overlooks the Severn estuary into Wales. Wales and the south-west have extremely close links on every level, and I am proud that the world-renowned defence and aerospace industries in my constituency are daily enhanced and empowered by the contribution of commuters from Wales. That is soon to be helped dramatically by the abolition of the Severn bridge tolls.

The thing we can do, not as parliamentarians but as members of the Union, to most strengthen the Union is to fight the false narratives that suggest it was imposed on the nations of the UK. Throughout the centuries of the Union, men and women from Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and England have come together to do wonderful things and have improved the world massively. The contribution that each nation of the United Kingdom has made to the world is immense and it is an honour to be in a Union with all. We must not let win out the voices that claim that the English or the Union itself hold them back or oppress them. We must all remind one another what this great Union has achieved through free association and, as the Victorian vicar put it, what we can achieve through this union of nations, union of national interests and union of hearts.

6.43 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti). I congratulate him on his eight years on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

As we would say on this side of the House, he has done his time down the salt mine. I am not sure what he is going to do next.

I am rather perplexed that the Government have called this debate in their own time on the second to last day before the summer recess, but it is welcome indeed, for a number of reasons. It is an opportunity to put the positive case for the Union and to expose for what they are the political games played in the Chamber in the last few months. I have the utmost respect for my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), the SNP spokesperson, and for his oratory—he is well-known for it locally as well—but I am completely astonished that he could stand up in the Chamber in 2018 and say that, if there were a vote in the House to bring down a Labour Government that ushered in 18 years of Conservative Government, he would do exactly the same again. It is an astonishing thing for an SNP politician to admit.

Tommy Sheppard *rose*—

Ian Murray: I am happy to give way if the hon. Gentleman wants to clarify the comment, but we have it on the record.

Tommy Sheppard: To clarify the record, that is not what I said. I said that, in retrospect, had I been there at that time, I would have made the same decision. That is not the same as saying I would vote to do it today.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman also said that the SNP in 1979 withheld consent. It did not withhold consent; it voted with the Conservative Opposition to give the Opposition a one-vote majority, which brought down the Labour Government and ushered in 18 years of Conservative rule.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) rightly said from the Front Bench, we are here because we are currently stuck with two nationalist Governments, one here in London and one at Holyrood in Edinburgh. She was also right to quote John Smith, who lived in my constituency and was the best Prime Minister this country never had. He did say—I am happy to quote it again for the record—that we had two parties sawing away at the legs that supported the Union. He said that then, but it is actually more relevant today.

Let me tell the House why we have two parties sawing away at the legs of the Union, and let me start with the Conservative party. I have made the contention today, and will make it tonight, that the Conservative party is as big a threat to the Union, whether it be Wales, Ireland or Scotland, as any nationalist party in Wales, Ireland or Scotland, and let me say why. The Conservatives bet the farm on an EU referendum and had the arrogance to think they could win it, but they lost it, having put no plans in place for what would happen beyond that.

In 2014, on the steps of Downing Street, the very same person who gambled the farm, the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, as the sun was rising over London, and before all the votes in the independence referendum had even been counted, declared his intention to introduce English votes for English laws, a completely unnecessary procedure in this House that has failed miserably. In that regard, I agree wholeheartedly with

the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who has railed against EVEL for many years, despite having supported it previously. That kind of thing goes straight to the heart of how the Conservative party is undermining the Union.

What about the continued and unnecessary austerity? It is a political choice to have austerity as a policy central to government, but it has not worked. It has trebled the national debt to nearly £2 trillion and we still have a deficit—the Government promised to wipe it by 2015, but I am not even sure they will wipe it by the projected 2022-23; it may be decades beyond that. Then there was the creation of a hostile environment, not just for migrants coming to contribute to this country, but for anybody in this country who happened to be in the unfortunate circumstances of claiming social security.

Then we have Ministers being dragged to the House by urgent questions to explain why they had to cheat on votes in the House to get policies through last week. I am sorry I was unable to ask a question in the urgent question. I would have asked what the Government would have done had the Opposition broken a pairing deal last week with someone on maternity leave on the Government Benches and won that vote. The Government would be dragging us all back here as quickly as possible to have that vote again.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of information—perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not here for the urgent question—there have been 66 breaches in pairing arrangements, 52 of which were by Opposition parties, not the Government side.

Ian Murray: I was not here for the urgent question, so I cannot clarify those figures, but I can say that in my eight years in the House the Opposition have won three votes, so breaking those pairing arrangements has obviously not affected the operation of Parliament, and I do think it important to maintain the pairing arrangements.

Then we get on to the way the Government have dealt with the Brexit process in terms of devolution. It has not been the Secretary of State for Scotland's finest hour. I am sure that if we could wind the clock back to April, May or June and have those debates again, the Government would have dealt with it differently. We had promise after promise at the Dispatch Box from the Secretary of State, and all those promises were wiped aside. I intervened on the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) at least nine times, if not more—maybe he can tell us during his contribution—to ask when it was all going to happen, what his objections were and how they were going to resolve those devolution problems, and I am still waiting to hear the answers. I look forward to him telling us when I intervene on him during his speech later.

Then we have a Government in chaos, with resignation after resignation after resignation: the Secretary of State in charge of the negotiations to take us out of the EU, gone; the worst Foreign Secretary in history, gone; and all just a few parliamentary weeks away from having to agree the final EU deal.

Then we have the question of a hard Brexit. Everyone is going, "What's a hard Brexit? What's a soft Brexit?" However, when we look at what the Government are doing, we are hurtling towards a no deal Brexit. The Government put together—cobbed together after two years—what

they now affectionately call the Chequers agreement. The following week, they undermined that very same agreement by accepting amendments to the Trade Bill and the customs Bill that have driven a horse and coaches—a "corse and hoaches" if you have been drinking the same whisky as the Minister who opened the debate—right through that agreement. Not only did those changes undermine the agreement, but the EU had already ruled out the agreement in its original form. We are heading for a hard or no deal Brexit, and all that is happening in the Government at the moment is that people are trying to fight for the keys to No. 10, rather than for what is in this country's interests.

Everyone in this House, to a person, will absolutely agree that there should be no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, the Government have set red lines in the Brexit process that make that completely and utterly unachievable, which undermines the fabric of the United Kingdom. I keep asking Ministers this question, but I cannot get an answer, so it would be interesting to hear an answer from the Scottish Conservative MPs this evening. If the Government can argue, with the red lines that they have set, that they will no longer require any kind of border equipment on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, if the UK and the Republic of Ireland are in two different trade and customs arrangements, how could they possibly argue, in the event of another independence referendum, that we would require a border between Scotland and England?

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is restating the oft-repeated myth about the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. I do not know whether he noticed that EU negotiators—Juncker and Barnier—promised the Irish Government this week that there would not have to be any kind of checks at the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, even in the event of no deal. If there can be no checks with no deal, we can have no checks with any sort of deal.

Ian Murray: That is an extraordinary comment. We will see what happens come 29 March 2019 or after the transition period. I just do not think that the right hon. Gentleman can achieve what he wants to achieve with the Government's current negotiating position.

The Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson promised during the 2017 snap general election that, if Scottish Conservative MPs were sent to Westminster, they would stand against the Prime Minister's hard Brexit and deliver what would be in Scotland's best possible interests—[HON. MEMBERS: "She never said that."] Well, if she did not say that, perhaps the Scottish Conservative MPs can tell me what she did say. Ruth Davidson stands up day after day, week after week, to rail against her own Government here at Westminster, while the 13 Scottish Conservative MPs loyally traipse into the Lobby to put through the hard Brexit and everything else that is upsetting for Scotland.

Stephen Kerr *rose*—

Ian Murray: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman, and "one opportunity" means "one opportunity".

Last week, every single vote in this House on Monday and Tuesday on the customs Bill and the Trade Bill was passed with a majority fewer than the number of Scottish

[Ian Murray]

Conservative MPs. If they did what they promised to do, we would be in a much better position. That is why they are undermining the Union.

Let me quickly go on to why the SNP is undermining the Union. It does not want the Union; it wants independence for Scotland. The SNP's proposals for Scottish independence are now in this growth commission report, which has been fundamentally torn apart by anyone who has ever read it who does not want independence. This morning, the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) talked about a no deal Brexit potentially meaning 50 years of austerity in the UK, but the growth commission report promises 25 years of austerity.

Tommy Sheppard: Will the hon. Gentleman way?

Ian Murray: I cannot, because I need to wrap up. If the model in the growth commission report had been applied over the past decade, Scotland would have had £60 billion less to spend on public services than has been the case. The SNP is therefore proposing austerity-max.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I cannot. Madam Deputy Speaker wants me to wrap up and I would not like to upset her.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald *rose—*

Ian Murray: I am happy to upset the hon. Gentleman, but I am not going to upset Madam Deputy Speaker.

I will wrap things up with a few remarks that point out why the SNP is just as big a threat to the Union as the Conservatives. All the analysis of the Scottish NHS has shown that, even under a Conservative Government who have been putting less and less into the NHS than previous Labour Governments, Barnett consequentials have not been passed to the Scottish NHS through the Scottish Government to the tune of anything between £340 million and £750 million, depending on the measure used.

There are a few things that will strengthen the Union and keep it together. A soft Brexit is one. We need a more transparent Joint Ministerial Committee that works. As the hon. Member for Stirling said in a Westminster Hall debate, Departments should be retagged to state whether they are English or UK Departments. We should have a federal constitution that deals not only with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but with England, which is too large, with the north-west and the north-east not feeling as well represented as they could be. We need to stop both Governments fighting over the constitution and to start celebrating and developing devolution. I will finish by plagiarising Nye Bevan, who said of the NHS that it will survive while there are people left in politics who will fight for it. Well, the UK will only survive if there are people willing to fight for it, and Scottish Labour always will.

6.55 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). I was, however, a little surprised by his extreme and unfounded criticism of

Scottish Conservative Members, particularly when he so often love-bombs Conservative voters in Edinburgh South, on whom he relies to ensure the majority that gets him elected to this place.

It will come as no surprise to the House that I am a passionate advocate of this United Kingdom, which is partly because nowhere is the strength of our Union more obvious than in my constituency in the Scottish borders, where going to work or to the nearest supermarket or visiting friends and family can mean travelling across the border perhaps once or twice in a single journey.

The preservation of the United Kingdom is not only one of this House's biggest challenges, but one of its biggest opportunities. However, we have unfortunately failed to address that properly over many years. The Union has never been in doubt over most of its history, so there has never been the need overtly to defend it. The Union has evolved organically, with no written constitution at its heart, so it lacks the texts and the formalities that define other nations, but I stress that that is a good thing. Witness the way in which our Union accepted and allowed a referendum on independence in 2014, when there was a democratic case for it, and compare that with the reaction in other nations that we consider to be free and fair.

However, this more flexible, uncodified, relaxed Unionism always runs the risk of lapsing into complacency and indifference, especially when faced by an organised and highly political opponent such as the SNP, whose sole *raison d'être* is to find grievance at every opportunity. The people have seen through that, sending a message to the First Minister in last year's general election, when the dramatic loss of support led to more than 20 fewer nationalist MPs.

The current situation should be seen as a starting point, not the end, so I welcome the UK Government's recent announcements, including over £1 billion investment in five regional growth deals in Scotland and the basing of a spaceport in the north of Scotland, highlighting their commitment to our United Kingdom. But more must be done. There is no reason the next big investment in infrastructure should be in London when it could be just as effective in Lisburn, Livingston or Llandudno. During the 2012 Olympics, the football venues were spread throughout our islands, and there is no reason that could not be done again in a UK-wide World cup. A nation that spreads its power networks across the country will ensure that all of us, no matter where we live, feel that we have a real stake in it. While I may have opposed Brexit, there is no doubt that leaving the European Union and returning substantial powers to the UK can be used as a catalyst for that reform.

Stephen Kerr: Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to remind the House that all Conservative Members of Parliament, whether in Scotland, England or Wales, were elected on a manifesto commitment to leave the European Union, the customs union, the single market and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes a fair and reasonable point. While I voted remain, I am also a democrat. Just as the SNP should accept the referendum result of 2014, I accept the referendum result of 2016, and we were all elected to ensure that we deliver Brexit and get the best deal for Scotland and the entire United Kingdom.

Whitehall needs to consider the maintenance and promotion of the Union as one of its central tasks, not as a bolt-on extra. When the Union was in peril during the independence referendum, that worked well. Civil servants wrote a series of analysis papers pointing out the strengths of the UK internal market and the UK's integrated system, but it should not require the threat of separation to ensure that that becomes a matter of course. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister got there first in a speech last year where she acknowledged that Whitehall often devolves and forgets. Her proposal was to ensure that in reserved areas, the UK Government explicitly look after the interests of the Union in their policy making, while in devolved areas they must look for ways to collaborate and work together to improve outcomes for everyone. Scotland has two Governments, and it is time they were seen to be working in partnership—not against each other—to improve the lives of all the Scots whom we represent as Scottish constituency MPs.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is the vice-Chair of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. We have the Chair in the Chamber, too, and I am a member. Does he agree that the Committee is a fantastic example of all parties coming together, working together, discussing the UK Government and the Scottish Government and scrutinising what is going wrong? We need to see more of that working together, and less of the appalling and embarrassing shouting we have seen in the Chamber today.

John Lamont: I agree with the hon. Lady. We work very well across that Committee. It is a good example of parties and parliamentarians coming together to highlight the issues that many of our constituents have to deal with day to day.

The dualling of the A1—the issue affects my constituency—all the way from Northumberland to Edinburgh would be a great example of partnership between the UK Government and the Scottish Government. This should be built in as a strategic aim for Whitehall and one for St Andrew's House to pursue.

As with most things, there is no silver bullet for strengthening our Union for everyone. I know from being out on the doorsteps in my constituency that people in Scotland want their two Governments working in synergy. We should strengthen our Union because it is the will of the people of our land. Recent polling by Policy Exchange clearly demonstrates that the majority of people across the United Kingdom are in favour of the Union in its current form. Some 68% of people in England, 52% of people in Scotland, 66% of people in Wales and 59% of people in Northern Ireland want a continuation of the Union.

However, that polling also confirms that there are concerns across all parts of the United Kingdom about the impact of Brexit on our Union. Majorities in all nations of the UK said that they believed Brexit would make the break-up of the UK more likely. That is the challenge, and it is why this debate is so important. With the nationalists constantly looking for grievance and new opportunities to stoke the separatist fire, we must do more to invest in our Union to ensure that it lasts for many more hundreds of years to come.

The recently published Policy Exchange paper, which was released on the back of the polling, sets out a number of suggestions as to how we might address the challenges.

Bearing in mind the consequences of the new powers landing in different parts of the UK as we leave the European Union, we need better to understand the idea of shared rule across the UK as a whole. At the same time, we need to respect the value of devolution with the rights of the devolved institutions.

Intergovernmental relations within the UK have not been as good as they should have been, and that could be exaggerated as Brexit happens because many of the powers repatriated from Brussels will fall within the competency of the devolved Administrations. We therefore need to revisit how the Joint Ministerial Committee works to build better trust between the Westminster Government and the devolved Administrations.

The Scottish Conservatives will bow to no one in promoting and defending Scotland's interests and making its voice heard across the United Kingdom. Where we differ from the SNP is that we will not do so with the express purpose of trying to split the country in two. Far too often, the SNP picks fights purely for their own sake. This is the SNP's reason for existence. The difference, though, between us and the SNP is that we will pick fights not because we want to rip up the Union, but because we insist it works better. We have already seen that is a more effective way of standing up for Scotland as the approach of the Scottish Conservative MPs has secured wins such as the VAT refund for Police Scotland and fair pay for our brave men and women in our armed forces.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman talks about fair pay for those in the armed forces. What about the 220 not getting paid the living wage in Scotland?

John Lamont: It is very clear that those in the armed forces who were going to be paying extra because of the nat tax imposed by the Scottish Government will not have to pay it. It is fair that everyone across the United Kingdom who works for the armed forces gets paid the same, regardless of where they are based.

I will ensure that I spend my time here, however long or short that may be, as effectively as I can. That means standing up for Scotland in a constructive and beneficial way, not storming out and throwing tantrums, as we have seen from SNP Members. Voters are tired of the politics of division. Let us give them what they want: a strengthened Scotland and a strengthened United Kingdom.

7.5 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It seems a curious pleasure to be speaking in this debate this evening. Just when we thought the House was going to adjourn early for the summer recess to assist a beleaguered Prime Minister, we find ourselves here, debating the Union. With the UK facing an unprecedented crisis, with a rudderless Government, a leadership in crisis and a divided party about to face the Brexit precipice, the most important thing that the Government can think of to debate on the day before Parliament adjourns is the Union. I wonder what businesses in Scotland think about that. What will EU nationals who are worried about the future think about it? What will academic institutions think about it, and what will hard-pressed families seeing such a massive reduction in their household income because of their Brexit make of the obsession of these Conservatives to discuss the Union on the day before we adjourn for the long summer holiday?

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way on this point, because it is important. He is criticising the UK Government for having a debate about strengthening the Union. The Scottish National party has had two debates in this term. Its last one was on the claim of right. Why did his party not choose European topics to discuss when it had the opportunity?

Pete Wishart: I will tell the hon. Gentleman what we will do: we will try to help him out with the issue about strengthening the Union. You know me, Madam Deputy Speaker; I try as much as possible to be helpful in these debates.

Let us see how helpful it might be to the hon. Gentleman to look at a whole range of issues just now and see whether he would put them into the “Strengthening the Union” column or the “Diminishing and weakening the Union” column. Let us start with Brexit. How will we get on with that one? [*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman is chuntering away. It is what they do. I say to him that the Scottish people are watching this debate, and they see him chuntering, heckling and shouting away. They are not impressed with him behaving in such a way.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman is criticising me for apparently chuntering, but the point is I asked him a question two minutes ago that he has not answered. It would be respectful to this Parliament to answer the point, rather than chuntering away through his speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I want to emphasise again that using points of order just to get interventions in the debate on the record—the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was guilty earlier—needs to stop. It is not fair on others. Lots of Members want to speak, and this is not the way we should be having these debates.

Pete Wishart: The people of Scotland are watching, and what they are observing is something that they do not particularly like. Sometimes I wish the cameras would swing around when Scottish Conservative Members are at the height of their heckling and shouting, just so the Scottish public could see how they behave in this Parliament, but let us get back to the debate.

Let us look at a number of issues and help the Scottish Conservative Members assess whether those things are helping strengthen the Union. Is the way that the Government are so consensually and deftly negotiating this Brexit process helping to strengthen the Union? That is a hard, challenging question, because we have a Scotland that voted 62% to 38% against this mad, chaotic Brexit. In increasing numbers, Scottish people are deciding they want absolutely nothing to do with it. Some may say that this clueless, chaotic and delusional approach to the most significant constitutional change that Scotland has faced since the war may not necessarily go into the credit column in the debate on strengthening the Union.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I ask the hon. Gentleman to face the Chair?

Pete Wishart: Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Let us look at where we are when it comes to Brexit. On the Brexit “madcon” scale, we are now at madcon 10. A no deal Brexit has now moved up from being possible to being likely. What does that mean for Scotland? According to a range of civil servants from right across Whitehall, the port of Dover will collapse on day one as Kent and the whole of the south-east of England becomes one big lorry park, while supermarkets in Scotland will run out of food within a couple of days and hospitals will run out of medicines within two weeks.

The UK Government—for goodness’ sake—are even preparing to issue 70 technical notices to families and businesses in the event of a no deal Brexit. We have had a little joke about can openers, but the Government are advising families to stock up on canned food, and they are telling businesses to prepare for a sudden exodus of EU nationals. That is what the UK Government are now saying to hard-pressed families in Scotland—and that before we even get on to air travel, holidays by the sea and mobile phone roaming.

However, Scotland will be hit the hardest economically by what the Conservatives are planning with their no deal, hard Brexit. Not only would we have conditions akin to a state of emergency, but Scotland’s economy could lose up to £10 billion a year—a fall of 5% in our GDP—with real household incomes falling by 9.6% for each family in Scotland, or by £2,263 per head. There may be some people who say that all these things will help to strengthen the Union, but may I offer the counter-contention? When people in Scotland get the opportunity to weigh up their constitutional options, they could choose the chaotic cluelessness of these Tories or they could decide that they want to manage their own affairs themselves, and I have a good idea of what the Scottish people will decide and conclude.

Let us look at another example of what the Conservatives are doing and assess the strengthening the Union column: what the hon. Gentlemen and the Conservative party are doing to our national Parliament with the power grab. Perhaps that is another cunning ruse to strengthen the Union and make the people of Scotland fall in love with the UK all over again. Devolution has been on an seamless trajectory since 1999—I have been in this Parliament since 2001 and I have seen three Scotland Acts, all of which gave significant new powers to our national Parliament—but with their Brexit, that has all ended, because for the first time devolution has been stopped and they have started to reverse it. The model with the reserved powers arrangement in the Scottish Parliament has served it so well—that has been the founding principle and the thing that has guided devolution through the past two decades—but the Conservative Government have decided that that is enough, and they are not prepared to allow devolution to go any further.

The Scottish Conservative MPs sometimes misunderstand the power grab, and I am quite surprised that they have not all been saying, “What powers are being grabbed from the Scottish Parliament?” I have never said that any powers will be taken from the Scottish Parliament—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Now I have their attention, let me tell them how the power grab works.

There are powers returning from Europe. According to schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998, the reserved powers should go to the Westminster Parliament, but powers in devolved areas should go to the devolved legislatures. What has happened is that all the reserved

powers are going back to the UK Parliament, but the devolved powers have been grabbed and given to this House. It is called a power grab because powers that should be given to the Scottish Parliament have been grabbed by this Government. I hope that helps Scottish Conservative Members to understand properly what is happening.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that what he is describing is a power release from Brussels to Scotland, rather than a power grab?

Pete Wishart: I have never said anything about no powers coming back to the UK. The point is that the powers that should rightly reside in the right hon. Gentleman's Parliament and in my Parliament have been grabbed by the UK Government, and they will now be resting in Westminster, not in our devolved Assemblies. This is really important because our Parliaments—the right hon. Gentleman's and the one in my nation—depend on the reserved powers model, and if that is broken, devolution is broken.

The Conservatives have started to muck about with the founding principles of our Parliament, and the Scottish people are watching: they are looking at what the Conservatives are doing, and they are not impressed. It is in line with what they are doing with the Sewel convention in relation to taking legitimate decisions of the Scottish Parliament to the Supreme Court to be challenged and possibly overturned. People may say that this all helps to strengthen the Union and that it is a very clever and cunning ruse by the Conservatives to get us back on board with the Union. However, I suggest that, once again, it is undermining their Union, and the power grab was very much to the weakening of the Union cause.

Douglas Ross: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I do not have time to take any more interventions.

I ask the Scottish Conservative MPs—I may give way to one or two of them later—whether they are helping to strengthen or to weaken the Union in this Parliament. They came down here with 29% of the vote—the “Ruth Davidson opposes a second referendum” party did relatively well in Scotland—but they have lost five percentage points in the past year. Their constituents are watching them whine on about a Parliament and a Government 400 miles away, and they are sick and tired of being represented by people who could not care less about their duties and functions in the House, but everything about a Parliament that they can no longer question, and that is having an impact on what they are doing.

We could get on to English votes for English laws. Does that strengthen or weaken the Union? Well, there is a hard one. We could also get on to the £1 billion that Democratic Unionist party Members were able to secure, of which Scottish Conservatives have not been able to get a single penny. However, let us just sum up where we are in the wider debate. If we look across the range of defining constitutional issues, we find, when the people of Scotland are tested in opinion polls, that independence now stands at 47%, or two percentage points up from our very impressive gains in 2014. We are very much on

a journey with all this. Independence remains more or less at the level we had in 2014, and we are not even campaigning for independence at the moment.

The defining feature in all this will be the Conservatives' Brexit—their hard Brexit—and how the Scottish people start to assess the situation. Scotland is currently tethered to HMS Brexitannia, which is heading full speed for the biggest iceberg ever encountered in political history. Unlike the real Titanic, this HMS Brexitannia is hurtling towards an iceberg at full speed in the full knowledge that that will sink the ship and all the souls on board.

For Scotland, however, there are lifeboats attached to this doomed and stricken liner, and they are marked “Independence”. All we in Scotland need to do is clamber aboard, get them off the vessel as quickly as possible and row towards the shores of independence, security and sanity.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind hon. Members that I said if they keep to less than 10 minutes, everyone will get in. This is about being considerate to others.

7.17 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I am trying to cheer myself up, as his crystal ball looks rather gloomy at the moment—I hope it brightens up as the weeks go past.

I am a staunch supporter of this sovereign country. It is a Union of nations—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—which makes me a very happy Scot and very happy to be a Unionist. I do not want someone, a group of people or even a cult taking away from me my Britishness and giving me nothing back, except selling my soul back to Europe, which is the direction of travel SNP Members wish to take.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am sorry, but is the hon. Gentleman referring to the Scottish National party as a cult?

Bill Grant: I mentioned that a cult is driving forward the break-up of the United Kingdom. If you are suggesting that that is the SNP, that is entirely your choice.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I once again say that we do not use the word “you” when referring to Members across the Chamber? “You” means me, which is lovely if you are talking to me. I ask Members to stick to that, otherwise it becomes very distracting.

Bill Grant: I will do so, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Within my own home, there is not simply a matrimonial union, but also a micro-union of nations, given that I was born in Scotland and my wife was born in Nottingham in England. She and I work together as a team and have done so for quite a long time—some 47 years, which I might add is longer than we have been in the European Union. We work as a team, and teamwork is just as important for the constituent parts comprising the United Kingdom.

[Bill Grant]

One may well ask, “Why support this historical and cultural Union when you’re about to leave the European Union?” Perhaps Sir Winston Churchill summoned it up best in days gone by when he said:

“We see nothing but good and hope in a richer, freer, more contented European commonalty. But we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked, but not comprised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed.”

In more recent times, the Prime Minister has been endeavouring to ensure that the UK will form a new partnership with the European Union and has been aiming to build a fairer, stronger and more global Britain. Unlike others in the Chamber, I am confident that a deal will be achieved, despite the scaremongering we hear from various quarters.

It is clear that we must strengthen the precious Union between the four nations of the United Kingdom. As powers are repatriated to Britain, the right powers will be returned to Westminster and the right powers—many, many of them—will be passed back to the devolved nations. Indeed, in Scotland the SNP has suites of new offices in Glasgow and is recruiting a raft of new employees, which is strange if we in Westminster are taking all these powers away in what has been described as a power grab—I thank the SNP for that.

Developments since the 1707 Treaty of Union have in recent times included the emergence of devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. However, these devolved Administrations do not operate in isolation. Far from it: for example, much of the devolved Administrations’ spending is funded by grants from the UK Government—a common source and common pool to which all the nations contribute and from which they all benefit. One only has to think of the Barnett formula, which determines the annual change to the block grant and seeks to ensure that changes to funding in England are replicated for comparable services elsewhere in this United Kingdom.

The purpose of devolution was to devolve, not to divide, its aims and aspirations to make government more local for the four nations and apply localised solutions to localised issues.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the powers being devolved from here to the Governments in Holyrood and Cardiff should be devolved further down to local authorities and the areas distinct to them?

Bill Grant: I do agree with that; indeed, the hon. Gentleman has obviously seen the next line of my speech.

The journey has not made government more local, but has seen the weakening of councils and the centralisation of services such as the fire service—my own service—and the police service in Scotland, to the detriment of the aspirational vision and intention behind devolution.

The Scottish independence referendum of 2014 asked the question, “Should Scotland become an independent country?” My constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock covers two council areas, East Ayrshire and South Ayrshire. Both returned a resounding no. They wanted to remain part of the Union, and that is the way it should remain, despite the continuing threats on a daily

if not weekly basis about indyref2. No respect is shown for that decision—I think 28 of the 32 authority areas in Scotland voted to remain in the Union.

There are greater strength in numbers and greater economies of scale to be achieved when our nations are united, with their historical and cultural links. We need consensus not convergence, co-operation not conflict. The Joint Ministerial Committee facilitates partnership working on devolved issues at ministerial level and was referred to in a previous debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). However, what really caught my attention was his suggestion of the creation of “a new and powerful Department of the Union at Cabinet level”.—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 142WH.]

That would help to bind together Secretaries of State for Departments of Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland. I believe the idea merits further consideration.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Is that not what No. 10 Downing Street is supposed to do?

Bill Grant: That is a very interesting point. [*Interruption.*] Yes, it is, but while things are very good, they could be better. Therefore, we need to improve on that good performance. We should be continually improving our performance to strive for a better set of circumstances.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend is making an important point, just as the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) did in his intervention. In Canada, for example, the current Prime Minister is the equivalent of a Secretary of State for the Union—such is the importance of driving the Union forward together.

Bill Grant: I believe the UK Government must do more in every policy area and, as my hon. Friend says, at every level to ensure that we do not simply devolve and forget. The UK Government still have a role to play in the devolved nations, and we must remember that the Scottish Parliament was never designed to replace Westminster, but rather to complement it.

I am confident that the leader of the main Opposition party in the Scottish Parliament, who relentlessly supports the Union, will nevertheless always stand up for Scotland’s place in the United Kingdom. Together as a United Kingdom we achieve much, but despite the scaremongering, I believe that our best days as a Union are yet to come. As another Scot, Robert Burns, said:

“O let us not, like snarling tykes,
In wrangling be divided;
’Till slap come in an unco loon,
And wi’ a rung decide it.
Be Britain still to Britain true,
Amang oursels united;
For never but by British hands
Maun British wrangs be righted.”

7.25 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here on this of all Mondays, speaking up for my constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. In short, it is a pleasure to continue working on their behalf, as I will be throughout the summer recess.

Now to the Union, of which I am proud and which I campaigned tirelessly to defend. Today we are gathered here as the democratically elected representatives of the

people of Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales. We are here to hold this shambles of a Government to account. We are here to fight for a sensible way forward on our relationship with the European Union. We are here to fight for and defend the jobs of working people in all four nations of the United Kingdom. We are here to ensure that the internal dynamics and fallouts of the Tory party do not decide the future of our country. We are here to defend the principles upon which the national health service was formed. And, as the debates over recent weeks have shown us, we are here to defend all that is good about our country and fight against all that is bad.

I am here to ensure that Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill has a loud, passionate, effective and local voice down here in Westminster. I am also a champion of our community in North Lanarkshire, which I am proud to serve. As I have said in the House before, my pitch to the people in my constituency at the snap general election was pretty simple. I had spent my career working for Royal Mail Parcelforce and delivering parcels to people across my constituency. I asked them to send me down here to continue delivering for them. I was grateful for the opportunity to serve then and I am grateful for it today.

As we approach the summer recess, I reflect on the last year that I have spent here. I am proud to be a Member of the Parliament of the United Kingdom and I am proud to have the chance to stand up for my neighbours and friends and for all communities. I am determined to spend every day I have in this place focusing on getting a better deal for working people.

It is always tempting to call out the Government for their heartless policies, their misplaced priorities and their lack of respect for the people of England, the people of Wales, the good people of Northern Ireland and the fine people of Scotland. In last year's general election, Tory MPs from Scotland were called "Ruth Davidson's Conservatives". They were meant to be compassionate. They were meant to care. They were meant to be different. That was all an image—a campaigning narrative, a fiction. The last year has shown that Scottish Tories on the Government Benches may have been elected as Ruth Davidson's Conservatives, but they are now Theresa's terrible Tories.

Andrew Bowie: Can the hon. Gentleman tell me how many times he has voted against the Leader of Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and what he has told him to do?

Hugh Gaffney: The point is that had the Tories done what they said they were going to do when they came down here, we would have a different result.

Tory MSPs and their leader in Holyrood are just numbers for Nicola's nationalists and their austerity agenda. And then there is the SNP, which has been in government for more than a decade. The problems faced by working people in Scotland lie squarely at the door of the SNP and the Tories. Look at the budget cuts to local government across Scotland—the impact of decisions made by the SNP Government in Holyrood. Look at the housing crisis facing Scottish families, with some 50,000 children living in poverty—the impact of decisions made by the SNP Government in Holyrood. Look at the fact that food bank use in Scotland is the

highest it has ever been—bad decisions taken by the Tories and made worse by the impact of decisions taken by the SNP Government in Holyrood.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman will be as aware as I am of the cuts across every policy budget area in Wales. Is that the fault of the Labour Government?

Hugh Gaffney: No, it is the fault of the two Governments we have got just now.

As Tony Graham, the Scottish director of the Trussell Trust, said,

"it is completely unacceptable that anyone is forced to turn to a food bank in Scotland".

We are, we must be, and we always will be better than that. The decisions taken by politicians make a difference. They have an impact and they do change lives.

I was thinking over the weekend about what I wanted to say today, as I attended a number of community events across the constituency. There was one theme in my thinking: what does this Union mean for my constituents and for our country? What can we do in this Parliament? What can our colleagues in Cardiff Bay, Holyrood and Stormont do to make our four nations better, more inclusive, more equal and more just? As some may say, how can we deliver for the many, not the few?

I am very firmly of the view that the people of all four nations are sovereign. They have the ultimate say. They are our boss, and they have the right to determine the form of government best suited to their needs. That is a principle that I believe in and, importantly, it is a fundamental principle that the Labour party is very proud of. It was a Labour Government who restored power to the people, and it was a Labour Government who allowed the people of Scotland and Wales to vote in Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections to elect a Scottish Government and a Welsh Government as part of our United Kingdom. Devolution strengthened the Union in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and that strength is obvious today. While it is my responsibility to call out the Westminster and Scottish Governments, I respect the fact that each received a mandate from people across the United Kingdom.

I am so sick of seeing in my surgeries and in my inbox stories of the impact of this Tory Government on my constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. On a national level we have seen jobcentres closed; local Department for Work and Pensions offices closed, including one in Coatbridge; housing benefit for under-25s scrapped; support and funding for local authorities across the United Kingdom slashed; and children across the United Kingdom plunged into poverty—and those are the children of parents who work. That is just to name a few of the divisive and unnecessary decisions taken by the Tories, first under Cameron and now under the present Prime Minister.

Since 2010, the Tories have unleashed a programme of unprecedented spending cuts covering all areas of the support network for people in this country. The House of Commons Library has provided information revealing that since 2010 a staggering 86% of the burden of austerity has hit women up and down this country. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 Act did some disgraceful things. I am just sorry that I was not a Member

[Hugh Gaffney]

of this House at that time, because I would have spoken out against the Tories' Act. There was also the abolition of the Child Poverty Act 2010. The Tories and the SNP always talk about the last Labour Government. I welcome that, because the last Labour Government lifted over 1 million children out of poverty.

I want to say a word here about how Labour, when in leadership, can deliver real results for people. In my own area, north Lanarkshire, the Labour-led council, under education officer Councillor Frank McNally, has announced plans to provide free school meals to children who need them, 365 days a year. This is the first time that has happened anywhere in our United Kingdom. I am delighted that the birthplace of Keir Hardie is leading the way, and I hope many others will follow.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: How come that when that same measure was proposed by the SNP administration in Glasgow, Glasgow Labour voted against it?

Hugh Gaffney: It was not a council in Glasgow but a council in north Lanarkshire, and I voted for it.

We will overcome, despite the shambles of the Government here in London. We should not forget that half the Tory party are following the Prime Minister and the other half are following the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). As for the former Foreign Secretary, he is holed up in a grace and favour residence a few minutes away from here with no friends at all.

As I conclude, I would like to wish all the staff of the House—the people who keep this place going—a happy and enjoyable summer recess. I am sure life will be easier without us around. I would like to wish my team and the teams of all Members a happy recess, too. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud of our country, proud of our history and proud of our Union, but above all I am proud of our nation's biggest strength: the people who send us here.

7.35 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

We should speak about some of the positives of our great country, these great nations with so much in common. As I have said before, it came from a man with vision. James VI of Scotland and I of England saw the opportunity in Great Britain. He commissioned the Union flag and regularly pushed for full Union in the United Kingdom. The pushes for the Union were not just with him: they were in 1606, 1667 and 1689—I am sorry the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) is not in his place; we could go history notes on history notes—before finally in 1707 we had the Parliament of Great Britain. Historian Simon Schama was right when he said it was a “full partnership” that became “the most powerful going concern in the world...it was one of the most astonishing transformations in European history.”

That partnership shows that Scotland is not a victim; it is a leader in the United Kingdom.

What have we achieved? We hear a lot in this House about all the negatives of Westminster: how bad it is, what a disgrace it is, how much it has let people down. That is right, Madam Deputy Speaker, it did let people

down: through the industrial revolution, the political enlightenment, the abolition of slavery, the establishment of the NHS, the creation of the welfare state and being a key player in the creation of the United Nations and a whole structure of local governance that has kept peace and security in our world for the past 60 years.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the positive benefits from this Union. Does he agree that one of the key aspects of that great litany of achievements is that Scots have been at the front, leading those achievements throughout history? That is something to which, as an English MP, I pay proper tribute.

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend, and I could not agree more. My office has been involved in helping out a constituent who is championing the cause of a former constituent of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) who was involved in the foundation of Singapore. Often overlooked in favour of Raffles, my constituent is making sure that this noble man from Perth receives the recognition he so rightly deserves.

Our Union enabled us to have victories not only on the battlefield but in sports stadiums, with Scottish athletes bringing 19 gold, 27 silver and five bronze medals in summer Olympics since 1997—trained, funded and championed by Team GB. In science and technology, it is not about competition between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom but working together. One fine example is that of the Boulton and Watt steam engine. The first one in Scotland was in my constituency in Clackmannanshire, used by the Kennetpans distillery. Clackmannanshire led the way in technology then. I hope that, through the geothermal project that I hope the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will support in this House, Clackmannanshire will once again lead the way in technology and renewable energy.

It does not stop there. We also had Dolly the sheep, funded by PPL Therapeutics and the then Ministry of Agriculture. The Forth Road bridge, which was an engineering achievement of its time, was 78% funded by Westminster. More recently and most excitingly for the “Star Trek” fans in this House—I know there are many on the SNP Benches—a collaboration between a Scottish university, the University of Dundee, and an English university, the University of Southampton, funded by UK Research and Innovation, created a tractor beam. How forward-looking could we be?

What is the Union about? It has to be about more than money. With almost the equivalent of one fifth of Scotland's population living in England, it is about the shared values that we hold of democracy, justice and international humanitarian aid, as demonstrated by the nurse, Pauline Cafferkey, who was saving lives abroad in Sierra Leone under the British flag, before falling victim to Ebola. When she returned home to the United Kingdom, she received life-saving treatment in London before returning home to Glasgow. That is what true Union is about.

In the United Kingdom, we are proud not just of the nations, but of our proud regions and counties. That is why in supermarkets people champion Devonshire custard as much as they do Perthshire strawberries. Rather than

there being just a homogenous bloc of Scotland versus England, people want to know the county, town and village—all around the country—from which the products are sourced.

Pete Wishart: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my neighbour, for giving way—[*Interruption.*] He is from south Perthshire; he is my neighbour when it comes to these things. There is very little of what he says that we would ever disagree with or dispute, and in fact, we would probably very much endorse nearly everything he says. However, why does he feel that we need a political Union between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom to enjoy all these wonderful relations, our heritage and our shared history? Surely that is not necessary.

Luke Graham: I thank my neighbour for his intervention. I am glad that we have so much common ground between us. The simple answer is that it gives our constituents the opportunity to leverage not only the combined power of around 5 million, but the full power of over 65 million together to resource their sports, help to fund their armed forces and push forward science and technology in a way that other countries can only dream of. That is why we have this House: individual Members are equal in it. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire is equal to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire—certainly in their place here—or the Members for Oxford West and Abingdon and for Dundee East, and for any other seat in the United Kingdom.

There have been three centuries of family and social ties in the United Kingdom. We have competitive spirit in sport, but for every Scotland versus England rugby match that brings up old rivalries, there is always an episode of “Doctor Who” to bring us back together again. No one should be bullied into choosing between being Scottish or British. People can be Scottish, English, Welsh, Northern Irish and British, and be proud of both.

A lot is said in this House about the differences between parts of the United Kingdom, but when it comes to social attitudes surveys, there are very many times that Scotland and England come out exactly the same in what respondents say. In fact, the only difference is about immigration, on which there is usually a one to two percentage point difference between England and Scotland. When we consider how few immigrants Scotland has had compared with England, we can probably see why there is that result.

Our past battles have been shared, but so are our future challenges, such as climate change, the rate of technological advancement and globalisation. On not one of those challenges will we be better facing it alone. It is by working together that we can combine our resources and look forward, so that we can do things such as improve education, invest in infrastructure, champion initiatives and, for example, launch things that bring together citizenship and science and technology and be the country that brings about the first tractor beam.

At Prime Minister’s questions last week, I mentioned the spaceport in Sutherland as an example of what we can do to provide for the future and our constituents together. We used to be a country that ruled the waves. I hope that in the 21st century, we can be a country that reaches for the stars.

7.43 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am grateful to the Government for giving us this debate, because it has given me the opportunity to wear this skirt, which I had given up wearing after my colleagues reckoned that it was a Unionist skirt and that I should not take it out of the wardrobe anymore. I am very disappointed that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) is not here in his suit, so that we could be matching. I have not seen that suit since the referendum campaign—

Ian Murray: I am wearing a suit.

Alison Thewliss: He knows the suit I mean! If we are talking about clothing, the Union is more like a fur coat, nae knickers type of deal. It is funny how far we have come since the independence referendum and the scare stories that we were given. Lord Robertson said that it would have a “cataclysmic” effect on world security—well, look at where the world is now anyway. There was George Osborne and his currency bluff. There was Alistair Darling and his scares about pensions—tell that to the WASPI women who have not received their pension because of the UK Government’s actions, and that includes parties on both sides of this House. We had talk about border posts between Scotland and England and all the scare stories that went along with it—tell that to those in the island of Ireland who now face that real prospect. I have spoken to people who tell me that the border runs through their kitchen. They cannot even get to their cake to eat it because it will be on the other side of the kitchen if the Government have their way.

I draw the House’s attention to the excellent report by Chartered Institute of Environmental Health on Brexit and food security. It says that there are significant risks to food flow in the United Kingdom, including that the failure to keep food central to the Brexit negotiations could have a catastrophic impact on our food security and for those whose jobs rely on it. It says that UK food resilience is fragile and dependent on “just in time” delivery systems that could quickly grind to a halt if border controls were reimposed. It says that the Government are ambiguous at best on the question of migrant workers and how essential they are to the current working of the UK’s food system and that the current approach is imbalanced, with the specific needs of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, whose economies are highly food-dependent, being repeatedly sidelined. It also criticises the UK Government for their fundamental mistake in aiming only for alignment in farming and manufacturing but not for retail or food service, which are both absolutely huge.

All these concerns fall on deaf ears. These are not scare stories, but legitimate concerns that we never got anywhere close to in the independence debate. The biggest scare story, however, was the prospect of being forced out of the EU. Famously, Better Together tweeted:

“What is process for removing our EU citizenship? Voting yes. #scotdecides”

Scotland decided then, but it is in a very different position now.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will my hon. Friend enlighten the House as to why she thinks that account has deleted that tweet?

Alison Thewliss: I think that the account has perhaps deleted the tweet because it was getting so many retweets from people pointing out the utter hypocrisy of that position. It is entirely in our gift now as a nation to revisit that decision, given what has changed. Just yesterday, I had an email from a constituent who said:

“though I am not a Nat, I am coming to the conclusion that an independent Scotland within the EU would be the best outcome, at least for Scotland, from all this mess.”

Lots of people feel that same way and have reserved the right to change their mind when the circumstances have fundamentally changed.

Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. One of the people who have now said publicly that they have changed their mind is Mike Dailly, director of the Govan Law Centre, who during the referendum campaign was on platforms for Better Together.

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. He joins Murray Foote, one of the authors of “The Vow”, who has come round to the other point of view, having seen where this ridiculous Tory Government have taken us.

I want to turn to a few issues where I feel that Scotland—Scotland’s views and Scotland’s voice—has not been respected. One of the issues that I have campaigned on is the two-child policy and the rape clause. Scotland’s women’s organisations—all of them—and Scotland’s Government spoke out against this policy, but the UK Government have implemented it anyway, in the full and certain knowledge that it would push people into poverty. That policy is not finished now, because from February 2019, regardless of the date of a child’s birth, new claimants will not be able to receive the child amount for three or more children unless an exemption for the third or subsequent child applies. We do not even know what the impact of that policy is yet. The research has not yet been done, but we know that 73,530 households have been affected so far by the two-child policy, and we are only one year in.

What do the demented Unionist Daleks say about this? “Mitigate! Mitigate!” They say “mitigate” for a policy that we did not want, did not vote for and we will not have, but we are having it imposed because child tax credits are a UK Government policy. That ignores the evidence of organisations such as Turn2us, who say that women feel pressured into having abortions because of the two-child limit. It has evidence to suggest that this has actually happened. Government Members sigh and roll their eyes, but this is actually happening in the UK today. It is no Union dividend. This also ignores the fact that no claims under the rape clause have been made in Northern Ireland, probably due not least to the fact that the Attorney General started issuing guidance only a year after the policy came into effect. That was a whole year in which women and organisations were liable to prosecution under the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 as a result of this policy.

Luke Graham: The hon. Lady is making a point about a very sensitive policy area, on which we have had a lot of debates in this House. Does she not realise that when it comes to policies such as this, they are for the entire United Kingdom? I take issue with her divisive tone and her saying that it is Scotland’s problem, not

England’s. These policies affect all the United Kingdom, so if there is an issue, it is an issue with the policy, not the nation.

Alison Thewliss: I have campaigned solidly in favour of getting rid of the policy throughout the UK. All that the Scottish Tories have said—all that those Daleks have said—is “mitigate, and mitigate”, but I want to get rid of it for everyone.

There is another area in which the UK is not doing its part. We want the drug laws to be changed in Scotland. Last year there were 934 drug-related deaths in Scotland, and the vast majority were in the city that I represent. Glasgow City Council and the local health and social care partnership have a plan—a policy. They want to introduce drug consumption rooms, so that we can mitigate the worst of this terrible scourge of society.

There are drug consumption rooms now, but they are in back courts, bin sheds and dirty lanes all over the city. That does not serve anyone well. We have a public health emergency in the city of Glasgow, but all that the Prime Minister could say last week was, “Oh, that is too bad. It is really sad that that people die from drugs.” We have a policy and we want to get on with it, but the UK Government will not devolve that policy. They see fit to allow people in Scotland to go on dying as a result of drug overdoses, when we have a public health solution that could have an impact on their lives.

Then there is the issue of immigration. Scotland needs immigration. We need people to come to our country and participate in our economy, but what do the UK do? They say, “No, you cannot have those powers. Those powers will stay with us.” Constituents of mine who made a minor, legitimate change to their tax returns find themselves, under paragraph 322.5 of the Immigration Rules, branded a threat to national security and told to leave. They are highly skilled migrants who could bring many skills to this country. We should be valuing and thanking them, but what do the UK Government give them? They give them a hostile environment. They give them a policy that Scotland does not want.

When Glasgow City Council was a Labour administration, it put a sign over the door saying, “We welcome refugees”, and I am proud of it for doing so. That is the nation that we ought to have. We want nothing to do with the hostile environment, but while immigration law stays at Westminster, we have no say over this issue. The UK Government should hang their heads in shame.

As for Labour Members, they talk about employment law and low wages, but what did they do? They refused to devolve employment law to Scotland. We want to make those changes. We want to give our people better conditions. In the areas where we do have control, we have encouraged people to take up the real living wage—not the Chancellor’s “pretendy” living wage, which is not available to young people. There has been a high uptake, but we do not have the full control over employment law—over zero-hours contracts, for instance—that we would like to have.

The Labour party did not even deign to give us part of its World cup bid. Immediately after the World cup, Labour Front Benchers were saying, “We should have a World cup bid for England.” It is some Union if Scotland is not even involved in the football. That is literally taking the ball and going away.

I must finish my speech now, and let other Members speak. Let me end with the great words of the White Stripes, in a song that they took from “Citizen Kane”. You will have to forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, because it is a direct quotation, and there will be a “you” in it.

“You said, the union forever
You said, the union forever
You cried, the union forever
But that was untrue, girl.”

7.52 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I think it is important, before I get into the main context of my speech, to pick up some of the highlights we have had so far. I use the word “highlights” with some caution, but we have heard one major admission in the Chamber today. Following a point I made—I wrote it down: “So Welsh Labour believes in the Union, Scottish Labour does not”—at the Dispatch Box, Scottish Labour’s most senior politician in this Parliament, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird), said, “Yes. Where have you been all these years?” The shadow Scottish Secretary confirmed, from the Dispatch Box, that Welsh Labour believes in the Union and Scottish Labour does not. I think that that will be a very important message for people in Scotland to hear because Labour was once a proud Unionist party in Scotland. At the last election and since the referendum, we have seen that it is no longer a strong supporter of the Union, and I am very concerned to hear those words from the hon. Lady.

Lesley Laird: Can I clarify the record, so that there is no misunderstanding? I think that I clarified the issue when I was asked earlier whether I was a Unionist and whether I also supported Scotland. I can confirm both again, not just for me but for my party. We are absolutely a party of the Union. We are a party of democracy. We are the party of devolution and we will not waver from that. If I inadvertently said what the hon. Gentleman says that I said, it was inadvertent, and I absolutely take that statement back.

Douglas Ross: That is a very important clarification because I have checked the official record and I said, in this Chamber, “Does Welsh Labour support the Union and does Scottish Labour not support it?”, and the hon. Lady is on record as saying, “Yes. Where have you been all these years?”

Lesley Laird *rose*—

Douglas Ross: The hon. Lady has clarified that, and I have only 10 minutes in which to speak. I am grateful for her clarification.

Lesley Laird *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Is the hon. Gentleman going to take an intervention?

Douglas Ross: I think that the hon. Lady has clarified the position, and I have only a few minutes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to take the intervention.

Lesley Laird: Having clarified the point, I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman stopped repeating a statement that I have already corrected. That would be extremely helpful, not only to the House but, obviously, to the public outside.

Douglas Ross: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to move on, because I think that is an important point that we have discussed.

There were some other, what I would class as highlights. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) is no longer in his place. I have come very late to “Games of Thrones”. I have just finished watching season 1. Not even “Game of Thrones” season 1 goes as far back as the hon. Gentleman did in his speech. He spoke for 20 minutes, and about 18 of them were prehistoric, but he chose to totally omit some of the major developments that we have had in Scotland. He gave cursory notice to the 2014 independence referendum. I wonder why. Because the SNP lost. Then he mentioned the 2011 Scottish parliamentary elections, where the SNP was elected with a majority. Why then did he not mention the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections, when the SNP lost its majority? It now relies on votes from the Green party to keep itself going.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has also left. He always gives us very entertaining speeches. I had to wonder why we had all this talk about HMS *Brexitannia*, and then it came to me. Clearly, the editor of *The National* had been on the phone and said, “We have a great idea. We have a great picture to put on the front page of *The National*, but we need someone to give us a story”—and, as always, the hon. Gentleman obliged.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: May I take the hon. Gentleman back to his point about elections? What happened to the Conservative party in 2017? Did it lose its majority and does it now have to rely on another party to get things through Parliament?

Douglas Ross: Yes, and we have discussed that many times but, as a minority, we are governing in the United Kingdom. We can keep going on about elections. We can speak about the 162 extra Conservative councillors who were elected in 2017—more than any other party in Scotland. We can speak about the 13 Scottish Conservatives elected to this Parliament, or the 21 SNP MPs who lost their seats. I am quite happy to compare election results with the hon. Gentleman.

I want to return to the subject of the referendum that we held in Scotland in 2014. My Moray constituency was very clear: 58% of people in Moray said no to separation. We had another referendum in 2016 and Moray came closer than any other part of Scotland to voting leave: 49.9% of people voted leave, compared with 50.1%—a difference of just 122. So when we hear that Scotland voted by such a big margin against leaving the European Union, we must always remember and respect the fact that there are people in all our constituencies who voted to leave the European Union and we have to try to get a deal that works for everyone.

This, however, is a debate about strengthening the Union. I am delighted to take part in this debate because in Moray we know about the strength of the Union far better than many others—because we have a great defence footprint in the constituency. We have Kinloss

[Douglas Ross]

barracks and the 39 Engineer Regiment, and, of course, RAF Lossiemouth, which has had huge investment. I am grateful that the new defence procurement Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew)—is on the Front Bench today. I am sure that he will be a regular visitor to Moray to see the huge investment—the £400 million of investment by this UK Government in defence at Lossiemouth—and hundreds of new jobs.

We heard from the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), about the incredible decision by the UK Government to mitigate the nat tax. The SNP made Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom. Our poor armed forces—our service personnel who proudly serve the United Kingdom at home and abroad—were suffering because of that. It is only because this UK Government mitigated the SNP Nat tax—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am always grateful to debate this issue with the hon. Gentleman. I have asked him to do this before, and I hope he will do it this evening. Will he support the UK Government now reimbursing the squaddies in other parts of the UK who are paying more tax than frontline squaddies based in Scotland?

Douglas Ross: The Ministry of Defence pays our hard-working and extremely brave servicemen and women the UK rate—the same level of tax. It is only because the SNP decided to make Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom that we were forced to mitigate that. [Interruption.] SNP Members can chunter away from sedentary positions and shout down this policy, but how dare they say the £4 million—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Ross: No, I will not give way. How dare SNP Members say the £4 million annually that this UK Government are paying to mitigate their policy is wrong? That is absolutely scandalous, and armed forces personnel in Scotland will be viewing—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman keeps shouting. I think that is extremely—[Interruption.] He continues to shout, and it is extremely disrespectful to our armed forces personnel who have been supported in mitigating his party's policies.

I do not have an awful lot of time left, but I want to mention the cuts commission, because it leads on from what I have just said about defence. The cuts commission—or the growth commission, as the SNP would try to call it—was many months in the making and the report was shoved out one Friday on a bank holiday. We all wondered why it was not published to great fanfare. It is because there is so much bad news for the SNP in its own cuts commission.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies mentions

“the Commission’s proposals for immediate cuts to defence”—very interesting for my seat in Moray and others around Scotland—

“and other spending currently undertaken by the UK government.”

That is not me saying that; that is the IFS saying that the SNP’s cuts commission will lead to immediate cuts to defence. John McLaren of Scottish Trends made an apposite point when he said:

“Scotland will be moving from a deficit equivalent to nearly 6% of GDP towards a 3% target. It doesn’t take a mathematical genius to work out the implications.”

The implications for our constituents in Moray and across Scotland are that, under the SNP and its cuts commission, we will see more cuts to local authorities and more cuts to the NHS, and I will not accept that.

Bill Grant: Does my hon. Friend sense, as I do, that the SNP’s objective is to get independence for Scotland at any price? The SNP will pay any price and the people of Scotland will be the victims of its desire to break up the United Kingdom.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a very serious point. The outcome of independence does not matter to the SNP; it simply matters to the SNP that it gets independence and separates from the rest of the UK. And it does not matter that it affects my constituents in Moray, with cuts to NHS Grampian, one of the poorest funded health boards anywhere in Scotland. That is why I have been joining protestors across Moray against the downgrading of our maternity services; that is the outcome we have from an SNP Administration in Holyrood after 11 years of them in government.

I wanted to make many other points. I wanted to briefly highlight power grabs, something that, again, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire mentioned. I think there is a power grab going on, and it is by the SNP, because it wants to grab these powers from Europe, and it does not want them in Holyrood or in Westminster; it wants them back in Europe. That is a power grab—the SNP grabbing these powers to give them back to Europe. The fishermen in my Moray constituency do not want that. Many of the one third, we are told, of SNP supporters who voted to leave the EU must now be wondering what their party is promising them because the policy is for the hated common fisheries policy to go straight back to the EU. So many other policies that are currently ruled by Europe would go straight back to the EU if the SNP ever got its way. [Interruption.] I have seen the wink in your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I know my remarks must now come to a conclusion. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Again, SNP Members cheer because someone had an opposite view from them and they are about to finish their speech. They can give it out but they cannot take it.

This Conservative Government are strengthening—[Interruption.] SNP Members keep shouting. This Conservative Government are strengthening the Union. More powers have been devolved to Holyrood by this UK Conservative Government since 2010 than any others, making it one of the strongest devolved Assemblies anywhere in the world. As a result of Brexit, with so many more powers going to the Scottish Parliament and to Holyrood, it will just get stronger. That is how we are strengthening the Union.

8.3 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I am upset to be called after the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) because as a result I was not included in his greatest hits, but there we are.

Over the past weeks, months and years, we have seen the Union becoming weakened or threatened. Some say events such as the Scottish independence referendum, the EU referendum and the subsequent mishandling of the Brexit negotiations have all taken their toll, but underpinning those events is the ongoing wrecking of our communities and people's trust in politics by this Tory Government. We need to learn from these recent examples when the Union has been at risk, but we also need to evaluate why people decided to vote in their masses for such drastic measures and such changes to the Union.

Constituents who voted for Scotland to leave the UK and for Britain to leave the EU tell me they did so because they wanted change. They are fed up with this broken system that sees the privileged few at the top and then the many, the masses, being told that we all need to bear the brunt—we need to tighten our purse-strings. We are struggling to get by. We are saving up for nice things, but then having to spend savings on essentials instead. People are seeing their local services decimated and their streets full of rubbish, with their councils unable to afford regular bin collections. No wonder people want change.

But we cannot accept the Tory approach of sweeping all of that under the carpet and bleating on about the power of the Union while working people reluctantly turn to food banks to feed their families. But we also cannot accept the SNP approach that we have seen of peddling the lie that everything would be better after independence, while simultaneously hiding austerity in its so-called growth commission.

The Union across our nations is of course a result of hundreds of years of co-operation and decisions taken at a political level. But it is also essentially something that exists in the hearts and minds of people across the UK. For many people, being a part of the Union fills them with pride and in some cases provides them with an identity. However, sadly, in Scotland today, how we talk about our identity has changed. It is a sad fact that, as has been highlighted, some people feel forced to choose between their Scottish and British identities. None the less, there are various events that cut across the nationalistic identities, and I want to share my view of my identity.

I am from Dalkeith in Midlothian, a mining town, and just last weekend I made my way to the “big meeting” which, to explain to other Members, is the Durham Miners' Gala. For almost 150 years, people from across the UK have made the cultural pilgrimage to Durham to celebrate our shared history and the work we are carrying out in the trade unions and the Labour party to make people's lives better across the UK. The people who gather there have a shared identity and culture that remains unbroken within mining communities such as mine. I would feel at home in any mining community across the country; whether in Wales, the north-east or Midlothian, I could go into a miners' club and feel at home and they would literally have the same wallpaper. But of course this identity is not unique to mining communities. My identity is class rather than nationality based, but I absolutely respect every identity that people choose. People have shared identities that come from varied communities, the NHS, common interests and sectors, family heritage and political will.

Recently, people came together in their thousands to promote British values of tolerance and equality. Members from across this House may have joined the thousands of people across the UK who protested against the values and ideas espoused by President of the United States, Donald Trump. We as a country showed that we reject his politics of misogyny and we stand up to hatred. Such demonstrations were held across the UK.

It is for those reasons, and more, that I believe that there is a commonality and a shared identity that exists across the United Kingdom, but regardless of where in the UK people are and where they live, this is being eroded by the damaging and often heartless policies of the current Government. I want to give a few brief examples.

We have a Government who are content with cutting taxes for millionaires, while at the same time cutting benefits paid to the most vulnerable in our society. Across local authorities affected by the roll-out of universal credit, we see soaring shortfalls in councils' rental income. In my own constituency of Midlothian, rent arrears are up by more than a fifth, with temporary accommodation arrears a staggering 278% higher since UC full service began. Every penny that is lost to local authorities in rent arrears represents a person pushed further into debt by this Government and their policies.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the fact that solidarity transcends borders and is grounded in class politics. Does she also agree that the hostile environment policy in this country is another thing that we need to tackle collectively as one people? My constituent, Giorgi Kakava, who is in the Gallery today, is an example of someone affected by that policy, which we must challenge if all the people of the United Kingdom are to have a secure future.

Danielle Rowley: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I wonder what the Windrush generation feel about their British identity.

I know that this debate is on the Union, but I feel that it was important to mention those points because many people who come into my office are in need of food bank referrals or of assistance with correcting mistakes in their universal credit payments. They will be seeking a political alternative to the harsh policies affecting their lives, and that is what makes them seek change. I hope that Members across the House, especially those in the Government, will recognise the real and serious threats that these policies are posing to the Union.

For many people, the answer is to rip up the Union and go it alone, but I do not believe that that should happen. We saw that during the Scottish independence referendum, and I fear that the Government have not yet learned from that or from the European Union referendum. If they are serious about strengthening the Union, they should stop their damaging policies and instead look at new ways of strengthening and improving the Union, such as adopting a model of federalism and devolving decision making to local level.

A Labour Government would establish a constitutional convention, as described by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), to challenge where power and sovereignty lie in politics, the economy, the justice system and our communities. We want to extend democracy locally, regionally and nationally, exploring

[Danielle Rowley]

the option of a more federalised country. We need a relationship of equals with devolved Administrations throughout the UK. In this regard we differ from the SNP, which has sought the path of centralisation to strengthen the powers and influence of the Scottish Parliament, often at the expense of local government.

So how do we strengthen the Union? We can do it by treating people right across the UK as humans and with dignity; by ensuring that we have equality of opportunity in every community in the UK; by giving workers in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales a proper wage of £10 an hour and secure work; by valuing all our workers and giving them real protections and good wages; by providing reliable and dignified support for those who cannot work; and by showing respect for our devolved nations, with well funded local councils.

I would like to give the House a quick anecdote. In 2014, I made a film during the referendum campaign, and I was privileged to come here to Parliament to interview the man I am now honoured to call my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). He gave me a lesson in collectivism. He told me that, in his life and looking through history, he had found that the challenges of capitalism had never been defeated by running away or by separating off and turning our back on things; instead, they had been defeated by coming together and collectively challenging the issues. So, yes, let us be ambitious and let us scream for change and an end to this top-down, unequal and unfair system, but let us choose the best way to reform our society and keep our Union strong at the same time. That is achievable, but it is clear to me—and it is becoming clearer to people up and down the UK—that the only way to do that is to deliver a Labour Government.

8.13 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I am delighted to rise to speak in this debate this evening. In fact, there is nowhere else I would rather be on a beautiful July evening than here, and no issue that I would rather discuss than the Union yet again. It is an issue that is close to my heart, and close to the hearts of my constituents, 60.4% of whom voted to remain in the UK in 2014, and 67.6% of whom voted for Unionist parties in last year's general election. Despite what SNP Members say, what I hear regularly from my constituents, and expect to hear many times again this summer as I traverse my beautiful constituency of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine—details are on my website—is that they have little appetite left for referendums, whether on Scotland's place in the Union or on Britain's place in Europe. A recent poll by the *Daily Record* has found that fewer than half of Scots agree with Nicola Sturgeon when she says that

“independence is back on the table”

after Brexit. What the overwhelming majority of my constituents—and, I believe, the public at large—want from us is to get on with the job of governing in the national interest for all of Britain's people, and that is what we in the Conservative and Unionist party are doing.

As I was looking for inspiration for this speech today, I stumbled on these words:

“This morning we have renewed our joint commitment under the Edinburgh agreement to work constructively and positively to implement the will of the people. That work starts immediately.”

Those are the words that Alex Salmond did not say on the morning of 19 September. They are taken from the speech that he had prepared to use if Scotland had voted yes in 2014. It is a pity that he was not so keen to renew that commitment to implement the will of the people following the actual result. Unlike the SNP, the Conservative party kept to the spirit of the agreement, respected the result and delivered everything it had promised through the Smith commission to build a strong Scotland with a powerful voice inside a United Kingdom of which every Member in this House should be proud.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): But Ruth Davidson promised that if Scotland voted no it would get to stay in the European Union. How come that has changed?

Andrew Bowie: I think the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but of course she did no such thing. The people of Scotland went into the referendum in September 2014 in the full knowledge that a referendum on our membership of the European Union was coming down the tracks. It had been promised in January 2013, a full year and nine months before the September 2014 referendum.

It seems hard to believe it now, but when the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly were created in the 1990s, the goal was to strengthen the Union. Lord Robertson of Port Ellen might not have got it exactly right when he declared in 1997 that devolution would “kill nationalism stone dead”. I will admit that the temptation on our side, and probably elsewhere, to say “we told you so” is sometimes rather strong, as the only thing that it seems to have killed is the Scottish Labour party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

We are the party that respects the 2014 referendum result and the 2016 referendum result, so we are the only party that respects the original aim of the devolution process: to bring politics and decision making closer to Scottish communities and to make our politics more representative and responsive. Unfortunately, between the incompetence of the two Labour-Lib Dem Administrations and the deliberate actions of the now three SNP Administrations, Scotland has suffered only centralisation, power hoarding in Edinburgh and central belt bias in decision making, with Aberdeenshire and the north-east—forever Scotland's cash cow—taxed more than any other part of the country and forever being short-changed.

Reading *The Press and Journal* this morning, I noticed that Aberdeenshire Council was being forced to double the cost of renting town hall premises in Stonehaven and Banchory due to a cut in grant funding from the Scottish Government. We should never forget that it was the SNP Government's obsession with centralisation that led, disastrously, and despite many warnings, to the deeply flawed reorganisation of police services in Scotland, for which they found themselves liable for £35 million a year in VAT—a situation that was resolved only by the election to this House of 12 additional Scottish Conservatives.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: We hear a lot about this centralisation issue. Why was it that, when the Scottish Government brought in the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, the Scottish Conservative party abstained?

Andrew Bowie: I would have to look into that in more detail to find the exact reason why we abstained on that vote. I personally, of course, would have voted against it.

We know that the SNP Government created that situation with VAT in the full knowledge of what they were doing. They attempted to turn it into a grievance with Westminster, and then tried to use it to force a wedge between the nations of our United Kingdom. The Scottish National party is committed to the break-up of the UK. Every action it takes, every speech its members make and every policy from Bute House is weaponised and sent into battle for the express purpose of weakening the bonds between our nations and breaking apart the most successful economic and political union in the world. It puts ideological and constitutional obsessions over the good of the Scottish people, and it always will.

I personally am proud to be British. I am proud of what this country has done in the past, and sure of what this united, global Britain will do in the future. I hope beyond hope that in 2021 the Scottish people will get the Government they deserve: a transformative Conservative Administration in Holyrood, delivering real, fair devolution to the people of Scotland and working alongside a Conservative Government in Westminster governing and legislating for the whole UK—working together in the national interest and strengthening our Union. Only then, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) likes to say, will we truly be in the early days of a better nation.

8.19 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I thank the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird) for their sartorial support for this debate, with the former's Union Jack dress and the latter's dress with a flower of the Union in Northern Ireland—the orange lily—displayed so prominently. In fact, I was thinking of pairing them—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): With the tie of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard)?

Sammy Wilson: An orange tie. They would blend in well at that great celebration of Unionism in Northern Ireland on 12 July.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has challenged and mocked this as an irrelevant debate that has just been thrown in at the end of the parliamentary term, but this is an extremely important debate for the people of the United Kingdom.

Speaking from a Northern Ireland perspective, I know that the Union is not just academic or some kind of constitutional thing. People in Northern Ireland died fighting against a terrorist campaign to ensure that we stayed within the Union. This debate is important, because it is important that people right across the United Kingdom understand the value that they personally, their countries and their regions obtain from being part of the United Kingdom.

There are, of course, the economic benefits of being part of a country that is the fifth largest economic power in the world, which means that people in Northern Ireland have access to the internal market. Some 66% of the goods we produce in Northern Ireland find their way into the market of the rest of the United Kingdom, sustaining hundreds of thousands of jobs.

I mentioned in an intervention the fiscal transfers within the United Kingdom that ensure that the parts that require them, because of either geographic disadvantage, historical disadvantage or the changing structure of their economy, receive the money to sustain their economies. Some might argue that the transfers are not enough, but the fact is that we benefit from being part of a large economic unit. Of course, we also benefit from the protection of the security umbrella that the United Kingdom affords to us. Again, we benefit from the United Kingdom being a major international military power. As independent nations, none of us could ever sustain those things. In Northern Ireland, of course, we benefited within our own territory when we had the support of the military in defeating the terrorist campaign we experienced for 40 years.

There is also British soft power, with the connections that a country the size of ours has across the world. I could go into a lot of examples, but just recently the jobs of 6,000 workers at Bombardier in Northern Ireland were sustained because of the connections that this country's Ministers have with Boeing and with the United States Government. They could make the case for protecting those jobs and for ensuring that Bombardier was not closed out of US markets.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will mention all the historical connections, such as in the names of towns. Londonderry, of course, owes its importance and its prosperity to the merchants from London who went there, invested in and improved that part of Northern Ireland. Newtownards in his constituency is a new town formed by those who came to settle there and develop the economy.

The Union is important to all of us, and I have given examples from Northern Ireland. Of course, the Union is always under attack from nationalist elements, and we have heard that here today. All countries, all relationships, go through difficult times, and it is easy to say, "Ah, but if we were in a different kind of relationship, it would be better." The grass is always greener somewhere in the distance, and we have heard a lot of examples today—"If we were not part of the United Kingdom, we wouldn't have to suffer this and we wouldn't have to experience that," but, as I have said, as independent countries we would face all those problems without the support of the bigger Union.

The most recent example has been Brexit. Nationalists in Northern Ireland have used Brexit to try to drive a wedge between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Despite all the nationalists' arguments about Brexit, the surprising thing is that the latest poll by UK in a Changing Europe, which is not sympathetic to the Brexit cause—indeed, I do not think it is sympathetic to the Union—found that, even with all the propaganda that has been spread, only 21% of people in Northern Ireland would vote to leave the United Kingdom.

I do not accept the argument made earlier that Brexit means dividing Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic, which is not our main market anyway. Indeed, only last week, the EU and the Irish Government confirmed—indeed, they boasted about it—that, even if we left without a deal, no infrastructure would be placed along the Irish border. That is not me saying it, it is not a Brexiteer saying it, and it is not a partisan person saying it; this is the

[Sammy Wilson]

EU negotiators, who had been telling us that the border was an insurmountable problem. Suddenly it is not when they want to give reassurance.

I will quickly make a few points on what can be done to strengthen the Union, because I want to keep to the 10-minute limit. First, we have to make sure that there is a fair deal for all parts of the United Kingdom. I criticise this Government too, but Labour Governments and Conservative Governments have both fallen into the same trap, with policies often tending to be London-centric or south-east of England-centric, without considering the impact of tax and trade policies, for example, on regions. In Northern Ireland, we are sitting with a land boundary with a country that has done away with air passenger duty and reduced VAT on hospitality and the tourism industry, skewing the market. Again, when devising policies on a national basis, it is important that we consider their local impact.

Secondly, we have to celebrate important events around the Union, and there will be an opportunity in the near future, when Northern Ireland comes to its centenary in 2021, to celebrate the fact that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. I hope they will be not just Northern Ireland celebrations but national celebrations. We recently had the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the RAF, which gave a reminder of its importance to the nation in a colourful and dramatic display. Those kinds of things can be unifying to a nation.

Thirdly, recognition has to be given to the fact that there are devolved Administrations. Although they cannot override national policies, proper consultation should be undertaken and proper cognisance given to the views of devolved Administrations.

Lastly, it is important that the Government are not seen to be centralised here in London, which means that we need to spread out the administrative arrangements and administrative facilities across the UK, so that we know we are part of one nation and we can be proud of that and of our long history. Everybody across the UK needs to be aware of the sacrifices we share, as well as the benefits, so that they become supportive of the Union.

8.29 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I am going to do something that breaks with convention in this debate—I am going to say something positive about what is going on. I am not going to get into arguments about different areas of the UK, what is going wrong and who could be doing things better than the others. Let us just pause and look at exactly where we are at this moment in time.

I have to make a declaration: apparently, I am the only Parliamentary Private Secretary in history to have been PPS to the Secretaries of State for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Even I did not know that when it happened.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): And Lancashire!

David Morris: And Lancashire, and quite right, too, Mr Deputy Speaker; one great Lancastrian speaks to another.

So what have we done to make things even? Well, we have English votes for English laws, which went a long way to try to even out the big question—the West Lothian question. [Interruption.] It did. When we did that, we looked into the Barnett formula and idiosyncrasies that went with it. The Government have put £1.2 billion into Wales, boosting the Barnett formula by 5%, so for about every £100 spent in Wales about £120 is actually coming back into Wales. This has gone a long way to evening out the equilibrium of the economies.

If we think about that, we see that putting an extra 5% into the Barnett formula works out at £67 million over the next five years, which has to be welcomed. This has put Wales in a very positive position in terms of the Brexit problem of leaving the EU. The Government are extending to mid-Wales a growth deal similar to the city deal in Cardiff. That city deal is £615 million, which has been more money put into Wales than any other Government have ever done before. That has to be welcomed. If we are doing that in mid-Wales, imagine what is going to happen there. There is always a problem with transport in mid-Wales, but if we get the transport sorted out in that area, that will provide a boost—it is inevitable. If we get a spaceport there, which is something I will discuss when I get to the Scotland part of my speech, that will pay dividends for mid-Wales, because we have aerospace factories there—Airbus is there and just nearby. That is a huge contributor to that part of the economy in that area, so we must think of this in a positive way.

Turning to Scotland, I know I am probably going to upset the SNP, although I do not really want to do that because the whole tone of what I am trying to do is to be constructive. [Interruption.] I do not want to upset my own colleagues either, so please behave!

I have to make another declaration, as I am the chairman of the parliamentary space committee—there is such a thing. A lot of SNP Members are on it, along with a lot of Conservatives and a lot of Labour Members. The space industry is growing by 11% a year—it has done so year in, year out, all the way through the recession we have just been through. The industry is getting bigger and bigger. Within the next 10 years, space tourism will be a reality. Not so long ago, it was announced that we were going to be having horizontal take-offs from the south-west, but we are going to be having ballistic applications happening in Sutherland. What does that really mean? I do not want to stir up my SNP friends and make a political point, but if we have a spaceport in that area, that will change the economy; it will be a big game changer and a huge infrastructure programme. Although I really want you to stay with us, another problem we would have if Scotland did go independent is that it would contravene the ITAR—International Traffic in Arms Regulations—agreement. The Americans would not accept anything ballistic we put up there, so we would not be able to send satellites up from there or they would not put satellites up from that area. [Interruption.] That is true. If Members would like to look into it, they will find that is a valid point.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I do not dispute whether or not what the hon. Gentleman is saying is correct, but that is just a ridiculous reason to ask people not to vote for Scottish independence—it is madness.

David Morris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that interjection. You are right: it has nothing to do with that; it is to do with trade. But I want you to stay with us. I do not want Scotland to go. As has been said, your rhetoric of leaving—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This is not about private chats. You have to speak through the Chair. I know there is great temptation among Members on both sides of the House to have a private debate, but the rest of us need to hear it and be part of it.

David Morris: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am speaking collegiately.

Looking at where we are going to go with this, we must think of the opportunities that will be afforded to us if we all stay together. We are talking about investment of £2.5 million in an area that is crying out for it, and an estimated injection of £4 billion over the next five years. That cannot be bad.

When I was in the Northern Ireland Office with my hon. Friend the Minister, we had to set a budget. I hope that we will soon be back to having a full, devolved, operating Government there again—I would love to see that—but £410 million has been put into Northern Ireland, with £80 million for health and education, £30 million to support mental health, and £100 million for ongoing health matters.

We have to look after all parts of the UK, which is why it is imperative that the Union survives—from the top end in Scotland, to Northern Ireland, Wales and England. We are all one people and we should reflect that in our politics.

I do not agree with the SNP, but I do respect its policies, which are about leaving the rest of the UK. I do not want that to happen; I respect and understand that position, but I do not agree with it. As has been said, there is an anomaly in that the SNP wants Scotland to have its own sovereignty while remaining in the EU. There is a paradox there, because it is not possible to have sovereignty and give it away to Europe at the same time.

On that note, I will just say that we are all better and stronger together. I hope that toned things down a little—I am sure it did—but please just think about that.

8.37 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who has perhaps taught us that the Union is more complicated than rocket science.

What is our Union based on? Is it based on history, reality, identity, economics, cultural friendship or kinship—or is it based on all of those? It is more than the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1707, which led to the creation of the Union as we know it. It is all that and more. More importantly, our Union is not fixed. It has matured, developed and deepened. It has facilitated change and been subject to change. It is still not fixed now. It is still open to development, and devolution is possibly the most relevant example. The Union is not a cul-de-sac out of which we need to reverse; it is a highway on which we travel when we support, aid and seek aid from those we support across the Union.

I want to pick up on the question of identity, which my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) raised, and how it feeds into and fuels the concept of the Union. Individuals' relationships with the Union and the Union itself lie at either end of the concept, and the identity that individuals feel feeds into that concept.

Identity can be both objective and subjective. As an objective concept, it is, sadly, becoming increasingly based on a pure geographical location sitting at the heart of the identity—small-minded nationalism. Increasingly we see that geographical nationalism is based on a foundation of exceptionalism. There is also, however, a subjective assessment of identity—namely, how a person feels to themselves. People may remember writing in their school books all those years ago, starting with their street, then their town and then their region and country. In my case, I would then put, “Europe, the world and the universe”. That is childish fun, but within it sits a strength of identity driven not by geographical location, but by the association we feel for others, be they close by or far away.

I love it that in Scotland people are identified and judged not by their jobs or by their educational achievements, but by the person that they have become. From that comes an acceptance that someone may have an opinion. One may disagree with that opinion and argue against it, but the discussion that can take place strengthens the value of that relationship and the knowledge that we all have. Brexit has shown us that if we take the relative simplicity of economics—should I joke?—we will see that there is an interconnection between countries that make up a union. Such interconnections are complex, intertwined, co-relational and much like that Gordian knot—a problem some see answered by a simple slicing through, although that answer is far too simplistic for such a complex question. A separation once made cannot be remade.

The strength of our Union is that it allows for all these different identities and more. It is stronger because identification is fluid. It is stronger because we share and mix answers, ideas and solutions. It is stronger because, even though the current Union is not fixed, it is a vehicle that allows for growth, development and change. The power to empower our communities by passing down powers to the level that they can work at best by people answerable to those the decision affects and linked to the funding of those decisions is important.

As Einstein said:

“Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind.”

However, nationalism with a small “n” allows us to celebrate and to promote cultural difference. It can inform, educate and rightly be something to take pride in. I am not talking about the simple aggressive nationalism that penetrates our contemporary politics. When unchecked or when used to dominate, this malign form of nationalism has historically been shown to be catastrophic. No one should be cowed into dissociating themselves from their background.

Devolution exists as a constitutional bridge between Scottish and British backgrounds. Culturally, Scotland has always had a different education system. It has had different norms in its legal system and alternative ways of approaching politics. In the 1970s, JP Mackintosh asserted that it was these cultural and national differences

[*Martin Whitfield*]

that spurred the need for a different way of governing Scotland. Like Donald Dewar, I do not believe that our current devolution settlement would be possible without the work of the East Lothian and North Berwick MP, JP Mackintosh.

I wish briefly to mention an early-day motion that I tabled this month, which recognises the contribution that John Pitcairn Mackintosh made in this place, in this debating Chamber and on this issue. A week today, on 30 July, we will mark 40 years since John's untimely death. He was a fierce debater, a strong proponent of European integration, a constitutional reformist and, of course, a man who fought tooth and nail, even within the Labour party, to deliver devolution to Scotland. He was an incredible constituency MP. Along with Gerald O'Brien, he brought astuteness, tact and organisational strength to Prestonpans and East Lothian Labour party. Mackintosh's most notable expression, now fittingly placed at the entrance to the Donald Dewar Room, acknowledges that

"the people in Scotland want a degree of government for themselves...and it is not beyond the wit of man to devise the institutions to meet those demands."

Critically, Mackintosh believed that these demands would strengthen, not weaken, the unity of the United Kingdom. A strong Union sits well within Mackintosh's conception of devolution as he advocated for a co-existence of national considerations—the ability to identify as British and as Scottish. He rightly argued that the people of Scotland do not want the trappings of independent statehood, or any reversion away from self-governance. It was this third way that was backed by Scotland and by East Lothian by a clear margin in both 1997 and in 2014.

While debating the Scotland and Wales Bill in 1976, Mackintosh developed an image of devolution that sits remarkably close to our contemporary system, but the Bill itself, which he did support, was still not radical enough for him. The reserved powers still left the Secretary of State as a governor of Scotland rather than the person watching over it as it governed itself. That point was forcefully made by Mackintosh. He argued for extra taxation powers, which were eventually brought forward 40 years later through the Scotland Act 2016.

This is a union state that is made stronger by the diversity of its various parts—the contributions from Wales, Scotland, Birmingham, Cornwall, Glasgow, Cardiff, Aberdeen and even Newcastle. The UK is at its best when there is a full contribution and expression from all the different identities, with common links and experiences. It is a Union, not a unitary state.

Much has been said about the challenges of the British national identity and the risk to the Union, but that fails to see the strength that lies in a subjective, fluid identity. The strength of the Union lies in its fluid nature, which hugs the diversity of its parts, rather than smothering the imagination and dynamism of its individuals. The challenge is to re-empower those communities by giving back the ability to flourish and prosper; to draw on other parts, resources and talents; and to support those other parts so that together we can create a Union that truly is a tapestry of strength.

8.45 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I rise to defend and advance the cause of the Union: the most successful political and economic union between nations in the history of the world; a union that, as a force for good, built the modern world that we live in; the Union between Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; our precious United Kingdom. I remind the House that Adam Smith described the Union from the perspective of Scotland as

"a measure from which infinite good has been derived to this country."

Amen to that.

The Union defines who I am, with a Scots father and an English mother. Three of my four children have married spouses from Northern Ireland and England. More generally, our Union is also a matter of family. We are a family of nations. For me, the Union has always been a much deeper issue than economics or other additions of numbers. It is, in fact, a matter of the heart. The Union between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom has together defeated fascism, seen out communism and helped to shape today's modern world. It is a bulwark of democracy and freedom that uses its wealth for good to help some of the poorest people around the world.

As I said, the Union is a family. The English, Welsh and those from Northern Ireland are our cousins, nieces, nephews, wives and husbands. In my case, they are my mother, my son-in-law, my daughters-in-law and my grandchildren. We should not cast aside this social union for the sake of some backward-looking nationalist instinct. We must always call out nationalism for what it is. Wherever it is in the world, it has created havoc and destruction by creating divisions between people. It is a deeply unpleasant and unattractive ideology.

The nationalists try to portray themselves as civic and joyous, inclusive and accepting, but it is all wearing rather thin now. The "All Under One Banner" march took place in my constituency a few weeks ago. At the heart of the march was a huge banner that read, "Tory scum out." The march was a display of political intolerance. I urge all those who say that they were on with the march but did not agree with the "Tory scum out" banner or the "F the Tories" mugs that were on sale to note the name of the rally, which was "All Under One Banner". That banner is barely disguised political bigotry. That is what my constituents in Stirling saw and that is how they judged it.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I just say to the hon. Gentleman that he is many things; a piece of scum is not one of them. I would deprecate that banner and, as I am sure he knows, the decent majority also deprecates that banner. The sooner that it is caught, melted down, recycled or whatever, the better.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is indeed honourable, because he has been the very first on social media to condemn the antics of the extreme elements of the nationalist movement that these events sadly attract, as we know only too well. I will not relate anything further to do with my social media timelines because, as the hon. Gentleman knows, it is not the kind of place for us to spend any time if we want to keep our sanity.

It is time for us Unionists to engage with and defend the Union against this kind of onslaught. It is time for us to seek a future that will combat nationalism and constantly rejuvenate the Union so that it will endure. I say this particularly for the benefit of my English and Welsh colleagues in the Chamber, who perhaps do not really appreciate the nature of Scottish nationalism on the ground as we encounter it as Scottish Conservative Members of Parliament. We do not expect co-operation or partnering from nationalism. We do not expect there to be some agreement—some middle ground. The aim of the nationalists is disruption, division and manufactured grievance, not unity: they are not interested in that because it does not serve their party political objectives.

Divergence is a very important part of what we get from devolution. I have absolutely no issue with that. I believe passionately in local democracy, and the divergence that comes through local democracy, but I do not hold with divergence for the sake of it. Of course we need locally tailored policy solutions to meet local conditions, but divergence that gives the Union strength is when it is for a good reason. We have a Scottish legal system that is tailored to our country. We have an education system that is tailored to our country: it is ours. All these things provide the strength whereby Scotland can have solutions for its own systems, its unique history, and the needs of its people.

But in some areas, divergence is pointless—for example, having a separate card for public transport in England and in Scotland, coming up with two different systems for deposit returns, or dismantling the British Transport police simply because it has “British” in its name. This is merely nationalist ideology that we have to be strong in standing up against. These differences are not about public policy necessities—they are about pulling Scotland apart from the rest of the United Kingdom to become separate. The nationalists want to use divergence to create division. They want to make the Union dysfunctional. I want the Union to work better. My hon. Friend the Minister will therefore not be surprised to hear that I will persist in my argument for a stronger and more functional Union that serves all the people and all parts of the United Kingdom.

My constituents in Stirling pay their taxes, and now, in many cases, they pay significantly more tax than any other part of the United Kingdom. They pay their share of the cost of Whitehall Departments. They get the same protection from the armed forces. They get the same help and support abroad when they visit a consulate or an embassy. But when it comes to some of the other Union Departments, the support becomes less clear. We should make that clear by renaming Ministries and Departments that serve England only as such—for example, “the Department for Health and Social Care for England”. Ministries serving the whole of the United Kingdom should, as a matter of course, be asking what policy implications there are for Scotland, for Wales, for Northern Ireland and for the regions of England.

I am afraid that there is a concept that is endemic in government in this respect. It is not specific to this Government but to all previous Governments since the devolution settlement, and it is, “Devolve and forget.” That phenomenon plagues Government and must be guarded against. The UK Government are as much the UK Government in Edinburgh as they are in Chester. Part of the issue is that UK Government Departments

operate through the prism of their territorial offices. The propensity for UK Departments to dump issues into the laps of the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland Offices is very high.

UK Departments also far too easily think about devolving further to the Scottish Parliament, as almost an automatic reaction. Sometimes that is appropriate and right, but at other times, frankly, it leads to problems and unnecessary confusion. I would take as an example the broadband issue that plagues us in Scotland.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: What exactly have UK Departments rushed to devolve that they should not have devolved? *[Interruption.]*

Stephen Kerr: Well, the British Transport police, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) rightly says, is the example that immediately springs to mind.

The delivery of broadband is another example, as I said. We should never have devolved the delivery of broadband to the Scottish Government. They were given the responsibility of delivering broadband in Scotland by Broadband Delivery UK, and the result is mayhem. We are so far behind other parts of the United Kingdom on the delivery of broadband because we allowed the Scottish Government to get involved in the first place. We can see the problems with the situation that has arisen, which makes it unclear who is responsible. Broadband is a good example of this. When anything good happens in Scotland, Scottish Government Ministers will turn up and get their photographs taken, but when anything goes wrong in Scotland, it is suddenly all reserved—they point at us and say, “Oh, it’s reserved; you should deal with it.” These kinds of games go on all the time. It is insidious and makes it all the easier for the nationalists, in that space of confusion, with their ideology of grievance and division, to do just that. We must avoid that by improving our system and machinery of governance.

Now—one minute! *[Laughter.]* I have one minute. The best bit’s to come. UK Government Departments should be unafraid to fly their colours in Scotland, to proudly hoist the Union flag above their offices every single day of the year, not just on the Queen’s birthday, and to tell the people of Scotland, loudly and proudly, that their United Kingdom Government is serving them. It would show people clearly that Scotland has two Governments and that both are working to deliver vital public services to them, even if they need to work more closely together.

It may seem somewhat controversial, but this debate about the intergovernmental relations in the UK will continue until we address the machinery we need to make the Governments of this country work more closely together. Ironically, I turn to the White Paper on the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. I got as far as chapter 4, where I read details about how the different Governments, Departments and Parliaments could work together for the benefit of the people. With no small sense of irony, I advise the Government to read chapter 4 on page 84—many people never got to page 84, I am sure, but I did. It talks about how arrangements could be put in place by which Governments could work together. It is a very interesting chapter. I refer in particular to

[Stephen Kerr]

paragraph 2. The institutional arrangements it proposes are practical and flexible and would create a dialogue and mechanisms for resolving disputes and the accountability and mutual constructive tension necessary for us to get the best government possible for the people of our country.

I will conclude.

Ian Murray: Hear, hear!

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for the support for that statement, if for nothing else I have said.

It is understandable in Scotland, where the political climate can sometimes be quite poisonous, for people to feel intimidated and harassed, rather than to engage in debate. Much is said and done under the guise of robust debate that falls squarely into the category of bullying, so fear is understandable, but I call upon Her Majesty's Government not to flinch. They must face up to that culture firmly and fairly. I believe they shall. They should be proud and loud about their activities in Scotland. We should not submit to the bullying and provocations of the nationalists. We should not surrender our country. Under no circumstances would that bring about a flourishing Union that can be a boon to the peoples of this country for generations to come, which is what we need now more than ever before.

8.58 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to contribute to what has so far been a somewhat enlightening debate.

The starting point of my analysis in this debate, as a democratic socialist, is: what structures of governance are best situated to deliver maximum economic benefit to working people in delivering the highest possible quality of life and public services and amenities to serve their interests? That underpins my thinking. When I think of the benefits of the Union, I think back to my own grandparents and my grandfather fighting with the Royal Artillery, making common cause with people from across the United Kingdom to defeat fascism in Europe.

That common cause transcended into the spirit of 1945 and that 1945 election, which delivered the first majority Labour Government, who fundamentally transformed this country, delivering the welfare state and the pillars that underpin modern civilisation in this country. That is why I never had any doubt about joining the Labour party at the age of 16. I knew that, although it might not have delivered only good, it had delivered everything that had been good in this country in the preceding 70 years. I had no doubt that every great societal achievement and all progress this country had achieved had been delivered by the solidarity of working people acting in the labour and trade union movement. I never had any doubt either that the United Kingdom served their interests when the British state was mobilised in their service. Indeed, when I look at Scotland today, I think of the benefits that we have achieved. If nothing else holds true, Scotland benefits every year from £9 billion that it would not otherwise have to invest in the provision of public services that ensure that quality of life for people in Scotland is better than it otherwise would be. That is equivalent to

£1,470 per person in Scotland every year. For as long as that figure is correct, there can be no socialist analysis for unpicking and destroying a Union that delivers that economic and social benefit for the people of Scotland.

The SNP's analysis is so awry when it comes to dealing with that reality that it has run away from the idea of full fiscal autonomy because the transfer is undisputable. Looking at its latest analysis in the so-called growth commission report, we see that it tries to compare Scotland with other advanced economies. Speaking about the target of reducing the fiscal deficit in Scotland to under 3% of GDP within five to 10 years, Scottish Trends' John McLaren says that

"it clearly involves a tighter fiscal strategy over this period than is likely for the rest of the UK. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), currently expects the UK to have a deficit equivalent to 2.3% of GDP in 2021-22 and falling, which should allow for an easing in public expenditure settlements over time. Meanwhile Scotland will be moving from a deficit equivalent to nearly 6% of GDP towards a 3% target. It doesn't take a mathematical genius to work out the implications."

As long as those implications may threaten the interests of working people in Scotland, I am opposed to the notion of separation and am committed to the idea of the Union.

The growth commission assumes that an independent Scotland would achieve a GDP per capita growth rate that is 0.7% greater than it would be if it remained in the UK. However, the justification for that figure is extremely tenuous, relying on territories or countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore in the comparison set, despite explicitly rejecting their low-tax, high-income-inequality economic models. Remove Hong Kong and Singapore from the comparable countries' growth rate analysis and 0.7% becomes 0.26%. If that were the case, instead of the 25 years that the growth commission assumes that it would take to generate £9 billion of revenue to close the gap with the UK, it would take 67 years. However, £9 billion is of course less than the £10.3 billion effective fiscal transfer that Scotland received from the rest of the UK in 2016-17, which we would of course lose on day one of independence. To test that assumption further, if we look back at the independence White Paper, the equivalent figure used then was in fact only 0.12% per annum. On that basis, it would take over 140 years to close the gap with the UK. Why on earth would anyone vote for that?

If we look at the performance of the three countries that the growth commission explicitly cites as being those it seeks to learn in particular from—Denmark, Finland and New Zealand—then, using the growth commission's own data source, the superior growth rate becomes an immaterial 0.06%. It is becoming apparent that the comparisons are utterly fanciful. On that basis it would take nearly 300 years to close the gap with the UK—the entire length of time that the United Kingdom has existed—which is utterly absurd and demonstrates that the growth commission is bereft of any intellectual rigour.

Then there is the albatross of the currency. In designing a currency regime or mechanism for an independent country, it is critical that the regime offers the country a credible means of adjusting disequilibria—deficits and surpluses—on its balance of payments. If it does not, it is doomed to fail in the absence of a risk-sharing agreement or transfer mechanism, and we have seen

that play out in Europe when Greece and Ireland suffered heavy internal devaluations and mega-austerity. That is an important lesson in the economic history of currency regimes. In thinking about the appropriate currency regime for an independent Scotland, it is crucial to have the adjustment question at the back of our mind at all times.

If Scotland were to become an independent country, it would become a net exporter of hydrocarbons. It is well known in currency economics that the crucial role of oil price changes in affecting the competitiveness of the non-oil sector must be addressed in designing a currency regime for a country with a diversified non-oil export sector and an oil sector. Otherwise, the non-oil sector gets crowded out, which has implications for jobs, output and the sustainability of the balance of payments and interest rates. It is the classic Dutch disease phenomenon. However, all the literature on the currency issue that has been generated since the referendum, including the Scottish Government's growth commission report, does not even address that particular issue.

Regardless of the currency regime that an independent Scotland might choose, it would need a market-credible pool of foreign exchange reserves to run a currency regime. From the evidence of similar sized economies, that would amount to £40 billion, which is around one third of Scotland's annual GDP and not a sum that a newly separate Scotland could borrow on international financial markets. The only way that such an amount could be accumulated is through running budgetary surpluses for a number of years, but an austerity programme would need to be run in any case in order to establish the "hard currency" effect, so the reserve accumulation issue can be seen as reinforcing that effect.

The growth commission's alternative to the 2014 White Paper's formal currency union would be to adopt the pound, much as Panama adopts the dollar, Montenegro adopts the euro and so on. That is a currency substitution system, but such a system is viewed as inherently unstable by economists because it is subject to the whims of individuals' expectations and the effects that these can have on demand for money, which can lead to changes in supply through the balance of payments. There would be no effective control over the money supply in Scotland and no lender of last resort function because changes in the current account of the balance of payments would directly affect the money supply in the Scottish economy. For example, a surplus on the current balance would increase the quantity of sterling in the economy, which would have inflationary implications. Conversely, a current account deficit would draw money out of the economy with deflationary implications.

To deal with such flows, a separate monetary authority would need to be set up to smooth those effects, but the evidence from similar-sized economies to Scotland, such as the Nordic countries, is that foreign exchange reserves of upwards of £40 billion are needed to achieve that. If the monetary authority were prepared to offer deposit insurance of £120 billion of retail deposit accounts in Scotland, it would need to accumulate foreign exchange reserves of £160 billion, which is greater than the entire Scottish GDP. Those are extraordinary figures.

Where would the money come from, given that the balance of payments of an independent Scotland would have a deficit of between 2% to 5% of GDP? It would

need in the region of £6 billion to £7 billion just to cover those international obligations. The only way those sums could be achieved would be through a massive austerity programme. For context, the Scottish NHS budget every year is just £13 billion. We can wipe that out right away. The proposal is simply not a sustainable proposition that anyone of a socialist background could endorse.

All the points I have made focus purely on the monetary implications, but let us look at the competitiveness of the non-oil export sector with the effect of the oil price changes. That would massively impact on the competitiveness of the Scottish economy, entailing mass industrial closures of a scale we saw through the 1980s. Indeed, any alternative, such as a form of sterlingisation with a currency board, would need the currency to be backed 100% by foreign exchange reserves, which again is an unsustainable position. Such systems require considerable amounts of foreign exchange—both cash and reserves—to back deposit accounts. The Hong Kong experience shows that £200 billion of reserves are required to run a currency board. Those massive sums of money in turn require policies of fiscal austerity, balance of payments surpluses and no lender of last resort function. Again, the loss of competitiveness issue would not be addressed in that set-up. It is simply not viable as a currency option unless the Scottish Government are intent on handing over large sums of Scottish taxpayers' money to hedge funds and speculators.

Interrogating the Scottish growth commission's proposals demonstrates that they cannot offer a socialist solution to separation. That is why the growth commission has achieved only one thing: it has demonstrated that the huge benefits we derive from being part of the fiscal, monetary and political union are as relevant and integral to quality of life in Scotland today as they have ever have been. That is why we continue to argue as the socialist Labour party that we must marshal the forces of the British state to deliver the best quality of outcomes for the people of Scotland by utilising its fiscal and monetary powers to deliver world-class public services for the people of Scotland. We stand by that commitment today, as we did in 1945 when this party built the national health service and the welfare state.

9.7 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is interesting to follow the shadow Minister. He has been a Member of the House for a year and personally I get on with him incredibly well outside the Chamber, but he is a shadow Scotland Office Minister and, in the 10-minute speech he just gave on strengthening the Union, he did not put forward one single policy on how he sees the Union being strengthened. Instead, we were treated to a 10-minute anti-independence diatribe.

Mr Sweeney *rose*—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman shortly, but I want to get into the crux of what I am going to say first. I will be generous to the Minister who will be summing up, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew). I congratulate him on his appointment to the defence procurement portfolio. He has been a kind and honourable Member in the time I have been here and, as my party's defence spokesperson, I certainly

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

wish him well. However, I am afraid to say that the opening speech by the Minister for the constitution, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), was something else. I do not think I have heard a speech delivered through such rose-tinted, “Land of Hope and Glory” lenses, despite several Members being strong in the running to beat her on that. It shows such an incredible lack of self-awareness to bring forward a debate on strengthening the Union the day before the UK Government take the Scottish Parliament to the UK Supreme Court. But a lack of self-awareness is only one of the things that plagues politics in this place. I will come back to the others later, but I said I would give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Sweeney: I thank my fellow Glasgow Member for giving way. I have to put to him that the fundamental ethos of my argument was based on the idea that the British state can marshal far greater fiscal and monetary benefits for the quality of life of the people of Scotland. That underpins what I was arguing for, in the spirit of 1945. Does he agree that that is a fair analysis?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I agree that the hon. Gentleman believes that to be the case. I am afraid I do not believe that to be the case. Like him, I see too many injustices delivered by the British state through the welfare system, the rape clause and the provisions that affect the WASPI women—I am sure he meets many of them in his constituency—so I do not buy his argument. I just think it is a shame he has become so convinced by it.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, I will not give way because I want to make some progress.

I want to quote a former Glasgow Member—the Independent Labour party Member of Parliament for Glasgow Bridgeton—the late, great Jimmy Maxton, who was born in Pollokshaws in my constituency. In a speech, he said:

“I believe we can achieve more for the Scottish people within five years in a Scottish Parliament than in 25 or 30 years of heartbreaking struggle in the British House of Commons”.

If only some of that thought would plague Labour Members, rather than the thoughts that plague them right now. Is it any wonder that Winston Churchill described Maxton as possibly the greatest parliamentarian of his day? I believe that that quote from Maxton is the bar against which we should measure the progress of Scotland’s Parliament.

Is it any wonder that Sir George Reid, with the tremendous foresight for which he became famous, used that quote in his maiden speech in this House on 15 March 1974? That was five years before Maxton’s nephew entered the House as the Member of Parliament for Glasgow Cathcart, which has now become my constituency of Glasgow South. I understand that Maxton’s nephew now takes his seat in the other place.

As I was reading that earlier, I was interrupted by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who now occupies that seat. In that speech, Sir George Reid quoted the slogan of Clackmannanshire, which we have discussed. At the time, the slogan was

“Look about ye”, but it was changed in 2007. I forget what it was changed to, but I know it is not as good. “Look about ye” means “Look around you, and face the facts”. Surely we could do with following that old Clackmannanshire slogan as we debate strengthening the Union—in fact, as we debate anything—in this House.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: How can I say no after quoting the hon. Gentleman’s constituency slogan?

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for quoting what used to be my constituency phrase of “Look about ye”. Should he not look about himself and realise that a majority in Clackmannanshire voted to remain in the United Kingdom? Should he not look about himself and accept the fact that Scotland wants to be in the United Kingdom, not out with the SNP?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am willing to accept that entirely, but that does not mean I have to stop arguing for it. Indeed, it was the hon. Gentleman’s party leader in Scotland who said it was legitimate, and even honourable, for the Scottish National party to continue advocating Scotland’s independence, and that is what I intend to do. I hope to turn the hon. Gentleman’s constituency around. I note that he did not mention the result of the EU referendum in his own constituency.

The point that Sir George Reid was making then, and it applies now, is that facts change and people are entitled to move. I want to come back to the point he was making about the facts. We should be looking at that, rather than allowing ourselves to be plagued by the positioning in trenches that poisons our politics and breeds cynicism, which is the least healthy thing we can have in our politics. It was Mandela himself who noted that cynicism must be opposed at all times.

There is a real danger that we will go back to a poisonous period in this Chamber in 1945, when the first ever SNP Member of Parliament, Robert McIntyre, was elected. He won his seat in a by-election for Motherwell. It took him several days to take his Oath, because there were no two Members who would stand at the Bar of the House and allow him to approach the Table to do so. I do not want to see us return to that any time soon.

We are constantly being told that we are manufacturing grievances—indeed, the shadow Secretary of State said it earlier. I have much to be aggrieved about; I wish the shadow Secretary of State could be aggrieved about it with me. If that makes me a grievance monger, then frankly that is what my job here is to do. I am aggrieved by many of the things this Government do—some of which were adumbrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who talked about drug consumption rooms and the awful immigration cases that all of us see coming through our constituency surgeries—and by the dreadful and quite regressive welfare measures that we see impacting on our constituents. You’d better believe it, I am aggrieved about many of those things.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out grievances that he has with this Government. Is it not therefore fair for those of us on the Government Benches and Scottish Conservatives around Scotland to

have grievances against his party, which has been in power in Scotland for 11 years? We have seen educational standards dropping, mergers of police and fire services, which many in rural constituencies are against, and a number of problems with our NHS services. We are entitled to raise those grievances, as is he to raise his, in this place.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is in a unique position, as is the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who is sitting on the Bench behind him. They left the Scottish Parliament to come to this Parliament, but even with that in mind—I add it purely for information—the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) is entirely entitled to raise any issue he wishes to, whether it is devolved or reserved. However, I come back to the point that he gave up a seat in a devolved legislature to come to this place to hold this Government accountable. He does a job for his constituents, and he is entirely right to do that.

I come to the tone in which we have these arguments. Some of the points that the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) raised earlier were uncomfortable to listen to. Indeed, it is uncomfortable to see anyone on my side of the constitutional question hold up a “Tory scum out” banner such as he mentioned, far less march behind it with any sense of pride. I do not think Tories are scum. I think a lot of their policies are terrible policies, and I will argue and fight against them at election time. Ultimately, I will argue for the ultimate salvation from them, which I believe to be Scottish independence, but we need to get better at disagreeing with one another.

Stephen Kerr: I again commend the hon. Gentleman for his spirited defence of democracy in this context, but why did the MSPs for Stirling and for Clackmannanshire and Dunblane not join him in condemning that banner when they were at the march behind it? It just does not make sense to me. This is where the disjunction occurs.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman. I know he believes what I am saying to be sincere. I do not believe that any of those individuals had their picture taken with the banner. Indeed, this was a march of many, many thousands of people. I only wish that more people had moved to get those responsible out—I understand that some did—and I certainly hope that they do not turn up again, but the hon. Gentleman will have to raise what individuals do with those individuals.

I see you getting anxious, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will draw to a conclusion. Although the Union is clearly important to many people, not just in this House but right across the United Kingdom, I am afraid that this has been a very small subject for debate. Opposition parties regularly table debates on various hobby-horse issues. That is what Opposition parties do, but we are supposed to expect a bit more from the Government. At a time of such threats to international peace, international order and the rules-based system, which the Prime Minister regularly stands at the Dispatch Box and talks about, and indeed I regularly find myself in agreement with her; at a time when the far right is on the rise in fundraising and organising and displacing moderate, centre-left or centre-ground people right across Europe; at a time when fascists and racists are no longer embarrassed

to be fascists or racists and are shaking off those cloaks that we have made them wear for many decades—is this issue what the Government want to bring forward for debate? It really is a small subject.

I accept that the Union is important—of course it is important. I grew up in a heavily Unionist household. Indeed, my own father will watch this speech and quite possibly tell me I was talking a load of rubbish. I make no observation other than that, but I am afraid the world is bigger than Scotland and bigger than Britain, and it is a dangerous time out there. The Government have chosen to table this debate, which, frankly, is a university debating society issue at this moment in time. This is supposed to be a legislature. We are here to legislate and hold the Government accountable, and the Government have utterly shirked that in tabling this debate this evening.

9.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Government for bringing this matter to the House for consideration. I do not underestimate the importance of this debate and the importance of the Union, and I will speak along those lines.

I am well known for my love of a good quote. I know of no other person alive whom I honour and respect more than the person who issued this quote, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. She said:

“I know of no single formula for success, but over the years I have observed some attributes of leadership are universal and are often about finding ways of encouraging people to combine their efforts, their talents, their insights, their enthusiasm and their inspiration to work together.”

That is Her Majesty the Queen telling us in this House what we should be doing. I think those are inspirational words for us all. It is important that the parties whose Members have contributed today—the Conservative party, the Labour party, the Scottish National party and ourselves, the Democratic Unionist party—have come together to debate the issue. It is good to have all the talents of those parties coming together, even if there may be a wee bit of an exchange now and again. Even the Liberal Democrats, who unfortunately are not here to contribute to the debate, make a valuable contribution to debates in this House.

We are called to be leaders of this nation, and to encourage people to combine efforts, talents and enthusiasm and work together. I look around this Chamber at my fellow Members and sometimes I am slightly in awe of the ability, intelligence and personalities at play. But I have also become frustrated when I have seen that instead of working together through difficulties and through different opinions to provide our best and strongest foot through negotiations, we have sometimes shown a fractured relationship and from that we have shown weakness.

Several hon. Members mentioned sport. We all have our own countries, our own football teams and regions. But whenever England were playing in the World cup, the flags were out all across all of Northern Ireland—I have to say not necessarily for the England football team, as it was around the 12 July time of the year. I tell you what, though, there was not a household that I was aware of that was not supporting England, just as I was. There was the biggest cheer whenever we got through. My prediction was the quarter-finals. We got to the semi-finals, and that was good. Was I the only person

[Jim Shannon]

who was cheering for England? No, I was not. All the regions were doing so. Whenever teams are playing in Europe, am I the only person who looks through the teams from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and cheers them on, whoever they may be, and hopes they do well? In Northern Ireland, we play opposition who are clearly above our level, but that is by the way.

I believe that Europe would be astounded if it came across the full force of the United Kingdom and if we could come to terms with the legally binding referendum vote and be determined to do what is best for all the people in the country who democratically cast their vote or exercised their right to abstain from voting. If we were determined to do what we are elected to do—carrying out the democratic will of the people instead of taking any opportunity to score a political point at the expense of the strength of the UK—I believe we would display our strength instead of our weakness. A house that is divided against itself cannot stand, as the Scripture says. That certainly applies to us all.

I declare an interest as someone who served in the armed forces for 14 and a half years as a part-time soldier in the Ulster Defence Regiment in an anti-terrorist role in Northern Ireland, and for 11 and a half years as a territorial when the iron curtain was still up and strong. What a joy it was to serve alongside people from different parts of the United Kingdom in the one uniform doing what we did together in one Army. In the skies it was the RAF and on the seas it was the Royal Navy. The Irish Guard and the Royal Irish Regiment consist of people from across all the regions of the United Kingdom. That is important for English regiments as well.

It is also great to see the exchange of exports and imports across the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland in particular. We have a very strong agri-sector, including in my constituency. It is Northern Ireland and Strangford that feed the nations—I say that with respect, Mr Deputy Speaker; I know you will have your own thoughts. We in Northern Ireland export to Scotland, Wales and England and across the whole world, and the Ulster fry is renowned for its quality and taste. I had a full English breakfast this morning, and I tell you something: a full English will never match an Ulster fry—I say that to all Englishmen and women who are here today.

I recently spoke about the Scotland-Northern Ireland ties that go back through our history and the current economic ties, and they are only enhanced when we realise how strong we are together. For two islands to be able to be the global force that we are can only be because of the different strengths that each region brings to the table—the different talents, abilities and natural strengths that we each possess—which, added together, produce this wonderful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

There is no doubt in my mind that for Northern Ireland to be segregated from Great Britain in any way would be catastrophic. We simply could not do without our biggest trading partner, and we would not want to do without it either. A special status that would mean being annexed from the UK in all but name would be a back-door unification with Ireland, which would be unacceptable. I was never as glad to walk through the

Division Lobby as I was last week to ensure that any backstop arrangement would now be considered illegal. We are one body and better off together.

Hon. Members will know that I read Scripture regularly. I want to speak about one particular Scripture text that comes to mind, and the message is very clear. It is from 1 Corinthians 12, verses 21 to 31. As we all know, when the four nations came together, they based their laws, rules and regulations on the Holy Bible and what it taught us. It is important that that is the base for where we are. The message of the Scripture text is:

“But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of.”

This is the story:

“An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn’t be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, ‘Get lost; I don’t need you?’ Or, Head telling Foot, ‘You’re fired; your job has been phased out?’ As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way—the ‘lower’ the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it’s a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honour just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn’t you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?”—

in my case, that is quite clear, as one who has very little hair, but I would probably settle for a good digestive system before that. It is important that Members listen to this if possible:

“The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together...every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don’t, the parts we see and the parts we don’t. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.

The thrust of that Scripture text and message is simple: we are better together. The body can only operate if all parts are operating together. I look to my friends in the Scottish National party—I call them my friends because they are—and say that as an Ulster Scot and one who has descended from the Stewarts of the lowlands of Scotland, I know my heritage and where I come from, and I appreciate the culture that we have, and that tradition, history and language. When my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) sometimes says to me, “Can you understand the guys from Scotland?”, I say that “understand” is the very word. I have no bother with their accents. I can understand them all, because I see it as something that we are very much together on. We might not agree on all the politics, but we agree on many, many things. That is why I truly believe that we are better off together. When we look at English and Welsh history and names, we see that they intertwine. The four nations are clearly strong through their relationships. We are stronger when we are united in the face of those who wish to see us crumble. Whether it be Newtownards in Strangford, Northern Ireland, Newton Stewart in Scotland, Newport in Wales or Newcastle in England, we are talking about four regions as one, together. There is no doubt that we work in our individual countries because we are part of a greater nation: a whole, together.

I implore every Member to consider this: the people have spoken. Whether or not we agree with that call, we have a duty to deliver the best that we can deliver, and we can succeed in doing that only from the position of strength that is found when we stand together.

I began with a quotation. Let me end with another. Edward Everett Hale said:

“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.”

We are better together. Let us be successful by working together.

9.30 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to wind up the debate on behalf of the Opposition. It has been an interesting debate, but, as a Lancashire lass, I have felt a bit left out. At times, the debate seemed to be about Scottish tit for tat rather than focusing on uniting the Union as a whole. However, I thank all Members for their contributions.

My hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) rightly highlighted the Government's political choice of austerity and the impact that it has had on our Union. They were right to do so, because, instead of bringing communities together, the Government have overseen some of the most divisive and unequal times that anyone in the UK can remember. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for his thoughtful insight on devolution, and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for his detailed and forensic analysis. I also thank all the Members who used the debate as a history lesson to settle old scores from the past 20 years of devolution. However, I want to focus my remarks on the motion of today and the Union of tomorrow.

What has become clear from all those speeches is a developing narrative—a narrative about passing responsibility away without passing the money or the powers. Quite simply, the Government have been passing the buck without passing the bucks. Devolution that is devoid of real power is meaningless, and is an insult to the communities that it was supposed to serve.

How did we arrive at this state of affairs? It can be traced back to the brutality of the austerity cuts that were introduced eight years ago. The Government knew that they could not weather the storm of the spending cuts that they wanted to implement across the UK, so in England they chose to heap responsibility and obligations on our local authorities, city regions and regional Mayors, while at the same time cutting their budgets and limiting their powers. They let everyone else take the blame for their cuts, and took no responsibility for their own brutal actions.

The Government have failed to entrust our devolved Assemblies and Parliaments with responsibility. Under cover of their self-made Brexit chaos, they are snatching powers back to Whitehall rather than strengthening our devolved nations. They are preferring to kick the political football and yet again to put self-interest before the strength of the Union, thus wasting a historic opportunity to secure further devolution. The promise of meaningful devolution for our communities has been exposed as merely a masquerade for their regime of austerity and Westminster-centric power.

As an MP representing a northern town, I found that betrayal particularly stinging, because I know exactly how desperately devolution is needed. For too long our town economies, our northern regions and our nations of the UK have been neglected. Power, resources and funding are tightly held by Whitehall, and communities across the country have little say in, influence over or even knowledge of the decisions affecting their daily lives. Some say that those towns and other areas have been “left behind”, too slow to respond to a rapidly changing country. I say that they have been held back—held back by a system that gives them no voice and no choice.

In my constituency, we have seen the gradual decline of our manufacturing base. The Beeching cuts of the 1960s disconnected our town from the rail network, and our economy experienced a total drying up of the infrastructure investment that is needed to attract business growth and create well-paid, secure jobs.

The answer from this Government to my own area, Greater Manchester, is to point to our two regional transport bodies, our combined authority and our new city Mayor. On the face of it, this is exactly what was needed, and we can imagine the hope communities such as Leigh were given: would this be the moment when power, resources and funding were handed back down to the local level? Unfortunately, however, the reality is far from the promise. Responsibility was gladly handed down, but the powers did not follow. The regional transport bodies that were created know exactly what is needed to meet transport demands and to attract investment and stimulate growth, but are without the powers to enact transformative plans. Our Mayor, Andy Burnham, is trying his hardest to tackle the local skills shortage, keep our communities safe and meet our housing needs, but is left without the ability to take a whole-system approach to these burning issues. Right across the country we have seen councils, mayors, local authorities and transport bodies left as the punching bag for local anger, but restrained by Westminster from taking any meaningful action.

On the Government's pet project of the northern powerhouse, I have to tell them that the reality for those of us trying to make a difference on the ground is that it has felt more like the “northern powerless”, unable to take these important decisions on infrastructure, which are the foundations of inclusive growth. Subservient to Whitehall, the Government's flagship policy is nothing but devolution in name only. As a result, communities across the UK have been left feeling completely disconnected from Whitehall and the people who make decisions on their behalf. The many no longer feel that their country is working for them.

Last year, the Government's policies were exposed by a damning report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which stated that as a result of the 2010-17 austerity measures

“households with one or more disabled member will be significantly more adversely impacted than those with no disabled members.”

It also stated that

“ethnic minority households will be more adversely impacted than White households”,

and:

“Lone parents lose around 15% of their net income on average—almost £1 in every £6. By contrast, the losses for all other family groups are much smaller, from nothing to 8%...Women lose more than men from reforms at every income level.”

[Jo Platt]

Does that sound like we are all in this together? Whether it is town versus city, rich versus poor or remain versus leave, the divide-and-rule tactics the Government have used have left our country in a far less cohesive place than they found it.

So what should a strong Union look like? A strong United Kingdom is where opportunity is open to all and success is dependent not on background or wealth but on talent and resolve. A strong United Kingdom is where our different cultures and traditions are respected but come together as one, and where we appreciate and celebrate the differences and the unique qualities of our nations and our regions instead of using them as a source of division. A strong United Kingdom is where power lies with the many, and where communities are resourced and empowered to make meaningful decisions on their day-to-day lives, and where everyone—young and old, north and south, rich and poor—feels they have a stake in society.

We on this side of the House have that plan for meaningful devolution—a plan that builds on the successes of the previous Labour Government, and looks to meet the needs and aspirations of the nations and our regions; a plan that unites our communities and our country at a time when unity is needed more than ever.

That is why Labour has committed to a constitutional convention if elected. If we are truly to transform and strengthen our Union, we need to have that wider conversation about our Union settlement for the decades to come, and that cannot be done from Westminster. These decisions need to rise above the day-to-day politics of this place and be made by the people political reform will most affect.

Our aim in government will be to transform our politics so that we can finally transform our economy and society. The next Labour Government will extend democracy, bringing it closer to the many; break up the political influence of corporate power when it serves its own interests over those of society; acknowledge that local needs can be met only by local people with meaningful decision-making powers; and recognise that meaningful devolution needs the proper funding to follow, which is why we have also proposed a national investment bank that sits in the community, making local decisions on local infrastructure by local people.

John Lamont *rose*—

Luke Graham *rose*—

Jo Platt: I will carry on, thank you.

No longer can Whitehall hold the purse strings, dictating from London investment decisions in our towns and villages. No one is better placed to assess the needs of a community than those living within it. Labour recognises this and would remedy it. Eight years of Tory rule have left our United Kingdom less united than ever before, and to understand this Government's motives we need only look back at the last few weeks of mayhem. A crisis among the Conservatives has led to a divided party. They are warring among themselves at the expense of the country, but divide and rule is all they know; it has been typical of the last eight years. Week after week we are treated to the sight of self-serving politicians putting individual and party ambition before the needs of the country, and everyone has had enough.

In the midst of the most turbulent political time any of us can remember, it is now that the communities we serve need the leadership, the stability and the investment to reunite the United Kingdom. Labour has that plan—a plan to give power back to the many, to strengthen those powers with adequate resourcing and, most importantly, to be unafraid to entrust our local authorities, Mayors and devolved Assemblies with crucial decisions.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Platt: I am just about to finish.

We will transform the outdated political structures of this country, ensuring that they are fit to deliver Labour's ambition to reverse decades of growing inequality and to achieve social justice. That plan is called "For the many, not the few", and the next Labour Government will deliver it, finally bringing power back to where it belongs—in our communities.

9.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to reply to this debate, in what is my last act as a Wales Minister before I move on to the Ministry of Defence. I should like to take this opportunity to say what a great pleasure it has been to work with the Wales Office, and I want to pay tribute to the team, who have supported me brilliantly, and to the work that we have done with Members across the House and in Wales. I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt). I know that this is her first time at the Dispatch Box. It is always nerve-racking, and I would like to say that it gets easier, but it does not.

This has been an important debate. Like many other people here today, I am a proud Unionist. I grew up in Anglesey, and I spent the first few years of my life in Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlilllantisilio gogogoch. I can see *Hansard* looking worried! My father and all his family come from Scotland—I have to confess that my great-grandfather was a proud trade unionist and acted in the Labour party—and my mother is from England, so I have seen the benefits of our great Union of Great Britain.

We have heard a range of interesting views today. As the Prime Minister has said, as we leave the EU and in the years ahead, we will strengthen the bonds that unite us. The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe. We want a deep and special partnership with the EU. We will secure a deal that works for all parts of the United Kingdom and, at this momentous time, it is more important than ever that we face the future together, united by what makes us strong: the bonds that bring us together and our shared interest in the UK being an open, successful trading nation. It is imperative that, as the United Kingdom leaves the EU, all the Administrations of the UK benefit from a unified approach wherever possible. That is possible only through the strength of our relationships.

Our regular work with the devolved Administrations includes formal meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee and ministerial forums, as well as programmes of work at official level. Alongside regular bilateral discussions, the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations

provides a forum in which the UK Government and the devolved Administrations can discuss the progress of the negotiations and the domestic issues arising from EU exit. Of course, we recognise that engagement cannot remain static and has to evolve with our requirements.

As has rightly been highlighted today, respect for devolution is key to the constitutional integrity of the Union. The UK Government are resolute in their commitment to the devolution settlements. Devolution is about working together to deliver for the whole UK, and we remain committed to giving the different nations of the UK the space they need to pursue different domestic policies while protecting and preserving the benefits of being part of a wider United Kingdom.

Patrick Grady: If all this is so important, and if respecting devolution is so important, can the Minister explain why, for the first time in history, this House and this Government have chosen to override the will of the Scottish Parliament by passing the EU (Withdrawal) Bill without a legislative consent memorandum?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman will know full well that this Government engaged massively with both the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government, and we went a long way in listening to the views that were represented by both Governments. The Welsh Government, thankfully, recognise that the UK Government have come a long way and have produced a measure that is acceptable. It is a shame that the Scottish Government want to play politics.

A number of important elements of our Union have been discussed today, and I thank the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) for highlighting in her opening speech the role of the armed forces in the Union. I take this opportunity to do the same, and it is clear that in my new position at the Ministry of Defence I will see, on a daily basis, the armed forces' important contribution to ensuring the security of everyone in the UK.

As my hon. Friend also said, it is not just in defence that the Union has value. Our health services work together under the banner of the NHS—a banner that has turned 70 this year—meaning that whether a person is in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, they can walk into a hospital anywhere and be treated with the care and dedication for which the service is known.

I will now address some of the points that have been raised today. The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Lesley Laird), who led for the Opposition, talked about youth unemployment. Well, I am proud that under this Government youth unemployment has come down 40% from the high level we inherited from her Government, and that employment in this country is at its highest level since the 1970s.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) spoke up for his constituency. The thorny issue of potholes always seems to come up in politics, and I am glad he was able to raise it in this debate somehow. I hope his relationship with his local newspaper editor will improve as time goes by.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said that he did not want to go into the detail of the independence referendum, and I wonder why.

He gave us a long history, which was very interesting indeed, but he skirted over the issues that did not suit his own argument. On the issue of intergovernmental relations, the Government recognise that we need to review the structures and ensure they are fit for purpose, which is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister led the discussions at the JMC in March at which all Ministers agreed that officials will look at the arrangement and will involve the devolved Administrations as we pursue that future working relationship.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) was right to talk about the Northern Ireland Assembly and about the abolition of tolls on the Severn bridge. Many people cross our borders every day to go to work. I saw an interesting statistic the other day that, in the Wrexham authority, 40% of people who work actually go to work across the border, which shows how important the Union is to people who go to work every day.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) was very critical of the Chequers agreement. I see the Chequers agreement as a pragmatic and sensible plan for our leaving the European Union. He also talked about the national health service, and I am proud this Government have committed to putting an extra £20 billion into it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) talked about the city deals. He rightly said that £1 billion has gone to Scotland so far through those deals, and more will be on its way. We are devolving more powers to many parts of England and Wales through similar deals.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) talked about heckling, which seems a bit rich, as he certainly likes to heckle a bit. He was very doom and gloom about Brexit, painting a dark picture. I think I will just repeat some of his words back to him. At business questions last week, he said:

“There might be the occasional rhetorical flourish, an over-emphasis here and there perhaps, or even a bit of exaggeration”.—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 600.]

I will leave it there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) talked about his partnership with his wife for 40-plus years, so I congratulate him on that. He was right to point out that there is no such thing as a power grab here, as we will be giving more powers and those powers will be transferring to the Scottish Government. That is exactly why, as he pointed out, they have had to appoint more Ministers to cope with it. There were so many other speakers that I cannot go through them all, but my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) was right to talk about the importance of the investment in defence. I am sure I will be dealing with him a lot more in the coming months in my new role, and perhaps he will answer the phone a bit quicker to me now than he did when I was his Whip.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Given that the Minister is now a Defence Minister, I hope he will be able to help me. What was the promise made by the then Defence Secretary, now the Chancellor, during the independence referendum on troop numbers in Scotland? How far off target are the Government right now?

Stuart Andrew: The honest answer is: I do not know the answer to that question, but I will be honest about it and I will happily get back to the hon. Gentleman if he will allow me.

The hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) talked about how sad it is that people feel they have to choose between being Scottish or British, which is an important point. I consider myself Welsh, but I am very proud to be British, too. My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) rightly pointed out that people such as Alex Salmond will never respect the result of the referendum, and that it is only the Conservative party that respected both the 2014 and 2016 referendums.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) rightly said that this is not a pointless end of term debate. The Union is incredibly important to this country and to this Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) reminded us that he is the only PPS to have served the Wales Office, Scotland Office and Northern Ireland Office. The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) made an interesting point when he said that the Union is not a cul-de-sac but a highway. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) rightly made a point about the tone of our politics. It is outrageous to see banners that have words such as “Tory scum out” on them, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for making the intervention he did—he was right to do so. This debate does get heated and it has high passions, but, as a number of people have said, it is right that we treat each other with decency.

The final contributions came from the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney); the hon. Member for Glasgow South, who was kind about my recent appointment; and, of course, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who talked about sport. That brought us back to one thing I have noticed that really unites us. If Wales are playing, I will cheer them on, but I was more than happy to share in the celebrations as England went through the stages of the recent World cup. That is what we should all do. We should celebrate the great things that unite us as a nation. England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have so many different characteristics and cultural contributions to make, but that is what makes this Union such a unique and special thing that we should be proud of and it must continue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered strengthening the Union.

Business without Debate

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Christian Matheson be discharged from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Clive Efford be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Naz Shah be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Kate Green be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mike Amesbury and Jo Platt be discharged from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and that Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi and Teresa Pearce be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Jack Lopresti be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Maria Caulfield be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

PETITIONS

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

9.55 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I rise to present a petition from constituents from the neighbouring constituency of Great Yarmouth. They are concerned that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities but with no consultation with the home education community; that the revised guidance encourages local authorities to breach article 8 of the European convention on human rights and the general data protection regulations; and, further, that there is no way for parents to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Great Yarmouth constituency,

Declare that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated: further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidance and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002232]

Green Deal Scheme

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of some of my constituents. There are 167 households in my constituency that have been affected by mis-selling of the green deal scheme.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North East,

Declares that the Government backed Green Deal Scheme has affected petitioners as we have suffered a detriment to both our finances, our private and family lives; further that many vulnerable residents have invested their life savings in good faith, and others

have accrued up to £17,000 debt to pay for the work that was carried out; and further that in many cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result we are unable to sell our properties or have the assurance that they are safe to live in, or can be insured.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to ensure that the Government will compensate and protect people who have found themselves suffering a detriment because of this Government backed Scheme, and take steps to ensure that this cannot happen in the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002231]

Mamba: Societal Effect

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

9.58 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am delighted finally to lead this debate about the effect on society of the drug Mamba, which is a growing issue both in my constituency and in similar towns across the UK.

Mamba, also known as Black Mamba, is one of several synthetic cannabis products that have emerged on the drugs market in recent years. Members might also have heard of Spice, which was originally a brand name for a version of synthetic cannabis. These drugs contain a herbal smoking mixture that has been mixed with a group of drugs known as synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, or SCRAs for short.

Spice and Mamba are now used as nicknames for any type of herbal mixture that has been coated with an SCRA. They were sold as legal highs until the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 came into force, so this is a very recent challenge, which perhaps explains why we seem to be fairly unprepared for dealing with it.

Mamba and Spice were initially seen as an alternative version of cannabis but, as I will go on to say, they bear a closer resemblance to harder drugs such as heroin. The name “synthetic cannabis” is in many ways unhelpful, because it draws comparisons with cannabis that are largely untrue, and the impact is certainly far worse both for individuals and for communities. These drugs are often known as “zombie drugs” for the terrible effects that they have on their users. After consuming Mamba, users often resemble zombies, slumped in a state of semi-consciousness, sometimes foaming at the mouth and sometimes passed out in the street. Tom in my office has given CPR to drug users on multiple occasions when they have passed out in the street outside my office during working hours in broad daylight. It is a huge strain on police, ambulance and hospital services, as well as on Tom’s nerves. These drugs vary wildly from drug to drug and even from batch to batch. They are often made by small-scale producers, so the quality is incredibly inconsistent and sometimes dangerous.

I know that many of my colleagues and Members across the House will have similar issues in their own constituencies. This is a national problem affecting every corner of the United Kingdom.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

Ben Bradley: This is a national problem affecting every corner of the United Kingdom. In Mansfield town centre, like many town centres around the country, we have a persistent and growing problem with these drugs and the individuals who take them. Users tend to congregate in town in very public places. They consume Mamba and then stay in the town centre for hours in a semi-comatose zombified state. It is awful to see, and it has a terrible impact on users and a knock-on effect on the whole town and across society. It is no exaggeration to say that I receive an email or a message from constituents on this issue literally every single day.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this matter. As always, he has picked a subject, as he rightly says, that is very important across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Given that Spice is as addictive as heroin, does he not agree that it must be treated with the seriousness, and also with the sanctions, of heroin trafficking?

Ben Bradley: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Later in my speech, I will come on to why that is the case and to what I hope will be remedies for the issue as we currently find it. This comparison with cannabis in particular is neither fair nor realistic. It is more comparable with heroin, and it is important that it is treated in the same way, so that users and people experiencing this in the town centre get the same level of help and support as those addicted to heroin.

I am keen to use this opportunity to ask the Government to undertake a number of actions on this issue. First and foremost, I am concerned about the classification of these drugs. Before the ban on psychoactive substances in 2016, these drugs were sold either over the counter or online, under a variety of brand names. They were often seen as a new version of cannabis. I am pleased that the Government have banned these drugs and other “legal highs” but I am concerned that we have not gone far enough. These drugs are incredibly dangerous, they destroy lives and they are very clearly damaging my community in Mansfield as we speak.

Mamba is highly addictive and the withdrawal symptoms of Mamba and Spice are said to be worse than coming off cocaine or heroin.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the development of a new test for detecting Mamba would be of enormous value in the fight against this drug?

Ben Bradley: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There do not seem to be medical interventions into Mamba in the same way as there are with other drugs. Absolutely, being able to diagnose the cause of this zombified state would be very important and could help the police and local health services.

Anecdotally I have heard from constituents who have tried to overcome their Mamba addiction by moving on to heroin, because they say that it is easier to deal with and that there is more support and more medical intervention available to help them to quit heroin than there is for Mamba, which goes to show that this drug is not comparable with cannabis. This is a hard drug.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman comment on the fact that in countries such as the Netherlands where cannabis has been legalised there is no demand for Mamba, Spice or any of those products?

Ben Bradley: As I have said, the comparison with cannabis is not a fair one. The challenge with these drugs is their affordability. They are illegal, but people can still get multiple hits for a fiver in the town centre. They were legal before, and perhaps we did not see the back street issue that we do now. The growing strength and poor quality of these drugs means that they are a growing health problem for many constituents.

Ronnie Cowan: That is the very point. Because these drugs are now illegal, we have driven them underground and put them into the hands of the criminals. The criminals are making them. We do not know the quality of these drugs. People who could be taking legal cannabis and would be happy taking legal cannabis have been driven into the hands of the criminals and are taking a product with no idea what is in it, and this is having the effects that the hon. Gentleman has so eloquently described.

Ben Bradley: The point I am trying to make is that cannabis is a totally different thing from these particular drugs. I would be happy to discuss whether we should legalise cannabis further down the line—different models exist around the world—but the point I am trying to make this evening is that the impact of these drugs is far worse than that of cannabis. I certainly do not think that we should go back to a scenario where these particular drugs are legalised. That would present huge challenges.

Users frequently suffer seizures, vomit, and have terrifying hallucinations and severe psychotic episodes. Seeing people in our town centres slumped against walls or hovering in this zombified state is horrific. It is awful for the users, who have literally lost control of their functions and are in desperate need of intervention and support, but it is also awful for other people in town. I have had the experience of trying to explain to my three-year-old son that the man on the floor is not dead and that he must be tired and asleep or whatever. I can easily understand why families contact me regularly, having had that experience, and then choose not to return to Mansfield town centre as a result.

As well as considering reclassification, we need a more joined-up strategy to help towns to deal with this issue. We need more help from the health service, including support programmes and the help for users that exists for other drugs such as heroin, but not for Mamba and Spice. Let me be clear; I am under no illusion that this is a simple issue. It is clear that the effects of Mamba on society are far-reaching and touch upon a number of Government Departments. Since being elected last year, I have focused on local issues, particularly homelessness in Mansfield and Warsop. Individuals who take these drugs are often facing their own personal crises, perhaps due to family breakdown, homelessness, other addictions or mental health problems. I am keen to look at the ways in which we can care for these individuals who are homeless and vulnerable, and who need assistance.

I pay credit to the charities, support workers and volunteers who help Mamba users in my constituency and around the east midlands. Relatively local to my constituency is the Nottingham Recovery Network, which runs a series of Mamba clinics in Nottingham to help users across the city. Next month, I am due to meet Neil Brooks, a clinical specialist who works in connection with the network, in order to learn more about his work and to speak directly to former Mamba users. Neil was kind enough to brief me on his work ahead of this debate. He is broadly supportive of the campaign to raise the classification of Mamba from class B to class A, and is also keen for the Government to look at the ways in which they can support detox programmes for Mamba users. The Nottingham Recovery Network has produced a series of notes that outline the situation locally and

provide a useful insight into these drugs, which, after all, are relatively new on the scene. The notes paint a bleak picture.

I will take a couple of minutes to look in more detail at the current situation locally. There are no national figures for emergency hospital admissions for Spice-related incidents, but it is likely to be several thousand admissions a year. Not only is Mamba one of the cheapest drugs on the market; it is also one of the strongest. In their pure form, synthetic cannabinoids are either solids or oils. They are then added to herbs, vegetable matter or plant cuttings to make a smoking mixture, so that the result looks like cannabis.

A key feature of Mamba is the compound acetone. Dealers frequently use nail polish remover, which is used to bind the liquid to the herbal plant matter during production. As well as giving the drug a distinctive smell, acetone causes a variety of physical problems for Mamba users. What is even worse is that dealers and producers are frequently adding more and more acetone to their product to make their Mamba stronger. Alarming, the extra acetone content leads to the cost of the drug declining, making it more affordable, but obviously much more dangerous. Mamba continues to drop in price—from £60-£70 an ounce, to now regularly selling for £40-£50 an ounce or even lower. The price of a bag bought on the street remains at about £5, typically providing four hits, so hon. Members will understand why it is becoming the drug of choice for hard drug users.

Mamba is also having an impact in our prisons. Unlike traditional cannabis, Mamba and Spice have a much lower odour, making it difficult for prison staff to tell when inmates are smoking the drugs. There are already considerable pressures on the prison system, but the prevalence of these drugs makes the situation even more challenging for prison staff. It is five years or more since the first reports of these kinds of drugs being used in prisons, and the situation has not been solved. Even worse are the cases where prison staff, nurses or other support workers have encountered the drug by accident, including by inhaling second-hand smoke. The drug is so potent that the effects of inhaling second-hand smoke can be quite significant.

We need to take this seriously. Mamba is not a slightly harder version of cannabis or a recreational drug that users occasionally dabble in. It is becoming the more affordable version of heroin. It is the hard street drug of choice for users because of its affordability, and it is making towns such as Mansfield places that people do not want to visit—never mind the personal impact on the users themselves.

I am asking the Home Office to consider reviewing the classification of these so-called zombie drugs, because the current classification does not reflect the truly dangerous nature of these substances. Changing the classification would mean tougher penalties for manufacturers and dealers.

Ronnie Cowan: Has the hon. Gentleman considered what we would be saying to criminals by raising the classification of synthetic cannabis to class A? We would be saying to criminals who handle this drug, “We are going to hammer down on you for this, because we see this drug as more destructive.” They will therefore protect themselves and the people around them by increasing the levels of violence that they use on their people in

their marketplace. That would mean that, yet again, it is the vulnerable people who would be the most punished by such a move.

Ben Bradley: I am not sure that I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The problem is the availability of these drugs—they are so easy to find. I have come across bags of it lying in the street in my town centre, just abandoned there. Part of the problem is that people dealing in it and taking it do not see any consequence to their situation. There are very few legal consequences. Later I will come on to some of the challenges with people going round and round the system because of this drug.

Making Mamba a class A drug would mean that it would become more of a risk to deal in it. As a result, the supply would decrease and prices would rise. It would also, crucially, give the police greater powers to prosecute offenders and to get dealers and users off our streets and out of our town centres, whether that is to support services, rehabilitation or, in some cases, prison.

Jim Shannon: I fully support what the hon. Gentleman says. It is quite clear that we need legislation in place to prevent this drug from destroying lives and destroying the future for many people. It is not sufficient to say that if we legalise it in some places that makes it better—it does not. We need to make sure that it is not legalised and thereby we make sure that people do not have access to it.

Ben Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I want to draw the distinction, again, between these drugs and cannabis. They are totally different propositions. There may be an argument for a discussion about the legalisation of cannabis; that is obviously a hot topic at the moment. However, these drugs do not fall into that category—there is genuinely not enough legislation and not enough consequence to taking these drugs. Some of us have seen the impact in town centres; it sounds as though the hon. Gentleman has. The impact that this is having on Mansfield, in particular, is horrendous to see.

Ronnie Cowan: Following the hon. Gentleman’s logic, he wants to crack down on Mamba after a series of crackdowns over the years on other hard drugs, but that has hardly been a raging success, has it? All we have seen is the escalation of drugs on our streets. They are so readily available because they are in the hands of criminals, and we do not know what is in them. Coming down hard on vulnerable users and low-level drug dealers does not stop or interrupt the flow of harmful drugs to our streets for any more than a couple of hours. They are soon back and doing it again. All we are doing is playing into the hands of the criminals.

Ben Bradley: This has to be about support from all sides. A legal line has to be drawn—there have to be ramifications to taking these drugs. There need to be support services and medical intervention. As I have said, medical interventions do not exist for these drugs in the same way as they do for heroin and others. It is becoming increasingly apparent to me in Mansfield town centre that the users of this drug see no legal consequence to literally walking through the streets shouting about having taken it, in front of families, children and whoever else. They are in and out of prison with no consequence. They can go round and round the legal system without

[Ben Bradley]

any ultimate price to pay. For a homeless person, sometimes a bed in a prison is better than their normal situation. We have to come at this situation from all angles—support, policing, medical intervention and various other aspects that can help to deal with it—because it certainly cannot be allowed to carry on as it is. However, I fully appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point.

It is also vital that we get the message across in schools. Obviously we talk about drugs in schools, but Mamba is relatively new, and it is dangerous. We need to stop people experimenting with the drug in the first place and make sure that they are aware of the dangers.

While the zombified images of users are bad enough—they are flowing around my constituents' Facebook pages as we speak—let us not forget that these drugs can also be deadly. In March, the deaths of seven men in Birmingham were linked to Mamba. It is not just adults; children are now accessing these substances. The examples I have read about have been absolutely terrifying. Earlier this year, an 11-year-old in Wales smoked synthetic cannabis and ended up in hospital in a high-dependency unit for 33 hours while doctors dealt with the effects it was having on his young body. Although toxicology reports are still pending, it is believed that a 14-year-old boy from Greater Manchester died earlier this year after taking Spice while having a sleepover at his house with friends. He died at the intensive care unit at Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool.

It is horrendous that we now have children dying after taking these drugs. Local police in my constituency tell me they are concerned that more and more children are now associating themselves with groups of Mamba users, and that this could become a heightened risk over the summer holidays. These drugs share the same classification as cannabis but have far more severe side effects. Having sought the advice of local services, charities and the local police, I know that stakeholders on all sides broadly support the idea of reviewing the classification of Mamba and other synthetic drugs.

Policing this issue is largely managed locally. In June, I met Inspector Nick Butler, the neighbourhood policing inspector in my constituency, and it was good to discuss how the police were tackling it locally. He detailed his concerns about policing Mamba and the effects of Mamba usage on crime levels more broadly. In the past 12 months, the town centre in Mansfield has seen a 22% rise in antisocial behaviour and a 34% rise in shop theft. Much of it relates to street drinking and Mamba usage. There is a persistent group of offenders in the town centre consisting of about 20 individuals, many of whom are heavy drug users. The police know them well and regularly review their cases. The police and support services are trying to deal with the problem, but without the ability to take tough action or a national framework or best practise to draw upon.

It might help if I detail a local case that the police in Mansfield dealt with recently—it might also evidence my view that we need tougher legal ramifications. The example, which I have anonymised, illustrates why we need tougher action. In Mansfield, a male resident and Mamba user repeatedly threatened and assaulted shop staff, district council staff and police in the town centre. This went on for a year. He carried weapons such as

flick knives and would not listen to advice or engage with any of the agencies providing support. In fact, he would become verbally abusive if support was offered.

He would take Mamba and other substances in the town centre on a daily basis and become extremely abusive. He would often collapse, which would require an ambulance call-out, but when an ambulance would arrive he would threaten to assault the paramedics. A criminal behaviour order was obtained with a condition that he was not to enter Mansfield town centre, but what happened? He breached the order immediately and was arrested and placed before the courts. This happened four times. He was warned each time by the magistrates court not to breach the order, but each time he would walk out of the court and straight into the town centre, showing a complete disregard for the legal system.

The next time he breached the order, he was placed before the magistrates court and given a £10 fine, but the court also amended his order to allow him to visit a church in the town centre that he said he needed to access support services. The court did not consult the church, which was not very happy, to say the least. After the hearing, he immediately breached the order again on leaving the court and was given a suspended 21-day sentence. Having breached the order for the eighth time in four weeks, he was imprisoned for 30 days. He has once again returned to the town centre, however, and continues to abuse members of the public. He has been arrested again and the court has now bailed him pending reports.

That case makes it only too apparent that individuals can breach orders again and again and just how difficult it is to deal with persistent offenders. My local police cannot figure out what else they can do beyond issuing criminal behaviour orders and moving people out of the town centre. We need to take action to change that. It seems that the police are limited in what they can do when the courts cannot or are not willing to implement tougher penalties.

Aside from that case, I have been contacted by many constituents raising concerns about the impact Mamba is having in our town centre. I have been contacted by staff from local shops, including independent shops and larger companies such as Wilko. Shop staff have raised concerns about threats that they receive at work. The level of shoplifting has risen—I mentioned the statistics earlier—which is having a real impact on the profitability and viability of stores in the town centre.

Ronnie Cowan: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of a project run by John Marks in the Wirral in the 1980s, where he gave medical heroin out to addicts, after which the crime rate dropped by 96%?

Ben Bradley: I am not aware of that, but I would never advocate giving out heroin to my constituents, and I do not think many of them would go along with it either. I would be interested to read about the project and see the science behind it, but I do not think I would ever be likely to condone that kind of action, if I am being honest.

The threat of violence and the possibility of business closures is causing understandable stress for retail workers locally. They do not deserve to have to deal with "Mamba zombies" as part of their daily work. The Government

are working on a number of ways to support our high streets and town centres, but that good work can so easily be undermined by the presence of hard drug users in our town centres. I explained earlier the experience I had with my children, walking through town and trying to explain to them exactly what was going on with this drug use.

Mansfield has great potential in its town centre— independent shops, listed buildings, a lovely market square, amazing people—but I am concerned that the persistent group of drug users in the town centre is already putting people off, and that this reputation will continue to grow unless we take action. I have already touched upon some of the positive steps being taken locally, including work to co-ordinate the approach of the local police and local housing organisations' outreach support. It is also good news that Mansfield District Council now has a specialist team to tackle drug-related antisocial behaviour in the town centre.

The purpose of this debate is not only to highlight the impact that Mamba is having on local communities, but to lobby the Government for change. I am keen that more action is taken to address the problem at a national level. I have been in contact with the Home Office about Mamba in recent weeks, and of course I welcome the various actions that have already been taken to deal with the misuse of such drugs. Since the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 came into force, banning such substances, hundreds of retailers across the UK have either closed or are no longer selling these drugs. Police have arrested suppliers, and the National Crime Agency has removed many such substances from UK-based websites.

There has been action—it has been a good start—but we need to review the classification of these drugs. We also clearly need a national strategy and support from central Government to help to tackle an issue that is not confined to Mansfield. It is a national problem, with many town centres across the UK experiencing similar problems, and I have heard from other Members about similar issues in their constituencies. We require a national framework, and I am calling on the Government to work with police forces, councils, charities and experts to put a framework in place to help towns and cities to deal with this problem effectively. Police and councils need some advice on how to deal with the problem at local level. Mamba usage is a relatively new problem with its own specific challenges, and the approach has been mixed because we do not have a national plan. While there are great examples, such as the clinic run by the Nottingham Recovery Network, the reality in many areas is that police forces, councils and charities have to deal with the issue without effective guidance and without the frameworks to ensure a collaborative cross-organisational approach.

We also need to investigate what medical interventions might be possible. It is easy to talk about drug users as a problem, but many obviously have their own personal issues and terrible personal circumstances that have led them to this point. As far as I can see, there is no medical approach in the same way that there is for heroin users with methadone. I have not concentrated on that, because a Home Office Minister is responding to the debate and it is more of a Department of Health and Social Care issue. However, I hope that the Minister will consider that.

I am asking the Government to create a national strategy and framework, including clear guidelines and advice, to help those who are dealing with such drugs. I will be grateful if the Minister will talk to his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care about the medical interventions that may be available. Most importantly, the Government should consider reclassifying the drug so that it is more comparable with heroin and cocaine than marijuana, to give the police the opportunity to deal with it in the same way. This is an incredibly serious problem that we need to address head on.

10.22 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Since being elected, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) has been a tireless champion for his constituents, and I congratulate him on securing a debate on an issue that is clearly causing a great deal of concern in Mansfield. As he rightly points out, that concern is shared across many town centres, which was reflected in a recent Westminster Hall debate on the subject, and I saw for myself while out on patrol with the police on the streets of Newcastle just what a damaging and unsettling effect these so-called zombie drugs can have. As he points out, such drugs have also been linked to deaths, with 27 in 2016 according to the Office for National Statistics, so we are talking about a serious issue.

As my hon. Friend said, this is a relatively recent challenge, but it is a growing one, and I hope I can assure him that the Government are taking it seriously. We are not going as far as he would like at this point, but the subject is kept regularly under review because we are aware of how dangerous such drugs can be, of the devastating impact that they can have on families and the individuals taking them and of how unsettling they are for communities. As he pointed out, such drugs are often more potent than cannabis and their effects are not well understood. Batches vary in strength, making it easy to use too much. Using such drugs can cause immediate side effects such as panic and hallucinations, long-term harm such as psychosis, and dependence. That was why we acted to control these substances as class B drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and to give the police the powers they need to take action, including making possession illegal and providing longer sentences for dealers.

Ronnie Cowan: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr Hurd: I am not going to take interventions, because the hon. Gentleman took up a lot of time during the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, and I have a short amount of time in which to respond and pay sufficient respect to the subject.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, the use of new psychoactive substances has fallen significantly since we introduced the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. Thanks to that legislation, hundreds of retailers have either closed down or are no longer selling psychoactive substances, and the first offenders have been convicted. He expressed a note of scepticism about police powers. While there were 28 convictions in England and Wales in 2016, with seven jailed under the new powers, that rose to 152 convictions with 62 people immediately sent to custody in 2017.

[Mr Hurd]

My hon. Friend's central point was his desire, shared by colleagues in the House—I am thinking particularly of our mutual hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster)—to see synthetic cannabinoids such as Mamba and Spice reclassified from class B to class A drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. I understand the argument my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield is making specifically about wanting to introduce more risk into the dealing of these highly dangerous drugs. He will appreciate that the controls we have put in place are relatively recent, and their impact is being monitored closely. The Government rely heavily on advice from the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs. Its position at the moment is not to reclassify synthetic cannabinoids.

Ronnie Cowan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I have already told the hon. Gentleman that I will not give way to him, because I am responding to the debate.

I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield that the Government will continue to keep an eye on the area and will continue to engage with colleagues who have a deep concern. In the absence of the decisive move that he is arguing for, the key in the short term is cross-sector partnership work at the local level, as he pointed out. I am aware of the approach being taken in Mansfield, which he rightly praised. I am also aware of the work that the police there have undertaken along with other agencies to tackle problems with the use of these drugs. He talked about the need for a national framework. He may or may not be aware that the national policing lead for drugs has provided forces with operational guidance setting out tactical options for dealing with synthetic cannabinoids. I will keep under review the need for broader national guidelines on best practice in relation to cross-partnership working, which is the key here.

In my hon. Friend's area, there is close work between partners including the drugs monitoring group, which identifies general drug problems and emerging trends in Nottinghamshire; the professional information network, which shares intelligence and learning among partner agencies in the area about emerging psychoactive substances, including Mamba; and the police, who disrupt the

supply and distribution. I am also aware of a problem profile of the drug that Nottinghamshire police have drawn up. My hon. Friend may be aware of that.

On top of that work, Mansfield—along with Nottingham, Rushcliffe, Gedling, Broxtowe, Ashfield, Newark and Sherwood and Bassetlaw—is receiving £370,000 over two years to provide a Nottinghamshire rough sleeper prevention service. My hon. Friend will know of the clear links between these drugs and rough sleeping. That money will help rough sleepers to access support services, including substance misuse services.

Another very good example of multi-agency working has taken place in Manchester. A study was commissioned to understand the scale and nature of the problem in the area, and the multi-agency approach there appears to be working. It includes enforcement work to tackle the dealing of these drugs; working with treatment services to ensure that synthetic cannabis users are receiving treatment; increasing the numbers of trained outreach workers; fast-tracking users to a range of services; and local voluntary sector support to police and ambulance services. I commend the work in Manchester, as well as that in Nottinghamshire, including Mansfield.

I have made the connection with rough sleeping, because the increasing use of synthetic cannabinoids among rough sleepers reflects the fact that, as my hon. Friend pointed out, they are cheaper, stronger and more accessible than other substances, such as heroin, crack cocaine or alcohol. Local strategies must therefore cover rough sleeping. As he knows, the Government take this issue very seriously. We will be bringing forward our rough sleeping strategy later this summer, which will make an important contribution.

In conclusion, I again thank my hon. Friend for securing this Adjournment debate on a very important topic. I hope I have made it clear that the Government are not sitting on our hands. We recognise across the Government that this issue is best tackled by working collaboratively. There is no overnight solution, but the set of measures I have set out shows the strong links between the use of synthetic cannabinoids and vulnerable groups, and this Government are determined to take the necessary action to get on top of this growing problem—

10.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Written Statements

Monday 23 July 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I will this morning lay before Parliament a draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill which establishes a register of the beneficial owners of overseas entities that own UK property. This follows the commitment made at the anti-corruption summit in 2016 to establish such a register, in order to combat money laundering and achieve greater transparency in the UK property market.

Overseas entities will be required to register their beneficial ownership information with Companies House before obtaining legal title to UK property via the land registries. Overseas entities that own UK property when the requirements come into force, as well as any overseas entities that subsequently acquire UK property, will be required to register (and regularly update) their beneficial ownership information before they can undertake certain transactions with that property, such as selling or leasing the land, or creating a legal charge over the land, such as a mortgage.

This will deliver a world-first register, and builds upon the UK Government's global leadership in tackling corruption, ensuring that the UK continues to be a great place to do business.

The draft Bill will be published with accompanying explanatory notes, an overview document and impact assessment and research report on the potential impacts. The draft Bill will undergo pre-legislative scrutiny to ensure that it is robust and workable. The Government intend to introduce the legislation early in the second Session of this Parliament.

[HCWS897]

CABINET OFFICE

Engaging the Devolved Administrations

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I wish to update the House on recent and ongoing engagement between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations and my intentions for maintaining and strengthening intergovernmental relations moving forward.

The UK Government are committed to strong and effective relations with the devolved Administrations of the United Kingdom. As we leave the EU, and in the years ahead, we must continue to strengthen the bonds that unite us, because ours is the world's most successful union.

It is imperative that, as the United Kingdom prepares to leave the EU, the needs and interests of each nation are considered and that the UK Government and devolved Administrations benefit from a unified approach wherever possible. That is only possible through the strength of

our relationships and continued constructive engagement through a number of fora at ministerial and official level.

As chair of the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations (JMC(EN)), I seek to provide through these meetings the opportunity for meaningful engagement at the right time, to focus discussion on the most pertinent issues, understand where positions between the Administrations differ and find and build on common ground. JMC(EN) has met on five occasions so far this year, to discuss the progress of EU negotiations as well as domestic issues arising from the UK's departure from the European Union. It is my intention to convene another meeting in September and that the Committee should continue to meet regularly as we approach exit day.

Meetings of JMC(EN) have allowed for considerable progress in a number of shared priority areas, including agreement on a set of principles for establishing common UK frameworks for certain powers as they return from the EU. They also enabled an agreement with the Welsh Government on amendments to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill and the establishment of a new ministerial forum on EU negotiations (MF(EN)) and official-level technical working group sessions to enhance engagement with the devolved Administrations on the UK's negotiating position. This forum has met on two occasions—in Edinburgh and London—since it was set up in May. The next meeting is due to take place in Cardiff on 1 August and the forum will continue to meet regularly, while remaining flexible to the emerging rhythm of negotiations.

Meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee on Europe (JMC(E)) also continue to be held in advance of each European Council meeting, providing a forum to discuss the UK Government position on issues being discussed at the European Council that are of an interest to the devolved Administrations.

Officials from all Administrations continue to work together to take forward EU-exit related programmes of work including on frameworks. Recent frameworks engagement has included a number of substantive multilateral discussions on areas where legislative frameworks are envisaged, in whole or in part. We will continue to discuss these areas with the devolved Administrations over the summer.

UK Government officials worked closely with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to develop the provisions that are now in the EU (Withdrawal) Act. While we were able to reach agreement with the Welsh Government, it is disappointing we were not able to reach that same agreement with the Scottish Government. The Northern Ireland civil service has been kept fully informed of the progress of discussions, but it would be for an incoming Northern Ireland Executive to engage with this agreement. This agreement is without prejudice to the re-establishment of a Northern Ireland Executive and the intergovernmental agreement remains open to incoming Ministers in a future Northern Ireland Executive. The Government remain committed to the full restoration of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, as the Prime Minister clearly set out to the people of Northern Ireland and the political parties, during her visit of 19-20 July.

The UK Government will continue to seek legislative consent for Bills according to the established practices and conventions, listen to and take account of the views

of devolved Administrations, and work with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and Northern Ireland officials on future legislation, just as we always have.

The UK Government and devolved Administrations are also working together to amend laws that would not work appropriately when we leave the EU to ensure we have a fully functioning statute book.

The Cabinet Office works closely with the Scotland Office, the Wales Office and the Northern Ireland Office in overseeing intergovernmental relations and the devolution settlements, as well as in ensuring the UK Government advance the interests of each nation within a stronger United Kingdom. The territorial Secretaries of State engage not only with the devolved Administrations but with stakeholders across the devolved nations, ensuring that the interests of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are fully and effectively represented in the UK Government.

The UK Government also recognise the need to ensure our intergovernmental structures continue to work effectively. The Prime Minister led a discussion on the issue at the plenary meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee on 14 March, attended by the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales. Ministers agreed that officials should take forward a review of the existing intergovernmental structures and the underpinning memorandum of understanding and report their findings to the Committee in due course. This work is now under way, with UK Government officials working closely with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations.

My Cabinet colleagues of course continue to engage with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations on a regular basis on a wide range of policy matters relating to EU exit and ongoing Government business.

[HCWS905]

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces and Cadets Association External Scrutiny Team Report 2018

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a report into the condition of the reserves and delivery of the Future Reserves 2020 programme compiled by the Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations external scrutiny team.

I am most grateful to the team for its work. In particular, I thank Lieutenant General Robin Brims, who has led the team since 2012, as he leaves that role. I will take some short time to consider the report's findings and recommendations and will provide a full response to the team in due course.

[HCWS903]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The United Kingdom's (UK) permanent representative to the European Union, Sir Tim Barrow, represented the UK at the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). It was chaired by the High Representative and

Vice President of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Current Affairs

Ministers reviewed the situation in Gaza and the meeting of the Joint Commission of the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPoA) in Vienna on 6 July. The UK reported on the Western Balkans summit that took place in London on 9 and 10 July. Ministers noted that the EU-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) meeting and Somalia Partnership Forum would take place in Brussels on 16 July.

Eastern Partnership

Ministers discussed the Eastern Partnership ahead of the Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting that will take place in October. They reaffirmed the commitment of the EU to the region, to the reform agenda, and to the priorities identified as the '20 deliverables for 2020', to achieve a stronger economy, governance, connectivity and society. The Council confirmed the continuing relevance of a tailor-made and differentiated approach for each of the six countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) in their relations with the EU. Ministers noted the progress made in the six countries but also underlined the need to step up reforms in areas such as governance, justice, the fight against corruption, economic reform and the business environment. They expressed particular concern over the situation in the Republic of Moldova. Finally, Ministers highlighted the importance of using the opportunity that the 10th anniversary of the partnership in 2019 would present, to highlight the EU's commitment to the region.

Libya

The HRVP reported back on her visit to Libya on 14 July. Ministers reiterated their support for the Secretary General of the United Nations' (UN) special representative, Ghassan Salame. Ministers stressed the need to accelerate work towards elections and that a proper constitutional and legal framework must be in place before they take place. They welcomed the resolution of the recent crisis in the oil crescent but underlined the importance of addressing the causes. Ministers agreed that the EU should increase its work with the UN to ensure that revenues from oil are distributed in a transparent manner and highlighted the results of the EU's work on the ground on migration.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

During discussions on the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK), Ministers reiterated their full commitment to support efforts towards complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and the EU's readiness to facilitate steps towards this objective. In line with the EU's policy of critical engagement, Ministers underlined the importance of continuing to maintain pressure through sanctions, while keeping channels of communication open. They also agreed to encourage the DPRK to sign and ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty.

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council adopted conclusions on the International Criminal Court on the 20th anniversary of the statute of Rome;

The Council adopted a decision and regulations on Maldives restrictive measures;

Iran: blocking statute: The Council indicated its intention not to object to the Commission delegated regulation;

The Council adopted a decision on the extension of tariff preferences to the Western Sahara in the association agreement with Morocco to the Western Sahara;

The Council endorsed the Common Foreign and security policy report 2018;

The Council adopted negotiating directives for the HRVP to negotiate an enhanced partnership and co-operation agreement with Uzbekistan;

The Council approved the opening of an EU delegation to Turkmenistan;

The Council agreed the proposal to open an EU delegation to Kuwait;

The Council concluded the partnership and cooperation agreement between the EU and Singapore;

The Council adopted al-Qaeda restrictive measures.

[HCWS896]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health and Social Care Update

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinage): The Learning Disabilities Mortality Review (LeDeR) published its second annual report on 4 May 2018, which covered the period from 1 July 2016 to 30 November 2017. The programme is led by the Norah Fry Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Bristol and commissioned by the Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership (HQIP) on behalf of NHS England.

As I outlined to the House on 8 May (*Official Report*, 8 May 2018, Vol. 640, Col. 545), the report makes a series of national recommendations that are aimed at NHS England, as well as health and care commissioners and providers.

This Government are committed to reducing the health inequalities that people with learning disabilities face, and reducing the number of people with learning disabilities whose deaths may have been preventable with different health and care interventions.

There is already a considerable amount of work underway to address the issues raised in the second annual report of the LeDeR. The Department is working with NHS England and other system partners to agree meaningful actions to each of the nine recommendations, and our response to the report will be published after summer recess.

[HCWS906]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU Settlement Scheme

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary laid before Parliament on Friday 20 July a statement of changes in immigration rules [Cm 9675] concerning the EU settlement scheme

for resident EU citizens and their family members. The Government also laid before Parliament on Friday 20 July the Immigration and Nationality (Fees) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which provide for the fees and fee exemptions for the scheme.

As set out in the statement of intent published on 21 June 2018, and in my oral statement that day about the scheme (columns 508-520), the EU settlement scheme will be opened on a phased basis from later this year and will be fully open by 30 March 2019, and this will be preceded by a private beta phase to enable us to test the relevant processes and ensure that they work effectively. These measures, together with the Immigration (Provision of Physical Data) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 on biometric enrolment for the scheme, which were laid on 2 July under the affirmative procedure, will enable this private beta phase to begin from 28 August 2018.

I am very grateful to the 15 public sector organisations set out in the statement of changes in immigration rules which have agreed to take part in the private beta phase. They are 12 NHS Trusts and three universities in the north-west of England, whose relevant employees and students will, if they wish, be able to apply for status under the EU settlement scheme during this period. It is appropriate that the national health service and the higher education sector, which both benefit so greatly from the contribution of EU citizens, should help in this way to establish the EU settlement scheme. As indicated in the statement of intent, we will provide further details in due course of our plans for the phased roll-out of the scheme.

We also continue to expand our wider communications about the EU settlement scheme to ensure that EU citizens and their family members living in the UK are aware of it and of how it will operate, but are also reassured that, in line with the draft withdrawal agreement, they will have plenty of time (until 30 June 2021) in which to apply for status under the scheme.

[HCWS901]

Government Transparency Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I have today laid before the House the third iteration of the Government transparency report on the use of disruptive and investigatory powers (Cm 9609). Copies of the report will be made available in the Vote Office.

In view of the ongoing threat from terrorism, including five attacks in the UK since the previous publication of this report, and the persistent threats from organised crime and hostile state activity, it is vital that our law enforcement and security and intelligence agencies can use disruptive and investigatory powers to counter those threats and to keep the public safe. This report sets out the way in which those powers are used by the agencies and the stringent safeguards and independent oversight which governs their use.

As this report shows, there has been a marked increase in the use of certain powers since publication of the second iteration in 2017. This is largely a reflection of

our commitment to disrupt and manage the return and threat posed by UK-linked individuals in Syria and Iraq.

This Government remain committed to increasing the transparency of the work of our security and intelligence and law enforcement agencies, and this next iteration of the transparency report is a key part of that commitment.

Publishing this report ensures that the public are able to access, in one place, a guide to the range of powers used to combat threats to the security of the United Kingdom, the extent of their use, and the safeguards and oversight in place to ensure they are used properly.

[HCWS900]

Justice and Home Affairs Post-Council Statement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The first meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Austrian presidency took place on 12 and 13 July in Innsbruck. A senior Government official represented the UK for Interior day. The Secretary of State for Justice represented the UK on Justice day.

Interior day focused on the follow-up to the June European Council on migration. Discussion reflected on the progress made since the 2015 migration crisis, and the challenges that the EU continues to face. There was broad consensus on the need for strong external border protection, as well as the establishment of regional disembarkation platforms. Member states agreed that the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) reforms, including Dublin IV, should be negotiated as a package. The UK continues to support a comprehensive approach to migration but does not support a mandatory redistribution system within the EU and has not opted into the Dublin IV regulation.

The lunch debate was centred around anti-Semitism and European values. A number of Jewish organisations presented to Ministers their view of the situation for Jews in Europe. Ministers agreed on the importance of combating anti-Semitism in all its forms, and noted the importance of combating online hate speech. The UK condemns all forms of extremism.

Community policing and human trafficking was the final discussion on Interior day, where Ministers discussed practical methods to improve trust between police forces and communities.

Justice day began with a consideration of the Commission's e-evidence proposals. The UK is currently considering whether to opt in to the e-evidence regulation. Member states considered the opportunities and challenges in negotiating a bilateral EU agreement with the US to enable direct execution of requests for electronic evidence, including concerns over fundamental rights. The Secretary of State for Justice intervened to set out the progress to date on the UK-US agreement, noting the passage of the CLOUD Act in the US and offering to share UK experience to support the Commission.

During the discussion on "Enhancing judicial co-operation in civil matters", the Commission urged ambition in adopting e-Codex (e-Justice Communication via Online Data Exchange) and the greater use of videoconferencing under the two proposed regulations on service and taking of evidence. The Secretary of State for Justice noted that the proposed regulation for

taking of evidence would mean that where evidence is being obtained directly by a court from a person domiciled in another member state, the person from whom the evidence is requested will be compelled to provide it, and that the implications of this will need to be considered. He also expressed the UK's view that consideration needs to be given to the proportionate costs of e-Codex in relation to requests being served through unsecure post.

Justice day ended with a working lunch on "Mutual recognition in criminal matters", during which Ministers discussed the areas of judicial co-operation that would require a strengthening of mutual trust.

[HCWS899]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Professor Alexis Jay's report (2014) into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham and Louise Casey's follow up report (2015) exposed the serious systemic failures by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to protect vulnerable children from sexual exploitation.

In response, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the then Secretary of State for Education took immediate action to protect the children of Rotherham. In February 2015, they appointed commissioners to take over all of the authority's executive, and some of the non-executive, functions and drive a programme of improvement.

With the support of commissioners, the council has made steady and significant progress in its improvement journey. As a result, my predecessors were able to return functions to the council on four separate occasions: 11 February 2016, 13 December 2016, 21 March 2017 and 12 September 2017.

In her recent progress reports (February and May 2018) and letter (21 March 2018), lead commissioner Mary Ney has recommended that the intervention in Rotherham can now be concluded: "the political and senior officer leadership of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council is able to function and continue its improvement without the need of Commissioner oversight."

The evidence provided to support these recommendations, includes the report of the independent health check, which was undertaken in February 2018 and supported by the Local Government Association. Furthermore, in January 2018 Ofsted rated Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's children's services as 'good'.

As this is a joint intervention with the Department for Education, together with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), I have carefully considered the evidence put forward by commissioners. We have also met with them to discuss their recommendation in more detail. In addition, we have also met the Leader and Chief Executive of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council in person and received

assurances from them that they are confident the council is now in a position to drive forward and deliver its own improvement agenda.

As a result of this robust evidence provided by commissioners and the positive conversations with the council, I am pleased to announce that I am minded to exercise my powers under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 to revoke the Direction of 26 February 2015 as amended, and remove commissioners from the council and hand back the remaining executive functions to the council.

However, I am mindful that the decision to hand back the remaining functions, particularly children's services, is a significant one. Therefore, I am also announcing that I am minded to put a new Direction in place which requires Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to undertake an independent review before 31 March 2019 when the new Direction expires. This will enable a last check of the council's performance once the commissioners have left.

I am inviting the council to make representations on these proposals, which will be considered as part of my final decision.

We are determined to protect children from harm, and we will do everything we can to prevent this from happening again—either in Rotherham or elsewhere. Government Departments are working collectively to ensure that the National Crime Agency's Operation Stovewood, and victims of child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, have the support that they need. The Home Secretary has written recently to Rotherham and the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner confirming Government's commitment to working closely with Rotherham over the coming years to assess the demand on services, to encourage as many victims as possible to come forward and to provide support—financial and otherwise—where it is appropriate to do so. To date, the Home Office has provided £12.4 million of police special grant funding towards Operation Stovewood. The Department for Education is providing additional funding of up to £2 million to Rotherham's children's social care services, over the four year period 2017-21, for additional social workers to work with children in need of support as identified through Operation Stovewood. The Ministry of Justice has provided £1.6 million to the Police and Crime Commissioner to commission additional services locally and also committed around £549,000 extra funding to provide specialist support, including for the provision of Independent Sexual Violence Advisers. NHS England has worked with regional Health and Justice Commissioners and partners to reconfigure existing resources to support victims in Rotherham, providing £500,000 from 2018 to 2020 to support the sustainability of this project.

I am placing a copy of the documents associated with these announcements in the Library of the House and on my Department's website.

[HCWS904]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence Policy Oversight

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The 2016-17 annual report of the Intelligence and Security Committee was laid before Parliament on 20 December 2017 (HC 655).

I responded to this on the same day in a written ministerial statement. The Government have given additional consideration to the Committee's many important conclusions and recommendations, and I have today laid a further Government response before the House (Cm 9678).

Copies of the response have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS902]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Government Response to Caste Consultation

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt):

No one should suffer prejudice or discrimination on any grounds, including any perception of their caste. In March last year, the Government launched a consultation on "Caste in Great Britain and Equality Law" to obtain the views of the public on how best to ensure that appropriate and proportionate legal protection exists for victims of caste discrimination. The consultation ran in total for six months, closing in September 2017.

I am publishing the Government's response to that consultation today, together with an independent analysis of the consultation that provides an assessment of all the responses. This report should be read in conjunction with the Government's response.

The consultation considered different ways of protecting people from caste discrimination. The first option was to implement a duty, which was introduced by Parliament in 2013, to make caste an aspect of race discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. The second was to rely on emerging case law which, in the view of Government, shows that a statutory remedy against caste discrimination is available through existing provisions in the Equality Act, and to invite Parliament to repeal the duty on that basis.

The consultation received over 16,000 responses, showing the importance of this issue for many people in particular communities. About 53% of respondents wanted to rely on the existing statutory remedy and repeal the duty, 22% rejected both options (mainly because they wished the Government to proscribe the concept of caste in British law altogether) and about 18% of respondents wanted the duty to be implemented. The arguments put forward for these different views are set out in the Government's response and in more detail in the analysis.

The Government's primary concern is to ensure that legal protection against caste discrimination is sufficient, appropriate and proportionate. After careful consideration of all the points raised in the consultation, we have decided to invite Parliament to repeal the duty because it is now sufficiently clear that the Equality Act provides this protection. The judgment of the Employment Appeal Tribunal in *Tirkey v. Chandhok* shows that someone claiming caste discrimination may rely on the existing statutory remedy where they can show that their "caste" is related to their ethnic origin, which is itself an aspect of race discrimination in the Equality Act.

The judgment is binding on all who bring a claim in an employment tribunal, has status equivalent to a High Court decision, and is based on the application of case law decided at a higher level. The Government consider, having also taken into account the consultation

responses, that the Tirkey judgment serves as a welcome clarification of the existing protection under the Equality Act—helping to deter those inclined to treat others unfairly or unequally because of conceptions of caste. We believe that the decision makes the introduction of additional statutory protection in the Equality Act unnecessary.

In light of changed circumstances since 2013, we intend to legislate to repeal the duty for a specific reference to caste as an aspect of race discrimination in the Equality Act once a suitable legislative vehicle becomes available .

We recognise that this is an area of domestic law which may develop further, and have carefully considered the full terms of the Tirkey judgment. We will monitor emerging case law in the years ahead.

To make clear that caste discrimination is unacceptable we will, if appropriate, support a case with a view to ensuring that the higher courts reinforce the position set out in Tirkey v. Chandhok.

In order to ensure that people know their rights and what sort of conduct could be unlawful under the Equality Act, we also intend to produce short guidance before the repeal legislation is introduced. We want this to be of particular use to any individual who feels they may have suffered discrimination on grounds of caste. It should also help employers, service providers and public authorities who are outside those groups most concerned with caste and who may have little awareness of caste divisions.

I am placing a copy of the response and accompanying report in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS898]

Petitions

Monday 23 July 2018

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declare that the “Home Education - Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated: further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidance and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc. . /

[P002254]

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Felixstowe Academy

The petition of residents of Felixstowe, Suffolk Coastal and the wider Suffolk area,

Declares that the most recent Ofsted report for Felixstowe Academy declares it as an ‘Inadequate’ school and that the Academy has been placed into ‘Special Measures’; further notes Ofsted’s damning summary that outcomes

for pupils are below the government’s floor standards; that Special Education Needs pupils do not make adequate progress; that there is a culture of bullying at the school that has not been dealt with effectively; that too many parents have lost faith in the school’s ability to deal with that bullying; that too many pupils are persistently absent; and that the support provided by the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) has been ineffective in helping the school to improve since the previous inspection.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to remove the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) from the management of Felixstowe Academy so the school can have a fresh start under new leadership for the benefit of pupils.

And the petitioners remain, etc. — [*Presented by Dr Thérèse Coffey, Official Report, 13 June 2018; Vol.642, c.8P.*]

[P002154]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

The Government understand, and share, the concerns of the petitioners.

In cases such as Felixstowe Academy we take the action needed to ensure that pupils get the education they deserve. This includes consideration of all options, including a change in the trust running the academy where we deem that necessary. At the heart of our decision making is determining which measures will drive improvement quickly, and therefore best serve the interests of the academies’ students.

As a result of the Education and Adoption Act 2016, regardless of the terms in an academy’s funding agreement, the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), on behalf of the Secretary of State, can terminate the funding agreement of an academy that has been judged inadequate. However, this is a power rather than a duty. Rebrokerage can be a disruptive process for an academy, so the benefits of a new sponsor for the academy need to be carefully weighed against the possibility of progress stalling.

In the case of Felixstowe Academy, we issued a ‘Minded to Terminate’ notice to Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) on 7 March. This set out our concerns about Ofsted’s findings and our expectations of the trust to ensure they address these urgently. We have been in regular dialogue with the local MP, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) won this issue, and we will continue to work fully with her to meet the needs of her constituents.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 23 July 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Space Policy

The following is an extract from the oral statement on Space Policy on 18 July 2018.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on this extremely welcome statement. As a fellow Surrey MP, he will be only too aware of the importance of the space industry to our county and of the astonishing success of the work in our county for the country. Will he confirm that if the EU remains determined on this astonishing act of self-harm as regards the development of the Galileo project, it will have to bear the long-term costs of the loss of all the British enterprise and expertise in this area, and that we will be free of the immensely bureaucratic allocation of jobs under this European programme, as is reflected in European defence and other space programmes as well? Once we are free to put our expertise within the international alliances where we can get the best possible return on our scientific expertise, so much the better, and in the long term it will be our 27 partners who bear the cost of this astonishing decision.

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Were the UK not to continue to participate in the Galileo programme, not only would the programme be delayed but it would cost EU member states a lot more.

Surrey Satellite Technology has been responsible for the cryptography and encryption of the Galileo system, and CGI UK, which has a presence in Surrey, has been responsible for building a number of the satellites. So the expertise and skills necessary to deliver the Galileo system reside in the UK, and were the EU to adopt what I consider to be an irrational position and not allow the UK to fully participate, we would not only take the action we need to take to protect critical national infrastructure, but we would also be at liberty to partner with other countries around the world, not only to develop our own global navigation and satellite system but to develop our space sector.

[Official Report, 18 July 2018, Vol. 645, c. 444.]

Letter of correction from Sam Gyimah:

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Were the UK not to continue to participate in the Galileo programme, not only would the programme be delayed but it would cost EU member states a lot more. **CGI UK** has been responsible for the cryptography and encryption of the Galileo system, and **Surrey Satellite Technology**, which has a presence in Surrey, has been responsible for building a number of the satellites. So the expertise and skills necessary to deliver the Galileo system reside in the UK, and were the EU to adopt what I consider to be an irrational position and not allow the UK to fully participate, we would not only take the action we need to take to protect critical national infrastructure, but we would also be at liberty to partner with other countries around the world, not only to develop our own global navigation and satellite system but to develop our space sector.

ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than
Monday 30 July 2018**

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