

Friday
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 22 March 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

9.34 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 0, Noes 84.

Division No. 372]

[9.34 am

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Maggie Throup and

Rachel Maclean

NOES

Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Benn, rh Hilary
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burghart, Alex

Burt, rh Alistair
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Charalambous, Bambos
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cooper, Julie
Creasy, Stella
Cunningham, Mr Jim

Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
De Cordova, Marsha
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Anneliese
Donelan, Michelle
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Mr Nigel
Ford, Vicky
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freer, Mike
Gaffney, Hugh
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Glen, John
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Hair, Kirstene
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Hanson, rh David
Harris, Rebecca
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Jones, Gerald
Kane, Mike
Knight, Julian
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lopresti, Jack
Matheson, Christian
McMahon, Jim

McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milling, Amanda
Morton, Wendy
Norris, Alex
O'Brien, Neil
Onwurah, Chi
Pennycook, Matthew
Penrose, John
Perry, rh Claire
Pincher, rh Christopher
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Rutley, David
Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft*)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Jeff
Smith, rh Julian
Snell, Gareth
Stevens, Jo
Stuart, Graham
Sunak, Rishi
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Tomlinson, Justin
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Western, Matt
Williams, Dr Paul
Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Thangam Debbonaire and
Chris Elmore

Question accordingly negated.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: As I imagine most right hon. and hon. Members present are aware, there will be a service in memory of and in tribute to our departed colleague Paul Flynn. That service is due to take place in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft, and will begin at 10.30 am. However, I want to reassure the House—I do so on the authority of my Chaplain, the Right Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin, who will lead the service—that it will conclude well in time for colleagues to return to the Chamber for the one-minute silence at 11 am. The one-minute silence is of course to mark the second anniversary of the terrible events of 22 March 2017, when lives were lost.

After the one-minute silence at 11 am, we will have urgent questions. When those have been disposed of—I am using the parliamentary term “disposed of”—we will resume the debate on the Bill. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues as a roadmap for how we are going to proceed today.

Overseas Electors Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

PROMPT TO REGISTER AS AN OVERSEAS ELECTOR

‘(1) If the registration officer receives information that leads him or her to believe that a registered elector has moved, or is going to move, outside the United Kingdom, the registration officer shall contact that elector to prompt him or her to register as an overseas elector.

(2) The Electoral Commission may issue guidance for contact under subsection (1).’—(*Philip Davies.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

9.54 am

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 3—Report on awareness of how to participate in elections as an overseas elector—

‘(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State must publish a report on levels of awareness of how to participate in parliamentary elections as a UK elector among—

- (a) persons entitled to vote as an overseas elector under the provisions of this Act, and
- (b) overseas electors in general.

(2) The report shall consider awareness of—

- (a) the law governing entitlement to qualify and vote as an overseas elector,
- (b) the processes of registering and voting, and
- (c) other matters as the Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State sees fit.

(3) The report shall set out any steps the Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State intends to take to increase awareness of—

- (a) how to participate in elections as an overseas elector, and
- (b) the provisions of this Act.’

New clause 4—Report on effects of extension of franchise—

‘(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State must publish a report assessing the likely effects of the extension of the franchise in section 1 of this Act and any measures necessary in response to those effects.

(2) The report must contain assessments of—

- (a) how many British citizens currently resident overseas are eligible to register as overseas electors, and how many are likely to be eligible if the 15-year time limits under sections 1(3)(c) and 1(4)(a) of the Representation of the People Act 1985 were removed;
- (b) any possible increased risk of electoral fraud by those purporting to be overseas electors related to the provisions in this Act;
- (c) whether current election timetables are of sufficient duration to enable the full participation of any increased numbers of overseas electors.’

New clause 5—Report on the representation of overseas electors—

‘(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State shall, within 12 months of this section coming into force, lay before Parliament a report on the representation of overseas electors.

- (2) That report shall include—
- (a) consideration of how well overseas electors are represented by their MPs and any related consequences of the provisions of this Act,
 - (b) an assessment of any additional demands that may be placed on MPs and their resources as a consequence of the provisions of this Act,
 - (c) any plans the Government has to monitor the representation of overseas electors, and
 - (d) an assessment of alternative models of representation of overseas electors, including the creation of overseas constituencies.’

New clause 6—*Review of absent vote arrangements*—

‘(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State shall—

- (a) review absent voting arrangements to consider whether they allow sufficient time for overseas electors to participate adequately in parliamentary elections, taking into account the likely effects of the provisions of this Act;
- (b) consult the Electoral Commission, local authorities and the Association of Electoral Administrators as part of the review; and
- (c) lay before Parliament a report on the review and any steps to be taken as a result.’

New clause 7—*Report on postal voting arrangements for overseas electors*—

‘(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State shall publish a report on postal voting arrangements for overseas electors.

- (2) The report shall set out—
- (a) any barriers to the participation of overseas electors in parliamentary elections, including in—
 - (i) the availability of pre-paid postal services for returning ballot papers,
 - (ii) the financial resources of returning officers, and
 - (iii) capacity in the specialist print and production markets to meet absent vote and ballot paper requirements;
 - (b) whether any such barriers are likely to become more significant or widespread as a result of the extension of the franchise in the provisions of this Act, including in particular countries and regions;
 - (c) any steps to be taken to make it easier for overseas electors to participate in parliamentary elections.

(3) The report shall, in particular, consider the effectiveness and cost of the International Business Response Licence for postal votes and any associated implications of the provisions of this Act.’

New clause 9—*Evaluation of the effects of the Act*—

‘(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State must, within 12 months of the provisions of this Act coming into force, lay before Parliament a report evaluating the effects of the Act and the extent to which it has met its objectives.

(2) That report must include assessments of the effects on numbers of overseas electors registered in each parliamentary constituency.’

New clause 10—*Closing date for electoral registration applications by overseas electors*—

‘(1) The Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 are amended as follows.

(2) In regulation 56, after paragraph (7), insert—

“(8) This regulation does not apply to applications by overseas electors.”

(3) After regulation 56 insert—

“56A Closing date for electoral registration applications by overseas electors

(1) The provisions in this regulation relate to applications to vote by post or proxy by overseas electors in parliamentary elections.

(2) An application by an overseas elector under paragraph 3(6) or (7) of Schedule 4 shall be disregarded for the purposes of a particular parliamentary election and an application under paragraph 4(3) of Schedule 4 shall be refused if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the eighteenth day before the date of the poll at that election.

(3) An application under paragraph 3(1) or (2), or 6(7) or 7(4) of Schedule 4 shall be disregarded for the purposes of a particular parliamentary election if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the thirteenth day before the date of the poll at that election.

(4) An application under paragraph 4(1) or (2) or 6(8) of Schedule 4 shall be refused if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the thirteenth day before the date of the poll at the election for which it is made.

(5) An application under paragraph 7(7) of Schedule 4 shall be refused if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the eighteenth day before the date of the poll at the election for which it is made.

(6) An application under—

- (a) paragraph 3(5)(a) of Schedule 4 by an elector to be removed from the record kept under paragraph 3(4) of that Schedule, or
- (b) paragraph 7(9)(a) of Schedule 4 by a proxy to be removed from the record kept under paragraph 7(6) of that Schedule,

and a notice under paragraph 6(10) of that Schedule by an elector cancelling a proxy’s appointment shall be disregarded for the purposes of a particular parliamentary election if it is received by the registration officer after—

- (i) 5 p.m. on the eighteenth day before the date of the poll at that election in the case of an application by an elector who is entitled to vote by post to be removed from the record kept under paragraph 3(4) of Schedule 4, and
- (ii) 5 p.m. on the thirteenth day before the date of the poll at that election in any other case.

(7) In computing a period of days for the purposes of this regulation, the same rules shall apply as in regulation 56.”

(4) The Representation of the People (Scotland) Regulations 2001 are amended as follows.

(5) In regulation 56, after paragraph (7), insert—

“(8) This regulation does not apply to applications by overseas electors.”

(6) After regulation 56 insert—

“56A Closing date for electoral registration applications by overseas electors

(1) The provisions in this regulation relate to applications to vote by post or proxy by overseas electors in parliamentary elections.

(2) An application by an overseas elector under paragraph 3(6) or (7) of Schedule 4 shall be disregarded for the purposes of a particular parliamentary election and an application under paragraph 4(3) of Schedule 4 shall be refused if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the eighteenth day before the date of the poll at that election.

(3) An application under paragraph 3(1) or (2), or 6(7) or 7(4) of Schedule 4 shall be disregarded for the purposes of a particular parliamentary election if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the thirteenth day before the date of the poll at that election.

(4) An application under paragraph 4(1) or (2) or 6(8) of Schedule 4 shall be refused if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the thirteenth day before the date of the poll at the election for which it is made.

(5) An application under paragraph 7(7) of Schedule 4 shall be refused if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the eighteenth day before the date of the poll at the election for which it is made.

(6) An application under—

- (a) paragraph 3(5)(a) of Schedule 4 by an elector to be removed from the record kept under paragraph 3(4) of that Schedule, or
- (b) paragraph 7(9)(a) of Schedule 4 by a proxy to be removed from the record kept under paragraph 7(6) of that Schedule,

and a notice under paragraph 6(10) of that Schedule by an elector cancelling a proxy's appointment shall be disregarded for the purposes of a particular parliamentary election if it is received by the registration officer after—

- (i) 5 p.m. on the eighteenth day before the date of the poll at that election in the case of an application by an elector who is entitled to vote by post to be removed from the record kept under paragraph 3(4) of Schedule 4, and
- (ii) 5 p.m. on the thirteenth day before the date of the poll at that election in any other case.

(7) In computing a period of days for the purposes of this regulation, the same rules shall apply as in regulation 56.”

(7) The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2001 are amended as follows.

(8) In regulation 57, after paragraph (6), insert—

“(7) This regulation does not apply to applications by overseas electors.”

(9) After regulation 57 insert—

“57A Closing date for electoral registration applications by overseas electors

(1) The provisions in this regulation relate to applications to vote by post or proxy by overseas electors in parliamentary elections.

(2) An application under section 6(1) or (5), 8(6) or 9(4) of the 1985 Act shall be disregarded for the purposes of a particular election if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the twenty-first day before the day of the poll at that election.

(3) Subject to paragraph (4) below, an application under section 7(1) or (2), 8(7) or 9(7) or (8) of the 1985 Act shall be refused if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the twenty-first day before the day of the poll at the election for which it is made.

(4) Paragraph (3) above shall not apply to an application which satisfies the requirements of either paragraphs (6) and (7) or paragraph (8) of regulation 55 above; and such an application shall be refused if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the thirteenth day before the day of the poll at the election for which it is made.

(5) An application under—

- (a) section 6(4)(a) of the 1985 Act by an elector to be removed from the record kept under section 6(3) of that Act, or
- (b) section 9(11)(a) of that Act by a proxy to be removed from the record kept under section 9(6) of that Act,

and a notice under section 8(9) of that Act by an elector cancelling a proxy's appointment shall be disregarded for the purposes of a particular election if it is received by the registration officer after 5 p.m. on the twenty-first day before the date of the poll at that election.

(6) In computing a period of days for the purposes of this regulation, the same rules shall apply as in regulation 57.’

New clause 11—*Offence of registering to vote as overseas elector in more than one constituency*—

‘(1) A person commits an offence if he or she is an overseas elector and is simultaneously registered to vote in more than one constituency.

(2) A person guilty of an offence under this section shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.’

New clause 12—*Report on electoral offences, overseas electors and the extension of the franchise*—

‘(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or Secretary of State must publish a report on electoral offences, overseas electors and the extension of the franchise.

(2) The report must include assessments of—

- (a) the effects of the extension of the franchise under the provisions of this Act on the incidence of—
 - (i) reports of electoral offences under the Representation of the People Act 1983, and
 - (ii) prosecutions for such offences,
- (b) the capacity of appropriate authorities to investigate and prosecute such alleged offences,
- (c) the number of reports of electoral offences under the Representation of the People Act 1983 alleged to have been committed by overseas electors—
 - (i) in the period since the provisions of this Act came into force, and
 - (ii) in a comparable period before the provisions of this Act came into force,
- (d) the number of prosecutions for electoral offences under the Representation of the People Act 1983 by overseas electors—
 - (i) in the period since the provisions of this Act came into force, and
 - (ii) in a comparable period before the provisions of this Act came into force,
- (e) any steps to be taken to reduce the incidence of such electoral offences.’

New clause 13—*Expiration of Act after five years*—

‘This Act shall expire five years from the date on which it receives Royal Assent.’

New clause 14—*Expiration of Act after three years*—

‘This Act shall expire three years from the date on which it receives Royal Assent.’

Amendment 40, in clause 1, page 3, line 23, at end insert—

‘(5A) An overseas elector's declaration shall be disregarded for the purposes of registration to vote in a particular parliamentary election if it is received by the registration officer after 5pm on the nineteenth day before the date of the poll at that election.’

Amendment 49, page 3, line 42, at end insert—

‘(ea) state that the declarant is aware of the voting offences under sections 60 and 61 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and associated punishments under sections 168 and 169 of that Act.’

Amendment 50, page 3, line 42, at end insert—

‘(ea) state whether the declarant intends to make absent voting arrangements or to vote in person at a polling station.’

Amendment 66, page 6, line 15, at end insert—

‘(da) state that the declarant is aware of the voting offences under sections 60 and 61 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and associated punishments under sections 168 and 169 of that Act.’

Amendment 67, page 6, line 15, at end insert—

‘(da) state whether the declarant intends to make absent voting arrangements or to vote in person at a polling station.’

Amendment 75, in clause 3, page 8, line 11, after “State” add

‘but no sooner than 12 months after section 3(5) comes into force’.

Amendment 23, page 8, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) No regulations may be made under subsection (2) until the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office has laid before Parliament a report setting out the effects of the provisions of this Act on processes for controlling political party donations.

(2B) The report under subsection (2A) shall consider—

- (a) the ability of political parties and campaigners to determine the permissibility of donations from persons resident overseas;
- (b) the ability of the Electoral Commission to take enforcement action where the rules on such donations have been breached.’

This amendment requires the Government to prepare a report on processes for controlling political party donations before the provisions of this Act can come into force.

Amendment 24, page 8, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) No regulations may be made under subsection (2) until the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office has laid before Parliament a report setting out on the likely effects of the provisions of this Act on the number of registered electors.

(2B) The report under subsection (2A) shall consider—

- (a) the number of overseas electors registered to vote in Parliamentary elections in each constituency and the policy implications of any such changes;
- (b) whether any differential effects on the electorates of constituencies necessitates a review of constituency boundaries; and
- (c) the merits of creating one or more overseas constituencies.’

This amendment requires the Government to prepare a report on the effects on the number of registered electors before the provisions of this Act can come into force.

Amendment 25, page 8, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) No regulations may be made under subsection (2) until the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office has laid before Parliament a report setting out the effects of the provisions of this Act on the extension of franchise.

(2B) The report under subsection (2A) shall consider—

- (a) likely demand for online registration services and how this demand should be met;
- (b) the effects of removing the 15-year time limits on the workloads of local authorities, including demands on electoral registration officers, and how any consequent resourcing requirements should be met;
- (c) how the electorates of existing UK constituencies will be affected; and
- (d) how the electorates of new constituencies recommended by the most recent reports of the Boundary Commissions for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be affected.’

This amendment requires the Government to prepare a report on the effects of the extension of the franchise before the provisions of this Act can come into force.

Amendment 26, page 8, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) No regulations may be made under subsection (2) until the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office has laid before Parliament a report setting out the effects of the provisions of this Act on the representation of overseas electors by MPs.

(2B) The report under subsection (2A) shall consider—

- (a) how well overseas electors are represented by their MPs and any related consequences of the provisions of this Act;
- (b) an assessment of any additional demands that may be placed on MPs and their resources as a consequence of the provisions of this Act;
- (c) any plans the Government has to monitor the representation of overseas electors; and
- (d) an assessment of alternative models of representation of overseas electors, including the creation of overseas constituencies.’

This amendment requires the Government to prepare a report on the representation of overseas electors by MPs before the provisions of this Act can come into force.

Amendment 27, page 8, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) No regulations may be made under subsection (2) until the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office has laid before Parliament a report setting out the effects of the provisions of this Act on the creation of a consolidated register of overseas electors.’

This amendment requires the Government to prepare a report on the effects of creating a consolidated register of overseas electors before the provisions of this Act can come into force.

Amendment 68, page 8, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) No regulations may be made under subsection (2) until the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office has laid before Parliament a report on awareness of how to participate in elections as an overseas elector.’

Amendment 69, page 8, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) No regulations may be made under subsection (2) until the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office has laid before Parliament a report on absent vote arrangements.’

Amendment 70, page 8, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) No regulations may be made under subsection (2) until the Secretary of State or Minister for the Cabinet Office has laid before Parliament a report on postal voting arrangements for overseas electors.’

Amendment 76, page 8, line 16, leave out

“on the day on which”

and replace with “12 months after”.

Philip Davies: I am sorry that my duties here will prevent me from attending the memorial service for Paul Flynn, but I am sure we all remember him with a great deal of affection and fondness.

I hope you, Mr Speaker, and Members of the House will forgive me if I come across at any point during these proceedings as being a bit disorganised. I only got the selection of amendments at just after 8.30 this morning, and given that there are so many down, it has been a bit difficult to get them all marshalled into the right groupings. If there is a delay or anything like that, it is simply because I am trying to work out which are the right amendments in the grouping, and I hope you will be patient with me in that regard.

Before I begin with new clause 1 and get into the nitty-gritty, I should congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) on his success in the private Members’ Bills ballot and on getting his Bill to this stage. We all know that it is not an easy task to get a Bill even to this stage, but my hon. Friend has done it with his customary charm and panache, and I congratulate him on doing so and on securing the support of the Government for his Bill up to the present.

Unfortunately, this has not been a total triumph, as far as I can see. While I am not opposed to the principle of the Bill, which is laudable in many parts, I have concerns about the way it is drafted in particular areas. In Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said something with which I entirely agree, and which is therefore worth repeating. He said that

“we should always be very sure about the changes we make to our democracy. Anybody who knows anything about the rules of political parties knows that the little amendments that are made for whatever reason at some point have a habit of creating all

[Philip Davies]

sorts of different conclusions later down the line. We ought to ensure that we play out the scenarios that they might present, but also ensure that the changes we make are proportionate to achieving the goal. If we can achieve the same goal by being more surgical, we should seek to do so.”—[*Official Report, Overseas Electors Public Bill Committee*, 17 October 2018; c. 22.]

I agree with those sentiments entirely not just for this Bill, but, I might add, for many other Bills that come to the House on a Friday.

I have looked through the amendments tabled by others at earlier stages of the Bill and, as far as I could see, some of them seemed worth exploring again to see whether the whole House shares the view of the Committee. I believe that some of my amendments are absolutely critical to making this Bill supportable, and some affect issues that should be examined more closely. I accept that it was a manifesto commitment of the Conservative party to change the overseas voting rules, but this Bill extends not just to the existing set-up to remove the 15-year time limit and give votes for life, but the range of those eligible for votes for life. There is a problem in that, because it goes beyond what we said in our manifesto.

I will turn to the new clauses and amendments in a bit more detail. What is now new clause 1 was actually discussed in Committee. I am delighted to see the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) in his place. If I may say so, he did an excellent job in Committee in tabling some amendments that were very worthy of debate and are worthy of further consideration today, and this was really one of his greatest hits, so to speak.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): There have been many.

Philip Davies: As the hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position, there have been many, and I am certainly not going to disagree. We probably should not have a Division on that, because I am certainly not going to disagree. In all seriousness, I think he made some very good points in what is now new clause 1. When he suggested the change in Committee, he said that the purpose behind it was

“to ensure that people register at the outset so that we avoid spikes in registration in the immediate lead-up to an election period when, given everything else that is going on, electoral registration officers are at their busiest, their work is at its most hectic and they are under the most careful of examinations.”

He pointed out that as we very much saw

“in constituencies across the UK at the previous general election, there was not just a flurry of late registrations, but in certain constituencies there were complaints afterwards that people had not been allowed to vote, even though...they had registered in time.”—[*Official Report, Overseas Electors Public Bill Committee*, 31 October 2018; c. 103-104.]

He also said that, in some circumstances, they had confirmation that they had been registered, but then found that they were not on the register, and that the new clause is intended to avoid those problems happening again.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): At the start of his remarks, my hon. Friend said that we must be careful about repercussive measures. My concern is that the new clause is repercussive and will lead to calls for

similar prompts for other kinds of people—new citizens, for example, or those turning 18. My other slight concern is about what kind of information registration officers are likely to receive about those intending to leave, or who have left. Surely if such a provision is to work, the email addresses of many more people would need to be available to registration officers, otherwise we will have no way of knowing that people have left or are intending to leave.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I do not argue with much of what he said. If he thinks that the registration officer will not have much information, that is not a problem with the new clause. His argument seems to be that there is not much point to the new clause—in the second part of his remarks he did not point out a problem with new clause; he said that he did not think it would be used very much, but that is not an argument against it. He might be surprised at what the registration officer finds out. The fact that the provision might not be used often does not mean that it is bad to slot it into the Bill—it just might not be used very often.

Neil O’Brien: I must have expressed myself badly. My second question was about what would need to change on the forms and the things that we use to get people’s information. If someone is a new tenant in a property and the previous tenant has moved out and gone overseas, unless we have some other process or forms, often those new tenants will not know that the previous tenants moved to another country. They will therefore have no way of providing the information that the registration officer needs to provide the prompt suggested in new clause 1. My question was about the process that would be needed to support the new clause to make it work.

Philip Davies: Just as the hon. Member for City of Chester did in Committee, I have avoided being too prescriptive about what should be involved. The new clause will be used if someone becomes aware of something, although that might be something we cannot currently envisage. New clause 1 advocates the principle that, should someone become aware of something—I do not necessarily know how, and I cannot be prescriptive about such things—there should be a mechanism to try to make the system easier, and to avoid the problems that we all accept took place in the previous general election, when people were turned away—it was a shambles in many constituencies. This may not be the most important piece of legislation the House has ever passed, and it might not be used a great deal, but it cannot do any harm. Even if it does a little to alleviate some of the problems that we faced previously with late registrations, it cannot be a bad thing.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend is generous with his time. Will he address my first point about the repercussive nature of new clause 1? He says that it cannot do any harm, but it will surely prompt people to say, “Ah, we now need similar prompts for those who turn 18 or who are new citizens of this country”.

Philip Davies: I do not accept that that is a necessary extension. We are dealing with new clause 1 of this Bill, and if somebody wanted to extend it to something else, they would have to find a Bill in which to do that, and argue for that extension. That would be a matter to

consider at that time, and it has nothing to do with this Bill. My hon. Friend could be right—I do not say he is wrong—but I ask Members to consider the new clause in the context of this Bill, rather than thinking about its repercussions on other legislation

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My hon. Friend is generous, as ever, in taking interventions. Is it the case that the earlier people register, the less of a bottleneck and a jam there is, and the more likely we are to ensure a robust system, and that those who register are bona fide and legitimate? We have seen in more recent elections that people voted in one place when they should have been in another.

Philip Davies: I am delighted to be scoring more runs with my hon. Friend than I did with my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), and I welcome his intervention.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab) *rose—*

Philip Davies: That intervention appears to have prompted a stampede from across the House, so I will give way to the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens)

Jo Stevens: One way round the problem would be to have automatic voter registration linked to the issue of a national insurance number at age 16, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will support the Automatic Electoral Registration (No. 2) Bill.

Philip Davies: I am accused of many things when discussing private Member’s Bills on a Friday, but I think it best if I stick to one at a time. If we get on to the hon. Lady’s Bill, I am sure we can go through its merits, or otherwise, and I look forward to that. I hope she will forgive me if I resist the temptation to start that debate prematurely. Mr Speaker would probably rule me out of order if I started discussing her Bill in a debate on this one.

Gareth Snell: May I probe the hon. Gentleman on the wording of the new clause? It mentions those who are “going to move”, and those who have moved, which are two different groups of people. I can foresee that measure being included in the annual canvass that every local authority has to make, so that those who are likely to move within the next 12 months are prompted to register as an oversea elector if they are leaving the UK. Those who have already moved, however, are a different group of people, and the local authority might not have information about where they have moved to. What guidance does the hon. Gentleman suggest the Electoral Commission should provide regarding those who have moved? The matter is simple for those who are going to move, but how does he intend to track down those who have already left the country, given that nobody keeps that information?

Philip Davies: Clearly, I have more faith in the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for City of Chester than the hon. Gentleman does. I do not seek to take over the responsibility of people who are more expert in these

matters than me. It is not the job of hon. Members to be prescriptive to experts in this field about how they should go about their job—I am happy to leave it to them. The hon. Member for City of Chester can correct me if I am wrong, but I see this as a matter of principle, and not really about the nitty-gritty and practicalities, which I am happy to leave to the experts.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) may or may not be right to say that the new clause will not make a massive difference, but that is not a reason not to include it, because it might help. Indeed, as he acknowledged, the new clause will help with one group of people, and that is an argument for taking a step forward, rather than saying, “Let’s not bother because I don’t know how many people it will benefit or how it will be used”.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend is generous in giving way. Has the new clause taken into account the situation of people such as those who work in the City who have to move at short notice? What he has described admirably covers those who are planning to move quite a long time in the future, but it does not take into account those who need to move at short notice. How will he deal with that?

Philip Davies: The new clause does not exclude that category of people, and the same principle applies. My hon. Friend seems to suggest that perhaps the new clause does not go far enough, and I am happy to take that criticism on board. Others say that we should not include it at all—I think I now have the full gamut of opinion in the House. Some say it is a bad new clause, some say it is good, and some say that it does not go far enough.

Mr Speaker: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting—if so, it will be a first—that he is now a fully signed up practitioner of the third way?

Philip Davies: I had not looked at it that way, and I would be slightly horrified if that is how it was perceived. New clause 1 is merely enhancing my reputation as a moderate; I will put it no stronger than that. I appear to be slap-bang in the middle of the debate, as I so often find myself.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I wholeheartedly agree that my hon. Friend is a moderate on this issue. *[Interruption.]* On this issue. Does he agree that, for example, members of the armed forces will welcome this Bill? When I have visited members of the armed forces serving overseas, as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, they have told me how disconnected they felt from the franchise in this country. Does he agree that such a system could be a simple way for them to continue to take part?

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am going to take her comment that I am a moderate on this issue as a compliment. I am not sure whether it was meant as such; I would like to think that I am on all issues, but it is best that we do not have a Division on that, too. I am sure that my hon. Friend is right, but if she will forgive me, we will come to the merits of the Bill as a whole on Third Reading. I am rather anxious to get to the merits or otherwise of my amendments.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab) *rose*—

Neil O'Brien *rose*—

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend has had a good knock so far, so if he will forgive me, I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

David Hanson: The point that the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) made is surely erroneous, in the sense that members of the armed forces will not be overseas for 15-plus years. They will be serving overseas for short periods. The people overseas for 15-plus years are those who have divorced themselves from the United Kingdom for a long period.

Philip Davies: I think the right hon. Gentleman is also referring to the merits of the whole Bill, and I had just said that I did not really want to get into that at this stage. Third Reading is probably the best time to deal with that. Indeed, I am sure that we can save up all these points for then. I am rather anxious to get back to new clause 1, but I will first give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough.

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is further burnishing his credentials as a centrist with new clause 1, so I hesitate to introduce a European dimension into the debate, but is he confident that it is compatible with the general data protection regulation? He is imposing a new duty on registration officers. Let us suppose that someone comes to an electoral registration officer and says, "My next-door neighbour is planning to move to another country. You should contact them and send them the forms to register overseas." Can such information, not gleaned by the registration officer for any particular purpose, be turned into a list under GDPR and used for a different purpose, such as to send the prompts that my hon. Friend is proposing? Is that compatible with European law?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am not a lawyer and I do not know the answer, but I am sure that we have plenty of qualified people in this place—we tend not to be short of them—who may be able to offer an opinion. However, new clause 1 is not limited to the registration officer finding out from a third party. It will apply if they find out from the person themselves, so my hon. Friend might be right about that circumstance and he might be wrong—I do not know; that might need to be tested by the courts—but the new clause is not limited to that group.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I appreciate the sentiment behind the new clause, but I have moved house on numerous occasions and have never found a way to tell anybody in authority where I was moving to, nor would I have wanted to. Will my hon. Friend explain a bit more how the new clause would work in practice?

Philip Davies: I am sure that many other people are like my hon. Friend in that regard. It is not a question about how the new clause will work in practice. It seems to me that it is self-explanatory, in that it says:

"If the registration officer receives information that leads him or her to believe that a registered elector has moved, or is going to move, outside the United Kingdom, the registration officer shall contact that elector to prompt him or her to register as an overseas elector."

How it would work in practice would seem self-explanatory. If the registration officer finds something out, he will contact the person concerned and say, "Will you register as an overseas elector?" I am not sure that I can add much to what the new clause already says.

10.15 am

Julian Knight: I thought earlier during my hon. Friend's speech about the GDPR issue, which our hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) has raised, but the truth of the matter is that, throughout government, people find ways to comply with GDPR. I do not think it is beyond the wit of registration officers to find a way for my hon. Friend's new clause 1 to be operable within the confines of GDPR. We should not fear GDPR in that respect. We should always try to find ways to work within it, but at the same time it should not stop us making law.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right. The other point is that if we find that the new clause is useful but is being stymied by the general data protection regulation, there would be nothing to stop this House amending it to make it easier for the new clause to operate, so I agree with him. I do not think we should fear doing anything because there might or might not be a problem further down the line. If there is, we can deal with it when it appears.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I acknowledge the important point that the hon. Gentleman is making: it is important that we properly scrutinise legislation that comes before us. However, it appears from the interventions that there is not much explanation for these new clauses, nor has any thought been given to their implications. For instance, has he thought through the practical implications of amendment 50 in this group and what it might mean for returning officers?

Philip Davies: If I could come on to my new clauses, the hon. Gentleman might get to hear my explanations. To be perfectly honest, I have not yet had a chance to get going on my explanations of my new clauses, so it is bit curious to be accused of not giving them before I have even started. That is a new one. However, I am delighted to hear at least one Labour Member state clearly on the public record that it is important to scrutinise Bills that come before us on a Friday. I am sure that is welcome, and I hope that view will spread like wildfire across the Opposition Benches, because we are usually told that we should not scrutinise them at all, so that is a step in the right direction. If we keep going, we will be on to a winner.

I am also surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman make what I consider to be a criticism of his hon. Friend on the Front Bench, the hon. Member for City of Chester.

Christian Matheson: He's my best mate!

Philip Davies: Well, with friends like that, Mr Speaker, you do not need many enemies in this place. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) basically stood up and said that the hon. Gentleman's amendments were a load of old cobblers, and then the hon. Gentleman says that he is his best friend. Goodness! I knew things were bad in the Labour party, but I did not know they were that bad, with infighting even among friends.

Jim McMahon *rose*—

Philip Davies: I will give way again. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can explain himself a bit better this time.

Jim McMahon: I am very happy to explain myself in more detail, but I should also say that my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) has many friends in this place. In amendment 50, the hon. Gentleman is asking electors to declare whether they intend to be an absent voter or to vote at a polling station. What are the practical implications of somebody saying, “I won’t be an absent voter abroad; I want to vote at a polling station.”? Which polling station would they vote at? What are the practical implications of amendment 50?

Philip Davies: I knew it was a mistake to give way to the hon. Gentleman for a second time after his first effort. I am not entirely sure which new clause he was referring to, but I am still on new clause 1, and new clause 1 is not about whether someone should vote here or vote there or vote at a polling station. It is about what a registration officer should do if he finds out that someone is going to move abroad. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was ahead of me or somewhere else, but let me say, just for the record, that I am still on new clause 1. I hope that that is helpful to Members.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is indeed new clause 1 that I wish to discuss. Does my hon. Friend think that the information that registration officers would be able to obtain could then be available to political parties to further encourage people to sign up and to vote? In the past, parties have, for example, sent cards encouraging people who have just turned 18 to do so.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, particularly for putting us back on track. Yes, I do think that that would be the consequence. What we are trying to do is encourage people to register as overseas electors, and to do so as early as possible. The earlier they register, the earlier that information will be available more widely, and will enable party representatives to campaign. Not only will it solve the problems that we have had with late registrations—as the hon. Member for City of Chester made clear in Committee—but it will help people to engage with the political process. The sooner they are registered, the sooner everyone can engage with them. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting a point that I must confess I had not really considered.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way, on that last point?

Philip Davies: I will indeed, as long as the hon. Gentleman sticks to new clause 1 and has not been affected by the person sitting next to him.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We cannot have both hon. Gentlemen on their feet at the same time. I believe that Mr Davies is giving way, and Mr Rodda is going to intervene. Mr Davies, are you giving way?

Philip Davies: I will give way.

Matt Rodda: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I appreciate that he has a great deal of interest in a wide range of potential amendments. Does he agree that there is a certain rich irony in the fact that he is devoting so much effort to considering issues relating to overseas electors—and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) mentioned earlier, there are deep technical problems for local registration officers trying to take ballot boxes to a large number of overseas locations—that he may be neglecting the much more pressing need of local British residents who move house regularly, such as the young people who move regularly in my Reading constituency?

Philip Davies: I am not entirely sure what is up with that part of the Opposition Benches. The hon. Members for Oldham West and Royton and for Reading East (Matt Rodda) seem determined to talk about anything other than the Bill and the new clause that we are discussing. The hon. Member for Reading East appeared to be saying that it was all very well for me to talk about new clause 1—and I took it from what he said that he agreed with it, not least because it is the new clause that his hon. Friend the hon. Member for City of Chester introduced in Committee, so I would like to think that even on that basis he has a bit of trust in it—but that, notwithstanding the merits or otherwise of new clause 1, I should be talking about something completely unrelated to the Bill, namely the issue of domestic voters. I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that if I launched into a speech about how we should deal with UK voters who happen to move to another UK location, it would not be long before you told me, “You are out of the scope of the Bill, and you are deviating from the subject,” and I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman is encouraging me to do so.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way, on that point?

Philip Davies: I will give those on that Bench one last go.

Mark Tami: It is clear that a great deal of effort and money is going into dealing with overseas voters, while the large number of people in this country who could be registered much more easily are being totally ignored. Thousands of people have completed part of the forms but may not have included their national insurance numbers, for instance, but little effort has gone into ensuring that they get on to the register.

Philip Davies: It was clearly a forlorn hope to expect the right hon. Gentleman to stick to the Bill. All I can say, to try to clear the matter up, is that I did not table this Bill. It is not my Bill. Whether he thinks that we should be concentrating on this Bill or that some other Bill would have been a better use of the House’s time, this is out of my control. I found out that this Bill was top of the pops for today, and I decided to try to do what I think is the duty of Members. Explanations are usually aimed at people outside the House, but it seems that today we are having to give them to people inside the House. The purpose at this point—the Report stage—is to scrutinise the merits or otherwise of this Bill and to see whether it can be improved in some way. It is not to

[Philip Davies]

decide whether or not this Bill should be first on the agenda, which is a question over which I have no control.

Whether or not this is the most important Bill that should come before the House is a matter of debate that is not particularly relevant on Report. It is not my Bill. I did not choose for it to be debated. I am simply picking it up and trying to make the best of it and trying to improve it, and the improvements that I am suggesting have largely been suggested by Labour Members. I should have thought that the right hon. Gentleman would be encouraging me to try to improve it in the way that his own party wants it to be improved.

Jim McMahon *rose*—

Gareth Snell *rose*—

Philip Davies: I am certainly not going to give way to the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton again. I will give the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central another go.

Gareth Snell: My question pertains to new clause 1.

Philip Davies: Thank you!

Gareth Snell: In this country, 17-year-olds can currently register as attainers so that they will be on the register when they turn 18. Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting in the new clause that those who are prompted to become overseas electors will be able to register as such while they are still resident in the United Kingdom and that the registration would only become active if they choose for that to happen? How will he get around the double registration issue if they are already registered as domestic voters?

Philip Davies: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. That was a very good and sensible intervention, if I may say so. I do not envisage people registering before they have moved, because something might change and they might not do so. I think that that would be quite improper. The purpose of the new clause is to prompt them to be sure to register as soon as they have moved overseas. However, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which I think was very helpful.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. He is being customarily generous with his time.

May I return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), who raised the prospect of helpful neighbours sending information to registration officers about people moving? Is not the more pertinent issue that some parts of the Government machine—Departments and officers—may become aware that someone is moving away for work and may choose to share that information with a registration officer, and new clause 1 would then give that registration officer the agency to act?

Philip Davies: I agree with my hon. Friend. He has made a very good point. I think it has long been a policy of everyone in the House—certainly a policy of Members on both sides of the House—that we should do what we can to encourage more people to register to

vote. I have never known anyone to argue against that principle. As my hon. Friend says, this measure could easily help more people to register, which I would expect to be a welcome move.

The hon. Member for City of Chester touched on this when he moved his new clause in Committee. He said that it was likely to engage more people in voting. He referred to the Electoral Commission's overseas voter day on 10 May 2016, which was supported by embassies and consulates around the world and which was intended to encourage British citizens who were eligible to register as overseas voters to do so in time to vote in the EU referendum. The commission ran a public awareness campaign for overseas voters between 17 March and 9 June, and more than 135,000 overseas voters registered during that period.

As the hon. Gentleman made clear in Committee, the new clause could go some way towards making overseas voters aware of their voting rights at an early stage. I think we should all welcome that, because presumably we want more people to register and we think that the earlier they do so, the better.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): On that point, surely it might also be a function of our diplomatic teams abroad fulfilling their consular duty in that when a family moves abroad they tend to register with British embassies in order to receive consular support and such a prompt could easily and ordinarily be set up from the British embassy.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right.

10.30 am

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) has done a better job than me of teasing out one of the problems this new clause might cause for registration officers. My example of the helpful neighbour was in one sense unhelpful, because a more real difficulty for ROs would be on the question of what it is to be aware that someone is planning to move overseas, but as my hon. Friend pointed out, many other parts of Government might hold information that implies someone is about to move overseas.

My fear is that there will be differences in practice around the country in that some ROs will be quite effective and determined to seek out that information from other parts of Government, including local government, while others will not be, at which point there will be a row, because this is not an entirely unpolitical subject: some people are keener on registering overseas electors than others. We can imagine a world in which people say, "Look, in Rutlandshire we are using a data sharing system to pull information from this part of local government that people are about to move overseas in order to send out these prompts, but you over in Blodchester are not doing that. Why are you not doing that? You are failing in your duty to send prompts to people who parts of Government have become aware are about to move overseas."

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but I do not agree with the thrust of where he is coming from. I am sure he will correct me if I am wrong, but it seems to me that he is criticising the fact that there

could be a postcode lottery, to put it in common jargon. Therefore, it seems to me that he is basically advocating that, to avoid that, he would rather nobody could do something, rather than have some people doing something. I would sooner some people did something and we encouraged the others to follow suit than say, “Because I can’t guarantee everyone is going to do it I would rather nobody did it.” So I have a slight difference of principle.

Neil O’Brien: My fear is not so much that there would be a postcode lottery—I do not necessarily have a problem with differences in treatment around the country—but that there would be a legal problem for ROs who might be told by ROs elsewhere in the country, “You are not following best practice; you are not following the duty set out in new clause 1, and therefore you are legally failing in your duties.” What would their response be?

Philip Davies: If an RO was failing in their duties they absolutely should be pulled up on that. If this new clause were to enter into law and an RO was made aware that somebody was about to move overseas or had done so and did nothing about it, in effect they would be in breach of what was expected of them, and it would not be unreasonable for them to be pulled up for that. I would like to think that if this was put into law, ROs would be more than capable of complying with it.

Kirstene Hair: I want to return to the question of a future referendum, because although we do not have any of our Scottish nationalist friends here today they are continually pushing for a future independence referendum in Scotland. The last time we had a referendum there were 800,000 Scots disenfranchised because they were living either south of the border or in Wales or overseas. Does my hon. Friend think this new clause could be used in the future to ensure that Scots who chose for a short or longer period to live in another part of the UK would be included in a future independence referendum in Scotland?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good case. I had not given that point a great deal of thought before now, but I am finding her very persuasive; I always find her very persuasive, but particularly on this point—and it is great to see her in her place doing her duty, which is to represent her constituents in Parliament, unlike those who occupy the Scottish Nationalist party Benches opposite, who are absent without leave. She could teach our friends from the SNP a few things about how best to represent their constituents in Parliament.

We could be in for a long morning here because I have only just covered new clause 1 and have barely got going to be perfectly honest. We still have quite a few new clauses to go through as colleagues will see from this group, and we have three groups of amendments to go through, notwithstanding the urgent questions and so on, so if Members will allow I will—

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Philip Davies: As I mentioned the hon. Gentleman at the beginning of my remarks it is only fair that I give him a go.

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman has been very generous with his time and I am grateful to him for quoting what I said in Committee. He has mentioned on a couple of occasions his confidence, which I share, in electoral administrators’ abilities to fulfil what he lays out in the new clause, but does he have any concerns about their resourcing to do so? There is only £8.8 million in this for implementation and 10 years of operating. Would new clause 1 bring any other financial burdens?

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman raises a fair point, and clearly if we are placing requirements, particularly on public bodies, it is only reasonable that they are given the resources to implement them. I am not entirely sure that this would be an onerous burden on ROs, however, although he and his hon. Friends might have a different view; I am pretty sure ROs could readily do this.

I agree, however, that if my new clause were brought into law and it proved to be more effective and popular than even I had anticipated, it would be right for the Government to follow that up with the resources needed to make sure its requirements were followed effectively. There is no point having good ways to help people to register and then ROs just not having the wherewithal to do it, so I would sooner do it that way. We should see how it goes, but the hon. Gentleman is right that if it proved to be effective ROs should get the resources.

Leo Docherty *rose*—

Philip Davies: I am anxious to move on, but I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Leo Docherty: I thank my hon. Friend. I share his confidence that ROs and administrators in local government would be fully capable of implementing new clause 1 if it were put into law. I used to have great confidence in Andrew Colver in Rushmoor who was given an OBE for his contribution to democratic services in Rushmoor. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that the burden of this new clause should fall not just on the point of departure, but on the point of arrival, and that if this is to be done effectively consular officials and our diplomatic teams will need to have a public awareness campaign, so when people arrive at their new place of residence they are encouraged to register?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I certainly do not see this new clause as an excuse for embassies or people abroad to say, “We don’t need to do anything now.” On the contrary, I think it would complement the work they already do, and hopefully assist them in that, because he is right that that is just as, if not much more, important.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) *rose*—

Philip Davies: I was about to move on, but as my hon. Friend went to the same school as me—he is a far better advertisement for it than I am—I will give way to him.

Mike Wood: Yes, we did go to the same school and I was at the prize-giving last summer where I was reminded by the chairman of governors that in my final year I had won the Philip Davies prize for debating no less—so very big shoes to fill.

[Mike Wood]

I have no doubt that my hon. Friend's new clause would be both effective and popular. In the third line it says "the registration officer shall contact that elector"; it does not say "may" contact or, as our right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General might put it, "use best endeavours" to contact. This clearly would create a legal duty, therefore, so has my hon. Friend given any thought to what might count as the reasonable steps that one would expect ROs to take, and what remedies might be available should they fail to use them?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point and highlights once again why he is a far better example of our school than I am. I am sure that it uses him on its advertising brochures in a way that it does not use me. The point he makes goes without saying, and I like to think that that is how the law would be treated. People can only do what they can do; by definition, they cannot do what they cannot do. He might be right to say that the new clause would have been better drafted to include the words "use their best endeavours", but personally I take it to mean that anyway, as it is written, because by definition someone cannot do something that they are not physically able to do. However, he is as eagle-eyed as ever, and I am grateful to him for highlighting that point.

Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies: I am going to move on now, or else we could be here all night. I shall move on to new clause 3, and I will try to crack on a bit; otherwise, we could be here forever. New clause 3 in effect requests a report on the awareness of how to participate in elections as an overseas elector. Again, I have taken this from the hon. Member for City of Chester, who mentioned it in Committee. I commend him again for doing that. When he introduced this change in Committee, he said:

"We heard in the discussion of previous clauses about the dangers of overseas electors piling in as soon as an election is called. We discussed with the Minister the importance of electors participating early by registering as early as possible. Based on the 2016 survey conducted by the Electoral Commission, it is clear that there remains widespread confusion about what it means to be an overseas voter and the eligibility criteria necessary to vote." This is no doubt one of the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire brought forward the Bill in the first place. I think we can all agree that that is the case. The hon. Member for City of Chester went on to say:

"This lack of awareness has the potential to create a significant barrier to casting a ballot. The survey found that there was widespread lack of awareness about eligibility requirements, with 31% believing that eligibility required receiving a UK state pension and 22% believing that it required owning a property in the UK."—[*Official Report, Overseas Electors Public Bill Committee*, 17 October 2018; c. 67.]

Those were particularly pertinent points that he highlighted when he brought forward his new clause. We should all be concerned about the level of confusion that that survey revealed. The purpose of new clause 3 is to raise awareness among overseas voters of how they can participate in elections. Given that we are trying to get more overseas electors to participate in elections, the new clause, helpfully suggested by the hon. Member for City of Chester, would be a pretty important way to ensure we did that.

Neil O'Brien: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said so far about new clause 3, but I have a question about his new clause 5, which we will come to later. In it, he specifies that the report must be produced "within 12 months of this section coming into force",

yet in new clause 3 there is no timetable to guide the Minister or the Cabinet Office on the publication of the report. Such a report could be published 10 years later and be of absolutely no use. Is there a particular reason my hon. Friend has not suggested a timetable in new clause 3?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend again highlights the importance of the scrutiny of Bills, particularly on a Friday, and I am grateful to him for doing that. He makes a very good point; I am sure that a date would have been beneficial to this proposal. As it happens, I am not trying to pass on responsibility, because that is not the purpose of the new clause. I have merely taken what the hon. Member for City of Chester tabled before, because that was a good proposal. However, I obviously take full responsibility for the new clause that I have tabled, and my hon. Friend is right to say that it would have been better with a timetable. I hope that, if new clause 3 is passed, pressure could be brought to bear on the Minister to speed things up in the usual way that we do in this House.

Neil O'Brien: I do not regard the absence of a date as in any way fatal to new clause 3, or as an argument against it, but for the benefit of those who have to implement it, I wonder whether my hon. Friend could guide them by specifying now in this debate, which they will read, whether he expects this to be done prior to commencement or in a progress report sometime later, and indeed whether he expects there to be a regular report produced every year or every couple of years?

Philip Davies: I think that it should be done as soon as is practical, and my hon. Friend is right to suggest that it should not just be a one-off. It should be something that the Cabinet Office does on an ongoing, regular basis. I am grateful to him for picking up on that particular flaw.

10.45 am

Gareth Snell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He is being remarkably generous with his time. I appreciate that we will not debate amendment 50 until later, but it is part of this grouping. In it, he talks about declarants wanting to vote "at a polling station". New clause 3 talks about assessing ways in which overseas electors could participate in elections. In French presidential elections, overseas electors from France who are in the UK can physically turn up and cast their vote in a ballot box here. Is it his understanding that, as part of the assessment that he wants the Cabinet Office to carry out, it should consider the introduction of physical polling stations in overseas areas for overseas electors?

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. Obviously I will come on to my amendment 50 when I get to it. I do not really have a particularly strong opinion on whether such polling stations would be useful. It may well be that in areas with a large concentration of overseas voters, that might be more

convenient for everybody and it might encourage turnout. I do not have a strong opinion on this, however. I am not necessarily disagreeing with the hon. Gentleman, but I would not want him to take it that I was necessarily agreeing with him either—

Gareth Snell: Story of my life.

Philip Davies: I hope that he will accept that.

New clause 4 is again one of the hon. Member for City of Chester's greatest hits. He proposed this in Committee, where he made these points:

"It is essential that there is appropriate evaluation and investigation of the effects of passing the Bill on the number of registered electors in each constituency. We must have a clear idea about the sheer volume of people we are enfranchising in order to establish the necessary procedure to register and deal with the inevitable administrative bedlam that will result from the change."—[*Official Report, Overseas Electors Public Bill Committee*, 17 October 2018; c. 69.]

I want to cite some of the figures that the hon. Gentleman gave during that debate, because they were very interesting. He said:

"Under the 15-year rule, the number of registered overseas voters in the June 2017 general election reached just over 285,000, surpassing the December 2016 record. The Government have estimated that that is about 20% of eligible expats under the current 15-year limit, giving a potential electorate of around 1.4 million. Indeed, the figure has the potential to increase fivefold with the passing of the Bill. The number of overseas voters registering to vote has risen exponentially over the last 10 years and continues to rise. That can be attributed to the general increase in awareness by overseas voters about voter registration. Until 2015, the number of overseas voters registered to vote had never risen above 35,000."—[*Official Report, Overseas Electors Public Bill Committee*, 17 October 2018; c. 70.]

I thought that that difference was quite telling. What made the seismic difference was the EU referendum in June 2016. I mentioned earlier the amount of work that was done in embassies around the world to try to encourage people to register for that referendum.

New clause 4 therefore has merit if we are to deal with the scale of the increase in numbers that we are talking about. I am not saying that I would press it to a vote, but I certainly think that it has merit and requires further consideration today, because the points that the hon. Member for City of Chester made in that debate were striking and something that we should all consider.

Julian Knight: That is a very interesting point, and I am quite staggered that 7 million people overseas could be enfranchised long term if the 15-year rule falls. That is very telling. Is it not true, in terms of my hon. Friend's reflection on the EU referendum, that when the establishment wants to do something it will put its shoulder to the wheel and get it done? Is it not the case that with this Bill, should it come about, we will find a way to overcome any logistical issues?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is amazing what can be achieved when the Government and the powers that be set out their stall.

The point that the hon. Member for City of Chester was making, as I see it, was that this measure could make a big difference to elections in this country and ultimately elections could, and might well be, decided in future by people who do not live here. Is that something

we want to see? People might well be happy for that to happen, but I brought the new clause back after the hon. Gentleman tabled it in Committee because I think that the people should at least properly consider whether they want to put in place legislation that could in effect mean that the deciding votes in elections in this country are cast by people who do not live here. What might people living here think about that? We need properly to consider it and to ensure that we are content before we go ahead with it. I brought the new clause back so that people could be aware and could think about whether that was what they really wanted to happen with elections in this country.

Neil O'Brien: Before we raise our sights to the question my hon. Friend has just raised, may I press him on the question of new clause 4(2)(c) and

"whether the current election timetables are of sufficient duration to enable the full participation of any increased numbers of overseas electors"?

I was not clear when I read it why there was any fear about this and why there might be any problem with timetabling. If we can get postal ballots out, I cannot see what the problem is that my hon. Friend is trying to address. Perhaps he could enlighten me.

Philip Davies: As I mentioned earlier on the new clauses, we have experience in this country of things being a bit of a shambles during elections, with people not being able to vote when they thought they were able to, with people not having time or with things not arriving in time. We have it at the moment. I am sure that like me—this happened at the last election—my hon. Friend must have had voters get in touch and said they did not receive their postal vote at all or in time for the election. That is the problem I envisage. It is just a general one, and the fact that we might have so many more people involved—the increased volume—means that it seems to me that the chances are we will have even more complaints. That is the purpose of new clause 4(2)(c).

Alex Norris: The most significant point about new clause 4(2)(c) is that electoral administrators themselves have expressed concerns about the timetable. I was very enthused to see it on the amendment paper, as we were unable to get it in Committee. We really ought to listen to the experts and make sure that the system is workable.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point, and I do not disagree. It was a helpful point to make.

New clause 5—I am on a bit of a roll now—is another one that I have to thank the hon. Member for City of Chester for, as he prompted me to table it. When he tabled it in Committee, he said that the

"new clause requests a detailed report on the representation of overseas voters, including how they might be 'represented by their MPs' and 'any additional demands that may be placed on MPs and their resources as a consequence of the provisions of this Act'."

The guidance provided to MPs regarding constituency correspondence with expatriates is also vague, probably because there are not that many of them at the moment. The Bill does not define the responsibilities of Members of Parliament towards their overseas voters, and the assumption is that the current position and precedents

[Philip Davies]

will be maintained. The code of conduct says that Members of Parliament have a special duty to their constituents.

The hon. Gentleman went on to say:

“Given the Minister’s insistence...on treating overseas voters with the same importance as UK-based, domestic voters, there needs to be a...discussion about how best to achieve democratic representation”

before we open it up to many more people, and he asked:

“What assessment have the Government made of the representation of overseas voters by Members of this House?” —[*Official Report, Overseas Electors Public Bill Committee*, 14 November 2018; c. 112-113.]

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Would my hon. Friend accept that some others in this House represent the views and interests of overseas voters, irrespective in some cases of whether they are constituents or not, and find that it does not place an intolerable burden on us? I am quite sure that my hon. Friend and his staff could manage.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that point, and his first point is absolutely right. I do not think that anybody in this House does more to champion overseas voters than he does, and I pay tribute to him for what he has done over a sustained period of time. I will take his second point as a vote of confidence in me, and I am grateful to him for that.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I am worried that my hon. Friend might be setting a dangerous precedent as regards the idea of measuring how well MPs represent any of their electorate; the idea of a scorecard is perhaps one that he might consider for the future.

Philip Davies: Certainly not. I think the best measure of our ability to represent our constituents is shown at an election by whether or not our electorate wish us to continue to represent them. That is the best scorecard I can think of.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman is being exceptionally generous with his time. He has touched on the question of how MPs represent overseas electors as being quite important, but does he share my concern that if we have constituencies with an increased number of overseas electors putting burdens and strains on Members’ time, offices and staff, the ability of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to recognise those unique circumstances will be zero and we will spend most of our time battling with IPSA for the resources we need to do our job rather than actually doing it?

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman might be right. I am not one of those people who bashes IPSA; it has its job to do, it makes its decisions, and our job is frankly just to get on with whatever it determines. However, he might be right. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) is right that this largely would not be a problem. I accept that, but there might well be examples of a certain group meaning that the Bill affects certain constituencies a lot. I do not think it would affect mine, frankly, but it might have a disproportionate effect on others. One thing that IPSA finds it difficult to do is to deal with situations where there are different pressures in different areas. Things are usually done on a more across-the-board basis, understandably, but that can cause some problems, so on that basis the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central makes a fair point.

Neil O’Brien: Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), it seems to me that in new clause 5(2)(a) we are asking for something that is impossible, as it is simply a radically subjective measure. Is the Minister supposed to measure the turnaround time of correspondence, to look at a Member’s contributions in the Chamber or measure their eloquence? I am afraid that it simply seems impossible.

Philip Davies: I do not see it in those terms. I will accept that it is not particularly well drafted if that is the conclusion that my hon. Friend has drawn from it, but I do not see it measuring the success of MPs in that sense. I see it as more about whether constituents are getting the service that that MP provides to other constituents in the same way. I do not see this duty being placed on the Government or MPs in the same way as my hon. Friend does.

As for new clause 6, I appreciate that in a moment or so—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic courtesy. How fitting it is, colleagues, that the Chamber is as well attended as it is at this time, on this very significant day—thank you. Colleagues, we shall now observe a minute’s silence in memory of those who died in the Westminster attack on 22 March 2017.

11 am

The House observed a minute’s silence.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, thank you. Thank you, also, to all present in the Palace of Westminster today who have joined in that very proper display of respect.

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 11(4)).

European Council: Article 50 Extension

11.1 am

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to make a statement on the extension to the article 50 process agreed at the European Council summit on 21 March.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): Last night, the Prime Minister met Donald Tusk, following the EU Council's discussion on the UK's request for the approval of the Strasbourg supplementary documents and for a short extension to the article 50 process. The Council agreed, subject to this House approving the withdrawal agreement next week, an extension of the article 50 period to 22 May. This provides Parliament with time to pass the necessary implementing legislation and to complete ratification. If Parliament does not approve the withdrawal agreement next week, article 50 will be extended until 12 April. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in Brussels last night, at that point we would either leave without a deal or we would need to put forward an alternative plan.

The House should be aware that the European Council has clarified that any extension beyond 22 May will require the UK to participate in European parliamentary elections. The Prime Minister has made clear her view: that it would be quite wrong to hold these elections three years after this country voted to leave the European Union. The House should also recognise, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said last night, that we are now at the moment of decision. She, and the whole of this Government, will continue to make every effort to get a deal agreed so that we can leave the EU in an orderly manner and move the country forward.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question? However, given the significance of what was agreed in Brussels yesterday evening, the Government should have made a statement to the House this morning, instead of requiring us, once again, to drag Ministers to the Chamber. On Wednesday evening, the Prime Minister made a divisive speech from Downing Street, in which she chastised right hon. and hon. Members for not making a decision on Brexit. But we have made a decision, voting down her deal twice by historic margins. It is just that it is a decision the Prime Minister is clearly incapable of accepting. It is her intransigence, her pandering to the hardliners in her own party and her refusal to compromise that has brought us to this point. Now that the article 50 process has been extended, I trust that responsible Ministers are urging their colleagues to change course.

Let me turn to the substance of the EU Council's communiqué. It makes it clear that, provided the withdrawal agreement is approved by this House next week, an extension will be granted to 22 May. Can the Minister therefore confirm that the Government will give us a third meaningful vote next week and, if so, on what day? Can he explain how the Government intend to comply with the terms of the statement that you, Mr Speaker, made on Monday to the effect that to have a chance of being put the motion would have to be "substantially" different? Can he commit now publicly

to publishing the necessary secondary legislation and giving the House the opportunity to approve it at the earliest possible opportunity?

The Minister will know that it is highly likely that if the deal is brought back next week, it will once again be voted down. The Council's communiqué makes it clear that if it is, the article 50 process will be extended to 12 April, in the expectation that the UK will "indicate a way forward" before that date. As such, can the Minister state categorically that in the event of such a scenario it would not be the Government's policy to take us out of the EU without a deal, on or after 12 April? If that is the case—this is the crucial question—could the Minister set out the process by which the Government will provide this House with an opportunity to properly debate the range of alternative options available to us and to facilitate attempts to secure a majority for one of them?

Ministers have constantly told us that a responsible Government prepare for all eventualities. With that in mind, can the Minister tell us what contingency plans are being made for the distinct possibility that an extension beyond 12 April will be required? Over recent months, we have repeatedly argued that an extension to the article 50 process was inevitable and we have made it clear that its length must be determined by its purpose. After next week, it must be for Parliament to finally determine what that purpose is, so that we in this House can do what is right for businesses, communities and people in every region and nation of the UK. In short, it is time that we took back control.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman asks a number of questions and makes a number of assertions, some of which are simply not true, frankly. The idea that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has refused to compromise is an exaggeration; I do not think that is an accurate reflection of what has happened. With respect to his remarks about the meaningful vote, the Leader of the House set out clearly in her business statement yesterday that she will make a further business statement next week, which would be appropriate—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry, but there is a rather unseemly atmosphere in the Chamber.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I believe that the Minister may have used unparliamentary language in what he has just said. Can you guide me and offer me some advice on this matter?

Mr Speaker: I do not think it was unparliamentary language. Whether it was altogether tactful is a matter for speculation and conjecture, and people will have their own view on that. I am inclined charitably to interpret what the Minister said from the Bench; when he said that the Opposition spokesman had made statements that were "not true", I have to assume that he was asserting that the shadow Minister was incorrect—that he was erroneous. I cannot believe for one moment that the Minister was accusing the shadow Minister of lying, because that would be disorderly.

Kwasi Kwarteng *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: Indeed, the shake of the head from the Minister on the Treasury Bench, which will be recorded in the *Official Report*, testifies to the correctness of my

[Mr Speaker]

interpretation. May I gently suggest to the Minister, who has had a difficult time at the Box this week, that a felicitous use of phrase would probably be to his advantage?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Thank you very much for your guidance, Mr Speaker. I would also like to stress that I was not making any assertions as to the hon. Gentleman's moral character; I was just making a statement about my view of certain things that he said.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about the meaningful vote, it is the Government's full intention to bring this meaningful vote to the House. We have to have a decision, and the House has to decide whether it will vote for a deal and commit to an orderly exit from the EU or whether it seeks to maintain a stance of indecision and to continue the uncertainty.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am not sure the Minister has answered the crucial question put to him. In order to comply with the Speaker's ruling and have a chance of getting meaningful vote 3 through the House, there has to be a substantial change in the offer. The EU will not carry on negotiating, so the only way to do that is to do so unilaterally by way of declaration. Will the Minister comment on that? Will he make it absolutely clear today, on behalf of the whole Government, not just the Prime Minister, that three years after the referendum it would be utterly intolerable were we still to be in the EU during the European elections? I want him to give an absolute commitment today that the Government would rather resign than be privy to such an appalling betrayal of the people's trust.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am pleased that my right hon. Friend asked that question. Obviously, I cannot comment from the Dispatch Box as to what the Government will or will not do in the event of a European parliamentary election, because we are talking about hypotheticals, as my right hon. Friend always likes to do. I can only reiterate the words of the Prime Minister on this: it would be intolerable to have European elections, given that we would have had three years since the country voted to leave the EU.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We will not now be leaving the EU on 29 March, but this is crisis delayed, not crisis avoided. Will the Government now support the cross-party amendment for Monday tabled by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and supported by many others, which would enable the House to hold a series of indicative votes? If the House does agree on a way forward, will the Government support it? Because continuing to say "My deal or no deal" will simply see the country continue to hurtle towards the edge of a cliff.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman makes an assumption about when the meaningful vote may take place. At the moment, the Government's focus is to make sure that we can potentially get a meaningful vote and secure the deal on the table. That is what I have always maintained, not only since I have been in office but before. We want to pass the meaningful vote and introduce the withdrawal Bill. If the meaningful vote does not get through, we will have to look at alternatives.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My I remind the Minister of Denis Healey's first rule of politics? When you are in a hole, stop digging.

Whenever the meaningful vote is tabled—if you allow it, Mr Speaker—I believe that the House will vote it down, not least because of the rather hubristic speech that the Prime Minister made when she, in effect, attacked Members of this House for having the temerity to vote with their consciences. I think it will not go through. Will the Minister confirm that if that is the case, as I very much hope and believe it will be, we cannot extend again beyond 12 April, even if the EU Council wants us to, unless the United Kingdom agrees?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Of course, that is absolutely the case. If my right hon. Friend is right and the meaningful vote comes to the House and is voted down, the European Council will not be able to impose, necessarily, any exit terms on this House. We would have to have some consent in this House on the way forward.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says the House is in a state of indecision; it is not. The House has repeatedly decided: it decided on 15 January, on 12 March and on 13 March. In fact, it has decided repeatedly, every single week for the past few weeks, to say no to the Prime Minister. The House also wants to get on and make decisions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) talked about the cross-party amendment; if the House votes for that amendment and gets the opportunity to move things on, will the Government honour the will of the House—yes or no?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady suggests that the House has actually decided; the House has decided to say no many times, but it has not decided to have a course of action or a plan that will take us out of the EU. All I would ask for from Members of this House is a degree of patience. Let us see what happens in the meaningful vote, and we will then have to take forward the necessary actions. I do not want to prejudice that vote now.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It was interesting to see the outcome of the Council last night. Will the Minister reassure me that we remain committed to delivering the result of the 2016 referendum, and that next week the House faces the only three choices that we can take unilaterally: no deal, revocation of article 50, or support the deal on the table? There is nothing else.

Kwasi Kwarteng: As usual, my hon. Friend, with customary clarity, gets straight to the point. There are three choices facing the House. We sincerely hope, even at this stage, that we can get the deal through and leave in an orderly fashion. That is exactly what Her Majesty's Government want to do.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I detect from the smile on the Minister's face when he answers some of these questions that he knows perfectly well that he has been sent out on to some very thin ice and a very sticky wicket—if the House does not mind me mixing my metaphors. There are so many things to which he does not know the answer that there is no point in even asking, because the Prime Minister does not even know, but let me ask a simple question to which he might

know the answer. Will we be sitting next Friday and will we be sitting in the week commencing 8 April, which will lead up to 12 April?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will know that Friday sittings are a matter for the House—*[Interruption.]* Absolutely, they are, in terms of procedure. We do not even know whether the meaningful vote will take place or get through. The hon. Gentleman will know that that is a matter of procedure.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My diary is definitely clear, should we need to have more discussions.

Many Members of this House want to deliver on the referendum result in an orderly manner, and I will support the withdrawal agreement, when it comes back to the House, as the best way to do that, but if it does not go through and there are indicative votes, will they be free votes, so that everybody outside the Chamber can see that we truly are acting to try to find the best way forward, although the circumstances are difficult?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Obviously, if the House is asked to decide a way forward, it would be surprising if those votes were not free votes. Again, though, my hon. Friend will understand that the ultimate decision is for the business managers and will be taken as and when the debate takes place. *[Interruption.]* I said it would be a matter of surprise to me.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Reports state that yesterday evening the Prime Minister left European leaders deeply unimpressed with her performance. That described a familiar situation for those of us in the House who are used to questioning the Government. Did the Minister really say a moment ago, from the Dispatch Box, that he anticipates that the Government will have a free vote on the withdrawal agreement when it comes back?

Kwasi Kwarteng: With respect, the hon. Gentleman utterly misheard, or certainly misunderstood, what I said. I was not referring to the meaningful vote; I was referring to the indicative votes suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) in her question.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The extension agreed by the EU last night was clearly a significant alteration in the circumstances, which I hope will mean you feel able to allow the meaningful vote to be put to the House again next week, Mr Speaker. I am saddened that the Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), found it necessary to criticise the Downing Street speech. It was not a statement of opinion; it was a statement of fact. The fact is that hon. Members on both sides of the House have been very good at finding things they cannot agree with and not very good at finding things or a particular solution they can agree with. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister is offering not a grievance but a solution, and one that we should now support?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I cannot agree with my right hon. Friend strongly enough. The Prime Minister has set out her deal. I strongly believe it is the best way out of the EU and will continue to make that case, along with other members of the Government.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am heartily sick of being told by Ministers and other Members that the House has not said what it wants. We keep having that option ruled out. If the Minister is cross with us for not saying what we want, will he now commit the Government to supporting the amendment that would provide for indicative votes on what we do want? Some of us would really like the opportunity to say what we want.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I can reassure the hon. Lady that I am not cross at all. *[Interruption.]* Well, I am not; I am perfectly happy to take questions and to engage with the House. If we lose the meaningful vote, we will proceed to face the question the EU has set out in terms of 12 April, as the Prime Minister and Donald Tusk made very clear yesterday.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If indicative votes take place, whether whipped or free, and if they contradict the outcome of the referendum of 2016, which will the Government feel obliged to obey?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As my right hon. Friend knows, the Government have always been committed to honouring the result of the referendum, and we fully intend to leave the EU in an orderly manner, which is why at this late stage I continue to urge Members to back the deal.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister has urged the House to move beyond “indecision” and to adopt a “course of action” or “plan”. Does he not accept that the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) would achieve precisely that, and why does he have such difficulty saying that the Government would support it and honour it if it was passed?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that amendment—it is not clear whether it has even been accepted—has been rejected twice, and there is no reason the Government should back an amendment that has been rejected twice.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I say to the House gently that I am less and less interested in hypothetical solutions to this problem. I voted for the deal and will do so again. The issue of no deal is not about trading on WTO terms; it is about ending the enormous uncertainty that will continue for companies if we go out in a no-deal scenario.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend puts it extremely well. These hypothetical discussions do not alleviate the uncertainty or address the problem. There is huge uncertainty, and the sooner we end it by backing a deal, the better it will be for this country.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am tempted to ask the Minister what he had for breakfast this morning, as that might be a question he can answer. His performance is emblematic of the shambolic lack of preparedness over this whole issue. I will try a few very simple questions. Is the meaningful vote coming forward next week? If so, on which day? And if, as seems almost inevitable, it is voted down again, what happens then?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As with my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), I am not getting into hypotheticals. I have said that we hope to have a meaningful vote—let us see, Mr Speaker, if you decide that it is in order—and then we can test the will of the House.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that, notwithstanding last night's agreement, the article 50 period will only be extended if the House votes for a statutory instrument to give effect to such an extension?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is quite right. The Government would have to lay a statutory instrument and the House would have to debate and vote on it.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Does the Minister not accept the irony—some would say hypocrisy—of the Government saying the public can have a vote neither on whether to agree the Prime Minister's deal or remain nor in the European elections but that the House can vote three times on her deal?

Kwasi Kwarteng: And Labour Members are urging the Cooper-Boles amendment. It has been rejected twice, yet they still seek to bring it back to the House. That is how the House of Commons is operating these days.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Since last night's European Council meeting, would the Minister say that his Department's preparations for no deal have been stepped up or stepped down?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend will know that the Department has been engaged in no-deal preparation for about two years now, although it has been ramped up in the last few months, and we fully expect to be absolutely ready if this country leaves the EU without a deal.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): With due respect to the Minister, I am still not clear about the process from here. The world outside this Chamber would like to know on what day we will have a meaningful vote, whether the motion will be different from the one taken twice before and when the Government will lay the statutory instrument to extend article 50 beyond 29 March. People with businesses want to know the answers to those questions, and the Minister, on behalf of the Government, has a responsibility to answer them in this Chamber.

Kwasi Kwarteng: We all have a responsibility. As I and other members of the Government have been saying for many months, the most orderly way to leave is by backing the deal, but other Members have taken a different view. The Government fully intend to have a meaningful vote next week, and, as a consequence of a vote either way, I am sure that a statutory instrument will be introduced to the House early next week. That is the timeframe I have been led to believe. I think that is where we are.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): So the statutory instrument will be issued on Monday or Tuesday? It has taken a long time to get even that information out of my hon. Friend. Can he expand upon whether

the SI will be issued in draft before or after the Government's next—and likely failed—attempt to get this ludicrous deal through?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am not going to say today—Friday—the exact hour and time the meaningful vote will take place or the SI will be tabled. I have set out the path and the process very clearly. My hon. Friend should refer to my earlier remarks.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): This is not so much a crisis of the constitution as a crisis of leadership on the part of the Government. Parliament is not the problem; Parliament has not had the opportunity to find a way forward and establish a majority for anything because the Government have prevented it from doing so. That is the reality. I do not think that the Minister will be able to table the motion next week unless he substantially changes it, because you have ruled it would be out of order, Mr Speaker. Will he confirm that he does not intend to substantially change the withdrawal agreement and political declaration prior to subjecting them to another meaningful vote, and if the motion is ruled out of order, will he accept the need to establish a majority to amend it for it to proceed?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am not going to second-guess your decision on the meaningful vote, Mr Speaker, but there is a body of opinion, which I happen to share, that the circumstances will have changed—we will have had EU input on the timetable—and that it may well be argued that those changed circumstances allow another meaningful vote.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am afraid that I fundamentally disagree with this business of extension in the first place, but will my hon. Friend confirm whether there are any additional financial commitments associated with the proposed extension?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As far as I am aware, we have not discussed any more financial commitments outside those detailed in part 5 of the withdrawal agreement.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I absolutely despair at what this whole charade is doing to public trust in this place. That was not helped by the Prime Minister pitting the people against Parliament in an absolutely shocking speech. My constituents, who have been contacting me in their hundreds, say that they do not want a no-deal exit and that they do not want the Prime Minister's deal, and that is what Parliament has also ruled. The Minister is talking about hypotheticals, but, given that it is almost Friday afternoon, next week's business is not hypothetical. What will he say to reassure people outside of this place that this is not just an absolute farce?

Kwasi Kwarteng: What I say is: back the deal.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): There are millions of people outside this House who are absolutely seething. They are largely seething with people who stood on a promise to deliver the result of the referendum and who, once elected, try to frustrate, or in some cases even overturn, the result that they promised to honour when they stood at the general election. If those people do

not think that there will be a backlash, they are in cloud cuckoo land. The Government could, and should, leave on 29 March, as they promised all the way along. Why are they not doing that, and will the Minister give an absolute assurance that the two dates mentioned—the one in May and the one in April—will not, in any circumstances, be superseded by pushing it to a later date, because to do so would be the most appalling betrayal of trust to the British people?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I cannot recommend the words of my hon. Friend enough. We all stood on manifestos in this place that committed to honour the 2016 referendum result. Some Members of this House have essentially sought to flout that and turn their backs on the strong commitments that they made and they will have to answer for that. The Government are still committed to honouring the referendum and leaving the EU in an orderly way.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): The country is facing a national emergency, and this Government are taking us to the brink. We have seen a petition to revoke reaching nearly 3 million signatures in less than 48 hours. That is unprecedented. Will the Government seek another way forward by asking Parliament and then put that back to the people, or by revoking article 50?

Kwasi Kwarteng: It is not Government policy, and never has been, to flout the 2016 referendum result, going back on what the people voted for, or to revoke article 50.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Can the Minister suggest to the Prime Minister that her deal is dead and that MV3 is dead? May I also suggest that she watches the “Monty Python” sketch on the dead parrot to see that her deal is dead? If she is not willing to listen, perhaps she is willing to watch and then bring back a statement that will unite us rather than divide us.

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have said, I would be very surprised if the Prime Minister does not make a statement on Monday. Downing Street is, I think, committed to that. What I say is that a deal is the best way forward. That is the best way to leave the EU in an orderly way.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I found the statement by the Prime Minister sickening and revolting because she pitted our constituents—the British public—directly against us. It has made our job a lot, lot harder simply because she is trying to place her complacency and her ineptitude and inabilities to strike a deal on to us. Will the Minister respond by saying that, along with bringing back a meaningful vote next week, the Prime Minister will also come to the Dispatch Box to offer a full and unreserved apology to us all as parliamentarians?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am sure the Prime Minister will be coming to the Dispatch Box to give an account of what happened in the various conversations that she has had with EU27 leaders. In her statement, I think she was essentially reflecting a feeling among constituents—certainly among my constituents—that the House of Commons needs to get round a decision and move this thing forward.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Minister and the whole House will agree that, when a motion is defeated by a majority of almost 250 Members of this place and when Members such as me vote against that motion knowing that it will mean that that motion may not come back, we do not expect it to be hawked around for a second, third or fourth time. I voted against the people’s vote motion last week, and I presumed that the same would apply, given that the majority was almost the same. May I suggest to the Minister that one way through this would be to bring forward parts of the withdrawal amendment Bill and place in it, on statute, the roll that this House will play in the next phase of negotiations? We are in this mess, frankly, because the Prime Minister went to Europe and cut a deal that she supported without checking with us first. If she repeats that mistake, this process will go on for far longer than the European elections.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will understand that the Bill will only be introduced subject to the House voting through the meaningful vote. That is, I am afraid, standard process in these matters.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Minister keeps saying that he will not engage in hypotheticals, but on 14 March the Deputy Prime Minister said that the Government would, if a meaningful vote is not approved,

“facilitate a process in the two weeks after the March European Council to allow the House to seek a majority on the way forward.”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 563.]

Does he agree with the Deputy Prime Minister? If he does, can he tell us exactly when, and by what process, he would take forward the means of this Parliament reaching an agreement?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I agree with the hon. Lady to a point. If the meaningful vote is voted down, it would be reasonable to have a wide debate in the House, as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster suggested two weeks ago, to find what the House would tolerate and how it sees things going forward. I agree with that.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I voted leave in 1975 and I voted leave again in 2016. It is crucial that we respect the vote of the referendum. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that the best way to achieve that, and indeed to retain good, solid working relationships with our current European partners, is by supporting the withdrawal agreement and voting for it in the meaningful vote?

Kwasi Kwarteng: In all this noise and debate, the course outlined by my hon. Friend is the most secure one. It is the best one for delivering on certainty for our businesses. I, along with him, will continue to support the deal.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): In an age of polemics, I like to think of myself as a meek politician, but, in the biblical sense, meekness is a continuum from outright rage to outright apathy. As I listened to the Prime Minister’s statement on Wednesday night, I was filled with nothing but wrath for it. This is a person who holds an office that technically has an immense power and who has promised to leave the

[Mike Kane]

European Union on 108 occasions in this House yet has failed to deliver. Does the Minister think that the Prime Minister helped her cause in any way whatever with that statement on Wednesday night?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister expressed the frustration that millions of people across this country feel at the inability of this House to move the debate forward and to honour its commitments to leave the EU and to honour the referendum of 2016.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister said at her press conference last night that she would honour the commitments made by the Minister for the Cabinet Office to hold indicative votes if the withdrawal agreement was defeated again. I think that the Minister just confirmed that he agrees with her on that point. So when he confirms again in answer to this question that that is what he has just said, will he also confirm that the Government will be bound by the results of those indicative votes as a way out of the crisis that this country is currently in?

Kwasi Kwarteng: All I said—I want to repeat it—is that, in the event of the House voting down the meaningful vote, it would not be unreasonable to have subsequent votes to find out what the House actually supported.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Minister has said an awful lot about what he thinks, but not so much about what he knows. Does he think the Prime Minister even wants to get her deal through? She has to convince Members of this House to vote for it, but her irresponsible speech in Downing Street on Wednesday evening has seen increased hostility and threats, including death threats, towards Members of this House from members of the public, who she pitted against us.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I know that the Prime Minister has worked tirelessly to get the deal across the line, as have other members of her Government. We still maintain that this deal is the best way in which to leave the EU in an orderly and timely fashion.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Before I ask my question, let me say that the Minister should join his Chief Whip in saying that he is appalled by the Prime Minister's language. I have been standing up to bullies all my adult life and I will not be bullied by the Prime Minister, and neither will any Opposition Member. Will the Minister tell us what the new exit date will be after the SI has been tabled—12 April or 22 May?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman very ably sets out the alternative that the EU has suggested, but he will understand that it is conditional on what happens in the meaningful vote. If the meaningful vote goes through, we are leaving on 22 May. If it does not, 12 April is in play.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I just want to confirm what we have heard from the Minister today: we do not know when the meaningful vote will be; we do not know what will be in it; we do not know whether the Government will whip it; we do not know

when the SI will be tabled; and now we do not even know what will be in the SI. How can we have any faith that this Government can deliver anything, never mind Brexit?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I have said that we are committed to having the meaningful vote next week, and that once the meaningful vote is decided one way or the other, we will be looking to introduce an SI to change the exit day.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The last few years have been extremely difficult for parliamentarians. The referendum divided the country, but we have desperately tried to respect the result and find a way through, after being put in a really uncompromising position by the Prime Minister. In that time, we have faced harassment and targeted threats. When we come down here, our families are fearful for our safety; when we are here, we fear for our families' safety. And the Prime Minister—the Head of our Government—playing on that to try to bully and harass us even further will not work.

Good faith in this House is at a bare minimum now, and the Prime Minister has lost any good faith that I had in trying to work with her, but we still have to find time and find a deal, and that can be achieved only if the Government accept that we have to depart from the current withdrawal agreement to find a compromise that can win support across the House. The Minister must surely now accept that there has to be a change of direction.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the increased violence and threats faced by all Members of this House; it is right to observe this issue, particularly as we commemorate two years since people lost their lives in an attack on this place. With respect to the process, we still have to have the meaningful vote. The hon. Gentleman predicts that it will be voted down. If it is, we will table an SI in the manner that I have described. There may well be debates in the House to find a solution—a way forward. That is what I can commit to.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) was being rather generous and polite when he described the Prime Minister's speech as divisive; it would have been better described as shamelessly arrogant and dangerous. The Prime Minister is continuing to display that arrogance in every forum, and it really cannot go on. With respect, other Ministers are displaying the same arrogance in failing to face up to the situation that we are in. The Minister says that there will be a meaningful vote early next week, followed by an SI that will be published early next week and which clearly has to be voted on before next Friday. Presumably, that can be voted on only after the meaningful vote, so I imagine that that will happen on Thursday or Friday. Can the Minister give us some clarity about what we are doing next week, because Members of this House need to know?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The technicalities of the business of the House are a matter for the Leader of the House. The hon. Gentleman says he is confused, but he ably set out the path for next week. We want to have a debate and a meaningful vote. In either eventuality after the meaningful vote, we will be looking to introduce an SI to amend the exit date. That is a very clear path.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister has succeeded in alienating this House and inflaming the divisions in our country. She is bringing the House into disrepute with her inability to recognise that the House and the country might hold an opinion different from her own. She is like a child who will not share her Brexit toy. But this is about all our futures, so will the Minister set out how the Government will give the House or the people of this country the opportunity to find a different way, because the Prime Minister is not going to get her own way on Brexit?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I assure the House that the Prime Minister has been absolutely committed to delivering on the result of the referendum—on the fact that we have to leave the EU. I believe, as does the Prime Minister, that the best way to do so is with a deal, and I will continue to argue passionately for that.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Minister has come here and given a series of confused and contradictory replies to colleagues this morning. Once again, this shows the state of complete and utter disarray in which Ministers find themselves. When will the Government finally—at this late hour—look again at the whole issue of Brexit, and find an alternative way forward?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would say that the confusion and contradiction sit on the Opposition Front Bench. Labour Front Benchers do not know whether they want to revoke article 50, do not know whether they want to honour the referendum and their commitment to leave, and do not know whether they want to be in a customs union or not. They give totally contradictory and confused answers. The Government have been incredibly consistent that the withdrawal agreement marks the best and most orderly way to leave the EU.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), while the Minister

has been on his feet *The Times* journalist Francis Elliott has tweeted his information that the SI will be tabled and debated on either Monday or Tuesday, which rather throws us into further confusion, as my hon. Friend said, because that suggests that the meaningful vote would have to be taken before Monday or Tuesday. Can we have some clarity, or is it simply the case that the Minister is having to take one for the team?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am very pleased that the tweet confirms what I have been saying. I have consistently said that the SI would be introduced early next week, and Monday or Tuesday conforms to what I said earlier from this Dispatch Box.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister said that whether we sit next Friday, or when we sit, is entirely up to the House. Well, the House can make those decisions only if the Government have tabled something to that effect. It seems perfectly likely that we will be sitting next Friday for the reasons that several hon. Members have already mentioned. However, the Easter recess dates have already been announced—I do not think that we have voted on them as there has not yet been a motion before the House, but I may be wrong on that—and people are making plans. As it stands, the Easter recess means that we would not be sitting on 12 April, which is one of the next dates that is meant to be important. Would it not be really helpful if the Leader of the House were to make a statement before the end of today as to the future plans for when we are going to be sitting?

Mr Speaker: It would. Whether such will be forthcoming, I do not know, but the hon. Gentleman's point of order contained three propositions—or at any rate, two assertions and a proposition. He was right in every particular. We will leave it there for now. I cannot add anything at this hour, but my not being able to add anything at this hour does not put me into a position markedly different from that of the Minister on the Treasury Bench.

Gaza Border Deaths: UNHRC Inquiry

11.49 am

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): (*Urgent Question*): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

A few days ago, Dr Tarek Loubani came to see me. He is a Canadian who last year was volunteering in Gaza. When the protests began—

Mr Speaker: Order. At this stage, the shadow Foreign Secretary simply asks for a statement from the Minister—just a sentence.

Emily Thornberry: I do apologise, Mr Speaker. Everything is so topsy-turvy at the moment; I seem to have lost myself.

Mr Speaker: Just blurt it out—ask the question. One sentence, for the record.

Emily Thornberry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to make a statement on the vote at the United Nations Human Rights Council this morning.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): We have all been in the right hon. Lady's position; I appreciate the question and am happy to respond.

The Government remain deeply concerned about the situation in Gaza. The violence over the past year has been and continues to be shocking, and the loss of life and large number of injured Palestinians are devastating. Since 30 March 2018, more than 23,000 Palestinians have been injured and 187 killed.

We have been clear that the UK fully supports the need for an independent and transparent investigation into last year's events in Gaza. Our Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), the former Foreign Secretary, made that position clear to Prime Minister Netanyahu last year, and we continue to urge the Israeli authorities to look into the Israel Defense Forces' contact at the perimeter fence.

We have repeatedly made clear to Israel our long-standing concerns about the manner in which the IDF policed non-violent protests and the border areas, including the use of live ammunition. We call on Israel to adhere to the principles of necessity and proportionality when defending its legitimate security interests. It is totally unacceptable that Hamas and its operatives have been cynically exploiting the protests for their own benefit. Hamas and other terrorist groups must cease all actions that proactively encourage violence or put civilian lives at risk.

We welcome the fact that the Israeli Military Advocate General has recently ordered five criminal investigations that relate to 11 separate instances of Palestinian fatalities during the Gaza border protests. Those investigations are ongoing. Given the importance of accountability, it is vital that the investigations are independent and transparent, that their findings are made public, and that, if wrongdoing is found, those responsible are held to account.

In May 2018, the United Kingdom abstained on the UN Human Rights Council resolution calling for a commission of inquiry on the basis that the substance of a resolution must be impartial and balanced. We could not support an international investigation that refused to call explicitly for an investigation into the action of non-state actors such as Hamas. This morning, the UK abstained on the item 2 accountability resolution at the 2019 Human Rights Council, which included references to the commission of inquiry report. Although the report looks into Israel's actions, it is highly regrettable that it did not look comprehensively at the actions of non-state actors such as Hamas.

The perpetual cycle of violence does not serve anyone's interests, and it must end. The impact of the protests has been severe and catastrophic, particularly on Gaza's healthcare system. I am considering what more the United Kingdom can do to support those in desperate need in Gaza, and I hope to be able to make a further announcement in the coming days.

The situation in Gaza remains unsustainable, set in the context of a stalled middle east peace process that remains, in the view of the UK, vital to pursue and preserve. A long-term strategy for Gaza itself is desperately needed to improve humanitarian and economic conditions and reduce the restrictions that are damaging the living standards of ordinary Palestinians. Israelis and Palestinians deserve to live their lives in peace and security. It is vital that all parties redouble their efforts to move towards renewed negotiations and the shared goals of peace and a two-state solution.

Mr Speaker: I call Emily Thornberry.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I will have another go.

As I was saying, a few days ago, Dr Tarek Loubani came to see me. He is a Canadian who was volunteering in Gaza last year. When the protests began on the border last spring, he went to help the many protestors who had been wounded by gunfire or affected by tear gas. He said that, on 14 May, the situation was relatively calm. He stood chatting to his colleagues 25 metres away from the protestors, wearing his green hospital scrubs. He said:

"We could clearly see the IDF sniper towers...And they could see us".

When he turned sideways, that was when they shot him—one bullet, through both legs. The paramedic who came to his aid, clearly marked in high-vis clothing, treated his injuries, then resumed his work elsewhere and was shot dead an hour later. That paramedic was one of 189 Palestinians killed during last year's protests—35 of them children—while Dr Loubani was one of 6,000 shot by snipers.

The UN report into these actions may have its faults—I accept that, and I agree that it plays down the role of Hamas in orchestrating these protests, but it provides clear and compelling evidence that live ammunition was used in a way that cannot be explained or justified against individuals such as Dr Loubani and thousands more like him. Yet this morning, as the Minister said, the Government have abstained on a resolution endorsing that report, in effect telling the Israeli authorities, "We refuse to find fault with your actions."

Alistair Burt *indicated dissent.*

Emily Thornberry: I believe it does. Yesterday, we read the explanation for that decision in an article by the Foreign Secretary, along with the announcement that the UK would vote against all resolutions before the Human Rights Council under standing item 7 of its agenda—even those in line with official UK policy.

I want to ask the Minister about the logic of the Foreign Secretary's argument. He argues that because item 7 gives disproportionate attention to the situation in Palestine above all other conflicts, on principle the Government will veto all resolutions falling under that heading. By that logic, would it have been this Government's position to veto all Council resolutions on apartheid, which was a standing agenda item for 26 years, or all Council resolutions on Chile under Pinochet, which was a standing item for 15 years, simply on a point of principle?

Even if we accept that argument, let us look at what the Foreign Secretary says next:

"Britain will continue to support scrutiny of Israel...in the HRC, so long as it is justified and not proposed under Item 7."

But the report into events in Gaza debated at the Council today is being considered under item 2, not item 7. Surely the Minister cannot deny that its criticism of the use of live ammunition is justified. By the Foreign Secretary's logic, why have the Government refused to support the report? If Dr Loubani cannot be given justice for the injuries he has suffered and the killing of his colleagues, surely he deserves at least to hear the world, including our country, unequivocally condemn it.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's remarks, some of which I very much agree with. I also met Dr Tarek Loubani and colleagues from Medical Aid for Palestinians during the week. There is no doubt about his sincerity and the pain that he has experienced in relation to his injuries and the death of his friend. Any encounter with those who have been involved in the actions that resulted from the protests and the move towards the fence brings into sharp relief our discussions, when we confront the reality of what has happened—the loss of life, the life-changing injuries to a child hit by a bullet, a lifetime of disability and the loss of paramedics. Whatever the context of a right to protest and a right to defend, if such things result that is a tragedy, and such actions are shocking and appalling in equal measure. Whatever the context, that cannot and should not be an end result.

In relation to the procedural matters that the right hon. Lady raised, there are two parts to dealing with matters at the Human Rights Council: the vote itself, and the explanation of vote. The United Kingdom has not been alone in abstaining in relation to this accountability, and the votes were spread across the Human Rights Council. There are reasons for both.

The United Kingdom has taken a principled position in relation to item 7 for a period of time. When item 7 was introduced, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said, Ban Ki-moon, the then UN Secretary-General, voiced his disappointment, given the range and scope of allegations of human rights violations throughout the world, that there was one specific item relating solely to Israel, and Israel was the only country that faced that. That has been the long-standing concern about item 7. At the same time, we have been at pains to make it clear that when issues came under other items,

as with item 2 and this accountability report, the matter would be looked at entirely on its own merits, and we would support those actions that we believed we could.

In relation to this particular matter, at the time the inquiry was set up, we said that because of the nature of the inquiry—it would not be looking at the actions of those who were responsible for taking people to the fence and took some complicit action in relation to what happened—the inquiry could not be even-handed and balanced. That is why we abstained in the first place, and it is why we abstained again. If I may, I should put the explanation of vote that has been given in Geneva on to the record so that colleagues here can read it. It says:

"Our vote today follows on from our position in...2018 when we abstained on the resolution that created the Commission of Inquiry into the Gaza protests. Our expectation is that accountability must be pursued impartially, fairly, and in a balanced manner. We did not and cannot support an international investigation that refuses to call explicitly for an investigation into the action of non-state actors such as Hamas, and we cannot support a resolution that fails to address the actions of all actors, including non-state actors. The UK continues fully to support an independent and transparent investigation into the...events in Gaza. We note the IDF opening potential criminal investigations into a number of cases...But equally we have publicly and privately expressed our longstanding concerns about the use of live ammunition and excessive force by the Israel Defence Forces. Our decision to abstain reflects"—

our concern and our balanced position. That is the reason for it, but it does not stop us calling out those actions we consider to be wrong. We welcome the fact that there will be some criminal investigations, and we wait to see the result of them.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I agree with every word of the Government's position, as just read out by the Minister. I therefore do not understand why we just abstained, instead of voting against the proposal. If we felt that this particular organisation would produce only a partial and unbalanced report, and if we want an impartial and balanced report, would it not have made more sense to vote against the proposal?

Alistair Burt: No. We maintained the position of abstention because that reaffirmed our position in relation to the nature of the inquiry itself. However, the inquiry produced matters of concern to the United Kingdom in relation to what it did, such as listing those who were killed and wounded. The nature of the account led us to the belief that our concern could properly be expressed not by voting against it, but by maintaining our previous position.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is right to call for accounts of the conduct of Hamas in this situation, but this report also gives us clear evidence about the consequences for the people in Gaza of what happened last summer. It also gives us evidence of what is happening now; in particular, we see that the healthcare system in Gaza is still not able to cope with the consequences, with 8,000 elective surgeries being cancelled because medical staff have had to deal with the aftermath of the violence. May we press the Minister? He may not agree with the report, but we can all agree that we should take practical action in the light of what it shows us. Will he do more to help those struggling with healthcare in Gaza as a result?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady is right, and that is what we have sought to do. When I was last in Gaza, I went to one of the hospitals that have been involved and met two of the patients who were still being treated there for bullet wound injuries. We have provided £1.5 million to support the International Committee of the Red Cross appeal in 2018, which targeted several of the most urgent needs in Gaza, including drug supplies, emergency fuel and physical rehabilitation. I have taken a particular interest in the physical rehabilitation side, because it is one thing to treat people's injuries, but quite another to recognise, particularly for growing children, that they are going to need support over a lengthy period of time. We can indeed separate the two, and we are doing what we can in relation to support for Gaza, but we must remember the context. These injuries should not be occurring, and there are widespread reasons why these protests should be handled in a different way if they are not to risk people's lives in future.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I very much thank the Minister for his comprehensive answers so far. Will he please update the House on what steps the Government are taking to push for the comprehensive and independent report into the events he mentioned earlier in his remarks?

Alistair Burt: The Government have repeatedly called for an independent and transparent investigation at the highest levels and in multiple forums, including here in Parliament and at the UN Security Council. The Prime Minister and former Foreign Ministers have raised the issue directly with Prime Minister Netanyahu. Our position has not changed, and we will continue to do that. Earlier this week, British embassy officials raised the issue of Gaza with Israeli authorities, highlighting the importance of proportionality, and concerns about the volume of live fire used against unarmed women, children and medics.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister said that he has met Dr Tarek Loubani, who was shot in both legs despite wearing clothes that clearly marked him out as a medic and therefore a protected person under international law. Does the Minister accept that Tarek Loubani is one of 600 health workers who were wounded last year, three of whom were killed? In what other situation would the Government refuse to vote to hold accountable those who flagrantly breach international humanitarian law? Is the fact that the Government refused to do so on this occasion nothing short of disgraceful?

Alistair Burt: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and he knows this issue well, but I do not accept that charge. I have made it clear that our reasons for not supporting the inquiry are in relation to the nature of that inquiry. No medic should ever be targeted—I can make that statement clearly; it does not need a commission of inquiry to say something like that. There should clearly be accountability for any such actions, but this commission is not that.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The use of force, including the robust use of force in self-defence, is the legitimate right of every sovereign nation, and that applies to Israel and the United Kingdom. However, the use of disproportionate force is not. Will the Minister join me in deprecating the use of live ammunition in all but the most extreme and volatile circumstances?

Alistair Burt: Yes.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op)
rose—

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op)
rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Stephen Twigg.

Stephen Twigg *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: That is magnanimity personified. Charm and good grace have characterised the hon. Gentleman since first he entered the House in 1997. That is very good of him. I call Dame Louise Ellman.

Dame Louise Ellman: I welcome criminal investigations where they are warranted, but the report does not seem to take into account the fact that this was an organised demonstration that threatened an internationally recognised border, and that 150 of 187 people on those demonstrations had been recognised as operatives of Hamas, or of very similar organisations.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady points out one of the major difficulties in the United Kingdom accepting the commission of inquiry as a full commission. All the available evidence from open sources, and other sources, accepts that Hamas played a part in pushing people towards the border, and that circumstances in which death or injury were likely to result were deliberately created and exploited. Whatever accountability and criminal investigations there will be regarding members of the Israel Defence Forces, we can be certain there will be none in relation to Hamas, which is an imbalance. None the less, nothing justifies the circumstances, and all parties should be doing what they can to ensure that although there is a right of protest and—rightly—a right of defence, that should not end with the tragedies that the commission has had to document.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I appreciate the Minister's responses and his overall tone. Does he agree that although the report rightly points in some cases to the disproportionate use of force, it does not look at the whole picture, which is what we would want from a fully independent and transparent process? Although there are some issues that clearly require a criminal investigation, just as for difficult issues in our own past, any inquiry must consider all factors that took place.

Alistair Burt: As my hon. Friend and other Members know well from their own experience, the tragedy of the area is that the sheer practicalities prevent the sort of inquiry process we would expect, and it is very difficult to gain evidence of what might have inspired those who went to the fence, propelled by Hamas. That there were legitimate protests is not in doubt. The organising committee and those legitimate protests have no connection with those of violence. That we know, but we cannot know too much about what Hamas did, the exploitation of people and the results, because it will never be possible to get that sort of investigation. That is why I seek to set this in the context of needing to end the situation overall, because until there is a comprehensive peace agreement—a two-state solution, with justice for the Palestinians and a secure and safe Israel—we will not

see an end of this. That is why the United Kingdom, and I suspect this House, must want us to continue to press for that above all.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The ongoing programme of demolitions, illegal settlement building and annexations by the Netanyahu Government is threatening the territorial integrity of a future Palestinian state, so will the Government take action in solidarity with the Palestinians and recognise the state of Palestine?

Alistair Burt: Again, that is another familiar request. Our position—and my position—has not changed. The right to recognise the state of Palestine is something that can and should be exercised at a time that is most advantageous to the peace process, and the United Kingdom does not judge that to be yet. In relation to settlements and everything else, we share the hon. Gentleman's view. We condemn settlement expansion as one of the barriers to peace. We provide support for those who are being unjustly threatened and evicted, but again, this will be settled only in the overall agreement that we are seeking to see moved forward, and that is essential for the peace and security of Israel and also for justice for the Palestinians.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The situation is certainly a tragedy, but should the UN not also have taken into account the flaming kites, the hurling of explosives and the clearly audible cries of “Get closer! Get closer!” that were issued by Hamas officials?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right. Indeed, the commission did refer to those aspects and spoke about the damage done, saying in paragraph 109:

“The police force of the de facto authorities in Gaza bears responsibility for failing to take adequate measures to prevent incendiary kites and balloons from reaching Israel, spreading fear among civilians in Israel and inflicting damage on parks, fields and property. Similarly, the police force failed to prevent or take action against those demonstrators who injured Israeli soldiers.”

Some of that is touched on, but the underlying issue remains that Hamas has a credo of violence against the state of Israel, which is at the heart of its actions and sustains those involved in terror. That has to end, as part of the process that will see peace and security in the region.

Stephen Twigg: Both the Minister and the shadow Foreign Secretary have said that it would have been better if the inquiry had also looked into Hamas's involvement. I agree, but I do not believe that justifies or excuses our abstaining on the resolution. I, too, met Dr Tarek Loubani in London last week, as I know the Minister did. What message are we sending to the Palestinians if peaceful, diplomatic routes via the United Nations are being closed off to them, as we are doing now?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman understands the area extremely well. We are not sending a message that that is all closed off. We sent a clear message in relation to an inquiry that could do only one side of the job, but we have also made it clear that our opposition to item 7 being directed solely at Israel is mitigated if other items come into other parts of the agenda and that they will be considered by the United Kingdom on their merits, and we will continue to do that. There must be avenues—

they will not all be closed down—but those that, from the outset, will not do the job are a false premise for seeking international observation. We must do all we can to prevent that and to ensure proper and proportional scrutiny if we are to get to the bottom of these issues and, above all, prevent them in future.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Ten years ago I visited southern Israel to see the Israeli bombing, the Hamas attacks and the effect of the blockade on Gaza. The humanitarian crisis was appalling then: all the evidence that I have seen since is that it has got worse, and that has partly led to the protests, so what are the Government doing to put pressure on Israel to lift the blockade of Gaza?

Alistair Burt: I think that the right hon. Gentleman's observations about the nature of Gaza are entirely fair. They are borne out by my own observations, from my first visits in 2010 and 2011 to my most recent visit last year. The sense of a decline in hope and an increase in despair was palpable, both in Gaza and on the west bank. I met Minister Hanegbi from Israel, and I met the head of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, the organisation that deals with the transfer of goods to and from Gaza. I also met representatives of the Palestinian Authority, although of course they do not have control in Gaza.

We continue to exert pressure and make appropriate representations to Israel about what can and should come in and out of Gaza that will assist the economic situation, and we continue to support UN envoy Nickolay Mladenov and his long-term plans for reconstruction and support, but ultimately, only the balance of trust that can lead to the end of violence will produce a viable opportunity for Palestinians. In that context, it is not just the Israeli authorities who have a responsibility. It is important for us to put pressure on all to seek to resolve what is an utterly miserable and wretched situation for the average person in Gaza.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I, too, have met the fantastic Dr Loubani. As an emergency field doctor myself, I cannot fathom what it must be like to listen over the radio waves as your colleagues die, and to have to wait until they are dead before you can go and collect their bodies. I am ashamed that the UK abstained today. Will the Minister tell us how the Government will protect civilians, how they will protect medics, and how they will ensure that humanitarian law is upheld?

Alistair Burt: I am sorry that the hon. Lady is ashamed, and I commend her for her extraordinary work in the field, which we have discussed on a number of occasions.

The explanation of vote makes it clear, as does our contact with Dr Loubani and others, that we are not seeking a procedural reason not to accept a report which was flawed from the beginning. It only distracts people from concentrating on finding out what really happened and being able to make some changes.

We are very clear about the fact that international humanitarian law must be upheld, and we have commented on the deaths and injuries of medical workers. Let me say again from this Dispatch Box that no medical worker should be a target, and that when that happens, there must be independent accountability for it. We will

[Alistair Burt]

wait to see what arises from the investigations that have been started on the other side. Those who bear some responsibility for putting people in a position of risk must also be considered, but no medic should ever be shot. Something, somehow, went wrong in relation to that, and it is not conscionable in any terms.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that, as of December last year, there was less than a month's supply left of 42% of the essential medicines in Gaza. Indeed, in the 11 years since the illegal blockade, the Gazan medical system has reached the verge of collapse. If the Government will not vote for the recommendations in the report, to what concrete actions will they commit themselves?

Alistair Burt: The issue of support for medical supplies and the like is completely outside the report. I meet those responsible for the health situation in Gaza; that is why I went to the hospital. We make sure that some of our aid goes directly to support the International Committee of the Red Cross and others who are providing assistance as necessary. We have made it clear that we are looking into whether we can do more in order to counter any shortages that have occurred because of the intense pressure on the system, and we continue to make all the political representations that the House would expect us to make to those over whom we have influence to bring the situation to an end, but it is complex, and it is not one-sided. Everyone must recognise that violence is not the future of Gaza and there has to be a political solution, and one of the developments that must start that process is the end of Hamas's commitment to violence and the extinction of the state of Israel.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Those of us who have read the report will no doubt be very moved by the passages mentioning the stories of some of those who have been killed or injured. Over and over again, we see the names of people who were shot dead hundreds of metres from the fence—I raised this issue with the Minister in the House last year—when engaging in activities as mundane as smoking a cigarette or rescuing friends. Was the Minister as disturbed by those reports as I was, and, if so, why did the Government not vote in favour of the report?

Alistair Burt: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is, yes, of course I was disturbed. Section 6 on protected groups is a large section that goes through the children shot and either killed or injured, and there are also the medical personnel and those with disabilities; no one in human terms could be unaffected by this. I made clear earlier in my remarks why we made the extension but that does not stop the concern about what happened, the need for accountability and our calling out of those who have been responsible.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Prime Minister Netanyahu recently said that it would be "helpful" to his chances of re-election if the Bedouin town of Khan al-Ahmar could be destroyed and its residents forcibly displaced before the election in April. Does the Minister agree that that is a disgraceful statement and will he join me in condemning it and accepting that this shows that Netanyahu is no longer fit for office?

Alistair Burt: I have visited Khan al-Ahmar on two separate occasions over a number of years, and we maintain a presence to support those trying to ensure there is a different solution. We have maintained our support for the Bedouin community there and said people should not be moved and not be affected. I am not going to comment on the election remarks of a foreign leader. Our stance on Khan al-Ahmar has been clear and our condemnation of settlement processes in Israel has also been clear, and we stand by those remarks.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The recent resumption of protests in Gaza and the preparation of the Israeli military for conflict scenarios inside Gaza are both highly worrying signs. Does the Minister agree that instead of a descent into conflict, long-term peace talks are urgently needed, and will he update the House on what action the Government are taking to achieve that?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman is right. The individual daily tragedies of Gaza highlighted in this report stem from exactly what he refers to: the failure of those involved—the international community or whoever—over 40, 50, 60 years, to end this. Our efforts include regular contact with those working for reconciliation among Palestinian factions at the moment—an important factor—regular contact with the Government of Egypt, who are doing valuable work in relation to that, regular contact with the United States and its envoys who we continue to talk to about their proposals, although they do not give much away, and contact with others in the region. I was recently at the League of Arab States and EU conference in Sharm El-Sheikh where I took the opportunity to speak to Arab Foreign Ministers about ensuring that the middle east peace process remains at the top of the agenda in the region. So we do all we can to encourage this process. I suspect that nothing will happen until after the Israeli elections, but after that the world must not look away again and must do what it can. Until we do that, the increasing violence is likely to continue; the situation in the west bank and Gaza remains very volatile.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The UK mission to the UN in seeking to explain the extension this morning says:

"It is a source of great concern that, since 30th March 2018, over 23,000 Palestinians have been injured and 187 Palestinians have been killed during these protests. Hamas of course bear principal responsibility as their operatives have cynically exploited the protests."

Does the Minister seriously support that? Even if he regards this report as incomplete it is robust in what evidence is in it, which suggests that children, medics and civilians have been gratuitously executed by Israeli snipers over a long period. It appears that the Government are looking for an excuse not to condemn the Netanyahu Government; having had one removed, they now have an even flimsier one. Does the Minister not realise that this gives a green light to Israel to continue murdering civilians and maiming people in this way, and that his Government will bear some responsibility for that?

Alistair Burt: No. Of course I stand by the "Explanation of vote" given by colleagues in Geneva, which drew attention to the serious nature of the matters raised by the commission report but also dealt with its glaring

omission, which was in relation to Hamas, whose responsibility is known by those in the region and which is excluded from inquiry or investigation or accountability into anything it does. We set it all in the context of explaining our concerns about the disproportionate use of live fire and the other things I have mentioned that we will continue to raise with the state of Israel, but until there is an end to Hamas's commitment to exterminate the state of Israel, to the violent rhetoric that goes with that, and to the placing of people in vulnerable positions, it does bear part of the responsibility for what has happened.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I agree that the role of Hamas should have been part of the investigation, but by abstaining, have not the Government undermined what the Minister said, and what was in the article yesterday, including about the fact that the demonstration and its organisers were legitimate and that the use of live fire and excessive force were inexcusable?

Alistair Burt: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments, but no, my remarks were not intended to convey that. I have explained why, procedurally, we believe that it was right to abstain in relation to a report that was bound to be flawed from the word go. We were not alone: eight states voted against the report, 23 states voted in favour of it and 15 abstained. I think this proves the point that it is important for the Human Rights Council to act in a manner that all its members will be able to support. This report, from the outset, did not do that. Accordingly, we are having an argument over the terms of the report instead of doing what we should do, and what everyone in the House wants to do, which is to concentrate on how the deaths and injuries came about and, above all, on what we can do to stop them. That requires a balanced understanding, not something that is inherently flawed by being one-sided from the beginning.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Does the Minister share my concern that in this situation the numbers tell their own story, given the gross asymmetry and imbalance between the casualties on one side and the other? Does he also share my concern that, because we do not have unanimity and because the Government failed to vote in favour of the motion, the Israeli Government will simply do what they normally do—that is, ignore this and carry on regardless?

Alistair Burt: The figures are striking, and they speak on their own. The thousands of injuries and the number of deaths tell a dreadful story, and of course that asymmetry is at the heart of our concern about the disproportionate use of live fire, as I say again from the Dispatch Box. No, I do not think that Israel can or should draw any comfort from the United Kingdom's position. That is why we continue to pursue the state of Israel in relation to the inquiries that it is doing itself. Criminal investigations have been started in relation to this, and where they end up will be a matter of interest to us all.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The former Foreign Secretary intended to convene a summit of European and Arab Foreign Ministers and the Trump Administration to lay out his red lines for the US peace plan. Can the Minister confirm what those red lines are?

Alistair Burt: The former Foreign Secretary's letter made reference to "familiar parameters" in relation to the middle east peace process—the two-state solution, the 1967 borders and the like—because it appeared in the first instance that the envoys, Mr Kushner and Mr Greenblatt, wanted to take a different approach. They took the view that the cleverest minds in the world had been at this for 50 years without finding an answer, and that just maybe it was worth while looking at something different. They started with that approach, only to be reminded by everyone in the region that, while their approach had an honesty of its own, they could not neglect history, they could not neglect what had happened over the years and they could not neglect Oslo. What the former Foreign Secretary was seeking to do with states was to remind us that they still provide a foundation, whatever imaginative ideas the envoys might come up with and which we should encourage. Consequently, those talks have continued but they have not happened in a manner to bring everyone together, because the time is not yet right for that. However, the UK—myself and the current Foreign Secretary—remain of the view that the middle east peace process absolutely has to be at the top of the agenda in the region, and we will do everything we can to work towards that.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that in this polemic debate there is still a role for neutral mediation in finding Israeli and Palestinian peace, even though some of our world partners have abandoned that notion? What steps can the UK practically take with our partners to fill that void?

Alistair Burt: Good question. I might want to do more of that in the future myself, and I am interested in this whole process. Everything in relation to the issue gets pushed into the binary sides, and that suits those who wish to see the conflict continue—of course, there are people who wish for that. I suspect that what needs to happen is that the envoys should come up with a proposal and we should then get behind what elements we can. With the United States no longer being the sole broker, there will be a role for others. The EU, and the United Kingdom, I hope, will have a role, and I commend the UN envoys who work so hard. We need a willingness on both sides to say that they want to bring it to an end. I used to say in relation to almost everything that you cannot want peace more than the people involved, but sometimes you can. We need to keep working on this, and some of us will have a role to play in that in the future.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I also had the privilege of meeting the doctors from Gaza and hearing the anguish of the one who was unable to save his friend's life because he had been shot in the legs himself. The Minister said that the Government were deeply concerned. Therefore, given the indiscriminate shooting and killing of doctors by the Israeli military, how can the Minister justify the UK Government sitting on the sidelines and what he said earlier about the Government having taken a privileged position?

Alistair Burt: I wish there was a different answer from those that I gave before. As I say, the Human Rights Council procedure can look a bit arcane, in terms of the vote and then the explanation of the vote. As we all

[Alistair Burt]

know in this House, asbtension is sometimes not about sitting on the sidelines, but is about making a positive point. The positive point that we sought to make was that here was a report into something incredibly important that was fatally flawed from the outset, and our abstention maintains that position.

On the deaths and injuries involved, the concerns about disproportionate use of live ammunition and some of the incidents reflected there, we would expect to see that covered by other tribunals. We welcome the fact that Israel has opened some criminal investigations into some of its activities, but again I say that there are many responsible for the issue and we need never to forget those who have been involved. The work of Dr Loubani and others brings that to mind, and we need to ensure that we concentrate on concluding it rather than just debating these issues. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's regular concern and interest in these matters.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think the point of order is apposite as it relates to today, so I will take it now. Ordinarily it would come after the urgent questions.

Cat Smith: Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I seek your guidance on how much notice a Member would expect to get when a Secretary of State is visiting their constituency? I have just had an email—it is after midday—from the Department for Work and Pensions informing me that the Secretary of State is visiting my constituency.

Mr Speaker: It is a convention rather than a rule of the House, and the requirement is to notify a Member before a visit. It has to be acknowledged that in terms of the courtesies it should be done in good time. I am not personally privy to the circumstances of this case and am familiar with it only by virtue of what the hon. Lady has just said and on the strength of what she shared with me momentarily at the Chair, but what she has received does not seem to me to constitute adequate or courteous notice. This is often raised by Members on both sides of the House, and really we ought to be able to depend on colleagues to treat each other with respect. It is not acceptable to visit somebody else's constituency in a public capacity and not to do that person the courtesy of providing prior notification. I am disappointed that the hon. Lady has had this experience, and I hope that it will not be repeated.

Emergency Summit on Knife Crime

12.34 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister if she will make a statement on her emergency summit on knife crime.

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the Minister to address the House, let me say that the whole House should join in united expressions of good wishes to her as she celebrates her birthday. Clearly, this is a Minister who knows on her birthday how to enjoy herself.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The urgent question is the gift that keeps giving.

Before I start my reply, may I, on behalf of the Home Office, reflect on the very sad anniversary that we mark today of the events that occurred in this place two years ago and the terrible loss of PC Keith Palmer? Our thoughts are with his family and loved ones, and with the wider policing family.

We all want our children and young people to be safe on our streets. As the Home Secretary has said, there is no one single solution; we must unite and fight on all fronts to end this senseless violence. We are listening to what the police need, which is why we are introducing knife crime prevention orders on their request, in the Offensive Weapons Bill; we have increased police funding by up to £970 million next year, including council tax; and in the spring statement we announced there will be £100 million of additional funding in 2019-20 to tackle serious violence. This will strengthen police efforts to crack down on knife crime in the areas of the country where it is most rife. The funding will also be invested in violence reduction units, bringing together agencies to develop a multi-agency approach.

It is important, however, that we recognise that greater law enforcement alone will not reduce serious violence. We have already announced a multi-agency public health approach and will be consulting very soon on a new statutory duty of care to ensure that all agencies play their part. We are investing more than £220 million in early intervention projects to stop the most vulnerable being sucked into a life of violence. We are also addressing the drivers of crime, including the drugs trade, with the launch of our independent drugs review. But we continue to look for new ways to tackle this epidemic.

The Prime Minister announced that she would be hosting a serious youth violence summit. The event will champion the whole community public health model, which is crucial if we are to address the root causes of youth violence, as well as disrupt it in our neighbourhoods and local communities. Given the broad array of experts and interested parties, we have been working across government in recent days to ensure the right arrangements are in place. I am pleased to confirm that the summit will take place in the week commencing 1 April, and that we will provide further details shortly, in the normal way. This underlines this Government's absolute commitment to tackling knife crime and serious violence with our partners across the country, because we all want this violence to stop.

Louise Haigh: May I, too, say many happy returns to the Minister and apologise for dragging her to the Dispatch Box for the second time this week? I am sure

that she and you, Mr Speaker, will be pleased that there are no more sitting days left this week for me to pester you in. May I also add my thoughts to those expressed on this anniversary of the death of PC Keith Palmer? Not a day goes by when I enter this place that I do not remember the ultimate sacrifice he made in defending us and defending democracy, and I am sure that the same is true for many other hon. Members.

There is no doubt the country is in the midst of a political crisis consuming this Parliament and the entire Government. But a parallel crisis is taking place on our streets, one that is leaving young people afraid to leave their houses and leaving communities paralysed in the wake of more and more young lives senselessly lost, with families destroyed forever, never being able to see their son or daughter again. There has been a 93% rise in the number of young people being stabbed since 2012-13. There is a serious danger, in these tumultuous days, of the Government losing sight of the desperate need for leadership on knife crime. This is no second-order priority; there is no excuse for ignoring it.

The Prime Minister, 16 days ago, promised this House that she would

“be holding a summit in No. 10 in the coming days to bring together Ministers, community leaders, agencies and others, and I will also be meeting the victims of these appalling crimes to listen to their stories and explore what more we can do as a whole society to tackle this problem.”—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2019; Vol. 655, c. 950.]

I appreciate the pressures on the Prime Minister—we all do—but to break that promise to the victims is inexcusable. Since she made that announcement, more young lives have been lost. Nathaniel Armstrong was killed in west London. There have been stabbings in Leicester, London and Cambridge, and as we heard yesterday, a young boy was stabbed in Clitheroe in Lancashire.

Just this week, the former chief inspector of constabulary laid bare the Government’s failing response to violent crime. He said that the Home Office’s flagship response to serious violence, the serious violence strategy, is

“really, really inadequate”

and

“more concerned with its narrative and less with action”.

He said that it contains “almost nothing” about where violent crimes take place, who the victims are and what deterrent measures are effective, and concluded that the “layer” of police protection that can guard against surges in knife crime has been “breached” because there too few officers to patrol neighbourhoods.

We welcome the £100 million that was announced in the spring statement, but it is regrettable that it will be focused entirely on overtime and not on additional officers. Does the Minister recognise how overstretched our police officers are, how much overtime they are already undertaking, how many rest days they have had cancelled and how much leave they are owed? Does she really believe that there is £100 million-worth of slack in the system to cover the additional overtime that is necessary this year?

The critique of the Government’s approach to violent crime by the former chief inspector of constabulary was devastating. Their fragmented approach and drift are risking lives. They must get a grip, and it must be led by the Prime Minister. It is welcome to hear that a date for

the summit is now in place. Will the Minister confirm what its objectives will be, how they will be measured and how they will be reported back to the House? It is not good enough that time and again Ministers have to be dragged to the Chamber through urgent questions. They should be reporting to Members on their progress on a near-weekly basis.

It has been reported today that the Prime Minister visited the violence-reduction unit in Glasgow in 2011 and subsequently wrote in a report that a long-term evidence-based programme was needed. Will the Minister confirm that that report exists and explain why it was never acted on? Is that why last year the Government chose to whip against an amendment to the Offensive Weapons Bill that called for a report on the causes of youth violence?

Will the Minister also confirm what progress is being made by the serious violence taskforce, what actions have been agreed and what outcomes have been achieved? We have had reports that Ministers from certain Departments, notably the Department of Health and Social Care, are not engaging in the taskforce, and participants have described it to me as nothing more than a talking shop. How can the Minister assure us that is not the case? When will the Government open consultation on the public health duty? In the light of the stinging criticism from the former chief inspector of constabulary, will they now review their failed serious violence strategy, which has no analysis of deterrents and failed even to consider the effect of police cuts?

I am afraid all the evidence points to a Government who simply do not have a grip on this crisis—a Government in name only. Fundamentally, this is down to complete vacuum in leadership, and I am sorry to say that, political crisis or not, that is unforgiveable.

Victoria Atkins: It is interesting—is it not?—that this urgent question is essentially about process. If we focus on what the hon. Lady has just said, we can see that she applied for this urgent question because she wanted to know the date of the knife crime summit hosted by the Prime Minister. As I say, I can confirm that the summit is going to be held in the first week of April. I wish the hon. Lady had just asked me quietly in the corridors of this place. I am always happy to speak to any colleague about tackling serious violence. We did not need to have an urgent question about setting a date for a meeting.

Louise Haigh: We know you don’t like scrutiny—

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady is saying that I do not like speaking to the House. Come on, let us not be silly about this. This is such an important topic and it requires collaborative work. Frankly, urgent questions and press releases may be very helpful to the hon. Lady’s profile, but that is not what the hard work of tackling serious violence is about.

The hon. Lady wants to know what the Government have been doing. Last autumn, we set up the national county lines co-ordination centre, which has seen more than 1,000 arrests and more than 1,300 people safeguarded. Last week, there was the latest iteration of Operation Sceptre, as part of which every police force in the country adopts knife crime investigation methods appropriate to their areas to tackle knife crime. I do not have the figures for the latest iteration, because it ends

[Victoria Atkins]

at the weekend, but the previous week of Operation Sceptre resulted in more than 9,000 knives being taken off our streets.

We are funding Redthread to offer services in accident and emergency departments in hospitals with a particular problem with knife crime. We are funding projects across the country through the £22 million early intervention youth fund and smaller projects across communities through the anti-knife crime community fund. We have a long-running social media campaign—#KnifeFree—targeting young people most vulnerable to being ensnared by criminal gangs or to being tempted to leave their homes with knives and walk up the street with them. Only last week, I met the Premier League, which is working with us to get the message out through its vast network of contacts, including through its Kicks programme.

We are working with the Department for Education to publish best practice guidance for alternative providers, because we are well aware of the problems that seem to be arising with alternative provision. We are about to consult on a new legal duty to require a multi-agency public health approach to tackling serious violence. We have launched an independent review into drugs misuse because we know that the drugs market is the major driver of serious violence. We are launching the youth endowment fund: £200 million over 10 years for intervention on young people at various stages of their lives to move them away from gangs or prevent them from being ensnared by them.

We announced in the spring statement last week a further £100 million. That came about because chief constables told the Home Secretary they needed help with surge policing. They need it. We have delivered it. I remind the House that we are about to welcome back the Offensive Weapons Bill next week from the House of Lords. I urge—I implore—the shadow Minister to support the knife crime prevention orders that the Metropolitan police have asked us for to help that small cohort of young people who can be helped through those orders. I hope that the Labour party will stand by its words at the Dispatch Box and help us to pass those orders into law so that we can help exactly the young people I think we all want to help.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I welcome the plan the Minister has set out and the vital work she is doing. In 2015, we legislated for a minimum jail sentence for repeat offenders who carry a knife, yet more than a third of offenders are still being spared jail—more than 500 last year. Why is this; what can we do to review the situation so that we can enforce the law; and does my hon. Friend agree that we need to review the area more generally to ensure clarity and honesty in sentencing and to end the soft sentencing culture?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for raising mandatory minimum sentences. I note that they are not universally accepted. Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition voted against them—I think—when they were first introduced. The point of mandatory minimum sentences is to send out a clear public message that people will go to prison if they are twice caught carrying a knife. We have also ensured—this is important—that the judiciary,

which of course is independent and must be able to sentence on a case-by-case basis, has flexibility if the facts of a particular case require it. I note, however, that since mandatory minimum sentences were introduced, the number of people going to prison on the second occasion of carrying a knife has increased, despite the statistic he just cited. The message must be consistent. We do not want young people leaving their homes with a knife because it is more likely to be used against them than against others.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): We absolutely did need this urgent question because we did not know the date of the knife crime summit. It is all well and good the Minister saying we can have informal conversations, but the House needs to know when things are happening.

On the Minister's point about collaboration, I welcome her announcement of a public health approach, but, as we said in the Youth Violence Commission report, too often people talk about a public health approach without understanding what it is. One person who does understand is the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), so when the summit happens—in the week commencing 1 April—will the Minister ensure that the shadow Minister is invited?

Victoria Atkins: I will not comment on attendees at this stage. I have said that this is the ultimate in process questions, and we are in the process of arranging that summit. We work on a collaborative basis across the House. I am delighted that Members from the opposition parties join us at meetings of the serious violence taskforce. I am delighted, too, that we work collaboratively. I was delighted to visit the hon. Lady's constituency only last week to observe the police conducting a weapons sweep. This is about collaboration. I know that my announcing a date for the meeting is of interest to Members of the House—I will happily share that information—but my point is that the work of Government continues over and above the date of the knife crime summit. A tranche of work is going on.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Understandably, we have heard much about the immediate measures that are being taken, but will this summit focus a little more on longer-term measures to help tackle this dreadful scourge?

Victoria Atkins: It will—very much so. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I think that everyone agrees that there is no single solution to this matter; it is about short, medium and long-term work. That is why it is so important that we are funding the youth endowment fund that we have announced and that we are giving long-term commitments to those projects that work with young people, intervening and making sure that they are steered away from both carrying knives and greater paths of criminality. With regard to interventions, we are very much looking at education, health, local government and the charitable sectors because we know that, by working together, we will stop this violent crime on our streets.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I draw the attention of the House to my life membership of the Magistrates Association, which is asking whether more

force can be put into the role of youth offending teams in relation to the knife crime prevention orders that the Minister mentioned. Will she say something about how youth offending teams' expertise and knowledge of very vulnerable young people will be right in the centre of how courts make those decisions?

Victoria Atkins: I am so grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. Her experience in the magistrates court will help, I hope, to give her comfort as to how these orders are drafted. These are civil orders, deliberately so, because we do not want to criminalise these young people. Young people are being intervened on when there is intelligence or information from anyone—it could be anyone in the community—who is worried that they are involved in these gangs. This is about putting in place a structure around these children to help steer them away from criminality. Youth offending teams will, of course, be absolutely critical to that, and we will be working through it when it comes to the statutory guidance on how these orders should be used.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The official figures show that there has been a collapse in the number of stop and searches in recent years. It cannot be a coincidence that that has coincided with a huge surge in knife crimes and people being killed through knife crimes. Will the Minister give me some assurance that we will go back to trusting police officers to get on and do their job in the way that they know best without them fearing some kind of politically correct witch-hunt if they decide to stop and search someone they think is worth stopping and searching? We must trust police officers to do the job to keep us safe, because they know better than anybody in this House what needs to be done.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Stop and search is a vital tool in the police's armoury in keeping people safe on our streets. We want to give confidence to our officers that they have this power and that they can use it in accordance with the law. Interestingly, the rate of arrests arising out of stop and searches has increased in recent years with this intelligence-focused approach, but it remains a vital tool and the police have our absolute confidence should they choose to use it within the law.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In the past debate about antisocial behaviour, many of us found that acceptable behaviour contracts were far more effective than antisocial behaviour orders because they worked by preventing problems in the first place and by getting people to work side by side with the young people. I urge the Minister to look at that evidence from the past and see whether acceptable behaviour contracts could be a way to design the orders that she is talking about, because they would be far more effective with the public health approach.

Victoria Atkins: I will happily look at that suggestion. Only last week, the Minister for Policing and I held a roundtable with police and crime commissioners from across the country. It was a really useful for cross-party PCCs to share their thoughts and ideas about what is working in their local areas, so I will certainly follow up with them to see whether they are doing something similar.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The west midlands is gripped by a gun and knife crime epidemic, while the police and crime commissioner sits on his reserves and closes police stations such as my own in Solihull. Is not it time that, in this summit, we looked at the structure of West Midlands police, and rolled up the powers of the police and crime commissioner with those of the regional Mayor, better to tackle knife crime?

Victoria Atkins: This is a really interesting idea. There has been success in rolling up these powers—for example, in the cases of the Mayor of Greater Manchester and of course the Mayor of London—so there is a lot of evidence that it can work. My hon. Friend is right that decisions about reserves are made by police and crime commissioners. How they spend their money is their decision, and they are accountable to the public. I am delighted that police and crime commissioners are committed to recruiting more officers with the increased funding that they will receive this year. If that is what the public want, that is what police and crime commissioners should deliver.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that police overtime over the last five years is already at £1.7 billion, and that only £100 million is actually allocated for overtime and only to seven forces? Will she also confirm who will chair the summit when it occurs, how long it will last and whether she will publish the outcomes?

Victoria Atkins: We are working through the details of how the £100 million is to be spent and sent out. Last week, we listened to police and crime commissioners, who put forward some interesting suggestions, and it would only be right for us to consider those suggestions carefully. The structure of the allocations is also being worked through. I have ideas as to how we will communicate information on the summit to the House. I am clear that this is an important topic for the House to hear about, and we will be letting the House know through a variety of channels.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box for an urgent question for, I think, the third time this week. Devon and Cornwall police have been working on a knife amnesty, which has had some success, although we are still awaiting the final figures. Will she reassure me that the Government will press ahead in working with local forces regarding the powers in the Offensive Weapons Bill? Once those powers are on the statute book, the Minister will have to work closely with police and crime commissioners and chief constables to ensure that they are used to their best effect.

Victoria Atkins: This is another example of the use of the PCCs meeting last week. Alison Hernandez, the police and crime commissioner covering my hon. Friend's constituency, explained to us that she was using what I think she called parent care contracts to include parents in the conversation about preventing knife crime in the local community. Such ideas are really interesting, and other police and crime commissioners were interested to hear about them. We will make a real difference in communities across the country through that collaborative approach.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): On the Saturday before last—in one afternoon alone—there were four stabbings in my borough, one of which arose from a fight between 20 to 30 young people, some of whom were carrying swords. When the Minister is held accountable in this House for the knife crime summit, it is because of the sense of urgency that many of us feel. Will she confirm that there will be a discussion about police capacity at the summit, not least in view of the fact that my borough has lost a third of its police since 2011 and is set to lose more? On the prevention and early intervention strategy, today's figures also show that there has been a loss of 45% of youth club facilities in London since the 2011 riots alone.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will know that decisions about how her borough is policed lie at the feet of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and the Mayor of London, because the Mayor of London is the police and crime commissioner for London, so I hope that she has raised this matter with him.

The hon. Lady mentioned urgency. The knife crime summit is really important, but it is not the only thing happening in Government to tackle knife crime and serious violence. The national county lines co-ordination centre has been set up, we are spending £220 million on early intervention, there are local projects for the anti-knife-crime community funds and there is the #knifefree social media campaign. If colleagues want to work with us to send the message out through their constituencies that carrying a knife is not usual, I urge them to use that hashtag to refer people following them on social media—young people, parents, those who work with young people—to the websites that can get help for people they are worried about. We can all take responsibility for such measures as leaders in our local communities to help tackle knife crime.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will this knife crime summit examine why so many of the perpetrators and victims are male and so relatively few are women?

Victoria Atkins: The demographics of victims and perpetrators will be examined not just at the knife crime summit; we think about them carefully and try to reflect them in our policies. I urge a note of caution: we know that, sadly, girls are involved in gangs, and the youth workers and former gang members I meet have emphasised to me that girls are beginning to be ensnared in these gangs as well. The way in which some of those girls are treated by those gangs is utterly horrific—beyond most people's imagination. We need to support those girls who are ensnared in gangs as well.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): We are on the verge of a national epidemic, including in places such as Stoke-on-Trent, which have never been touched at this level before. Will the Minister advise us on how people such as the wonderful Claire Gaygen at Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College, who is co-ordinating our activity, can be assisted to get best practice from other parts of the country?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to hear about the activity in the hon. Lady's constituency. She is absolutely right: what is so worrying about the growth of county

lines is that criminal gangs that have exploited the drugs markets in large urban centres are now filtering out to rural and coastal areas.

Part of the reason for setting up the national county lines co-ordination centre is to help law enforcement and those who safeguard to co-ordinate better and share best practice. We are also hosting regional events across the country, bringing all the agencies together to discuss exactly how to get best practice. We have just had one in Birmingham, which is probably the nearest to the hon. Lady's area, but I will happily write to her about other events in the future.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister read out a list of proposals to combat knife crime, but when will these help the situation in Merseyside? The recent funding the Government have announced for Merseyside police is a one-off, and very small compared with the funding that has been lost. Cuts in local services, because of savage reductions to Liverpool City Council, continue remorselessly.

Victoria Atkins: What the hon. Lady mentioned are not proposals, but things we are doing. I was delighted to hear from the chief constable of Merseyside and also its police and crime commissioner in the last two weeks. The chief constable was urging the Home Secretary and others to assist with surge policing, and I am delighted that in the spring statement we secured that extra funding for Merseyside.

Last week, the police and crime commissioner for Merseyside gave her views on what can help. The reason we are focusing on the seven metropolitan forces is that they account for a great deal of the knife crime that we are seeing at the moment. If we can share their best practice with other forces that are seeing the county lines phenomenon, that will, of course, help those forces get up to speed quickly too.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): In my advice surgery last Friday, I met Mr Glenford Spence, whose son had been savagely knifed to death in a youth club two weeks previously. When I asked the Minister in the Chamber what action the Government were taking to prevent that kind of tragedy, she placed particular emphasis on the troubled families programme; what she did not say is that all funding for that programme ends in March next year and that the service heads are implementing proposals to wind down and close those services.

Given the Minister's recognition of the important part that the programme plays in preventing a further escalation of knife crime, will she confirm to the House now that funding for the troubled families programme will continue after next March?

Victoria Atkins: I cannot, in that that is not my Department, so it would not be right for me to make financial commitments at the Dispatch Box. I have discussed this with the Secretary of State in the last 48 hours, and we are very clear about the value that that sort of intervention can and does have for families who need a bit of extra support. If I may, I will ask the hon. Gentleman to contact the Secretary of State for a precise answer to his question about the future of that programme.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Two weeks ago, my constituent Ayub Hassan, 17, was knifed to death in West Kensington, and last week Nathaniel Armstrong, 29, was stabbed to death in Fulham. I have known Ayub's mum, Siraad, for some years. She is a wonderful woman who regarded her son as her best friend, as well as one of her three children. When I visited her last Friday, one of the things I promised her was that we would try to ensure that there was a full inquiry into what happened, and that the same thing would not happen to other young people like Ayub.

Contrary to what the Minister is implying about the Opposition, I do not seek to pass blame. I think we are all trying to work to solve this terrible problem. There is the expertise out there to do that, but in return, the Government have to accept that there is a lack of resources—£1 billion has gone from the Met police over a number of years, and neither the Mayor nor anybody else can cope with this on their own. When we have the knife summit, can it not be a talking shop? Can it propose real resources that will give hope to these communities?

Victoria Atkins: I am very sorry to hear of the events that the hon. Gentleman has witnessed in his constituency in recent weeks. On resources, we are putting up to £970 million extra into policing next year, and the £100 million is in addition to that, to help those areas that are seeing the highest surges in violent crime. The youth endowment fund is important because it will run over 10 years. We want to lock that money in for the next decade, so that it is a funding source for organisations that can make a real difference in young people's lives.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I politely say to the Minister that she has referred to "county lines" an awful lot during this exchange, but that makes this epidemic sound a bit like some sort of cartographic exercise, and it really is not. We should be calling it "child criminal exploitation", because that is what it is, in the same way that we stopped talking about "child prostitution" and started talking about "child sexual exploitation". These young people are the victims, and calling it out is the first step.

In response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), the Minister talked about coastal and rural communities. We are neither of those. We are a small city that has never had to deal with this, and there are small towns up and down the length of Staffordshire that have never had to grapple with this issue. Our police force is doing the best it can with reduced resources, but our police and crime commissioner is closing police stations, which does not help. When the Minister writes to my hon. Friend, can she talk about what specific help will go to those small communities that are not the Manchesters or Birminghams, as well as how the families in those communities will be involved? Parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles are the ones who see these young people day in, day out and will spot changes in their personalities. If we can identify these young people early on, we can prevent this from becoming the problem that it is in other places.

Victoria Atkins: I accept the point about the phrase "county lines", which has been used over a couple of years. It does not do justice to the horrors of the

exploitation of the children involved in it, but it is the terminology used, and it seems to have gained credence among the police, law enforcement and the charitable sector. For the time being, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will use it as a short-hand, but I always acknowledge that this is child exploitation.

The role of parents is something I am very concerned about, having met far too many mums, dads and grandparents who have lost loved ones. There is much more that I want to do to help parents and family members spot the signs of a child who may be beginning to take the wrong path, and I am trying to bring to fruition various ideas at the moment. I hope I will be in a position to say a bit more, perhaps in a few weeks' time. I am very conscious of that point, and I will update him when I am able to.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I say gently to the Minister that, although I understand she is frustrated about having to come to the Dispatch Box on her birthday, it looks terrible—to those of us who are working day in, day out with families who have lost people, in communities where people are utterly terrified to let their children out of the front door, and think this should be the national priority and discussed every single day in this place—to hear her attack this as a question about process? It is not; it is about the detail.

The Minister knows—I have been to see her several times—about my concern about the connection between school exclusions and children who are at risk of violence or who are involved in violence. We know that the Timpson review is massively overdue, so this is not about the Timpson review. Will she confirm that this summit will look at the precise link between exclusions and knife violence, and will it involve the Department for Education? It is just not enough to say to those families, "Look at all these programmes". They need to see concrete actions on issues such as the kids who get forgotten and then get caught up in violence. They deserve our attention.

Victoria Atkins: I get on very well with the hon. Lady, and I hope she knows that I am not in any way dissatisfied with being at the Dispatch Box on my birthday or on any other day. My frustration, such as it is, is that this is essentially a question about a date, and had the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) asked me quietly, I would have happily provided her with the date. However, this gives me the opportunity to explain the work that the Government are doing to tackle serious violence.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is right. I think alternative provision is key to this. We have our next serious violence taskforce meeting on Tuesday, and we will look at this issue in detail. I met the Children's Commissioner yesterday to talk about her recent report and the role of education in this problem, but also about providing life chances—the hon. Lady and I have talked about them—for the young people we are steering away from carrying a knife and from crime. Those life chances are critical to this, and will of course be an important part of the summit.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The disappointment about the Minister's objection to the urgent question is not about us in here, but about the impact it will have

[Bill Esterson]

on the families and on victims who have survived. Honestly, these are great opportunities for her to take examples and hear feedback from around the country on the sort of things that will make a difference in dealing with this epidemic.

I know the Minister said she cannot tell us exactly who will attend the summit, but will she take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said about education, as well as the points about youth services, probation, children's social care and all the agencies that have an influence in reducing the number of knives for one reason or another? In her answer to me now, will she recognise that it is so much harder for those agencies to do their jobs, along with the police, when they have had such fundamental cuts to their budgets since 2010?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is right. For the sake of the families, the victims and the young people who tell me that they are worried about walking around without a knife, it is important that this summit is done properly, and that takes a bit of time to arrange. We have a huge array of experts in this field, and getting everybody into one place on the same day takes a bit of organisation, but that is what will happen. It will be a summit that looks at all areas related to the causes of knife crime, the consequences of serious violence, and the efforts we can make to intervene on young people and those who may be on a wayward path.

The hon. Gentleman should not think for a moment that the knife crime summit is the only thing that is happening in Government; it absolutely is not. A whole roster of work is happening nationally to tackle serious violence. Some of it we have seen having an immediate impact, such as Operation Sceptre last week, and some of it will be longer term, as we know from the Glasgow model. Our efforts to improve alternative provision in education, and to intervene on children and their families if they need a bit of help, will all take a bit longer. However, we are very clear that we have an immediate, a medium-term and a longer term approach to tackling serious violence.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The causes of this appalling rise in knife crime—particularly among young people—are complex, as are the solutions, so may I draw the Minister's attention to three facts? Since 2010, 760 youth centres have closed, 4,500 youth worker jobs have gone, and annual budgets for local authority youth services have been cut by more than £700 million. Does she agree that Government cuts have created the conditions in which crime can thrive, and that denying young people somewhere to go, something to do, and someone to speak to, means that they are not getting the support they need to avoid finding themselves in those situations? Is it time for proper investment in our youth services, and for a statutorily funded youth service?

Victoria Atkins: I was delighted to visit Morecambe, which is next door to the hon. Lady's constituency, and to speak with its wonderful local MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), about issues pertaining to crime and the causes of crime in his constituency. I was also delighted to meet the Chief Constable for Lancashire Constabulary,

and to hold a conversation about the range of challenges faced by Lancashire—I should perhaps declare an interest, as that is the county in which I grew up and that I adore.

When I visited Blackpool I saw some of the real issues that are affecting our coastal towns, such as transient communities and the impact of the drugs market. We must be clear that those behind this criminality are the gang leaders and criminals who exploit children for profit. That is why, as well as the serious violence strategy, we also have the serious organised crime strategy. We must help young people to build resilience and intervene on them, but we must also get the criminals at the very top of those gangs.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Recently in Manchester, 17-year-old Yousef Makki was stabbed to death by another teenager. Last week, the response time of Greater Manchester police rose from six minutes to 12 minutes, and GMP has seen cuts involving more than 2,000 police officers. The solutions to combating knife crime are complex, but the fact remains that the police are struggling and need more resources than those the Government have provided. Will the Government provide the resources they need?

Victoria Atkins: We are providing up to £970 million next year in the policing settlement. We provided a further £500 million last year, and we are providing an extra £100 million through the spring statement to give the police the extra resources they need. I ask Opposition Members to do the right thing next week and support the Government's efforts to introduce knife crime prevention orders. Those have been asked for by the police—the police want them. We have considered them carefully and introduced the legislation as quickly as we can. We just need the House to pass it.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Minister rightly speaks about criminal child exploitation and tackling gang leaders—that point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). As my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) pointed out, last year 9,500 children were off-rolled from our schools, and the Department for Education has no earthly idea where they are. That has created a lost generation that can be exploited by the very people the Minister wants to tackle. That is combined with 20,000 fewer police officers, and the fact that half of youth services and clubs have gone—that point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith). Will those causal facts be on the agenda for this summit?

Victoria Atkins: As I have said, education plays a vital role in our efforts to tackle serious violence, and I know that colleagues across the House are concerned about off-rolling. There are good examples of providers of alternative provision across the country, and my challenge to those in the education sector is that if those good examples and that best practice exists, we should share it and let every child have the same quality of standards from which some children seem to benefit.

1.19 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 12 March, I asked the Home Office a written question seeking the time it takes for emergency travel document applications to be secured

for a person in immigration detention. I was told that the information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, during a sitting of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Public Bill Committee, the Minister for Immigration told us that the average time it takes to get travel documents for people in immigration detention is 30 days. As I am sure you are aware, Mr Speaker, my amendment proposing no more than 28 days' detention has signatories from across the House, including Tory and Democratic Unionist party MPs, so there is great interest in the Government's arguments on this issue. Can you advise me on how to ensure that the background data that the Minister relied on to make that claim in Committee is available to MPs seeking to evaluate her claim?

Mr Speaker: Strictly speaking, Government make a judgment about whether they can provide an answer. It is not a matter of order on which the Chair can adjudicate. That said, if I understood the hon. Gentleman's point of order and he has previously been given an indication in a Committee sitting of average waiting times, it seems not unreasonable that he should then put down a question seeking to ascertain the facts on that matter. Therefore, my advice to him is really twofold. First, at the risk of irritating the House, I would repeat my general advice in matters of this kind: persist, man. Persist. Persist. Keep asking the question. The hon. Gentleman might wish to put it in a different way—or possibly even to a different Department, although I doubt it—and to try to persuade the Minister, perhaps privately, of the reasonableness of the inquiry. Beyond that, it is open to the hon. Gentleman to seek to use freedom of information legislation to secure the response that hitherto has been denied to him. I hope that he will profit from my counsels and that it will not be necessary for him to raise the matter again, but if it is, I am sure that he will.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice. This morning my Manchester staff had to be escorted into their office by a representative of Greater Manchester

police. In the last few days, they have had to meet in a local coffee shop in Wythenshawe town centre to be escorted to the office by the town centre security guards. Is this not a time to make it clear that violence and threats to MPs and their staff are completely unacceptable in a parliamentary democracy?

Mr Speaker: It certainly is a time to make that clear, and I imagine that the proposition that the hon. Gentleman has just put to me in the Chair would be endorsed by every single Member of this House. We should try to remember, in this matter as in others, the precepts of "Erskine May". Moderation and good humour in the use of parliamentary language conduce to the best possible debate.

Parliamentary democracy is of the essence, and even though our system here in this country is not always enormously admired by those who write about it, the reality, as I know from travelling around the world and as other colleagues can testify, is that it is enormously admired by people in countries across the globe. The British parliamentary system is constantly imitated—great attempts are made to emulate the best practice that we apply—and it has been sustained for the very good reason that, as Churchill put it in a slightly different context, democracy might be a lousy form of government, except for all the others. It is superior to any of the alternatives, and at the heart of it is the notion that the Member of Parliament is a representative, sent here to do his or her duty, including to exercise judgment as to what to say and how to vote.

The notion that anyone should be threatened with violence because of his or her beliefs or parliamentary conduct is anathema. It cannot stand, because if such an attitude were to stand, that would sound the death knell for democracy, so every effort must be made, and it is made by those who look after us on the estate, and in some cases provide us with assistance—in security terms—in our constituencies. We must all be prudent in the way that we go about our business, but democracy will persist, and it should persist, because it is the best.

Overseas Electors Bill

Proceedings resumed.

1.25 pm

Philip Davies: I believe, Mr Speaker—and I stand to be corrected by your good self, or by anyone else for that matter—that I was just getting on to new clause 6 when I was stopped in my tracks. New clause 6 relates to a review of absent vote arrangements. I pay tribute again to the hon. Member for City of Chester whose ideas I have once again stolen, because he introduced this new clause in Committee as well. In doing so, he raised

“the concerns of the Association of Electoral Administrators that there needs to be greater emphasis on encouraging overseas electors to establish clear absent voting arrangements and to do so in good time.”

Failure to do so in good time, he said, would impose another burden on electoral staff. The association had apparently said:

“In view of this time limit being removed, consideration needs to be given to the deadline being brought forward for overseas electors to register so that it allows sufficient time to process and check previous revisions of registers, followed by documentary evidence...being provided, if necessary. In addition, sufficient time is required to arrange for any absent vote arrangements to be put in place so that the overseas elector can cast their vote at the election or referendum in time for it to be counted.”—[*Official Report, Overseas Electors Public Bill Committee*, 31 October 2018; c. 81-2.]

It seems obvious to me that that is absolutely necessary. I shall deal with the subject of timings in the context of another new clause, but I shall try to speed things along now, and I hope that what I have quoted is self-explanatory and stands for itself.

Alex Norris *rose*—

Philip Davies: Obviously it does not.

Alex Norris: We considered this point at length in Committee. It was suggested that we would be in danger of asking overseas electors to register before knowing whose names would be on the ballot paper. I did not think that that was a valid reason not to create an efficient and effective system, because I did not think that having to wait to find out who the candidates were would preclude people from wanting to take part. What is the hon. Gentleman’s perspective?

Philip Davies: I agree with the hon. Gentleman: I do not see how it is relevant.

New clause 7 requires the Minister for the Cabinet Office to publish a report on postal voting arrangements for overseas electors. We talked earlier about the scale of the number of people who would be affected if the Bill were to take its full course. I think that all the issues raised in new clause 7 will have to be considered, and that the Government should keep an eye on whether or not everything is in place to deal with the consequences. This new clause is also fairly self-explanatory.

Neil O’Brien: New clause 7(3) says:

“The report shall, in particular, consider the effectiveness and cost of the International Business Response Licence for postal votes and any associated implications”.

What particular concern did my hon. Friend have about the international business response licence? I could not understand what the concern was here.

1.30 pm

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right to ask me to elaborate. If he were to look up how the IBRL operates he would see that its “At a Glance” guide says customers can

“Receive direct mail responses from overseas customers”

and

“Only pay for the responses you receive”,

which is all fine, but the third part says:

“Responses arrive in 7-10 working days”.

I hope my hon. Friend will consider that that might cause a difficulty. That is from the IBRL’s “At a Glance” guide to its service, and it seems to me that that might not be wholly suitable for an election, especially when we are dealing with huge volumes and all the rest of it. That is why I put that provision into the new clause: because I am not sure it fits the bill. The Government should have a duty to consider that very carefully and see whether there is a better system that should be used.

I am sure we all have examples of possible problems. In my part of the world in the Bradford district we have had some terrible things happen with postal voting and postal vote fraud over the years, and we must always be very careful. When we are having a huge extension of voting and of postal voting we must be cautious, and this provision is merely an attempt to show some caution in moving forward and make sure we are not causing problems that might not have been expected at the time.

Neil O’Brien: For the benefit of the Minister who will have to implement new clause 7 can my hon. Friend make clear what his expectation is on timing? It seems from the tenor of his remarks that he is expecting this review to take place before commencement; is that the case?

Philip Davies: I would like that to happen: before having an extension it would be useful to have a review of where we are now, because that might highlight some of the areas of concern. So, yes, I would like to see that done sooner rather than later.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some important points. On the point he has just raised, does he agree that we would need to be satisfied that, in the event of an allegation of electoral impropriety, there will be the resources and willingness on behalf of overseas authorities to properly investigate that, because it could mean the difference between a correct result in an election or an incorrect result?

Philip Davies: I agree. The more people the franchise is extended to, the more chance of a result being affected by it, so my hon. Friend is right. That is why it is absolutely necessary that we get these things right. We must not just do them, find problems later and not really have a plan for how to deal with them. I would sooner we got it in place to start with and knew how we were going to try to prevent problems and deal with them once they arose.

I hope new clause 9 is self-explanatory. It would require the Cabinet Office or Secretary of State to “within 12 months of the provisions of the Act coming into force,”—

it has a date on it for the benefit of my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough—

“lay before Parliament a report evaluating the effects of the Act and the extent to which it has met its objectives.”

I have to say that we pass legislation on a regular basis in this place, in a slightly willy-nilly fashion in my opinion, and we seem to do it often on a sentiment—a worthy sentiment usually—but I would like to see more legislation come with some conditions attached, one of which would be a review of it afterwards to see whether it is meeting the objectives set out. That should be standard in all pieces of legislation. We just pass a piece of legislation and then that is it so far as most people are concerned. We then move on to the next thing and often nobody ever revisits to see whether it is working. In fact, when anyone is asked to justify anything, they often use the fact that they have passed a piece of legislation as their justification for having done something, regardless of whether or not it was effective. I would like to see this new clause added to many more pieces of legislation.

Alex Chalk: May I gently suggest that my hon. Friend is uncharacteristically proposing unnecessary bureaucracy? The reality is that if something were perceived to have gone wrong, he has shown himself to be well able to draw it to the attention of the House. Does he not agree that if such a matter needed to be ventilated in public, there is no doubt that that could be done fully and robustly?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend thinks that flattery is going to get him everywhere, but on this occasion I am not entirely sure that it will. It is very kind of him to say what he did, and—if I may reply in kind—no one is better than him at asking incisive questions and getting to the nub of things, particularly given his background. The problem is that we pass so much legislation in this place covering such a wide area that, no matter how good or bad any of us might be, we just cannot keep on top of it all. It is impossible to do that, and we sometimes need a prompt to remind us of the pieces of legislation that have gone through. I do not think it would do anyone any harm if a report came out that made them think, “Oh yes, I remember this piece of legislation. I’m interested in this one.” Even the best of us forget from time to time what legislation has been passed through this House.

Neil O’Brien: I tend towards agreeing with my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) rather than with my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) about this and about the importance of evaluation. For the benefit of the Minister who would have to compile the report, I think my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is quite right to ask for a breakdown by parliamentary constituency, but would he also advise the Minister providing the report to provide a breakdown by host country of overseas electors, so that we could see whether our efforts to improve take-up were doing better in some countries than others? They might be going well in Spain but not so well in France, for example. Would my hon. Friend also welcome that information?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am certainly not going to disagree with him about that. However, I fear that he might have done untold damage to his career in this place by saying that he tended to agree with me rather than with my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham. I am sure that the Whip on duty is busy writing that down even as we speak, in order to thwart his attempts at getting promoted. He might need to say at some point that he did not really mean it. We can pretend that he never said it and move on, if that would be of benefit. I certainly would not encourage him to say it on a regular basis—that would be fatal—but I am grateful to him for his support.

I am sure the whole House will be relieved that I am not going to read out the whole of new clause 10, because it covers more than three pages and that could take some time. I will take it as read that people can see it for themselves. It is quite detailed, and it may or may not find favour with colleagues, but I am anxious to move on—

Neil O’Brien *rose*—

Philip Davies: I am anxious to move on, but my hon. Friend clearly is not, so I will give way to him again.

Neil O’Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am genuinely confused about some parts of new clause 10. The deadline for registration for a general election in the UK is midnight 12 working days before polling day, and the deadline for applying for a postal vote is 5 pm 11 working days prior to an election. In the new clause, however, we have deadlines of both 18 and 13 days and at a time of 5 pm, which is before the end of most people’s working day these days. Will my hon. Friend explain why there is a discrepancy between the deadlines for UK-registered voters and those who will be voting overseas? Does he agree, on reflection, that 5 pm is not necessarily the right deadline?

Philip Davies: Well, in terms of the time of the deadline before an election for overseas voter registration to take place, if my hon. Friend will allow—he probably thinks I am trying to dodge his incisive question, but I want to come back to amendment 40, which touches on this subject, in due course—perhaps I can move on to that later.

Neil O’Brien: It sounds as though my hon. Friend will return to my question later, but one specific point about the new clause is that it refers to Scottish regulations. Do we have legislative consent for that? Do we need to? What is the position?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend has gone way beyond my expertise, which people will probably think is not a difficult task in itself. I am afraid that it would take greater minds than mine to answer the question whether those permissions are needed, have been acquired, would be required and have been given. I do not know. This shows the benefit of having proper scrutiny of legislation in this House and I commend my hon. Friend for doing that, but I am not sure that I am the right person to answer those technical questions.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On the importance of being able to scrutinise proposed legislation, does my hon. Friend accept that he is essentially being

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

chided by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) for not having provided an explanatory statement for the new clause?

Philip Davies: I think that my hon. Friend is the one doing the chiding. I suspect he is probably right to do so. I was unable to find the time to do that, and he is right to pick me up on it. If I had, colleagues might have had more of their questions answered. I listen to him a great deal, and particularly on these issues pertaining to Fridays, how things should be done and the importance of their being done, he tends to be right.

Jim McMahon: I say this advisedly, but can the hon. Gentleman confirm that he wrote the amendments he has tabled? With almost every intervention, he has been unable to answer a single question that has been put to him.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman has not had a very good record on interventions in this debate so far. Most of them have been wholly inaccurate. I think that it is fair to say that I have tried to answer every question that I have been asked.

Occasionally, there was a technical question. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough asked not about the amendment but about whether particular permissions from the Scottish Executive would be needed; I do not know the answer to that question. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton is obviously some kind of know-all, so given that he seems to know everything about everything, perhaps he could answer the question. No doubt, as a fine parliamentarian, he has studied every last word of the amendments, although his previous interventions would not suggest that. Given his expertise on the subject as a know-all, does he want to intervene again and answer the question asked by my hon. Friend? I will leave him to do it.

Jim McMahon: One thing I do know about is the amendment tabled in my name and those of many others who support votes at 16. I can answer in a great deal of detail on that, because of course it is my amendment. I would expect the hon. Gentleman to be able to answer questions about his own amendments, if they were indeed his own amendments. Did he write the amendments that have been tabled, or not?

Philip Davies: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is in need of some medical attention, but I fear for his wellbeing. Perhaps he was not listening, or perhaps it was not even here—he is in a different place now, so perhaps he absented himself from the Chamber and then beetled back in. I think that I have made it abundantly clear at the start of every amendment that they have often previously been tabled by the hon. Member for City of Chester. I have made that clear. Was the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton not listening? I have said at the start of each amendment that most of them were tabled by the hon. Member for City of Chester and I thought that they made very good points that were worthy of further consideration in the House.

I am not entirely sure which bit of this provision, originally tabled in Committee by the hon. Member for City of Chester, is difficult for the hon. Member for

Oldham West and Royton to grasp, as the point seems straightforward. Is it difficult for him to understand? Does he not understand those words? The provision on the Royal Mail that I mentioned was one I tabled and we had discussed it; my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough asked a detailed question about why I had included subsection (3), and I gave a detailed answer about that point. Perhaps the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton got out of bed on the wrong side this morning, as he seems to be in a particularly grumpy mood, not only about the amendments I have tabled, but about the ones tabled by the hon. Member for City of Chester, who, apparently is his best friend, even though he seems to think that all the amendments he has tabled are a load of old nonsense. I will leave the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton to explain to the hon. Member for City of Chester why he thinks his amendments are ridiculous.

1.45 pm

I think that the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton is getting grumpy because he is anxious to get on to his amendment. That is what this is really all about. He is in a grouch because he wants to stand up and lecture the world about his amendment, which he enjoys doing, and that is fair enough. But if he and his colleagues stopped interrupting me during my speech, we might make a bit more progress. By standing up and intervening every two minutes, his grumpiness at not getting on to his amendment is being reinforced because he is intervening all the time. Afterwards, because I am a generous kind of chap, I will have a chat with him and explain to him how best to get on to his amendments on a Friday if he wants to do so. The secret of success is not standing up and trying to intervene with a pointless intervention every two minutes. That is a good lesson for him to learn.

Gareth Snell: On pointless interventions, may I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) has one of the cheeriest, sunniest dispositions to be found on the Opposition Benches and never would the word “grumpy” apply to him? On the substantive matter, new clause 10 refers repeatedly to applications to vote “by post or proxy by overseas electors in parliamentary elections.” The hon. Gentleman will know that the practicalities of the system of overseas electing means that almost all those people will be voting by post and that having an opportunity to vote by proxy if they wish to appoint someone in this country is important. His proposal contains no content about emergency proxy votes to cover circumstances where the individual overseas might be entitled to make a late emergency proxy vote. To my knowledge, that can be done up until polling day itself if they are incapacitated. Has the hon. Gentleman given any thought to where that might fit into his amendments and to where future legislation may fix that problem?

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. He spoke earlier about the importance of polling stations and things like that, and I have points to make about them later. Wherever possible, the rules should be the same as they are for people here, so I think he makes a good point and perhaps we should all consider it if we ever manage to get back to it. I have every sympathy for the point he raises.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is making thorough and thought-through points. He said he wanted to see a balance between the opportunities to vote given to those overseas and to those back here at home. Will he then explain why his Government are making it much harder for people to vote here by seeking a greater degree of identification from people going into a polling station, given that there is potentially more opportunity for fraud in the postal voting system overseas, as he is explaining?

Philip Davies: I do not want to get sidetracked from the Bill, but the point I make to the hon. Lady is that many of the new clauses I have proposed and will go on to propose are about making the system robust, so that we have an honest result and we do not have any problem with the result being disputed in any way. Given the problems we have faced, certainly in my Bradford district, at polling stations and in postal votes, I support the Government in believing that we need identification at polling stations. In many cases, presiding officers in polling stations have faced a nightmare in terms of being able to identify people properly. That has been an issue for some time. I believe the same happened in Northern Ireland and they dealt with it there, but unfortunately some of those problems persist in the rest of the UK. It is right that the Government do something to make sure that the results of elections are robust. I am getting sidetracked, Mr Speaker, because this is not really relevant. The point I am trying to make is that I do not see a conflict.

For the benefit of the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton, new clause 11 is on a subject raised in Committee by the hon. Member for Nottingham North. I hope that is clear enough for the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton to understand. The new clause is about the offence of registering to vote as an overseas elector in more than one constituency. When he suggested this change in a new clause in Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham North said that it was his

“last stab at allaying the concerns that electoral administrators have expressed following the publication of the ‘votes for life’ document and the Bill.”

He was talking about their concerns relating to double registration. He went on:

“The principle is that when electoral registration officers use address data to verify someone’s eligibility to register, they will establish whether someone has lived in that place. However, they will not try to establish whether that is the last place where the person lived, or whether they have lived in multiple places and are having the same conversation with multiple electoral registration officers around the country, and possibly voting in two or more places.”

He rightly pointed out that there was therefore a

“live danger that might merit an individual sanction”.—[Official Report, Overseas Electors Public Bill Committee, 14 November 2018; c. 115.]

That is what new clause 11 provides. It says that somebody commits an offence by registering to vote in two separate parliamentary constituencies as an overseas elector. That is absolutely right. It comes back to the point I made before about making sure that the results are robust and without question and all the rest of it. Currently, there is something lacking in our system in respect of people voting in more than one constituency

at parliamentary elections, and there have been complaints about that. I genuinely do not know how widespread the issue is, and I am not sure that there is any great evidence one way or the other, but, anecdotally, people are concerned that the system is not as robust as it should be. The hon. Gentleman was absolutely right to highlight this potential issue, and we should do what we can to stop it.

Jim McMahon *rose*—

Gareth Snell *rose*—

Philip Davies: I have given up on the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton; he is certainly not taking my advice on how to get on to his amendment, so I will save him from himself and give way to his hon. Friend.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton is one of the finest parliamentarians that the hon. Gentleman will get to debate with. He should consider giving way to my hon. Friend—after my intervention, of course.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that it is not currently a crime in the UK to be registered in more than one parliamentary constituency at any given time—it is often the case for students, people who live in two different constituencies, and even Members of Parliament—but they cannot vote in more than one constituency at one time. Is the hon. Gentleman concerned that he might criminalise individuals who could register twice in the UK but not twice in the UK as overseas electors, thereby creating a two-tier registration threshold?

Philip Davies: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. Personally, I see a difference, which is that people can quite legitimately register in different places in the UK because they can vote in all those places in a local election. If they are a council tax payer in Yorkshire and a council tax payer in Dorset, they are perfectly free to vote in both, quite properly and legally—there is nothing wrong with that—but they are not allowed to vote twice in a parliamentary election. They can register, but they can only vote once.

Neil O’Brien: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Philip Davies: I will in a second.

It seems to me that there is a difference for overseas voters, because they do not need to vote in the local election because they live somewhere else, so it is really about the parliamentary election. They do not need to be registered in two different places to vote in a parliamentary election, given that they can vote only once anyway. It is a question of where they last lived, so there is a difference.

Alex Norris: This gets to the nub of one of the challenges in the Bill. In the case of someone living in this country, the question being asked is, “Where do you live?” Some people can legitimately claim to live in two places. Many people in this Chamber live somewhere else during the week. Of overseas electors, however, we are asking, “Where did you live last?” Those are two very different questions, and the result here might be to

[Alex Norris]

enable in our voting system exactly the same treatment in both cases, which should give us cause to reflect if not cause us some anxiety.

Philip Davies: I absolutely agree. I genuinely think that the points the hon. Gentleman made in Committee were very reasonable and worthy of consideration again today. We should think very carefully about the point he makes.

Matt Rodda: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the churn on the electoral register in some city centres and densely populated areas? In one part of Reading, a quarter of the population on the register changes every year. In my view, this indicates the need for far greater resources for the work he is advocating.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not know the precise problem in Reading, but I am sure it exists in other places too. He is right to raise that. As I made clear earlier, if the House imposes duties on electoral registration officers, it is only right that we provide them with the resources to perform those duties—it would be completely unacceptable not to—so I take his point and would tend to agree with it.

Neil O'Brien: Further to the point from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), does my hon. Friend agree that there is a potential problem here for those who have been registered perfectly legitimately in two different places so that they can vote in two different local elections? If such a person became an overseas elector, it would be easy for them to forget to deregister themselves for parliamentary elections in one of the two places they were registered. It seems this is not an insuperable problem, because we could create a mechanism automatically to deregister them, but does he agree that that does seem to be an essential step to avoid accidentally criminalising people?

Philip Davies: Yes, I take that point, which is a good one. These points are all worthy of further consideration. I do not disagree at all. Equally, however, democracy is precious, and when people start calling results into question, because of people voting twice or whatever, it does massive damage to our democracy. A democracy works only when the losing side accepts it has lost. If it does not, perhaps because the result was rigged or people voted twice—we see this in dictatorships around the world where people do not accept results because of various irregularities—we are on a very slippery slope. We need to do whatever we can to eliminate discrepancies that call results into question. My hon. Friend is right, though, and I certainly am not for unnecessarily criminalising decent people just because they make a mistake; I just thought the issue so serious as to be worthy of further consideration.

Neil O'Brien: At risk of doing further damage to my career, I strongly agree with my hon. Friend about the menace of people voting in multiple places and the need for strong sentences for those who do. His new clause 11 suggests that people who vote in two constituencies should be eligible for up to a level 5 fine. For other types of electoral offence—for example, false registration of

information, false registration in relation to postal voting, personation and so on—a person can receive a level 5 fine and a six-month sentence, and for things such as postal voting fraud they can get a two-year sentence and an unlimited fine.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we might want to rationalise the existing system for these different offences—there seems to be no rhyme or reason to it—and that we should review the maximum level 5 fine if it does not prove sufficient to deter people from committing what is a serious anti-democratic crime?

Philip Davies: Yes, I agree. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. These are serious offences, and the criminal justice system should see them as such, so I very much share his sentiments.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: I will press on. I did not realise at the start of this morning how difficult it would prove to get through my modest amendments in the first group. I am determined to do so, even if I have to upset the hon. Gentleman.

2 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I did not realise that the right hon. Gentleman was proposing to raise his point of order now; I thought that he was going to do so later. Nevertheless, he is seized by the moment, and I know that he is in a state of some perturbation about the matter.

Mr Francois: My sincere apologies to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), but when he hears this I hope he will understand, because it affects him, too.

Apparently, on the “Today” programme this morning, the BBC presenter, Jim Naughtie, made the following statement:

“The ERG, Jacob Rees-Mogg’s group, in France would be in the National Front because that’s what they believe, and in Germany they would be in the AfD. It’s only because of our system that the carapace of this party keeps them in”.

That is an outrageous comment and a slur on at least 80 Members of this House. We feel passionately about Brexit, as do Members from all corners of this House, but that does not mean that we belong in the National Front, a despicable organisation that all of us would condemn. I would like to take this opportunity in Parliament, as an elected Member of Parliament, which Mr Naughtie is not—he is just a very, very highly paid bigot—to say that his comments are outrageous. If the BBC does not get him to make a full and complete apology by the end of today, he should resign as a British Broadcasting Corporation presenter. If the corporation does not take action against him, that will prove what many in this House have suspected for a long time—that it is irredeemably biased and Europhiliac.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I will not seek to arbitrate on the matter of what people regard as the position of the BBC on Brexit, because although he has made the

suggestion that he has about the corporation's alleged Europhile tendencies, I know that there are many people who feel that much of the BBC's coverage in recent times has leaned in a very different direction. As Speaker, I do not think that I want to pronounce on that matter. Moreover, as the Clerk at the Table, who swivelled round to counsel me, observed, points of order of this kind, referring to people outwith the House, ceased to be commonplace some time ago. It was a true observation and helpful in one respect, but in another—I know that the Clerk will not take offence when I say this—at least marginally irrelevant for the simple reason that commonplace and the right hon. Gentleman are not only not nodding acquaintances, but complete strangers to boot. There is nothing commonplace about the right hon. Gentleman.

I do not seek to treat the right hon. Gentleman's point with levity; I recognise that he feels extremely strongly about it. For my part, I stand by what I said earlier: as far as parliamentary debate is concerned, the precept of "Erskine May" is that moderation and good humour conduce a better debate, rather than ad hominem personal attacks. People should play the ball rather than the man or the woman.

Moreover, though it is not for me to stand up for the European Research Group—it does not need me to do so and I am not doing so—I do want to say that, as far as the right hon. Gentleman is concerned, I have known him for 35 years and there is no way on earth that I could imagine him in the National Front. That is not the right hon. Gentleman, and it is not the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), and it is not the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), and it is not the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). That is simply not a fair characterisation. I cannot be expected to go through all the members of the European Research Group, but the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is a friend of mine. He has very strong views to which some people very strongly object and which other people very strongly support, but to suggest that there is some sort of National Front allegiance is quite wrong and, in my opinion, uncalled for. Let us try to lower the decibel level and treat other people's views on either side of an argument with respect, debating the issues rather than resorting to slogans. I hope that that is fair.

Mr Francois: It is, Sir. Thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: As a result of that exchange, we have been deprived for a number of minutes of the mellifluous tones of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), but I suspect that there will be an outbreak of ecstasy in the Public Gallery at the resumption of the hon. Gentleman's speech.

Philip Davies: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I certainly do not object at all to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) interrupting me with his point of order, with which I agreed wholeheartedly. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your response. I seem destined not to get through my amendments, for different reasons.

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend has been identifying the complexity of these matters in relation to both overseas electors and domestic electors. Does he agree that it might be a good idea if the Government

were to commission the Law Commission to draft some legislation on the subject that could then be brought forward as a draft Bill and properly discussed? The attempts in this Session—including in my Voter Registration Bill—to get consensus across the House have failed, as indeed this Bill has failed to get consensus. Is it not time to get some expertise from the Law Commission?

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his suggestion, which has a great deal of merit. I am not entirely sure that a private Member's Bill was the best route for this legislation, and we probably do need a bit more expertise, as he suggests. I certainly would not disagree with that.

I am not entirely sure whether I had got to new clause 12 or new clause 13, but, in the interests of trying to get through my amendments, I am going to move on to new clause 13 and hope that that was where I had got to.

Neil O'Brien: Before my hon. Friend moves on, new clause 12 calls for a report on electoral offences, including on whether the number has changed as a result of this legislation. Will he tell us how we might be able to pull apart the effects of the extension of the franchise in this Bill and the many other factors that could affect both the number of offences and the number of overseas electors? Page 9 of the Commons Library briefing on the Bill shows us that many factors, including electronic voting, referendum campaigns and general elections, cause the numbers to move far more than changes to the franchise.

Philip Davies: Yes, I understand my hon. Friend's point, and it is a good one. New clause 12 is more probing than one that I intended to push to a Division. The point that I was trying to make when tabling it was that it seems that the chances are that more offences will be committed if we extend the franchise so widely. It is therefore right that the Government look into this point in some detail. A report therefore seemed to be a sensible suggestion. However, I understand his point and do not necessarily disagree with it.

New clauses 13 and 14 are basically sunset clauses. I am a big fan of legislation with sunset clauses, because it means that a Bill that turns out to be hopeless is put out of its misery without any further need to do anything. If it is particularly good legislation, presumably there will be no problem with somebody wanting to resurrect it or bring it back. Sunset clauses are a good way to ensure that we end up with good legislation and that we get rid of bad legislation. New clauses 13 and 14 offer different suggestions for how long the legislation should last—one of five years and one of three.

Neil O'Brien: I want to put the case against my hon. Friend's argument in favour of sunset clauses. Last Friday, we were debating the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment) Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), which would put an end to the sunset clause put on the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009. That sunset clause had no particularly clear rationale. I understand the case for such clauses when we do not know whether we will solve a problem by legislating, but when we are making a principled and permanent change, they seem unnecessary and could eat up the time of the House. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Philip Davies: No. I would rather eat up the time of the House looking back on whether something is necessary and should be brought back rather than use up its time inventing new laws, which are often unnecessary and make things worse. To be perfectly honest, I think it would be a better use of Parliament's time if we looked back over these things. However, I take my hon. Friend's point about the different purposes of sunset clauses; I understand that.

You will be pleased to know, Mr Speaker, that I have gone through the new clauses. However, I still have to cover a number of amendments, although I hope to do that more quickly. My amendment 40 is a reheated version of one from the hon. Member for Nottingham North: to put a deadline of 19 days before an election for an overseas vote registration to take place. In proposing it, the hon. Gentleman said—I agree with his rationale—that it was to allow electoral administrators more time to process applications. He felt that the current timescale for registration deadlines did not work, and his amendment was designed to improve it. He reported concern among those who administer our elections about the issue—particularly about the timetable more widely for postal ballot papers to go out to overseas voters. That is not easy.

The hon. Gentleman went on to make a very good point: if we do not push this amendment through, we would be raising expectations among people who were enthusiastic about their chance to vote, but they would end up being disappointed because, owing to the volume of applications, in the end they would never get the chance. The hon. Gentleman's argument was very good.

I dread mentioning the EU referendum again, given everything that is going on at the moment, but I understand that in that referendum, and in the 2015 general election, the processing and checking of overseas applications was a big challenge in many places due to the high volume of applications in a very tight timeframe during the lead-up to the vote. If that was the case then, what problems will arise if we extend it massively? There is an issue here. The hon. Gentleman's suggestion that the deadline should be extended was a sensible way to make sure that, if we do extend it, everyone will get the chance to vote.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely detailed examination of the Bill. In its impact assessment of the Overseas Electors Bill, the Cabinet Office stated that funding was "planned to be provided by central government to support the additional costs incurred by EROs".

Given the stretched state of local budgets and austerity, will that financial support cover the £8.8 million expected cost of implementation and the 10 years of running policy from 2020-21?

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, for which I thank him. Again, that is why we need detailed scrutiny of these matters in the House.

I do want to press on, Mr Speaker.

Alex Norris *rose*—

Philip Davies: I must give way to the hon. Gentleman, because I have been referring to him so much.

Alex Norris: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is an avid follower of American elections; personally, I love following the House of Representatives. Occasionally, I confess, I might find common cause with the hon. Gentleman for the purposes of wagering—I probably should not have confessed that.

The extraordinary thing about American elections, certainly those in California, is that as long as a postal ballot went into the box on the day of the election, it counts. So elections are not declared for multiple weeks as the votes slowly build up until eventually they run into a trickle and disappear. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that there would have to be a much earlier deadline to give room for the votes to come in, and other silly things like that?

2.15 pm

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. When there is a tight contest, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that a result could be delayed until everything has been checked. That is why the suggestion he made in Committee was a good one and one that I wanted to bring back. He is definitely on to something, and I agree with him.

I will gloss over amendments 49 and 50, because they are pretty minor points in the scheme of things.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: I am going to crack on. I do not think anyone could say that I have not been generous in giving way.

Amendments 68 to 70 are linked to other new clauses that we have already discussed. I want to mention amendments 75 and 76. Amendment 76 would delay the coming into force of the extent, commencement and short title provisions by 12 months. I want to raise that because, whatever the merits or otherwise of a general election outside the fixed-term rules, it seems to me that if a general election were to be held sooner rather than later, this Bill coming into force immediately could cause some problems. Amendments 75 and 76 would delay the implementation of the Act for two years, which would give more time to prepare for the next general election, or even the one after, if we have one before the five-year term is up.

We could end up with people who are eligible to vote not being able to because the systems are not in place to cope with the rush. It would be blatantly unfair on qualifying overseas voters if some of their votes counted and some did not, and if some were able to register and some were not. I think that that can happen already, to be honest, but the problem would be made much worse if we extended the franchise and brought the provisions in very quickly. We would almost certainly create a problem.

All in all, I am sorry that we have had such a truncated operation and that my speech has gone on far longer than I anticipated. Obviously I was agitating some Members, and I wanted to accommodate their requests, because in all seriousness, that is how legislation should be debated in this place. We end up with better legislation when we listen to everybody's point of view. We have heard in interventions today people making some very good points that we should bear in mind and

that expose some of the flaws in the amendments I have tabled. That is why it is important that we go through this scrutiny of important pieces of legislation.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire for bringing his Bill this far. I hope that the provisions of the Bill will be introduced at some point, but with the necessary improvements. I urge the Government to listen again to the arguments made in Committee by the hon. Member for City of Chester and the hon. Member for Nottingham North in particular, because if their suggestions had been taken on board, this would have been a much better piece of legislation.

Jim McMahon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for allowing this point of order; I appreciate your generosity. Clearly time has run away with us, and we have had three urgent questions. That means we have not moved on to the second group, which would have included a debate on votes at 16. I recognise completely that that is legitimate in terms of how Parliament works, but I would like to place on record the names of members of Oldham Youth Council who submitted their personal responses about what votes at 16 would mean to them. Roshni Parmar-Hill, Charlotte Clasby, Samah Khalil, Liam Harris and Tia Henderson all sent in representations. I want to thank them and place on the record our appreciation for those submissions.

Mr Speaker: That is perfectly fitting and has been done with characteristic grace by the hon. Gentleman. I hope he feels that he has achieved his objective and secured in the circumstances a consolation prize, albeit a modest one.

Christian Matheson: I rise to address the House for the first time in today's sitting. May I start by paying tribute to my good friend the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies)? He has sat patiently through this and many other sittings, and I know how very keen he is to see this Bill progress on to the statute book. If it does not do so, that will not be because of any lack of effort on his part. I pay tribute to him for the decent diligence that he has put into the Bill. The tribute I pay him is heartfelt and genuine, and I wish him well.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): May I thank the hon. Gentleman as well for the hours he has put into this Bill in Committee, and will he allow me to join him in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) and all those who have campaigned for this change with passion and dignity?

May I take a moment to confirm that the Government remain committed to scrapping the time cap? This remains a manifesto commitment for the Government to fulfil, and we will return to update the House in due course on our steps to do so.

Christian Matheson: I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification. We have concerns about certain areas in the Bill. When the legislation is brought back, in whatever form it comes back, we will continue to debate those concerns and scrutinise the Bill, recognising that the Government remain committed to bringing in this change.

Listening this morning—and this afternoon—to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I was reminded that we should always take care about everything we say in Committee, because somebody somewhere will actually read the speeches that we make. I am rather gladdened and encouraged that a hon. Member of such diligence and such attention to detail as the hon. Gentleman has read much of what I said in Committee—and, indeed, taken it on, because, as he said to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), a lot of the new clauses he has tabled were ones that were first floated by me and my hon. Friends in Committee.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Christian Matheson: I would always give way to my good friend the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire.

Glyn Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman—my friend—for taking an intervention, and I think he knows what I want to do. First, I congratulate him, and I do thank him for the way in which he helped us in Committee. I did not always agree with him when we had a dispute, but he was always incredibly polite and well argued, and all the points he made were very well made.

I would like to take this chance to put on the record the huge number of people who have helped me in this process. I will name only one specifically, because I would take up too much time if I named them all. I do think that Harry Shindler deserves a mention in the House. He is 98 years old, and he came over here from Italy to discuss this Bill with me in person on two occasions during this process. The one thing he wants to do is to vote in a British election: it is the one thing left in his life that he wants. I have one disappointment in that it looks at the moment as though this Bill might not reach a conclusion today, but the real disappointment I have is that Harry Shindler will be disappointed, and I think that is a great shame.

Christian Matheson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I have not met Mr Shindler, but it is my understanding that he fought in the second world war. May I put it bluntly? We live in freedom today because of people like Mr Shindler and many hundreds of thousands like him who risked their lives, and we will never tire of making that case.

The hon. Member for Shipley made an extensive and detailed opening speech on his new clauses. As I say, many of them were very similar to, if not the same as, ones that I and my hon. Friends moved in Committee. He gave very detailed descriptions, so I do not want to go over them again in the time left available to us.

New clause 1 would mean that UK citizens who are considering moving abroad or in the process of doing so will be given a prompt by the electoral registration officer, if that officer receives information that leads them to believe that a registered elector is moving, to remind them to re-register. The hon. Member for Shipley is right: this is about stopping a huge rush of people registering in a short period before an election, so as to even out the burden on the electoral registration officer.

[*Christian Matheson*]

It would reduce the workload of EROs, who would otherwise have to send out reminders to encourage new voters to register.

Gareth Snell: When the hon. Member for Shipley spoke to new clause 1, I mentioned the difference between people who have moved and those who are going to move. May I tease out a suggestion from my hon. Friend on how that issue could be overcome? An electoral registration officer will not know whether somebody has moved unless they have been told, yet under the new clause they would be compelled somehow to provide people with information on how to register as an overseas elector.

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend is right, and given that the new clause seeks to reduce the burden on electoral registration officers, we would not want as an unintended consequence to increase that burden on officers, who would have to find voters who formerly lived in their constituency but who now live abroad. I imagine that the ERO would prompt people who are about to move abroad to register.

The new clause seeks to strengthen our democratic culture by encouraging voter registration. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) and my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said earlier, the Government are currently narrowing that group by making it harder for people to register and vote in certain pilot areas where ID requirements have been introduced. I call on the Government to think again about whether they are genuinely concerned with widening voter participation and registration, or whether they are considering such matters only for overseas voters.

Under new clause 1, EROs must ensure that the voting register is as accurate and complete as possible. Each year they conduct an annual canvass of households, issuing and chasing inquiry forms. Household inquiry forms are sent to every household to confirm the details of those living at the property. Although those forms do not directly generate new registrations, they are critical to producing information about the country. Under the new clause, any information generated from those forms that suggests that a British person is moving or has moved abroad, should lead to a notification from the ERO to prompt that person to put themselves on the overseas voters register.

Voter awareness is crucial to this legislation. The hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) spoke about the role that British diplomatic posts could play in registering UK citizens abroad, and letting them know about the importance of voting. Once overseas voters are made aware of their eligibility, they are more likely to vote. The earlier that someone registers within the current 15-year time limit, the easier it is to keep them registered after that time limit, and we will therefore remove the possibility of a rush to register immediately before an election, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Shipley.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is gracious with his time. Does he share my concern that the missed opportunity with new clause 1 is that there is no provision to help

those already overseas who may suddenly gain the right to vote? Nothing in the new clause seeks to provide local authorities with the ability or resources to do that, yet there could be thousands of people for whom that situation is their everyday existence.

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend's analysis is almost certainly correct. I am a little concerned because the proposal was originally mine, so I cannot exactly blame the hon. Member for Shipley, but that is what scrutiny in this place is for. I will take my hon. Friend's guidance and I am grateful for his insight into the deficiencies of new clause 1.

Moving, if I may, to new clause 3—

2.30 pm

*The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Bill to be further considered on Friday 29 March.*

Business without Debate

FREE TRADE (EDUCATION AND REPORTING) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 29 March.

PEDICABS (LONDON) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

HOMELESSNESS (END OF LIFE CARE) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (EXTENSION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

HUMAN FERTILISATION AND EMBRYOLOGY (WELFARE OF WOMEN) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

GENDER-BASED PRICING (PROHIBITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**HEREDITARY TITLES (FEMALE SUCCESSION)
BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 10 May.

**CHARITY TRUSTEES (TIME OFF FOR DUTIES)
BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**IMMIGRATION (TIME LIMIT ON DETENTION)
BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

HOUSE OF PEERS BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**ONLINE NEWS PLATFORMS (REGULATION)
BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

PLASTIC POLLUTION BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**PACKAGING (EXTENDED PRODUCER
RESPONSIBILITY) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**PARENTAL LEAVE AND PAY ARRANGEMENTS
(PUBLICATION) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**EMERGENCY RESPONSE DRIVERS
(PROTECTIONS) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 10 May.

ACCESS TO FERTILITY SERVICES BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

KEW GARDENS (LEASES) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**ACCESS TO WELFARE (TERMINAL ILLNESS
DEFINITION) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**ASYLUM SEEKERS (PERMISSION TO WORK)
BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
ASSISTANCE (PALESTINIAN NATIONAL
AUTHORITY SCHOOLS) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

**DESTITUTION DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
CONCESSION (ELIGIBILITY) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 April.

Winstanley Estate Regeneration

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

2.35 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured this important debate.

There are few places that show the severity of the Government's housing crisis more than Battersea. It is a wonderful, vibrant and diverse constituency, home to active and truly inspiring communities, but under the Conservative council for decades and the Government for the past nine years, it has been hit hard by the housing crisis. Planning and policy decisions have prioritised unaffordable homes, not the social and genuinely affordable housing that Battersea so desperately needs.

My constituents see countless luxury blocks rising around them. In Nine Elms, they see one of the largest regeneration projects in Europe, but there is not a single social home. At Battersea power station, they see a £9 billion development that contains just 9% of so-called affordable housing, and even those homes are being built half a mile away on an old industrial site. This is not building mixed communities for the social good of the many; it is building for private profit for the few.

I fear that the Winstanley and York Road estates regeneration is another example of a development that works for the few, but is not there to meet the needs of the many living in the constituency. The £1 billion regeneration project is being undertaken by Wandsworth Council, in partnership with developer Taylor Wimpey. There is no doubt that the estate is in need of serious investment. It is one of the most deprived areas in the borough and in the top 1% most deprived in the country. It has been neglected for years by Government and council alike.

Following the 2011 London riots, the council finally acknowledged that neglect, recognising that poverty and inequality were driving social alienation and discontent. That is what triggered the plans to regenerate the estate, and it could have been an opportunity to build the genuinely affordable and social homes that Battersea needs. It could have been an opportunity to tackle the housing waiting list and to home some of Wandsworth's thousands of homeless children. That is what it could have been, but that is not what the council is pushing. There has been a welcome replacement of existing homes, including council homes, and the new leisure and community hub, which includes a much-needed leisure facilities centre, a community centre, a library and a children's centre, is also welcome. However, the proposals will have no meaningful impact on Battersea's desperate housing need. Instead, they mark a worrying change in the social mix of the Winstanley and York Road estate.

At present the vast majority of homes on the estate are council houses, but of the proposed nearly 2,000 extra homes, just three—0.15 per cent of the additional homes—will be council homes, while nearly 90% will be unaffordable private housing. That is more than 1,500 new unaffordable homes, taking the total number of private homes to more than 1,750. As part of the scheme, there are set to be 100 homes with so-called affordable rents—we know that, at 80% of market rates, they are unaffordable to

many people—222 intermediate homes and 86 shared-equity homes, but this means the social mix will be radically changed. At present, nearly 70% of the estate is made up of social housing tenants; when the project is complete less than 20% of the estate will be for social rent. The social make-up of the estate will be transformed in what people have described as social engineering.

When Wandsworth Council has nearly 7,000 families on its housing waiting list, when 2,000 families are homeless, including nearly 3,000 children living in temporary accommodation, when private rents are soaring and when rough sleeping has rocketed by 150% in the last year alone, for a £1 billion development to have just 0.15% of its additional properties being council homes is totally inadequate. It is an insult to the many people in housing need.

Let us think for example of a family who have been to see me over just this past month. They have been in temporary accommodation for five years—a family of seven squeezed into a three-bedroom flat. Mould is destroying the walls and aggravating their five-year-old's asthma. When they raised this with the council, they were told to open their windows even though the heating in the home had broken. This is no way for a family to be forced to live. Dire housing situations like this are all too common, and my concern is that the additional genuinely affordable housing is so low in the regeneration because the council has not put the interests of its residents at the forefront.

The reported rate of return of the project is 35%, which is double the industry average. Hundreds of millions of pounds will be made in profit from this regeneration plan at a time when many in Battersea are struggling. And the concerns with the regeneration do not stop there. Residents of Ganley Court, which is set to be demolished in the later stages of the regeneration programme, have raised serious objections. Their concerns cover a number of issues. They have come to see me at my surgery on several occasions. In the proposal's first phase are huge tower blocks: two towers that would stand at 77 and 120 metres high, dwarfing Ganley Court, overlooking their properties and denying their privacy. A further concern is that in phase two of the project Ganley Court would be demolished, with freeholders offered new properties in the development, but merely with shared equity, losing their outright ownership.

Residents have repeatedly raised these concerns with the council, only to be given unhelpful, sometimes misleading information. They feel betrayed by their council and feel that the proposals do not give them a fair deal. And forgotten in the proposals are existing private renters. I know of families who have rented on the estate for 10 years and whose children go to the local school, but their block will be demolished, with no support or rehousing. They will be uprooted and disrupted, while their private landlords will be offered a new property. That is not fair and shows that it is not a project for the many.

Unfortunately, the regeneration scheme fits into a long history of the council supporting unaffordable private housing. Last year, 90% of the houses built in the borough were unaffordable private homes. Less than 3% were council homes, and over the past eight years, for every 20 unaffordable private homes the council has allowed to be built, it has built less than one council house.

This is not house building to meet demand or to protect vulnerable people; it is house building for the benefit of the few.

But this is, sadly, no surprise from a council that for decades has favoured developers over the interests of residents. It was Wandsworth Council that launched a right-to-buy scheme before it was national policy, even then refusing to replace the properties it sold, and under the Tory Wandsworth council, 24,000 council houses have been sold, deepening Battersea's housing crisis.

On house building, central Government have also failed. Across the country, there has been an 80% fall in new social rented homes and a 50% fall in new affordable homes for ownership. There has been a total failure to replace homes bought through the right-to-buy scheme, with only one being built for every four that are sold. Just as is happening in Battersea, the Government's failure to build housing to meet social need has driven a social crisis. In nine years, rough sleeping has doubled, child homelessness has increased by 70% and 120,000 children are now living in temporary accommodation. More than 1 million people are now privately renting, and we know that private rents have soared.

If we look at the cold hard numbers, and if we go beyond all the spin, the truth is clear: in Westminster and Wandsworth, the Tories have presided over this housing crisis. The housing market is broken. It is failing the families crammed into homes that are falling into disrepair, failing the children who are moved from temporary accommodation to temporary accommodation, failing the young professionals who spend half their income on soaring rents and, most of all, it is failing the most vulnerable: those who are sleeping on our streets.

There is a national housing crisis, but it does not have to be this way. Rather than being just another example of regeneration that serves developers, the Winstanley and York Road regeneration could serve local people. Labour knows that if regeneration projects are to be successful, they must be supported by local residents. That is why we believe that all estate regenerations should hold ballots. That has not happened with the Winstanley and York Road regeneration. The council has refused to carry out a ballot, as it is fearful that residents would reject its proposals. It claims that such issues are too complex for residents and does not trust their knowledge and experience. But if the council were to hold a ballot and to trust in its regeneration project and its residents, it could apply to the Mayor's affordable housing fund and access up to £50 million for genuinely affordable housing, which could add more than 100 council homes to the project.

Since the Mayor's introduction of ballots as a funding condition, we have seen their success. So far there have been five estate ballots, all in favour of the proposed plans, including the High Lane estate in Ealing, where the council, the Mayor's office and local residents worked together to improve the local community. This approach could be taken with the Winstanley and York Road regeneration, to access funding that would make a genuine difference. I am pleased that Greater London Authority is currently scrutinising the viability assessment, and we await its findings. Elsewhere, we are seeing housing developments that will make a real difference, such as the Holloway Prison development, where the Mayor and Islington Council have worked together to provide 1,000 new homes, including 600 genuinely affordable homes with at least 400 at social rent.

For the housing crisis to be solved, we need a change in policy and a change in Government. Labour's plans are to build 1 million new homes, including 500,000 council homes; implement rent controls; require ballots on all estate regeneration projects; provide indefinite tenancies for private renters; and end rough sleeping, with ring-fenced housing for those sleeping on our streets. These policies will make a real change. It is the bold, radical programme that we need. The people of Battersea deserve so much better than they are being offered. They deserve a housing market that works for them.

To conclude, does the Minister believe that it is acceptable for only 0.15% of the extra properties in the £1 billion Winstanley and York Road regeneration to be council homes? Does he share the council's view that residents cannot be trusted to judge for themselves whether regeneration will work for them? Does he agree that residents should be balloted on regeneration projects? Finally, does he believe that the council should pursue all funding options, including applying to the Mayor for GLA funding, to secure much-needed, genuinely affordable homes as soon as possible?

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to wind up the debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing it. I welcome the chance to respond to the points she made.

I start by recognising that a home is more than simply bricks and mortar. A home provides safety, comfort, financial security and a community for residents. That is why this Government are building the homes our country needs so everyone can afford a safe, decent place to call their own—and we are helping more people on to the housing ladder.

I note the points that the hon. Lady made about the Winstanley Estate, but I have to tell her that because a formal planning application has been submitted to Wandsworth Council for the Winstanley and York Road Estate development, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on it on the Floor of the House, so as not to prejudice the Secretary of State should the application eventually end up in front of him. Although I cannot answer her questions precisely, I hope she will bear with me, because she raised some broader points about affordable housing that I would be very happy to address.

Building more affordable homes, including those for social rent, is a priority for the Government. Since 2010, we have delivered more than 407,000 new affordable homes, including more than 293,000 affordable homes for rent. We also recognise that a mix of affordable tenures is required to meet the needs of a wide range of people. That is why, through the affordable homes programme, we have made £9 billion available for affordable home ownership, affordable rent and social rent.

The hon. Lady talked about the importance of councils building, and alongside the £9 billion we have lifted the housing revenue account cap to help them build more. That should enable councils to deliver up to 10,000 homes a year in the short term.

To turn to Wandsworth in particular, I am pleased to say that it appears to be a very high-performing borough in terms of overall housing delivery. It is achieving

[*Rishi Sunak*]

numbers of new homes significantly in excess of its local plan targets and it has made significant and welcome commitments to delivering new housing stock through the HRA. I pay tribute to its leadership and energy in providing the homes its community needs.

Although I cannot answer the hon. Lady's specific question about the nature of the affordable housing in this development, so as not to prejudice the planning application, it is worth putting it on record that the new development will have 35% of the building for affordable units.

Marsha De Cordova: Does the Minister agree that, as it stands, the proposal for the Winstanley and York Road development does not meet the London plan standard?

Rishi Sunak: It would not be appropriate for me to comment on whether any particular planning application meets any standard, but 35% is in excess of the local authority target of 33% for affordable housing developments. Indeed, there is a tripling of housing supply overall and an increase in affordable housing in the development in question. Of course, that will be decided in a formal planning application.

We talked about estate regeneration, and I agree with the hon. Lady that estate regeneration, done the right way, can create new and improved homes and communities for the people who live there. The Government published a new national estate regeneration strategy in December 2016 and, as she said, estate regeneration works best when the community is at the heart of the project. Residents must be key partners in any regeneration scheme and they should have opportunities to participate from the start, developing the vision, design, partner procurement and delivery.

Marsha De Cordova: I am pleased that the Minister recognises that residents need to be at the heart and the centre of all regeneration. Does he therefore agree that ballots should be carried out on all estate regeneration projects going forward?

Rishi Sunak: I am a localist, and although the Government provide overall guidance and direction for local authorities it is of course right that they determine how exactly to engage best with their communities in each and every circumstance. My understanding, reading through some of the material, is that in this instance there has been extensive engagement and consultation with the residents in question by the local authority.

We, of course, as a Government, have set out our expectation that estate regeneration should have the support of a majority of the residents whose lives will be affected. My team have been informed by Wandsworth Council that the majority of Winstanley Estate residents who responded to the options consultation chose a more extensive regeneration approach involving the demolition and development, refurbishment and new community facilities that we heard about.

It is also important to set out clear commitments on how the regeneration process will work and the housing options available. We believe that all existing tenants should have the option to return to the estate, and I am pleased to say that, as was acknowledged by the hon. Lady, Wandsworth Council has said that all council tenants will be offered an alternative home at social rent within the regeneration area. I am sure that that is warmly welcomed.

In addition, the estate regeneration national strategy sets out our expectation that disruption to residents should be minimised. Indeed, Wandsworth Council has informed my officials that a phased approach is being undertaken at the estate so that, where possible, residents are moved only once, from their current home to their new home. Furthermore, Wandsworth Council has stated that resident homeowners will also be able to take part in an equity share scheme. It is important that these home purchase options are made available, because residents should be given the opportunity to change tenure.

Although I cannot answer specifically every question posed by the hon. Lady, given the planning application that is in force, I hope she sees that I agree with her that local regeneration can deliver better-quality homes; additional homes, both for affordable rent and for market sale; and improved facilities for the community, as I believe she acknowledged is happening in this case. Good regeneration requires the strong leadership of local authorities and the engagement of residents. It is right that that happens and I am sure that she will make sure it continues to happen throughout the process. Of course, this approach does benefit from central Government support, which many communities have received, not least with the expanded affordable homes programme and infrastructure funding.

On that note, I thank the hon. Lady for bringing these matters to my attention and that of the House, and wish her well as she ensures that the planning application proceeds with all these considerations being borne in mind.

Question put and agreed to.

2.56 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 22 March 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

EU Emissions Trading System

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): On 11 March, the Government published legislation which changed the compliance deadline to surrender allowances for the 2018 reporting year under the EU emissions trading system (ETS) from 15 March to 26 March.

Today, the Government are publishing further legislation in relation to the EU ETS compliance deadline. This legislation will amend the compliance deadline from 26 March 2019, to 22:59 on 29 March 2019. It will also allow further changes to the compliance deadline to either the revised EU exit date, or 30 April 2019 if such a date is 1 May 2019 or later.

Extending the compliance deadline will allow all UK operators additional time to meet their EU ETS compliance requirements, and if extended to 30 April, enable them to comply at the same time as operators in other EU member states. UK operators would still be able to surrender allowances to meet their 2018 compliance obligations on any date before the compliance deadline.

The Government remain committed to meeting their target to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% by the year 2050, relative to 1990 levels. The UK also remains strongly committed to achieving the climate goals of the Paris agreement. This includes our commitment to carbon pricing as an emissions reduction tool, supporting a level playing field across the EU, while ensuring energy and trade-intensive businesses are appropriately protected from any detrimental impacts on competitiveness.

Our participation in the EU ETS has shown the benefits of carbon pricing, which gives emitters a choice to reduce their emissions where it is economic to do so, achieving our environmental goals in the least-cost way to society. The EU ETS covers around 1,000 installations and approximately 140 aircraft operators in the UK. Across the EU ETS, the scheme covers around 45% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions.

EU ETS participants are required to monitor their emissions during each calendar year and, at the end of each reporting year, surrender one emissions allowance for every tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) they have emitted, to meet their EU ETS obligations. This extension does not change the requirement for all UK operators to fully comply with all their obligations under the EU ETS.

[HCWS1440]

CABINET OFFICE

Public Bodies 2018-19

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I am pleased to announce the publication of "Public Bodies 2018-19" and will today be placing a copy in the Library of both Houses.

Public bodies play a vital role in the delivery of public services for all our citizens, covering wide-ranging functions. Well-governed, effective and efficient public bodies enable the Government to deliver their priorities.

"Public Bodies 2018-19" is an annual directory that provides a single transparent source of top-level financial and non-financial data on all executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies and non-ministerial departments across government.

[HCWS1438]

DEFENCE

Defence Procurement: Boeing E-7

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I am pleased to inform the House today that a \$1.98 billion contract to deliver five E-7 airborne early warning and control aircraft has been signed with Boeing Defence UK.

The E-7 will replace the current E-3D Sentry airborne warning and control aircraft fleet, providing UK armed forces with a highly effective, world-leading capability that has already been proven on operations with the Royal Australian Air Force. A thorough investment approvals process has taken place, with the contract concluded after a period of intensive negotiation with Boeing. The E-7 not only represents value for money for the UK taxpayer, it also provides the optimum surveillance solution to allow UK armed forces to monitor and manage airspace on deployments and provide early warning of threats. The E-7 is in operation with one of our key allies and this UK procurement will increase opportunities for interoperability and collaboration. It is also a vital element of the UK's continued 25% airborne early warning and control contribution to NATO, which will benefit from a greatly enhanced UK capability.

The E-7 contract will also bring significant prosperity benefits to this country, building on Boeing's current commitment to maximising investment in the UK. Modification work to transform the base Boeing 737 aircraft into the E-7 will be carried out in the UK, sustaining several hundred highly skilled jobs at Marshall Aerospace and Defence in Cambridge. In addition, there are also expected to be significant future opportunities for the UK supply chain in through-life support and training for these UK aircraft and their crews.

Boeing will begin work immediately, with the first of our aircraft expected in 2023.

As part of the plan for a managed transition to E-7, it has been decided to reduce the existing E-3D fleet from six to four aircraft by removing the two long-term unserviceable assets from the active fleet. Doing this now will enable the Sentry force to focus resources on providing better availability from the remaining four aircraft, to better assure the future Sentry fleet output, including our commitments to the NATO airborne early warning and control force and the provision of NATO assurance measures missions.

[HCWS1437]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Offensive Weapons Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am today placing in the Libraries of both Houses the Home Office's analysis on the application of Standing Order No. 830 of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons relating to public business in respect of the Lords amendments to the Offensive Weapons Bill.

[HCWS1439]

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Friday 22 March 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		DEFENCE	64WS
STRATEGY	63WS	Defence Procurement - Boeing E-7	64WS
EU Emissions Trading System	63WS		
CABINET OFFICE	63WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	64WS
Public Bodies 2018-19	63WS	Offensive Weapons Bill.....	64WS

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**not later than
Friday 29 March 2019**

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CONTENTS

Friday 22 March 2019

Speaker's Statement [Col. 1345]

Overseas Electors Bill [Col. 1346]
Not amended, considered

European Council: Article 50 Extension [Col. 1371]
Answer to urgent question—(Kwasi Kwarteng)

Gaza Border Deaths: UNHRC Inquiry [Col. 1385]
Answer to urgent question—(Alistair Burt)

Emergency Summit on Knife Crime [Col. 1398]
Answer to urgent question—(Victoria Atkins)

Overseas Electors Bill [Col. 1413]
Not amended, considered

Winstanley Estate Regeneration [Col. 1433]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 63WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
