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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 2 May 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That Mr Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough constituency of Peterborough in the room of Fiona Oluyinka Onasanya, against whom since her election for the said Borough constituency a recall petition has been successful.—(*Mr Nicholas Brown.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Great Western Main Line

1. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What progress he has made on the electrification of the Great Western main line. [910663]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): We have so far electrified the Great Western main line as far as Newbury, Bristol Parkway and Chippenham, and electrification to Cardiff is progressing towards delivery by November this year.

Jessica Morden: I certainly welcome the electrification work in south Wales, although it should have gone through to Swansea, but what is the Department doing to ensure that Network Rail works closely with communities such as Magor in my constituency, which is right on the line, to ensure that where work does have a big impact on residents it listens, reacts to problems and compensates accordingly?

Andrew Jones: I cannot comment on the specifics of that community, but I will take that up with Network Rail on the hon. Lady's behalf. As a general principle, I raise, and have raised repeatedly, with Network Rail how community engagement and communication are absolutely critical for all communities along the lines they serve.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The electrification of the main line railway through Devon and Cornwall would be massively challenging and hugely disruptive because of the geography, with a number of

bridges, tunnels and steep inclines. Does the Minister share my view that the best way forward for places like Devon and Cornwall is to use bimodal trains that make use of electrification where available, but then have clean diesel engines where electrification is not possible?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very wise point. Electrification has always been part of the answer to improve the network, its environmental performance and its running capability, but it will not be the right answer on every single occasion. There will be occasions where electrification provides no significant journey time savings, yet has a significant capital cost. In those situations, we should seek to get the benefits via technology and the technology in the rolling stock. I agree with my hon. Friend.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), my constituents, particularly those in Lawrence Hill, one of the most challenging parts of my constituency, had to endure months of inconvenience as the electrification work was carried out. To add insult to that injury, we are not even getting electrification to Bristol Temple Meads. They have to put up with the inconvenience without the electrification. What compensation, assistance or help can the Secretary of State or the Government give to my constituents in Lawrence Hill?

Andrew Jones: The issue of compensation when we do works on either the railways or the roads is raised repeatedly, but it would simply just add to the cost of projects. I recognise that we cannot work on the roads or the rails without causing some disruption. That should be minimised. As I said to the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), we should be working to communicate and collaborate with communities. In terms of compensation, there is no plan to change any of the current arrangements, but I just remind her that the services at the end of the work will result in the best ever services from Bristol.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Minister may be aware that the Welsh Affairs Committee reported on the cancellation of electrification to Swansea and pointed out that although Wales has 11% of the UK's rail network it receives 1.5% of rail investment. Does the Minister not agree that that disparity needs to be addressed?

Andrew Jones: We are keen to see investment right across our network. I know the hon. Gentleman has campaigned for a variety of infrastructure investments—indeed, we had a Westminster Hall debate on this subject only a few weeks ago—but we are investing at a record level. The budget for England and Wales for control period 6, which started last month, is £48 billion. That money is being spent on upgrading, maintaining and renewing our network. As proposals come forward for inclusion within schemes, they should of course be based on merit. I look forward to working with Welsh colleagues to see what happens.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is extremely welcome that a scheme is now being developed for electrification to Market Harborough. Can the Minister say when further decisions will be taken about exactly when that will happen?

Andrew Jones: I cannot say exactly when without going off and checking, but I will of course do that and get back to my hon. Friend with a more detailed answer.

Skipton to Colne Rail Link

2. **John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of restoring the rail link between Skipton and Colne. [910664]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): An initial feasibility study carried out in partnership with Transport for the North was completed in December 2018. We are now working to assess the scheme to ensure that it can be affordable, will attract sufficient traffic and is part of the right long-term solution for the cross-Pennine rail routes. The results of that work, which we expect to receive later this year, will inform the decision about taking the scheme forward.

John Grogan: Does the Minister agree that restoring the line would have the advantage of providing an important new freight link across the Pennines, as well as a passenger link? Will he agree to publish the feasibility study, so that Network Rail's £800 million cost estimate can be scrutinised and, probably, brought down considerably?

Chris Grayling: Of course if the scheme is to go forward, it has to be at an affordable price. It is part of the Government's broader strategy to improve connections between east Lancashire and West Yorkshire, and I commend those Members who have made such a powerful case for the improvement of those routes—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), at the other end in West Yorkshire, who has talked about the importance of those routes.

I also believe it is of fundamental importance that we have a proper freight route across the Pennines, as well as passenger services for local communities in those areas, so that we can provide shorter journey times from ports on the east and west coasts. That, to my mind, is the central part of this work.

Seating-only Policies: Capacity and Ticket Prices

3. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on (a) capacity and (b) ticket prices on the rail network at peak times in the event of the introduction of seating-only policies. [910665]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Department has made no recent assessment of the potential effect of the introduction of seating-only policies on our national rail network. I understand that Virgin set out a number of proposals in its submission to the Williams rail review, including seating-only services. Those will of course be considered by Mr Williams and his team as their work progresses.

Mr Cunningham: When do the Minister or his officials propose to have discussions with Virgin Trains? There is a great deal of concern that this could affect Virgin employees and, equally, pensioners' freedom to travel, so I hope the Minister will discuss this with Virgin.

Andrew Jones: I look forward to the Williams review's response to Virgin's submission. I see Virgin's point, but I have to say that the turn-up-and-go principle that has always been part of our rail network is important and, I think, valued by passengers. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about the impact on passengers and those who work on the railways, but the underlying turn-up-and-go principle is a fundamental part of our rail network, and we would only challenge that with extreme care.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Far too many rail passengers have to stand, which is especially inconvenient for those on lengthy journeys. Many other countries successfully run double-decker trains. Why do we not, with a bit of vision and ambition, introduce double-decker trains on our network?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion. Our challenge is that we have a very old infrastructure, including many cuttings, tunnels and bridges. Cuttings are perhaps less of a problem, but the tunnels and bridges would be more of a challenge. The height capacity, which also impacts on freight, is being considered, but the way to deliver the capacity that my hon. Friend seeks for his constituents and that we want is perhaps not through that route, which would require huge interventions and a large capital budget, but to use other forms of technology and development.

Midland Main Line Franchise

4. **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Where the trains for the new franchise for midland main line will be made; and what the timetable is for the delivery of those trains. [910667]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Brand-new trains capable of operating under electric and diesel power will be introduced into service on the midland main line from 2022. I hope and expect the first train to be tested in 2021. I must leave the announcement on the manufacture of the new trains to the operator, but my hon. Friend knows that I have signalled on many occasions since becoming Secretary of State how committed I am to seeing more trains manufactured in the United Kingdom.

Mrs Latham: How many new trains and carriages will be produced, and how many current ones will be refurbished?

Chris Grayling: The inter-city fleet will be entirely new, which will be a great bonus to travellers on that route. We expect to see more seats and a brand-new fleet of trains, which is really important as we go through the biggest upgrade to the midland main line since the Victorian age. I cannot immediately recall the operator's plans for the route from Kettering—serving the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone)—but they will no doubt set out the detail of those trains, which will be new commuter electric services down from those stations, for local Members shortly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State knows, we are a great manufacturing nation with the finest technology. Surely, after last night's

wonderful decision on climate change, we should think about how we can make more things in this country, without cheating the public. The Hitachi trains will not be made here, although they will be assembled here. When can we revive the train manufacturing sector in this country?

Chris Grayling: The more we build in this country, the more we invest in research and development. In the north-east, we are seeing more of Hitachi's capabilities coming to the United Kingdom. The same applies to CAF in south Wales and, in particular, to the great success of Bombardier in Derby. Bombardier currently has a huge amount of work, and is delivering new trains throughout the network. However, I am with the hon. Gentleman: I want more to be done in the United Kingdom. As we move further into the 2020s, I am very committed to ensuring that as much as possible of the new rolling stock that we are expecting is built in the UK.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My question relates to fair and consistent treatment of bidders. Given that the Department has confirmed that all three bidders for the East Midlands franchise were non-compliant, why were only Stagecoach and Arriva disqualified from the competition?

Chris Grayling: Because it is not the case that all three bidders were non-compliant.

Rachael Maskell: Well, that is certainly not what the Secretary of State's Department is saying. He withheld sensitive market information between 1 and 9 April when disqualifying Stagecoach from the South Eastern and West Coast Partnership competitions, thus demonstrating that his interference further discredits the franchising process. Have any of the bidders for the other rail franchise competitions submitted non-compliant bids, and have they been disqualified? If so, why has the information not been made public?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid that the hon. Lady's question is based on a totally false premise. She is incorrectly accusing me of interference, and she is incorrectly making assertions about non-compliant bids that are simply inaccurate.

Leaving the EU: Port Delays

5. **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What plans he has to minimise delays at UK ports after the UK leaves the EU. [910670]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (**Ms Nusrat Ghani**): My Department is working closely with the Border Delivery Group to help to ensure that trade will continue to flow with minimum friction at UK ports. We are also continuing to liaise closely with the devolved Administrations.

Dr Whitford: During the farce of the ferry company with no ferries, and indeed no harbours, the Secretary of State claimed that no taxpayers' money would be spent on services that were not required. However, the National Audit Office has reported that cancelling the

other no-deal ferry services that were contracted to start on 29 March will actually cost £56 million. Did the Secretary of State not understand the contracts that he was signing, or did he not even read them?

Ms Ghani: That was another question with some flaws in it. First, no taxpayers' money was paid to Seaborne. In view of the article 50 extension, the Government are reviewing no-deal contingency planning, and have decided to terminate the contract with Brittany Ferries and DFDS. It is right for us to ensure that we have done everything that we can in the event of a no-deal scenario. We had to take out an insurance policy, which is why the other contracts were provided. The cost of terminating those contracts will be £43.8 million, but had we delayed the termination, it would have been an extra £10 million. I remind the House that this is just 1% of no-deal planning. If the hon. Lady is concerned about the cost and about no-deal planning, I suggest that she vote for the deal.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): You will realise, Mr Speaker, that when we leave this dreadful European Union, there will be a massive expansion in trade as we increase exports all over the world. Has the Minister—this excellent Minister—planned an expansion of the ports so that we can deal with that increased trade?

Ms Ghani: Once again, my hon. Friend is waving the flag for the United Kingdom. We have indeed put together a 30-year maritime strategy called Maritime 2050, which will help to deliver the fantastic maritime nation that we were before we joined the EU. It is a great opportunity to promote again the hard work undertaken by our ports, including preparing for the possibility of—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am listening to the flow of the Minister's eloquence and the eloquence of her flow, but meanwhile the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) is chuntering from a sedentary position to no obvious benefit or purpose; the only thing I can detect is some muttering about one flag rather than another flag. The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to speak on his feet with force and Demosthenian eloquence in due course.

Ms Ghani: I was just going to end by talking about the fantastic work our ports do, including in preparing for no deal, and I look forward to working with them as we increase trade post Brexit.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Transport Minister in the Lords said yesterday that she did not rule out our having a no-deal scenario in October and therefore we could potentially be exactly where we are now later in the year. Can the Minister assure me that the ferry companies will not get double-bubble if that unfortunate situation occurs?

Ms Ghani: We have to prepare for no deal; it is the default position of triggering article 50. If the right hon. Gentleman has any concerns about the impact of no deal, I would ask him to vote for the deal at the next opportunity.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): So far we have had a contract with a company with no ships and illegal procurement practices, which resulted in Eurotunnel winning £33 million in compensation, and then the Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and tells us the £50-odd million cancellation of the current services is the right thing to do as part of the Brexit preparations. Now we also learn that P&O is suing the Department. When did the Minister learn of its action? Will this go through the courts, or will there be another £33 million cave-in as apparently such sums do not matter as they only represent a small percentage of the overall figure?

Ms Ghani: I am not going to comment on any procedures taking place in respect of legal action, but if the hon. Gentleman really is concerned about no-deal planning, he cannot in one breath say we have not prepared enough and in the next say we have prepared and now we have to deal with the consequences. If the hon. Gentleman is concerned about no deal, I suggest he think about voting for the deal. It was absolutely right that we respected the needs across Whitehall and procured freight capacity, including for urgent medical equipment and medicines that may or may not be needed; it was the right and responsible thing to do.

Alan Brown: I suggest that the Minister should change the record: why should we vote for a deal that we think is a bad deal just to cover up this Government's incompetence? We have had 89 lorries mimicking the effects of 10,000 lorries, a contract given to a company with no ships, a £33 million out-of-court settlement, another court case looming, and contracts with a 29 March no-deal date that could not be changed costing an estimated £56 million, yet the Government say they have stood down their no-deal preparations as they seem to think everything is okay. What real Brexit preparations work are this Government doing for a possible no-deal exit on 31 October?

Ms Ghani: That is such a lengthy question that I feel the hon. Gentleman has already cracked the urgent question to come after these departmental questions. To go over the whole debate about Brexit, we would need far more time than we have now. The public made a decision, and it was our job to undertake everything that would come out of that decision so we have to prepare for no deal. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is criticising us for preparing for no deal or for having no deal in the first place. It was the outcome once we had triggered article 50, and I must say that the work undertaken by the Department for Transport with our port sector was remarkable, with all the officers and directors who worked within the Department to ensure that everything was in place if no deal was to happen. The Department for Transport has a role to ensure that every other Department within Whitehall has what it requires for a no-deal scenario; that is why those contracts were procured and that is why we are in the situation we are in now.

Rail Franchising System

6. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the future viability of the rail franchising system. [910671]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Rail franchising has delivered substantial benefits to passengers and record levels of investment over the past 25 years, but it is time for a fresh approach and that is why we set up the Williams review, which will enable us to fundamentally realign the railway industry, with a renewed focus on the needs of passengers and freight customers across the country in the future.

Mr Sweeney: Well, the chair of that review has just said that the franchising system is not fit for purpose. In the light of that, does the Secretary of State not agree with Opposition Members that privatisation has been a litany of failure, that the fragmentation of the network has meant the coherence of the passenger-led system has been destroyed and that we need to have a reintegrated railway system under democratic control? Is that not the future for the railway system in this country?

Chris Grayling: The Labour party is very clear that it wants to recreate British Rail, and it has every right to argue for that—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members say no, but that is their policy. I remember the days of British Rail. It was a state-run railway on which routes were closed, services were cut and the trains were old and outdated. Today, we have a railway that carries twice as many passengers as it did in those days and has far more trains. The challenges that we face are challenges of success, not failure.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Of course, the Transport Secretary is right in many respects. In my own community, Putney station needs a second entrance to cope with the overcrowding, which is a sign of how important it is for commuters every day. Will he give us an update on this? He very helpfully visited the station last year, and he has described getting a second entrance as a second win. Will he update us on his discussions with Network Rail to help to move that project forward?

Chris Grayling: Since my right hon. Friend and I visited her station, I have discussed the issue with my Department and with Network Rail. In the past month, we have entered the new rail control investment period, which will involve £48 billion—a record level of investment in the railways—including a number of hundreds of millions of pounds to invest in stations and improvements. I absolutely accept, and I think we all believe, that particularly at busy stations in and around our commuter centres—which Putney certainly is—we will need such improvements. She knows that I am very sympathetic to what we need to do there.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, when we embark on a new franchising system, one of the considerations needs to be the provision of services not just on the main arterial routes but on the secondary routes—such as a direct service from King's Cross to Cleethorpes?

Chris Grayling: This is one of the things we need to achieve for the future. There is demand for extra services all round the country, and to release that demand, we need to continue to invest in capacity. That is what we are going to be doing in the next control period. We will also need to use smart technology such as digital signalling to increase the number of train paths, and we will of

course need to expand the network, which is what the HS2 project is all about. I absolutely understand and share my hon. Friend's ambition.

ShIPLEY Eastern Bypass

7. **Philip Davies** (ShIPLEY) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Bradford Council on a ShIPLEY eastern bypass. [910674]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I must apologise to you, Mr Speaker, because I am not possessed of either a Demosthenic or a Ciceronian eloquence, but what I can do is focus the House's attention on this perfectly formed and important local question regarding Bradford Council's discussions on a ShIPLEY eastern bypass. My hon. Friend has been a highly effective campaigner for this project, and as he will know, we have supported it within my Department. My officials remain in regular contact with officers from Bradford Metropolitan District Council. The council will need to provide a detailed business case for the Department to review to take forward plans for the road scheme, and my officials are advising the council on how to develop its business case.

Mr Speaker: Frankly, the Minister is altogether too modest. However, it is my own firm conviction, based on observing the hon. Member for ShIPLEY (Philip Davies) for the past 14 years, that he combines the qualities of both those illustrious orators.

Philip Davies: You are very kind, Mr Speaker, but I am not sure that we would want a Division on that proposition. As the Minister has made clear, the Government have paid for a feasibility study to be carried out, for which I am extremely grateful, but since then, not a fat lot seems to have happened at the Bradford Council end. So when does he expect to see the feasibility study completed by Bradford Council so that we can crack on with delivering this vital scheme?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus attention on the council, because it is with the council that the situation presently lies. Bradford Metropolitan District Council has said that, by November this year, it will submit a strategic outline business case looking at how to resolve congestion issues in ShIPLEY. The Department will then consider it and provide recommendations to Ministers.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am not altogether sure of the link between Brecon and Radnorshire and the ShIPLEY eastern bypass, but I have a feeling that I am about to be enlightened by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies).

Chris Davies: All will be revealed, Mr Speaker. Has my hon. Friend the Minister had any recent discussions with the Welsh Government over the urgent need for the M4 relief road, which will provide quicker and better access from Wales to ShIPLEY and the rest of the UK?

Jesse Norman: How unwise I was to have considered this a tightly focused question. I had entirely failed to understand the national implications for this proposal across Wales and England. My officials remain in close discussions not merely with Highways England about the M4 but with the Welsh Government about the strategic road network. I therefore have no doubt that once the great ShIPLEY bypass has been constructed, access from Wales will be as uninterrupted as my hon. Friend would wish it to be.

Dartford Crossing: Revenue

8. **Teresa Pearce** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): What the net revenue income has been from the Dartford crossing since construction debt relating to that crossing was repaid. [910678]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Before 31 March 2003, tolls from the Dartford crossing financed the construction of the QE2 bridge, paid down pre-existing debts and provided a future maintenance fund. After 1 April 2003, a charging scheme to manage demand was introduced at the crossing, reflecting research suggesting that if the tolls were lifted, demand would be 17% higher and congestion would worsen accordingly. To respond directly to the hon. Lady's question, the user charges have raised a net income of £669 million in the period 2003-14 to 2017-18, which has been reinvested in transport.

Teresa Pearce: I thank the Minister for his response, but according to my reading of the legislation and the accounts, the income from the Dartford crossing is paid to the Department for Transport with no ring fence, so it can be spent anywhere on anything transport related. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case? Given the crossing's adverse effect on Bexley and Dartford residents in terms of air pollution, congestion, extended journey times and often complete gridlock—the hospital is on one side of the Dartford bridge and residents are on the other—what percentage of the income has been and will be spent on improving transport for those residents?

Jesse Norman: I can confirm that all the money raised is reinvested into transport, and the benefits of that are felt locally through the charge, which reduces congestion and therefore improves air quality. Of course, a vastly greater sum is projected to be invested in the lower Thames crossing, which is currently under way and will relieve significant burdens on her local community.

Bus Journeys

9. **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of journeys taken by bus. [910679]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Local bus journeys remain central to transport choices, accounting for around 59% of all public transport journeys. The number of local bus passenger journeys in England has fallen since the 1950s to 4.36 billion in the year ending March 2018.

Mr Hepburn: Since 2010, public funding for bus services has been cut by 45%, leading to a 20% decrease in passenger journeys. At the same time, bus operators have pocketed £1.5 billion in profits. Does the Minister think that the country and commuters are getting a good deal?

Ms Ghani: Well, bus patronage differs up and down the country, as does the number of miles covered by buses. When local authorities have good partnerships with bus companies, the number of bus passengers across all age groups tends to be higher. It is fundamental to note that the one place where bus miles are going down is in Labour-led Wales.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Further to that point, does the Minister agree that we should congratulate Henley Town Council on its provision of a Saturday bus service, which is increasing bus journeys around the town, particularly for the vulnerable?

Ms Ghani: Once again, my hon. Friend is a true champion of his constituency, and he refers specifically to Henley Town Council. When a council has a good relationship and partnership with a bus operating company, decisions about where and how buses should run can be made close to home to ensure that services are run how passengers want. I want buses to be the most convenient, accessible and greenest form of transport across our country. This is not just about funding; it is about good relationships between local authorities and bus operating companies.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn) made an important point. Bus services are in deep crisis: funding has been slashed by £645 million a year in real terms since 2010; over 3,000 routes have been cut; and fares have soared by 2.5 times the increase in wages. It is therefore hardly surprising that passenger numbers have fallen by 10% since 2010. Will the Minister now apologise to the millions of pensioners, young people and commuters who rely on our buses?

Ms Ghani: Bus passenger numbers vary across the country, and I do not think it is appropriate for the hon. Gentleman just to whitewash bus services as if they were one national service. He should realise that bus passenger numbers are up by 15% in Bristol and by 38% in Poole, and bus passenger numbers are up among young people in Liverpool as well. Over £1 billion is spent on bus services, with some going directly to local authorities and some going to bus operating companies.

When the hon. Gentleman talks about the cost of a bus journey, it is important to remember that, every year, the cost went up three times as fast under the Labour Government than it ever has under this Government. Under Labour Governments, no matter how much change a person has in their pocket, they will never be able to afford that bus journey.

Matt Rodda: It seems that the Minister, sadly, may not fully acknowledge the depth of the crisis affecting our buses. For many people, buses are the only means of public transport. The crisis in our bus services is damaging our communities, particularly the young, the old and people with disabilities.

Our councils stand ready to help where this Government have failed. Indeed, the Minister references the work done by some excellent Labour councils across the country. On local election day, can she tell the House why the Government will not allow all local authorities the powers to regulate bus services and, indeed, to set up new council-run bus companies? Both measures have led to much-improved services across the country.

Ms Ghani: I can tell the House, on local election day, that we have put in place legislation under the Bus Services Act 2017 to allow local authorities to manage those partnerships with their bus companies to ensure that they deliver good value and good services locally. All local authorities need to do is to work on business plans and timetabling and they can bring those partnerships forward. They have not done that yet.

Rail Punctuality

10. **Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on improving rail punctuality. [910683]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Government take performance seriously and understand it is crucial to passengers and freight users, which is why we agreed a Network Rail settlement for England and Wales of £47.9 billion for control period 6 specifically aimed at maintaining and renewing the railway to improve reliability and punctuality for all rail users. The budget in Scotland is £4.85 billion, and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to make similar representations to the Scottish Government, who have devolved control of railway infrastructure funding in Scotland.

Patrick Grady: I am sure the Minister and the whole House will want to welcome Monday's launch of the new sleeper stock on the Caledonian Sleeper service. I recommend the service to you, Mr Speaker, should you ever want to come and visit us up in Glasgow.

Of course, the first services were slightly hampered by delays and a fall in punctuality as a result of signal failures and problems with Network Rail. Given the success, the ambition and the vision that the Scottish Government have shown with this new sleeper service, should they not now also have the power devolved to control the whole of Network Rail so that we can deal with some of these punctuality issues?

Andrew Jones: The whole of Network Rail would include England and Wales, which might be a stretch for the Scottish Government. I obviously also welcome the arrival of the Caledonian Sleeper. I have not seen the service yet, but I understand it is fantastic and I look forward to seeing it, and potentially even using it.

On how this is structured, the Scottish Government, as they should, have control of the spending north of the border in Scotland. I am keen to see devolution across our rail network. Local solutions to local problems is a merit that we should be considering.

I just point out that we have had a good run on punctuality over the past few months in the UK. Performance obviously needs to be constantly improved but, when I checked this morning, 95% of trains were

on time, including 94% of trains in Scotland. That is a strong performance from ScotRail and a strong performance across our whole network.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Punctuality is often viewed through the prism of the big strategic journeys, but may I urge my hon. Friend also to take into account, when considering how to improve punctuality and bringing pressure so to do on the operators, those small, intercounty and over county boundary journeys that are often so important to students and workers? I think particularly of those from Gillingham in my constituency through to either Salisbury or back to Dorchester—those journeys are vital to the local economy, and the service is not quite good enough.

Mr Speaker: I am wondering whether the Minister is going to offer to sample the service—

Simon Hoare: I hope he does.

Mr Speaker: Indeed. But it is not a sleeper service, so he will have to be awake.

Andrew Jones: I do sometimes fall asleep on the trains at the end of the week if I am heading north again. I was not planning such a visit, but I am always happy to visit and I would be happy to take up the invitation that you have just suggested my hon. Friend makes, Mr Speaker. I never think of punctuality as purely an inter-city question; everybody who uses our rail network should be able to expect to be on time every time. That is why the measure of punctuality is being changed to include “on time every time”, including all the stations on a route, not just the final destination. That data is being collected for the first time now and is very encouraging. Let me confirm to my hon. Friend that I agree entirely with his basic point, which is that passengers deserve an on-time service every time, and it is part of my planning.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Huq.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I think this a bit tangential to punctuality, Mr Speaker, but I might try to get it in. [HON. MEMBERS: “Give it a shot.”] Will the Secretary of State honour the pledge he made to me on 17 July 2017? I realise that that is not a punctual request, but now is the time. I asked him about the mutual mistrust between NW10 residents and HS2, and he said that his door would always be open. Now that construction has started, they feel as though they are living in a war zone, a dustbowl and the longest and largest building site in Europe. So will he make a visit or sit down with me and my constituents to sort this out?

Andrew Jones: Yes, there was a little bit of a tangent in that question. I am not the HS2 Minister, but I can, having just checked with the person who is, say that she will be happy to meet the hon. Lady. We will set that meeting up soon.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I know that, like me, the Minister will welcome the electrification of the midland main line, a project currently being undertaken,

and the new half-hourly service to and from Corby, which will be a real boost for our rail services in north Northamptonshire. But there is still a demand for more northbound services from Corby, so will he help me to explore that possibility, as I think we ought to be tapping the huge potential there?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and for the rail services to and from it. The new franchise will certainly bring a wide set of positive developments for the rail passengers of Corby. I am more than happy to agree with him on this and meet him to work together to see what we can do to make these services even better.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): If the Government are going to take on my predecessor Tom Harris, who sits on the Government’s own rail review board, they had better make sure that they are right. So can the Minister explain why Mr Harris is wrong when he calls for control over Network Rail to go to the Scottish Government?

Andrew Jones: I am aware of the work that Mr Harris does as part of the rail review, and I am looking forward to seeing what the rail review says. We have had some early indications on its thinking. We have seen some speeches made by Mr Williams to give some indicative direction on its thinking, and we will see more later in the summer. I think we should be looking forward to its work with enthusiasm.

Cycling and Walking

11. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage (a) cycling and (b) walking. [910685]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Cycling and walking are an important part of transport strategy for this Government, and of course they bring great benefits in terms of health, combating obesity and improving air quality, and, as the Committee on Climate Change has reminded us, with their effects on the environment more widely. We published the cycling and walking investment strategy in 2017. Since then, we have conducted a major cycling and walking safety review, as well as providing a lot more funding; about £2 billion is being invested over this Parliament. The Department is also supporting 46 local authorities with their local cycling and walking infrastructure plans, so they can deliver cycling and walking schemes according to a more phased and consistent long-term programme.

Daniel Kawczynski: As the Minister is an MP in neighbouring Herefordshire, I hope he can come to visit the excellent new cycle track in Shropshire. It has been built by Shropshire Council between the villages of Pontesbury and Minsterley and makes it more safe to cycle between villages in our county. Will the Minister come and have a look at the scheme? What more can he do to support councils in the building of safe cycle tracks?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will be aware that we have just made an award to Shrewsbury for the relief road, through the large local majors scheme. I look

forward to visiting that road at some future point, and at the same time I will certainly tie in a happy cycle down the excellent cycle path between Pontesbury and Minsterley. My hon. Friend should know that, more widely, we are now investing at a high rate in cycling and walking schemes, including through the transforming cities fund, which is now up to £2.5 billion in total; the housing infrastructure fund; and our new £675 million future high streets fund, which is specifically targeted at smaller conurbations.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Yorkhill and Kelvingrove Community Council recently submitted a £2 million community-led bid to the Sustrans Community Links Plus competition, with the ambition of making the area Scotland's most accessible community. Will the Minister welcome this cycling-village project which, as well as linking three national cycle routes, will be pedestrian, wheelchair and autism friendly? Would he welcome similar community-led initiatives throughout the UK?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will know, I am almost idiotically keen on cycling projects, so I massively welcome that development. We have recently funded Sustrans with a further £20 million-odd to support the national cycle network and are a great believer in much of the work that it does.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): We know from the international evidence what would work to boost us to continental levels of cycling: consistent, long-term funding, rather than stop-start funding, and for both capital and revenue projects. Will the Minister set out what he is planning to ask for? Will he press for cycling funding of £10 to £35 per head, to bring us up to continental levels?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I actually spent two hours yesterday in front of the Transport Committee debating exactly that question and specifying in some detail some of my hopes and expectations for future work, including for the spending review. Of course the hon. Lady is right about the importance of consistency and longevity in funding—that is what our local cycling and walking investment plans are doing and why we welcome the work that has been done in Birmingham by Mayor Andy Street and in Manchester through the Chris Boardman and Brian Deegan project—but I remind her that in 2010 the level of funding for cycling and walking was £2.50 a head; it is now at more than £7, and I hope that that upward direction will continue.

Topical Questions

T2. [910692] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The House will be aware that yesterday the High Court ruling on the proposed expansion of Heathrow found that my Department acted lawfully on all counts. It would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to thank all those in my Department who worked on the case for their exemplary work, not only through the preparation period for the national policy statement but

on the case itself. I also express my thanks to the business community, to the trade unions, including Unite in particular, and to the vast majority of Members of Parliament who have supported expansion. We must now get on with delivering that expansion for Britain, although always mindful that the expansion scheme must fit in with the UK's climate change obligations.

Mrs Latham: With new fleets on order for London Underground, the midland main line and High Speed 2, what is the Secretary of State and his Department doing to ensure that rolling-stock manufacturers maximise the UK content on trains?

Chris Grayling: I have said to all those who are commissioning new trains, particularly when my Department has a role in the procurement, that I expect manufacturers, when they deliver trains—this is an important point going back to what the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said earlier—to leave a skills footprint and a technology footprint in the United Kingdom. One thing we can all do through the procurement process is to be absolutely insistent that that skills footprint is left behind. That does more than anything else to ensure that trains are and will be built in the United Kingdom.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Secretary of State is in charge of the worst-performing Department when it comes to emissions. Transport emissions have risen since 2010. The Committee on Climate Change said that

“the fact is that we're off track to meet our own emissions targets in the 2020s and 2030s.”

Is the Secretary of State content with this failure, or will he commit to honouring the UK's own legal and international climate change commitments?

Chris Grayling: First of all, I am part of a Government who have presided over a fall in Britain's carbon emissions. Indeed my hon. Friends who have spoken on this matter over the past two days have set out ways in which this Government are among the leaders in the world in seeking to reduce carbon emissions and to deliver actual results in doing so. Members should look at what we are doing in pushing for a transformation of other vehicle fleets on our roads and in getting hydrogen trains on to our rail network as quickly as possible. If they look at the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) is doing to promote cycling and walking, they will see that we are spending more than previous Governments have done. There is, of course, much more to do, but we are working harder than any previous Government to deliver real change.

Andy McDonald: The Government contributed to the UN's special report on 1.5°C, yet failed to take into account its contents when designating the airports national policy statement. Similarly, the Secretary of State admitted that the Paris agreement, ratified years ago by the UK and by almost every country in the world, was not considered when designating the ANPS. Given that the UK Government have now accepted that we are in a climate emergency, will he review the ANPS

in the light of Paris, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report and the Committee on Climate Change advice—if yes, when?

Chris Grayling: When we prepared the ANPS and when the Airports Commission prepared its recommendations, it was done in the context of the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change. We have continued to work with the Committee on Climate Change, and I am confident that we will deliver that expansion and continue to fulfil our obligations to reduce carbon emissions and move towards what was set out this morning.

T3. [910695] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The new east midlands train franchise is likely to increase capacity southwards from Kettering, but will it improve connectivity north on the midland main line? The previous Labour Government cut our half-hourly service northwards and it is about time that we had it back.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I can confirm that, compared with today, there will more trains from Kettering going north. The trains will be new, so they will have more seats, which means that, in terms of capacity, there will be more trains and better trains. On timing, we will see the start of more services for my hon. Friend's constituents from December 2020.

T5. [910697] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): Train commuters faced 35,000 cancellations last year owing to driver shortages. That is purely because train operators are running the service on the cheap. What will the Government do about that?

Andrew Jones: I simply do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question. This service is not being run on the cheap. We are seeing record levels of investment—both private and public investment is at a record level. Perhaps I should point out to him that his party's policy is to nationalise the railways, which will result in more cash required from the Government, but of course the Labour party has not yet said where it might come from. We are focused on delivering the enhancements to the network, which will meet our aspirations for a high-capacity, environmentally clean rail network underpinning the UK economy. Therefore, I am afraid that I cannot really agree with the premise of the question.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is there any progress internationally in discussions to include maritime and aviation emissions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): When it comes to maritime emissions, we can look at the work of the International Maritime Organisation, which is opposite us on the Thames. A huge amount of work was done earlier this year to look at driving down greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2050. It is interesting to note that this Government led the high-ambition coalition to get that agreement made, so we are not only leading nationally, but driving down greenhouse gas emissions internationally as well.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Ministers will have seen the National Audit Office report on the sale of railway arches by Network Rail, which includes some criticism. It is of some concern that the impact on tenants was not an explicit sale objective and was considered only late in the sale process. Ministers were aware—we had meetings with the Minister responsible before the sale took place—but they seemed indifferent to the significant potential for massive rent rises for the businesses in the railway arches across the country. Given this NAO report and its criticism, what will Ministers now do to safeguard the interests of those businesses and to make sure that they are not subjected to massive rent rises by the new leaseholder management company?

Chris Grayling: When I took on this sale, I ensured—in the work we did to prepare for the sale and with potential buyers—that additional safeguards were put in place for those tenants. Whether the arches had remained in the public sector or been sold, it would always have been right to ensure that a market rent was charged. There is no expectation of rent increases out of line with market rents. In the public sector, it would not have been proper use of public money to provide subsidised rents for businesses.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On airport security, given the stresses and strains on many police forces, not least the Met police and Sussex police, what further consideration has the Transport Secretary given to allowing the British Transport police to have responsibility for the security of British airports?

Chris Grayling: That suggestion has been put to me on a couple of occasions. At the moment, because of the nature of the threat around our airports and the fact that so much airport security—particularly at our principal airports—is done through the Metropolitan police, who co-ordinate anti-terror work nationally, I am not yet convinced that it would be the right thing to do, but I am always open to considering change if it will deliver improvement.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Constituents have contacted me again this week to highlight the eye-watering increases in the cost of commuting by rail to Bristol, and how that is forcing them into their cars. After yesterday's climate emergency debate, is it not time for Ministers to act on extortionate rail fares?

Andrew Jones: We are in the sixth year of capping regulated fares in line with inflation. Also this year, we have introduced the railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds—effectively extending child fares up to their 18th birthday. The hon. Lady should recognise the action that is taking place and remember that Labour gave us a 10% fare increase during its last year in office. Where Labour is running the devolved railways, it is also increasing fares in line with inflation, so she should be backing the Government's policy, not criticising it.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I was hugely concerned to see that, although the Secretary of State was sent a memo in November 2017 outlining how many millions of people would be affected by the third runway expansion at Heathrow—up to 13 million people were planned to be part of a publicity campaign letting them know what

was going on, and 5 million people were to be leafleted directly—that campaign never took place because it was vetoed by officials at the Department. We effectively had a vote in this place when communities and the people who represent them were entirely unaware of the extent of extra noise from Heathrow. How can the Secretary of State be confident that there really is public support for this project when the public are wholly unaware of its impact on them?

Chris Grayling: I assure my right hon. Friend that nobody in my Department has vetoed any consultations. We have carried out all the consultations that we are statutorily obliged to carry out. Of course Heathrow airport is now also so obliged, and has been carrying out consultations itself, so we cannot veto it; this is part of a process. As I have said all along, a central part of the proposal is that Heathrow delivers a world-class package of support to affected communities, and that is central to what we will insist that it does. That is an absolute given and an absolute red line for the Government.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the ministerial team aware that an all-party group of Members of Parliament came together to secure the seatbelt legislation many years ago? After 13 failed attempts, we actually got it through on the 14th, and the number of lives saved and serious injuries prevented has been substantial. The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, which I chair and which is still a vigorous cross-party group, is concerned by the report today that seatbelt wearing is declining. A quarter of the people killed on the roads last year were not wearing their seatbelts. Could we make it an enforceable offence with three penalty points? Can we take action on this?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): We absolutely recognise the original achievement of passing that legislation. I thank PACTS for the work that it has done on this report, which I warmly welcome. Needless to say, we are working very closely with it. We will look very closely at the report. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have a road safety refresh statement coming up over the summer, and we will look at this in that context as well.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): There is a huge problem with congestion at Kibworth in my constituency. What development funding will be available to work up a bypass scheme, and will there be any money available as part of RIS—road investment strategy—3?

Jesse Norman: I am not aware of the scheme that my hon. Friend has specifically raised. The RIS 2 announcement will not be made until towards the end of this year, and RIS 3 will not begin until 2025. However, I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the issue in more detail, because it is obviously very important to his constituents.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Now that this House has taken the lead in supporting Labour's climate change emergency motion yesterday, does the Department for Transport not agree that it is time that we made sure that there can be no new roads without

cycle lanes, unless there is a damned good reason why not, and no new housing without cycle locks and electric car charging points?

Chris Grayling: Of course we will continue to seek to expand the cycle network. Given the nature of the hon. Lady's constituency, I hope she will welcome the commitment and the money that this Government are putting into MetroWest that will help to reduce congestion in the centre of Bristol, get people out of their cars and create a cleaner environment for people in her city.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): You will recall, Mr Speaker, that I have moaned previously about the fact that there was a bridge knocked down in my constituency, near to the Corby constituency and right by a business development centre, leaving people stranded. Thanks to the efforts of a local community action group, ROAR—Reinstate Our Access Road—plus Councillor Gill Mercer, and, in particular, the intervention by the excellent Secretary of State, that bridge is now going to be rebuilt. Does the Secretary of State agree that local democracy, hard work and a Secretary of State can get things done?

Chris Grayling: I am very pleased that we managed to resolve the problem. My hon. Friend puts his finger on an important point. When the unexpected happens or an unintended consequence disrupts a community, the ministerial team and I will always try to do everything we can to ameliorate or change it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Yesterday's judicial review on Heathrow was concerned only with the legality of the decision, not the merits of airport expansion. Given that this House has overwhelmingly affirmed that we face a climate emergency, surely a swift and easy way of meeting our obligations would be to cancel the third runway at Heathrow. Not only will it pollute my constituents' lungs, but it is costing us the earth—literally.

Chris Grayling: I gently remind the hon. Lady that this Parliament voted with a majority of nearly 300 to designate the national policy statement because we recognise that we need to provide jobs for the future, economic opportunities, and indeed the wealth that will deliver the environmental technologies that will clean up this country and help to clean up the planet. As I said earlier, we have sought, and the Airports Commission has sought, to make sure that these expansion plans are consistent with those obligations. International aviation does present a challenge, but I do not believe that we are suddenly going to see it disappear in the future. International aviation is only likely to disappear if the cost of holidays and the cost of travel is put up by Labour.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Rail Minister will recall that on his recent visit to my constituency, Associated British Ports and the other business representatives present expressed concern about east-west capacity for freight haulage. The Secretary of State referred to this earlier. Will the Minister agree to meet me, ABP and other representatives to see how we can further increase capacity?

Andrew Jones: I had a very interesting visit to my hon. Friend's constituency. He laid on an extremely good range of businesses, so I have clear insight into the concerns of the business community that he serves. I would of course be very happy to meet him. I can confirm that increasing capacity and having more freight services in the UK is a Government priority.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Holywell Town Council, in conjunction with Tesco, has recently put in place the first electronic vehicle charging point in a town centre in my constituency. I know the Minister will agree that the Government need to do more, so will he give an update on what progress has been made since the fanfare announcement last July of support for electronic charging points? How many have been introduced as a result of a Government initiative?

Jesse Norman: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we take that matter very seriously. We are about to launch the charging infrastructure investment fund, which will see £200 million of public money matched by £200 million of private sector money. We expect a rapid roll-out to what is already one of the largest charging networks in Europe.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge expressway started life as a project under the coalition Government, with Liberal Democrats in the Department at the time? Does he agree that the best opportunity to mitigate its effects for local villages is for it to go west of Oxford?

Jesse Norman: I can certainly confirm that the project originated in the coalition Government, and it would be quite disingenuous of any political party that was part of it to seek to distance itself from that decision. Of course, I can make no statement whatever about the direction, since that is the subject of a continued process of consultation and review.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) in thanking the excellent Secretary of State for getting the Leyland bridge issue sorted out. My constituents in Irthlingborough are delighted that the bridge will be rebuilt, but will he join us in keeping the pressure up, to ensure that it is done as quickly as possible? The inconvenience is unacceptable, and that would be very much appreciated.

Chris Grayling: I will indeed give that assurance. We continue with the biggest investment programme in the railways for decades and decades, and indeed the biggest investment programme in our roads for decades and decades—an investment programme that will help motorists, but which the Labour party wants to scale back, as part of its war on the motorist. I give a commitment that, as we seek to invest in the future of this country, we will do everything we can to minimise the disruption. I cannot promise that there will be none, but we will try to minimise it.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Does it flow from questions?

Matt Rodda: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Briefly.

Matt Rodda: I seek your advice, because I believe that the buses Minister may have inadvertently misled the House. In our exchanges, she claimed that all local authorities have powers to franchise buses. I believe that the Bus Services Act 2017 only allows metro mayors to do that, and there is a very small number of them, whereas there are hundreds of local authorities.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is champing at the bit. She clearly wants to respond, and we are happy for her to do so.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I did not say “franchising”; I said “partnerships”. The Bus Services Act introduced new powers for local authorities and operators to work together through partnerships and franchising. Mayoral authorities have those powers automatically. All local authorities must approach the Department if they wish to get permission. They need to prepare business strategies and put together programmes of work, but we are ready and waiting to work with them, as we do already. Mayoral authorities can franchise, and local authorities can put together partnerships. I am more than happy to put that on the record.

Mr Speaker: We will leave it there for now.

National Security Council Leak

10.37 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister to make a statement on the findings of the inquiry into the National Security Council leak.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The National Security Council takes critical decisions about keeping this country safe. It was established in 2010, in part following lessons learned from the Iraq war, to ensure proper co-ordinated decision making across the whole of the Government. It operates with the full breadth of expertise in the room, with Ministers from the relevant Departments and advisers and officials, including the Chief of the Defence Staff, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the heads of the intelligence services and others.

The decisions that it makes are critical to the safety of British citizens and to British interests both in this country and around the world. For example, it is inconceivable today that the Cabinet could take a decision to commit combat troops without a full and challenging prior discussion in the NSC, on the basis of full papers, including written legal advice, prepared and stress-tested by all relevant Departments, and with decisions formally minuted. I am sure that the whole House will recognise how important it is that those decisions are taken in an environment in which members of the council and those who advise them feel free to speak their mind, with absolute certainty that the advice that they provide and the conclusions that they reach will remain confidential.

The leak investigation into the disclosure of information about 5G was constituted to ensure that the integrity of the NSC in general was upheld and, vitally, that participants in NSC meetings could continue to hold full confidence in its operation and the confidentiality of its proceedings. The Prime Minister set out her response to evidence from the leak investigation last night, and has thanked all members of the National Security Council for their full co-operation and candour during the investigation.

The unauthorised disclosure of any information from the Government is serious, and especially so from the National Security Council. The Prime Minister has said that she now considers that this matter has been closed, and the Cabinet Secretary does not consider it necessary to refer it to the police, but we would of course co-operate fully should the police themselves consider that an investigation were necessary.

The House will recognise that it is the policy of successive Governments of different political parties not to comment on the detail of leak investigations, and I will not comment on specific circumstances or personnel decisions.

Tom Watson: The primary duty of any Government is to keep our country safe and secure. On that we all agree. This leak from the National Security Council is a fundamental breach of that duty. Let us be clear here: the Prime Minister believes that her former Defence

Secretary leaked information from the National Security Council; he vehemently denies it. Only one of these accounts is accurate.

I do not think we have ever seen a leak from the National Security Council, and that is why this is so serious. The damning letter from the Prime Minister was a result of her understanding that to leak from that committee was an abdication of responsibility and public duty. It is indicative of the malaise and sickness at the heart of this ailing Government. It is indicative of the sorry state the Conservative party finds itself in. In response to receiving the most brutal sacking I can think of, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) has protested his innocence. Therefore, this matter cannot be, as the Prime Minister says, closed.

The essential point here is that the Prime Minister has sacked the Secretary of State for Defence because she believes there is compelling evidence that he has committed a crime, but despite that she does not believe that he should face a criminal investigation. Where is the justice in that? In what world is it acceptable that the Prime Minister should be the arbiter of whether a politician she believes is guilty of criminal conduct in office should face a criminal investigation? Can the Minister confirm that there were no leaks from the leak inquiry itself, given that details seem to have been passed on to a national newspaper on 30 April?

At the heart of this battle in the National Security Council was whether the Prime Minister's judgment that Huawei should be allowed to be part of our critical infrastructure network was sound. Many believe it was not. Our Five Eyes partners are so concerned about the UK allowing this company to participate in our 5G network that they are considering whether they can safely continue to share intelligence with us. The Minister will know that for the Americans and the Australians to raise public concerns on this matter is unprecedented. The Five Eyes network is the intelligence apparatus that has helped keep this country safe for nearly half a century. I know that. I have been a Defence Minister, and I have seen the material that we share with each other in total confidence.

In his defiant challenge, the former Defence Secretary has put the Prime Minister's integrity and judgment in the spotlight. Whether or not he is guilty should be a question for the criminal justice system. The question that the Minister has to answer today is whether he is confident that the Prime Minister's decision to allow Huawei to participate in our 5G networks keeps this country safe and protects our intelligence relationships with our allies.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman elided several different subjects in his questions. On the substance of the Government's policy decisions, it has been said already from this Dispatch Box several times that the review of 5G networks by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is a matter of public record. The Government have committed to telling the House of their conclusions once those decisions have been taken and approved at all levels within the Government and once we are ready to bring the information to the House. That will be the time for the House to learn what the Government have decided and to hold Ministers to account for their decisions.

I can reiterate to the House that the Government's priorities for the future of telecommunications remain stronger cyber-security practices, greater resilience throughout telecommunications networks and diversity in the marketplace. Again, as has been said before from this Dispatch Box, this is a policy challenge that goes beyond a single company or even a single country, and we continue to work very closely with all our Five Eyes allies and with other international partners.

The problem with this particular case was not so much the material disclosed as the forum from which the leak came. The Prime Minister set up the inquiry and took the decisions she took yesterday to maintain the integrity and secrecy that is essential for the proper conduct of the business of the Government of the United Kingdom, whichever party happens to be in office. As far as I am aware, the inquiry was conducted on the basis of confidentiality throughout its proceedings. It came to conclusions that were reported to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and she took the decisions she announced yesterday.

This boils down to what is set out in paragraph 1.6 of the "Ministerial Code":

"Ministers only remain in office for so long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister. She is the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister and the appropriate consequences of a breach of those standards."

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not only the work of our intelligence and security services that could be compromised by unauthorised disclosure but the Council's access to information and advice provided by our allies on a top secret basis? Can he reassure us therefore that our allies have been reassured in turn that this sorry episode will not be repeated?

Mr Lidington: Appropriate contact is of course being made with our key allies, as my right hon. Friend would expect. He is absolutely right. I, like he, can recall discussions that involved not only material of the highest level of classification within the UK Government system but the sharing of information disclosed to us in confidence by key allies. Without going into detail—for obvious reasons—I should remind the House that among the subjects discussed at the National Security Council in the last year alone have been our analysis of and response to the chemical weapons attacks in Salisbury and our analysis and response to the civil war and conflict in Syria. I think that Members on both sides of the House will appreciate the importance of these discussions remaining confidential at all times and of all participants having full confidence that that will continue to be the case.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): This is a most disgraceful episode from the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson). Fair play to the Prime Minister for acting as swiftly as she did, but I am afraid that it is not in her gift to say that the matter is closed. Indeed, the fact that we are here shows that it is far from closed. The fourth paragraph of the Prime Minister's letter states that all the Cabinet Ministers interviewed

"answered questions, engaged properly, provided as much information as possible",

yet the conduct of the right hon. Gentleman was not "of the same standard". What was his conduct? What exactly did he avoid answering?

What is the purpose of this investigation? Surely to God it was not set up only to determine who the leak came from. Surely once that has been determined there must be a more severe consequence than just someone losing their Cabinet position. If the integrity of the Government—what is left of it—is not to be further shot to pieces, there must be more severe consequences. Does the right hon. Gentleman who has been sacked have a future in the Conservative party, or will he be suspended from it? Will he be eligible for future candidacy within the Conservative party, and will he have his CBE removed by the Government? Finally, will the Minister stand at the Dispatch Box and answer a clear question? Has the Official Secrets Act been broken—yes or no?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman's final question is not a judgment that I or any other Minister in any Government can make. Whether a criminal offence has been committed is a matter for independent prosecution authorities, and ultimately for the courts. I said earlier that I would not go further into the details of the investigation and its conclusions than had already been set out in the Prime Minister's public statement.

Members across the House will recognise the history of the close working relationship between my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), and that ought to persuade the House that the Prime Minister would not have taken such a decision were there not compelling evidence and no credible alternative explanation for what happened. As the hon. Gentleman said, the Prime Minister stated in her letter that during the investigation the conduct of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire and his team was in contrast with the full co-operation received from other ministerial members of the NSC and their teams, and the Prime Minister came to the decision that she announced last night.

On the hon. Gentleman's request for further punishments, honours are not a matter for a ministerial decision but for an independent committee in any case, but I would just say that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire has lost a job that he loved and to which he was utterly committed, and I think that should stand.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I entirely endorse the words used by my right hon. Friend in his statement, and it is necessary that the working of the National Security Council is kept confidential. Without that, our allies cannot trust us, and it would become impossible to discuss secret matters within the Government. Does he agree that we seem to have watched the progressive breakdown of collective responsibility? Unfortunately, that appears to have a corrosive quality, which starts in people's willingness to contradict colleagues over policy issues in Cabinet, and creeps incrementally into a willingness to brief externally on discussions of an increasingly secret nature. Does he share my hope that if some good comes out of this most unfortunate episode, it will finally be a shot across the bows for those who think that such behaviour is acceptable?

Mr Lidington: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend about the corrosive effect of unauthorised disclosures. We all have to be honest with ourselves. I do not think there has been a Government in history from which there have not been leaks and gossip from time to time—as I look at Labour Front Benchers, my mind goes back to what we saw under the Blair and Brown Administrations. But I do want to say this in response to my right hon. and learned Friend: above all, when it comes to National Security Council discussions—I think this applies to the Cabinet, too—there is great merit in the very old-fashioned precept that Members should speak with complete candour in the room and shut up when they get outside.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) asked the Minister a very direct question: whether he thought that the Official Secrets Act had been broken. In reply, the Minister said that it was for others to decide. Has the Attorney General been asked for his opinion? Was any other legal advice sought by the Prime Minister in coming to her conclusion?

Mr Lidington: It is not a matter for the Attorney General or any other Minister. This decision has been taken on the basis of the lack of confidence that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, regrettably, came to feel in my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State for Defence. It followed the principles I set out in quoting from paragraph 1.6 of the ministerial code.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Having been somewhat involved in the establishment of the National Security Council in its current form, and having sat on it for six years, I completely understand the Prime Minister's correct understanding that it has to be, as the Minister said, a sealed container if it is to do its work appropriately. Does he agree that notwithstanding the rather brilliant confections of Opposition Members, on this occasion—thank goodness—so far as the substance is concerned and regardless of its legal standing, which I accept is a matter for others to decide, there does not appear to have been a compromise of any classified information?

Mr Lidington: I do not want to rush to make that assumption because normally all papers that are considered by the National Security Council are at an extremely high level of classification. The key point—I think this is the thrust of my right hon. Friend's question, and I agree with him on it—is that the issue at stake was less the substance of the material that was disclosed than the principle of a leak from the National Security Council. The fact of that leak—that breach of confidentiality—is what puts at risk the mutual trust that is essential for all Ministers and advisers attending those meetings to have in one another, and the trust, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) said earlier, that we expect our allies to have in our respecting the confidentiality of the material that they share with us.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Prime Minister may or may not be right, and as far as the Government are concerned, her exchange of

letters yesterday is the end of the matter, but surely when it comes to matters in this House, different considerations apply. The right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) and the Prime Minister are both Members of the House, and they now have very different versions of events in relation to a matter of some national importance. It is surely important that the House should know which of them is right. For that reason, surely either the Prime Minister has to publish the evidence on which she relied, or somebody else has to be allowed to mark her homework. It cannot be possible that both mutually contradictory versions can be allowed to stand.

Mr Lidington: What we are talking about is a leak inquiry, carried out on the instruction of the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary, by another appropriate official, into the unauthorised disclosure of the proceedings of the National Security Council. It is an internal Government matter, just as any such disclosure and any leak inquiry would be considered a matter for the Government concerned—Labour, Conservative or coalition. I really do not think that it would be right to be in a position where the House collectively tried to establish itself as an investigating authority into internal matters relating to the conduct of Ministers as members of the Government, or the conduct of officials as members of the Government. Those are matters that it is quite proper for the Government to determine, and it is then for Ministers, as I am doing this morning, to come to explain the Government's decision and be held to account by the House.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Having also sat on the NSC for several years, I recognise the importance of undertaking this leak inquiry. However, at the heart of this is a broader question about the approach that both the NSC and the Cabinet need to take to serve the national and public interest. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend on the NSC, but surely an element of this extends to how Cabinet is conducted, the rules around it and the behaviour of those who sit in the Cabinet.

Is it not now time to be clearer about the ministerial code of conduct and the role of the public interest in briefings given externally? I say that because we have a freedom of information law that clearly sets a public interest test that is routinely applied by Departments, yet it seems that the Secretaries of State running those Departments can routinely set that test themselves, without any regard for the way in which their officials would do so from day to day by almost certainly excluding ever publishing advice to Ministers when the public ask for it.

Mr Lidington: I disagree with my right hon. Friend on this point. I think that Ministers and their officials take their duties to put the public interest first very seriously. That is absolutely central to the principles of not only the ministerial code, but the civil service code which, let us not forget, has statutory force, unlike the ministerial code. In my experience of the last nine years in government, Ministers take those principles very seriously indeed, and their officials—particularly senior officials—are clear and robust in reminding Ministers of those duties. I agree with my right hon. Friend in

hoping that lessons will be learned from this particular episode about the importance of mutual trust and the confidentiality of Cabinet proceedings.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): For well-rehearsed reasons, this is clearly an extremely serious matter, and it is aggravated by the source of the leak being the Secretary of State for Defence. Many people believe that this really marks the complete disintegration of the Government, with some of their members—I emphasise “some”—having completely swept aside any scrap of decency and honour in the pursuit of blatant personal ambition. This is really important. This is not somebody who has said, “I fundamentally disagree with this decision because it is against the public interest.” It is somebody who has leaked information because of his personal ambition and because of the crisis that exists in government. I do not think there is any question at all—no ifs, no buts—that this matter has to go to the police. In that event, will the Minister undertake that the Government will fully co-operate at all levels—including all Ministers, aides and officials, including special advisers—in that police investigation, which is now critical?

Mr Lidington: If the police consider an investigation to be necessary, the Government, at all levels—Ministers, officials and special advisers—will give full co-operation.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In this country, we believe in natural justice. In any company, the civil service or anywhere else, someone accused of a disciplinary offence, let alone a criminal offence, is given a chance, in an impartial forum, to prove their innocence. As a matter of natural justice, how will the former Defence Secretary now be given an opportunity to prove his innocence?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire has not been accused of any criminal offence but, sadly, he has lost the confidence of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and she has therefore acted in accordance with the principles set out in the ministerial code.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is difficult not to sympathise with the former Defence Secretary, because in a kangaroo court one cannot prove oneself innocent. That is what many of us are worrying about. If the former Defence Secretary has done what is alleged, he should of course face the full criminal law, but the Minister is completely wrong to say that it has nothing to do with the Attorney General. The Official Secrets Act states categorically that a prosecution can proceed only if the Attorney General allows it to proceed. Any member of the public can go to the police and demand that there be a full investigation—I suspect that many people will—but has the Attorney General’s advice already been sought, and how will the former Defence Secretary be able to make his representations to the Attorney General?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman mixes up a number of matters. The Attorney General’s consent is required to a prosecution under the Official Secrets Act, but the Attorney General has no power to initiate an investigation or a prosecution. The hon. Gentleman is also continuing

to confuse two points. What we are dealing with—this is at the heart of the issue and the decision before the Prime Minister yesterday evening—is not so much the substance of what has been disclosed as the fact that the leak was of proceedings of the National Security Council. Therefore, whether or not the various harm tests under the Official Secrets Act were met in this particular case, the Prime Minister reached the decision that, regrettably, she no longer had confidence in my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire. That was why she reached that decision in her assessment of the public interest.

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

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for New Forest West looks as though he is about to start to sprint. I think that he must be heard.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Outside this House, a right hon. Member is being called a liar, and inside this House, a number of Members have implied as much. Natural justice demands that the evidence be produced so that his reputation can be salvaged or utterly destroyed, doesn’t it?

Mr Lidington: I have, I think, taken great care in the language that I have used in the House today, and I am not in the business of going around making allegations of the kind that have apparently been made outside the House. The fact is, however, that having read the investigation report, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reached the conclusion that there was compelling evidence to suggest responsibility on the part of the former Secretary of State for Defence for the leak from the National Security Council, and that was why she took the decision that she did

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister herself, as chair of the National Security Council, is ultimately responsible for the security and the integrity of its meetings. Does the Minister agree—yes or no?

Mr Lidington: Yes, hence her actions yesterday.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Of course the principles of good governance must be upheld, but does this mark a turning point? Further to the question asked by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), does this mean that in future we will not see breaches of ministerial collective responsibility that undermine our negotiating position as we leave the EU?

Mr Lidington: I sincerely hope that all Ministers will abide by the principle that one speaks with complete frankness in trying to shape and take decisions about collective Government policy, and then when one leaves the room one supports that Government policy and does not disclose details of the various arguments and debates that may have taken place in Cabinet or Cabinet Committees.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I do not know whether the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) has undertaken a leak or not—I am not party to that information—but from having sat on the

[David Hanson]

Intelligence and Security Committee and being subject to the same official secrets arrangements and the same briefings that Ministers get, I do know that if I had leaked from that Committee, I would have been subject to a criminal prosecution. My question to the Minister is simply this: did the Cabinet Secretary's report or the Prime Minister's assessment suggest that at any time the criminal threshold has been crossed, and has a report been made at any time to the police, as would be the case for any crime committed on business or personal premises?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, if there had been evidence to convince the Cabinet Secretary that a crime had been committed, or that prima facie a crime might have been committed, he would have reported that to the Prime Minister and come to a different judgment about whether the Government needed to refer the matter to the police. The decision that the Cabinet Secretary came to was that this matter did not need to be referred to the police. To take up the right hon. Gentleman's initial point, there is a difference between the tests for criminal offences that are, as he will recall, set out in great detail in the various sections of the Official Secrets Act, and falling below the standards of confidentiality and other conduct required of Ministers under the ministerial code.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): There are a few troubling aspects of this affair, to put it mildly. As we have seen—most people would, I think, agree about this—there have been a number of leaks from the Cabinet as a whole, particularly in the past two years, yet inquiries into those leaks either do not seem to have been pursued or have not led anywhere. An impression is given that a leak from the Cabinet might be okay but a leak from the NSC is not, and we must be very careful to avoid that. I do not think the ministerial code even mentions the NSC or says that it requires a higher level of propriety. Are there any proposals to change the ministerial code in this regard?

Mr Lidington: Because the National Security Council is constitutionally a Committee of the Cabinet, it is automatically covered by the provisions of the code that apply to the Cabinet and all Cabinet Committees. The particularly serious nature of this leak is derived from the fact that it is inherent in the nature of National Security Council discussions and the papers going before it that the very highest degree of secrecy needs to be maintained, but my right hon. Friend's point about the need for higher standards as regards Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings is also well made.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Minister just said that the former Defence Secretary is not accused of committing a criminal act. If he broke the Official Secrets Act, he is accused of committing a criminal act. Can the Minister now answer the question that has been asked three times and he has failed to answer: has the advice of the Attorney General been sought or not?

Mr Lidington: As I said in response to an earlier question, the role of the Attorney General under the Official Secrets Act is not to authorise or initiate

investigations, but to give or withhold consent for a prosecution if and when a finished case is presented to him.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I know from sitting firmly on the other side of the official-ministerial divide how hard it is to get officials, let alone our allies, to share important, and particularly secret, information with Ministers at all. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what matters is that we protect the integrity of the National Security Council if it is to operate at all properly?

Mr Lidington: Yes, I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): How can this matter be closed as far as our security partners are concerned given that the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) has said that he is innocent? Has he been interviewed under oath at any stage during the investigation, because I note that he is not here to set out his position on the Floor of the House and it is vital that our security partners now have confidence? If it was not the former Secretary of State for Defence, who was it?

Mr Lidington: I think our security partners can have confidence that the Prime Minister has acted swiftly and resolutely to uphold the essential integrity and security of National Security Council proceedings.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is regrettable that the Deputy Prime Minister did not offer to make a statement to the House and instead had to respond to an urgent question and that he is not giving away the information that Members are requesting. The former Secretary of State has sworn on the lives of his children that he did not leak the information. This seems to have been a kangaroo court reaching a decision in secret without any evidence to base that decision on. Mr Speaker, you will remember what happened to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). There was a rush to judgment and he was forced to resign, but it was then proved that what he was saying was true. Is the Deputy Prime Minister absolutely sure, without any reasonable doubt, that the former Secretary of State is guilty, or could it just be possible that the kangaroo court has made a mistake?

Mr Lidington: There was a thorough investigation. Every ministerial member of the National Security Council, and those officials and special advisers who might have had access to the material relating to the proceedings of that particular meeting, was spoken to and, as the Prime Minister's letter yesterday made clear, co-operated fully with the investigation. The investigation report was presented to the Prime Minister by the Cabinet Secretary and, having studied it, my right hon. Friend came to the conclusion that there was "compelling evidence" to suggest responsibility on the part of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire. As she said in her letter to him yesterday, she took into account the fact that, in the findings of the investigation, there was a difference between the conduct of the former Secretary of State and his team compared with the conduct of other Ministers and their teams. That is

why she came to the conclusion that she did. I repeat that this comes back to the question of Ministers serving in office so long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister. That is a principle that has applied to every Government in this country, and it is what applied in this case.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): By all accounts, the former Defence Secretary is the 38th person to lose their job in a Government riddled with incompetence and disloyalty, so it really is going some actually to be sacked by the Prime Minister. What she has described as a grave breach of trust has been enough to lead to his sacking, so why has it not been enough to call in the police?

Mr Lidington: For the reasons that I have given in response to a number of earlier questions. The key issue here is less the substance of what was disclosed and more the fact that the disclosure was made in respect of proceedings of the National Security Council.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Notwithstanding the particulars of this case, is it not time for the Government finally to bring forward the espionage Bill, which would include the long overdue root and branch reform of the Official Secrets Act? Despite the Deputy Prime Minister's comments today, is it also not the case that Cabinet leaks will continue as long as Cabinet papers retain their current classification? Is it not time for a review of how Cabinet papers are classified, and should they not all be classified as secret or above?

Mr Lidington: The question of the classification of documents is kept under review the whole time. In my recent experience, some Cabinet papers have been classified at secret level and others at a lower level. The classification depends on the substance of what is included in those papers. My hon. Friend also asked about future legislation, and we are obviously keen to bring forward the measure to which he referred, and other Bills, to the House as soon as we can.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The former Secretary of State for Defence clearly thought that it was his way or the Huawei, and he has been told by the Prime Minister to go away, but he has not shut up. Is it not the reality that we will not get the truth unless the former Defence Secretary makes a resignation or sacking statement to this House and we have the chance to debate it to get to the bottom of the fiasco?

Mr Lidington: Whether my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire wants to apply to you, Mr Speaker, to make a personal statement is a matter for him, but there has been a public exchange of letters between him and the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister came to her decision for the reasons that she gave, and I have tried to set those out this morning. Her sense that the decision was necessary was accompanied by a sense of real sadness, because this is not a decision that any Prime Minister would take lightly and it would not be made without considerable regret.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The National Security Council is a relatively modern phenomenon, and my right hon. Friend has set out some of the issues that the body discusses. The clear concern of the House, however, is that if my right hon. Friend the Member for

South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) is not responsible for the leak, which is what he says, then someone within the NSC is. It is therefore vital that there is an independent police investigation to demonstrate whether or not he is guilty.

Mr Lidington: It is obviously for the police to decide whether they believe that the case merits their investigation, but it is not their job to conduct leak inquiries regarding material disclosed within the Government, for which there is an established system. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister concluded in her letter to the former Defence Secretary that there was no credible alternative explanation to this particular leak.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The events of the past week have brought into sharp relief both the importance of handling such sensitive information responsibly and the perception that that is undertaken securely. With that in mind, will the Minister reassure me that if the Government had concerns that the Official Secrets Act may have been broken, the matter would be referred to the relevant authorities?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, the Cabinet Secretary made a careful assessment of those matters in coming to his judgment, but that judgment is that this is not something that the Government should refer to the police, and the Prime Minister considers the matter closed. Again, I repeat, it is the fact that this was a disclosure from the National Security Council that is at the heart of the seriousness with which the matter has been taken.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said, and I have two questions. First, will he confirm that it is not naive or misplaced still to believe that we have a senior civil service that is imbued with integrity and probity and that we can rely upon? Secondly, following the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), we know that the security and intelligence family is close and, like all families, it relies on a mutual relationship of trust. Will the Minister assure me and the House that, rather than just taking it for granted that our allies consider that we are still trustworthy and steadfast, we will go out proactively and positively to reaffirm that case? Not to do so would clearly put our country at risk.

Mr Lidington: First, yes, I am very confident that we have an impartial and professional senior civil service that is always ready to serve the elected Government to the best of its ability, whatever political stripe that Government bear. Secondly, it is actions rather than words that will demonstrate to our allies on security and intelligence matters that they should continue to trust us, just as we look to their actions when there are reports of things going wrong within their systems, but it is absolutely right that we must act swiftly and be clear about putting right any flaws in our system of the kind that we have experienced with the NSC in the past couple of weeks.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Given that this has never happened before, is not the real question how it can be that the former Defence Secretary, or indeed anyone else, has felt so emboldened and

[Tommy Sheppard]

confident to leak confidential information now? Is not the answer to that, in large part, that this Government are so fractured and weakened that they have lost the authority and cohesion to be able to govern? That process will now be compounded by the Government beginning to eat themselves alive in the search for a new leader. Is not the real way to guarantee that this does not happen again for the Government to put themselves out of their own misery and call a general election?

Mr Lidington: Dear, dear. It takes a bit of brass neck for an SNP Member to talk about fights between party leaders. The truth is that the Prime Minister has taken very firm and swift action in response to the leak investigation that was carried out on her instruction. The Government are getting on with the task of developing policies designed to protect and enhance the national security of the United Kingdom in respect of both the safety of our citizens and the defence of our interests around the world.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): All members of the National Security Council have sworn the Privy Council oath, and top secret material is circulated and discussed. If a leak of information from the National Security Council is not a breach of the Official Secrets Act, what is?

Mr Lidington: The various tests for a criminal offence are set out in detail in the Official Secrets Act. Whether or not that threshold has been breached depends on harm tests, and those harm tests are different depending on the category and the content of the information we are talking about.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): Surely one risk of this leak is that it effectively predetermines the public mood on the substantive issue of Huawei in a more hawkish fashion before we have come to our own policy conclusions. Of course the Five Eyes are our most important allies, and we have to do everything we can to reassure them, but we are also a sovereign country, and we have our own unique circumstances and our own more nuanced position with Beijing, so can I urge my right hon. Friend to continue all the work across Whitehall in a calm, deliberative and, above all, objective fashion so that we come to the right policy on the point of substance?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those comments, and he is right. In carrying out that work, it is vital that we have a forum in the National Security Council where the intelligence chiefs can talk frankly to Ministers about their assessment of the balance of risks and threats this country faces and where Ministers, taking account of the best advice available to them, can weigh up how to strike the right balance between this country's future and developing security interests and our future and developing economic interests to try to steer a way forward that delivers the best outcome for the people of the United Kingdom.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Should any evidence or confirmations disproving these allegations come to light as individuals write up this story, what would be the consequences or implications of that?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend invites me to engage in a bit of hypothetical speculation. If there were to be any such clear evidence, I think the Prime Minister would want it reported to her immediately and given to her in full. It would clearly need to be the provision of information that provided some other credible explanation for the leak that has taken place.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I hold the Minister in high regard. Last week, during Prime Minister's questions, he implied that Huawei was "a private firm", effectively at arm's length from the Chinese state, as one of our own firms would be. Is that not at best a half truth? Huawei is 99% owned by Chinese trade unions and that, in effect, is being part of a one-party state. Therefore, Huawei is, in effect, an arm of the Chinese state.

Mr Lidington: Huawei is officially owned by its employees and is a private Chinese company. It is true, as I believe I said at the Dispatch Box and I have certainly said on previous occasions, as have other Ministers, that there is an issue here, in that Chinese law requires all Chinese companies to co-operate with the Chinese state. But, as I said earlier in response to another question, the review of 5G goes beyond a single company or a single country, because we need to make sure, among other objectives, that we have a diverse marketplace, so that the Government have a genuine choice of suppliers available to them.

Tom Watson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the points of order, on the assumption, which I would like to think is safe, that neither Member would seek to continue the debate we have just had. I feel sure that these are matters of order and that the Front-Bench Members will focus with a laser-like intensity on that.

Tom Watson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his answer to me earlier, the Secretary of State said that the matter of investigating a criminal act is one for the police, not for Ministers. Can you assist me as to what remedy there is if I think he may have inadvertently misled the House on that? While we have been in the Chamber, the Metropolitan police have told "ITV News" that the matter to investigate is one for the Cabinet Office and if it shares the information with the police they will investigate, but they will not investigate unless the information is shared. Will the Deputy Prime Minister clear this matter up? Is there a way he can do that? Perhaps he could agree to share the information with the police from the Dispatch Box.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has, as I think he knows, found his own salvation: by means of the attempted point of order he has registered his point. He has placed on the record information that may have been known to some Members but, for example, was certainly not known to me, because I have not been consulting electronic devices but have been merely attending to my duties in the Chair. If the Minister wishes to respond, he is free to do so, but there is, at this point, no sign of him uncoiling. However, the hon. Member for West Bromwich

East (Tom Watson) is a dogged terrier, and I feel sure he and others will pursue these matters if they feel so inclined in the days ahead.

Tom Watson A former Rottweiler.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am not sure I see the appropriateness of the inclusion of the word “former”.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Deputy Prime Minister said that the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) was not being “accused of any criminal offence”.

However, in response to my question, he said that that was not for him to determine. Given the further information just shared by the Labour Front Bencher, both of those things do not stack up, so I wonder whether the Deputy Prime Minister felt that he should, if you would indulge him, come to the Dispatch Box to clear up these issues that have been raised by me and the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson).

Mr Speaker: I would if he did, but he doesn't, so I won't. But I rather fancy that these matters will be explored further in the days ahead. Realistically, it does not seem to me that there is obvious scope for the scrutiny of this matter further in the Chamber today, but who knows what subsequent days might bring. Let us leave it there for now.

No-Deal Brexit: Cross-channel Freight

11.34 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) *Urgent Question*: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the no-deal Brexit preparations for cross-channel ferry and freight services.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government are now reviewing our contingency planning for a no-deal EU exit, in the wake of recent developments. No decisions have yet been taken for the preparations for the new EU exit date of 31 October, although of course many of the preparations that were made for 29 March are still in place. The planning assumptions that underpinned the original maritime freight capacity activity will need reviewing in the light of the article 50 extension, to understand whether they are still valid. A collective view will then be taken across the Government as to the necessary contingency plans that will need to be implemented, and that will include working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to understand the needs of their supply chains.

In December, we entered into contracts with ferry operators to provide additional capacity into the UK as part of no-deal planning. Those contracts were scheduled to run up until September, and were an essential insurance policy to ensure the continued supply of category 1 goods—primarily medicines and medical devices for the NHS—in the event of a no-deal Brexit. As I have indicated to the House previously, we took that step because of a change to the modelling carried out across the Government that indicated that flows across the short straits could fall significantly, and crucially for significantly longer than had previously been proposed by our analysts. It would have been irresponsible for the Government not to act, as no deal was and remains the legal default. It was an insurance policy, and insurance policies are a prudent investment, whether or not they are actually used.

Following the article 50 extension until 31 October, the Government have now decided to terminate the contracts with Brittany Ferries and DFDS with immediate effect, to minimise the cost to taxpayers. The termination of those contracts costs £43.8 million, which is lower than the National Audit Office's estimate of the total termination costs, and I should say that it represents around 1% of the overall £4 billion package of no-deal EU exit preparations that the Government have wisely undertaken to ensure that we are ready for all eventualities.

Alan Brown: Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker.

I wonder whether we will ever get to the bottom of this whole mess. Truthfully, the Secretary of State's statement does not give us any more clarification on what the Government are doing in respect of no-deal preparations. We were told that the initial contracts were part of emergency procurement for the unforeseen scenario of a no-deal Brexit, despite our having been told that the Government had prepared. We were then expected to believe the logic behind handing an emergency service contract to a company with no ships and no financial backing.

[Alan Brown]

In response to an urgent question, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care advised us that the contracts were needed for shipments of priority goods such as medicines, and the Transport Secretary has repeated that in his statement today. If that was the case, why did the contracts kick in automatically on 29 March, rather than being linked to an actual no-deal scenario, whenever that might occur? What exactly did the contracts procure? Why has it taken a month for the latest contracts to be reviewed and cancelled, at a cost of £43 million? What are the Government doing in respect of the next possible no-deal Brexit date of 31 October? If the previous contracts had to be entered into in December for a March kick-in date, it is clear that planning needs to happen now. It is obvious that the Government should be working on preparations right now.

In the emergency debate on the contracts, I asked about the possibility of further legal action and the Secretary of State assured me that there would be none. “A hae ma doots” is what I said at the time, so it comes as no surprise that we now learn that P&O Ferries is suing the Government. When did the Secretary of State find out about P&O’s intentions? Where has that case got to—is it going to go through the courts, or will there be a cave-in and another £33 million settlement?

I know that Governments do not normally publish legal advice, but with this turn of events we are clearly in exceptional circumstances, so will the Government provide or publish the legal advice that they have had over this period? What independent reviews are the Government undertaking to understand the blunders that have happened and to learn lessons so that this does not happen again?

The Secretary of State repeated what the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) said earlier in Transport questions: that the £43 million cost of cancelling the ferry contracts is only 1% of the Brexit preparation costs, as if it does not matter. In actual fact, overall the ferry contracts will probably cost up to £120 million, depending on the P&O settlement, so when will somebody become accountable for this waste of money? It is not a negligible amount of money; it is a lot of money.

Many people ask me why the Secretary of State is still in post after all his blunders. I cannot answer that, but I can ask that he does the right thing, finally takes responsibility and steps aside.

Chris Grayling: As usual, we have the customary stream of nonsense from the hon. Gentleman. This issue has been scrutinised, and will continue to be scrutinised, by members of the National Audit Office, who are the appropriate people to do so. I will not comment on ongoing legal matters, except to say that the Government vigorously disagree with P&O and will defend themselves to the hilt. I really do not think that he listened to what I said today, or that he has listened for the past few times that I have talked about this in the House. The fact is that he has disagreed all along with the steps that we have taken. Let me read to him a small excerpt from a letter that I received last month. It said that my officials

“have also asked that critical exports should be given priority access to the additional ferry capacity secured by the UK Government where this is not required for essential supplies.”

That request, clearly recognising the need for that capacity, came from the Cabinet Minister in the SNP Scottish Government.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We would not have had to spend the money had the party of the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) voted for the agreement. Is my right hon. Friend looking forward to the return of duty free on the ferries as much as I am?

Chris Grayling: It is very much my hope that we do reach an agreement and that duty free will not be necessary, but I am sure that if it becomes necessary, my right hon. Friend will have that opportunity. None the less, he makes a good point. To Members across this House who complain about the money that we have rightly spent on an insurance policy against a no-deal outcome, I say that the way of preventing that money being spent would have been to vote for the deal. Opposition parties have systematically refused to accept that what is before this House, and what has been before this House, is a sensible deal to deliver a sensible future partnership with the European Union. It is just a shame that they have always been unwilling to accept that.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On 5 March, I told the Secretary of State that his settlement with Eurotunnel risked further litigation from other companies. I warned that taxpayers could face more compensation bills in the tens of millions of pounds, and I was dismissed. But I was right, and he was wrong. His Department is now facing legal action from P&O Ferries. This all flows from his decision to award a contract to Seaborne Freight—the ferry company with no ships.

The Secretary of State bypassed procurement processes to award contracts—rules that were put in place to prevent this sort of waste of public money—and awarded a contract that was in breach of UK and EU public procurement law. As a result, he made a potentially unlawful £33 million settlement with Eurotunnel, promoting P&O to take legal action. Who made the decision to bypass procurement rules? Was it the Secretary of State and does he accept responsibility? The Transport Secretary should have recognised that his Eurotunnel decision risked further litigation. Why did he dismiss my concerns, and was he poorly advised?

Yesterday, we discovered that the Department must pay around £43.8 million to cancel no longer needed ferry contracts. Given that the entire Brexit process has been characterised by uncertainty, why did the Transport Secretary not negotiate contracts that could be delayed if the Brexit date was delayed? If he had, he could have avoided this colossal waste of money. What is his estimate of the total cost to the public of his no-deal contracts? Every other week, MPs must debate the Transport Secretary’s latest costly blunder. I am afraid that this will continue for as long as the Secretary of State remains in post. This country can no longer afford the Secretary of State.

Chris Grayling: That is indicative of the fact that the Labour party and the hon. Gentleman do not believe in or support the need for this Government and this

country making sure that, in all circumstances, the national health service receives the drugs that it needs. I am afraid that that is just irresponsibility on his side.

The hon. Gentleman raises various questions. He mentioned Seaborne Freight. The legal action with Eurotunnel had nothing to do with Seaborne Freight, because the contract with Seaborne Freight had been terminated several weeks before—after it had secured ships but when its principal financial backer withdrew. I did not bypass any processes. Things were done properly in accordance with Government procurement rules. They have been vetted and looked at by the National Audit Office, which has already provided one report on this. This was a collective decision by the Government to make sure that we could look after the interests of the national health service and that we took the right insurance policies in the event of a no-deal Brexit. We will continue to take the right decisions and the right insurance policies if there continues to be—I hope there will not be—a risk of a no-deal Brexit.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I do not see how the House can blame the Secretary of State for believing the Prime Minister, when she said 108 times that we were going to leave on 29 March. When her withdrawal agreement was defeated three times in the House of Commons, it would have been negligent of the Secretary of State not to have planned for a no-deal Brexit. The one thing that is for sure is that the Secretary of State cannot be blamed; maybe the Prime Minister can. Does the Secretary of State agree that a lot of people are making political points based on no evidence whatever?

Chris Grayling: That is the central point. The process was carried out properly in the context of the legal advice that was available and the needs elsewhere in Government. My Department never needed any ferry capacity; it was procured because other Departments did. If further contracts are let, it will be because of other Departments' needs for services such as the national health service. The Opposition seem more interested in trying to score political points than in supporting the securing of drug supplies for the national health service.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On 11 February, the Secretary of State said in response to my question on ferry procurement:

“I have been absolutely clear that this procurement was dealt with very carefully by officials in my Department and in the Treasury”—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 623.] Although the Secretary of State may believe that this matter was dealt with very carefully, I think the rest of the world believes otherwise—that, in fact, he has reached dizzying new heights of incompetence. His latest bungle has cost an extra £43 million, on top of the £2.7 billion he has cost us so far. If P&O wins its case, how much more is the Secretary of State going to cost the taxpayer, and will that be the point at which he finally accepts that he has no choice but to resign?

Chris Grayling: The right hon. Gentleman does not believe in Brexit and he clearly does not believe in no-deal preparations. He also clearly did not listen to me previously. I have set out exhaustively in this House why we took the decisions that we did and why we

responded in the way we did to the legal advice we had. We simply took steps to ensure that we were ready for a no-deal Brexit—the responsible thing to do. He might not agree with it, but that is what we have done.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to reduce the amount that has to be paid to the ferry companies involved?

Chris Grayling: That is an important point. We have paid a reduced cancellation charge, as set out in the original contracts in the case that we did not need the ferries as a result of a change in circumstance. The change in circumstance, of course, is that the potential no-deal date has moved by seven months. Nobody seriously expects that we would be paying to have ships either sailing empty or moored at the quayside for that time, but the companies incur costs—by leasing extra ships and taking extra staff—that have to be met. At the start, we negotiated a cancellation level of payments, meaning that we did not have to pay the full amount in the contract and mitigated the cost to the taxpayer of the insurance policy that we took out.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The private sector has no faith in the Department for Transport's ability to undertake procurement properly; confidence has been lost. Is the Secretary of State concerned that his own incompetence will reduce future private sector investment in the transport sector?

Chris Grayling: I do not know what the hon. Lady is talking about because she is not being specific. She says that the private sector has lost confidence in the Department's procurement, but that tends only to be the case if people have not won a contract.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have continually voted for the deal, as the Secretary of State knows. The insurance policy protects exports from and imports to the UK, so I fully accept what he is saying. Will he join me in trying to get a change to the procurement rules, so that they include a substantial element of alternative dispute resolution to make the whole thing cheaper and quicker?

Chris Grayling: I regret that any big company—particularly in the case of Eurotunnel—would take a decision to pursue a legal action at such a time, when the Government are seeking to operate in the national interest. But the law is the law, and we have to fulfil it. I agree with my hon. Friend that alternative dispute resolution is a good way of resolving such matters, when it can be delivered.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The criticism is not that preparations should not have been made; it is criticism of the way in which the contracts were awarded. The Secretary of State is doing his usual trick of standing back and saying that he is the innocent bystander in this situation. Is he actually saying that he just followed the advice of his officials and signed this off, or did he intervene and overrule, especially to ensure that Seaborne Freight were awarded a contract? Or is he just going to hide behind others and say, “It was somebody else's fault, gov—not mine,” as he did with the train timetable idea?

Chris Grayling: I can categorically say that I did not intervene in any matters relating to the decisions to let these contracts, how they were let and what the recommendations were about letting them.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my frustration with those in this House who, I think wrongly, rant that a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic but then oppose every single step taken to try to mitigate any of the concerns that it might bring about?

Chris Grayling: The bit I do not understand is that Labour Members do not appear to understand insurance. When someone takes out a home insurance policy each year, they pay their money and they do not get it back. It costs them money, but they have the insurance to protect them against an unforeseen eventuality. We took out this insurance policy because of a change to the forecast that suggested that we might have a problem in dealing with the flow of drugs for the national health service. That was the responsible thing to do—to take out the insurance policy for the country. Labour Members might not want us to do that. They might not want to look after the interests of the national health service, but we will.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State calls it an insurance policy, but I do not know what part of an insurance policy involves paying £33 million in an out-of-court settlement to a company because of his own incompetence. That is not really a viable and prudent form of insurance policy. Is not the reality that the Government were never going to have no-deal in the first place and that this has been the mother of all smokescreens by the Government to raise the stakes in effectively playing poker with taxpayers' money? It is a flagrant misuse of public funds, and he should at least have the grace to admit that.

Chris Grayling: I will not, because it is not true.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the reality is that cancellation fees are a standard aspect of contracts that exist between the Government and private sector suppliers to cover the costs that are legitimately created when a contract occurs?

In the event that cancellation takes place, it is perfectly reasonable for those costs to be covered; otherwise people would not contract with the Government.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It underlines one of the things that makes the business community much more concerned by a Corbyn Government than by Brexit, because Labour Members not only do not understand business—they hate business and do not believe that the Government should work with business. We hear time and again how dismissive they are of business, and this is just another example.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Do the Government's interesting U-turns reflect a change in their attitude and policy towards Brexit itself?

Chris Grayling: Our policy has been consistent from the start: we want to leave the European Union with a deal. We will continue to work to do so but will make appropriate plans for all eventualities.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We all knew that a no-deal exit might happen, but none of us could have said that it would definitely happen. So I do not know which is worse: whether the Secretary of State has overseen contracts that did not have the flexibility and caveats built into them to allow for that eventuality, or whether he refuses to admit that that was a mistake. Whatever it is, this combination of incompetence and arrogance is costing the taxpayer a lot of money. What assurances do we have that as we approach the October deadline and he begins over the summer to look at this process again, he will learn from the mistakes and not waste even more money?

Chris Grayling: That is precisely why these contracts had early cancellation provisions that enabled us to close the contracts down at a cost that was much lower than the full cost of the contracts.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. We come now to the business question, which is not as heavily subscribed as is often the case. Therefore, I think I can say with complete conviction that this session should finish no later than 1 o'clock and preferably long before then.

Business of the House

11.53 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 6 May will include:

MONDAY 6 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 7 MAY—Second reading of the Wild Animals in Circuses (No.2) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 8 MAY—Opposition day (un-allotted half day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced, followed by motions relating to Select Committee appointments.

THURSDAY 9 MAY—Debate on a motion on acquired brain injury, followed by a general debate on the 25th anniversary of the death of John Smith, former leader of the Labour party. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 10 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

Two weeks ago we were devastated to see the pictures of the fire at Notre Dame. Many colleagues have raised with me the similar risks that face the Palace of Westminster, which is one of the most celebrated UNESCO world heritage sites. We are redoubling our efforts to progress with the restoration and renewal of Parliament. Colleagues will have seen significant work going on to protect against fires and falling masonry. I am pleased that next week, the Government will publish their response to the Joint Committee's scrutiny of the Bill, and I hope to announce further news on the Bill shortly. In addition, next Wednesday, the House of Commons will launch a public consultation on the northern estate programme, which is a vital step in ensuring that we have decant accommodation when the major works get under way. There will be a briefing for all Members on 8 May in Portcullis House, and further details will be sent to colleagues later today.

This week is Maternal Mental Health Week, dedicated to talking about mental illness during pregnancy or after giving birth. Giving every family with a new baby the best start in life is a real passion of mine, and I know that many colleagues across all parties share a real commitment to providing better support during the first 1,001 days of a baby's life.

Finally, a display about Baroness Thatcher's life will be installed on the first floor of Portcullis House on Friday 3 May, and I encourage all Members to visit. As yesterday's debate on climate change demonstrated cross-party commitment to tackling this global crisis, we should remember that she was one of the first world leaders to recognise the challenge, when she said to the United Nations in 1989:

"Of all the challenges faced by the world community... one has grown clearer than any other in both urgency and importance—I refer to the threat to our global environment."

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, and I wonder whether the portrait of Baroness Thatcher will be taken out of her room and put on display. Baroness Thatcher was a scientist, and we know that the science is right on climate change.

I thank the Leader of the House for the Opposition half-day next week. With debates on the Wild Animals in Circuses (No.2) Bill and on the 25th anniversary of the death of John Smith—the most amazing Labour leader and possible Prime Minister that we could not have—it feels like Opposition week, and we are grateful for those debates. Is the Leader of the House able to provide us with any further information on Whitsun or even summer recess dates? Of course, we also need an updated version of the list of ministerial responsibilities.

The business is quite light. I previously asked the Leader of the House whether we could have a debate on the Non-contentious Probate (Fees) Order 2018, so that we can have proper scrutiny of it. The mum of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) is a probate lawyer, so she is quite keen to see the order debated.

We are breaking records again, with the longest time without a Queen's Speech. I do not know whether the Leader of the House has raised this at Cabinet meetings, but can she confirm whether the Queen's Speech will be in June or September, as some people have mooted? The Prime Minister's spokesperson has said that there is "no specific date" for a new Session. This is a bizarre state of affairs. I do not know of any other Government being run like this, particularly as there have been only five years since 1900 in which a Queen's Speech has not taken place. It feels like the Government do not want to or cannot get their legislative agenda through Parliament. When is the withdrawal agreement likely to be debated again? Will that be an ordinary debate or part of a new Queen's Speech?

We list the Prime Minister's engagements, and I wonder whether we should now list her dinner engagements, too. There was ladies' night this week, and someone donated £135,000. That is £19,285.71 for each of the Cabinet Ministers there. The previous donation by that donor was ruled impermissible by the Electoral Commission, but I understand that she now has leave to remain and is on the electoral register. Two former Home Secretaries and the Immigration Minister were at the event, and I hope there is no link between the two.

While Ministers were having dinner with the donor, the Department for Work and Pensions was sending misleading letters to GPs and doctors stating that their patients do not need a fit note any more when they have been found fit to work. The lack of clarity about when GPs should issue fit notes could put patients' finances and health at risk. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who is the shadow disabilities Minister, raised a point of order because the Secretary of State said that the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners have signed off these letters, when in fact they have not. They put out a letter yesterday saying that they have not. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State on exactly what the status is of these letters to GPs, and will they be withdrawn or updated?

While Ministers were having dinner with the donor, schools and teachers were having to pick up the costs of Government cuts. An NASUWT poll has found that two out of three teachers add their own cash to squeezed school budgets by paying for classroom stationery. That is the reality: it is not the Opposition who are saying it; that is the reality from teachers on the ground. May we have a statement on why teachers and staff in schools

[Valerie Vaz]

are using their own money to keep schools running? The Government will say that they have had record investment, but that is clearly not the case on the ground.

While Ministers were having dinner with the donor, the Government were failing criminal barristers across the country. Some 95% of members of the Criminal Bar Association have threatened to begin walking out of trials and are refusing to take on new work over a pay dispute with the Crown Prosecution Service, and 84.2% of respondents to a Criminal Bar Association poll said that they were in effect working for less than the minimum wage, while the workload has increased over the past five years. May we have a statement on the criminal barristers' pay dispute? After all, it is about the very foundation of our society.

The current Secretary of State for Transport, who was previously at the Ministry of Justice, oversaw all those cuts to the legal system, and he is the one, as we heard in the urgent question, paying out £50 million of public money, on top of the £33 million out-of-court settlement with Eurotunnel. I think we could ask schools what they could do with that money. When will we get a statement on the accountability for this waste of public money?

Last week, the Leader of the House wished everyone well in the local elections, but she did not say that there are no district or borough elections in Northamptonshire because the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has cancelled them. The seven district and borough councils would have been holding elections, but apparently the Secretary of State said that people might get confused when they move to the unitary authorities, so they will not get any elections until 2020. With no vote until 2020, people will not get a vote on the 5% increase in the council tax.

I want to take this opportunity to thank those councillors who are standing down in Walsall South: Keith Chambers, who was a councillor for Bentley and Darlaston North; Allah Ditta, for Palfrey, who may be back as a councillor to serve his community; and Eileen Russell, for St Matthews. Eileen was a teacher, and every time I go canvassing with her I find that she had taught practically everybody in St Matthews.

I do not know, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether you know the significance of 29 May. That is the date beyond which the Prime Minister has to serve to ensure she is not the shortest serving Prime Minister in modern times. Just for the record, the month of May is walking month. We have been warned.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has made some rather unpleasant insinuations and accusations, but I am sure those are a matter for her. I can absolutely assure her that none of her insinuations has any merit to it, and it is a great shame that she chooses to accuse individuals of making improper donations and to accuse people of dining while others are suffering. It is a very regrettable lowering of the tone, particularly at business questions, when Members are normally quite friendly and respectful towards one another.

To answer the hon. Lady's specific questions, she says next week is Opposition week, but in fact the Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill is a very important part

of domestic legislation. Indeed, she has herself called in previous business questions for the Government to bring it forward, so I hope she will be pleased about that.

Whitsun and summer recesses will be subject to the progress of business, as they always are. The hon. Lady asks for a list of ministerial responsibilities, and I will take that up again on her behalf. She knows that such lists are issued periodically and will be again.

On the statutory instrument on probate fees, the hon. Lady raised this in business questions on 11 April, when a debate was requested. In fact, the SI had already been debated in Committee on 7 February, and we will bring forward an approval motion in due course.

The hon. Lady asks about the length of the Session. I am sure she will understand that the purpose of the Queen's Speech is to set the Government's agenda for the parliamentary Session. It is available online for her reference, if she wishes to see how we are doing against the Queen's Speech. I can assure her that our legislation is making a real difference to people right across the country. More than 40 Government Bills have already received Royal Assent, including the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018; the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018; the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018; the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018; the Space Industry Act 2018; the Tenant Fees Act 2019; the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Act 2018—she is looking a bit horrified, but they are making a positive difference to people's lives, which is great news.

The hon. Lady asks when the debate on the withdrawal agreement Bill will be held. She will be aware that cross-party talks are under way. She will know as much as I do—possibly more—about the progress of those talks. We all hope they come to fruition very soon and that we make some progress in delivering on Brexit, which the House has committed itself to doing but has failed singularly to achieve so far.

The hon. Lady raises several other very serious points. I would encourage her to raise the question of doctors providing fit notes at Health oral questions on 7 May. On schools funding, she will know that the Government have provided significant funding for the education of our young people and that 1.9 million more children are now being taught in good or outstanding schools than in 2010, which is something we should be proud of. In particular, the number of pupils taking maths A-level has risen in each of the past eight years such that it is now the single most popular choice, which is brilliant news. On the pay dispute with criminal barristers, I understand from my excellent Parliamentary Private Secretary that the Justice Select Committee is looking at this, so there will be more to say about that soon.

Finally, the hon. Lady makes a point about Northamptonshire. It is considering merging into unitary authorities and so it would not be right to hold elections this year; they have therefore been postponed for a year, and there will be more news about that very soon, but I would like to pay tribute to everybody who is putting themselves forward for public service at the local elections and to wish everybody great success.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I add my support to what the Leader of the House has just said about the local elections. So many people take part as candidates and most of course will lose. What local councillors do is a great tribute to our democracy.

You will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the Prime Minister went to Brussels and, on her own devices, decided to keep us in the European Union past 12 April, until 31 October. This House has not had a chance to debate or vote on that. At the last business questions, I think the Leader of the House said that she would allow the prayer from my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and that we would have a debate and vote on the negative statutory instrument. Will the Leader of the House confirm when that will happen?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to address this issue again. He may be aware that our hon. Friend asked that this debate be had once the views of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments were known, and that will indeed be the case. We will come forward with further details in due course.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. Who would have thought that there were council by-elections in England today, given that every Member on the Opposition Benches, other than the Whips, is either from Wales or Scotland? *[Interruption.]* I said Wales.

I thank the Leader of the House for saying that we will be proceeding with the refurbishment of this place. For most of this country, R and R means rock and roll, but in this place it means restoration and renewal. I think we will all get on down with R and R in this place soon.

I was intrigued by the Leader of the House's response to the inquiry of the shadow Leader of the House about the Queen's Speech. We are only a few weeks from what should be the end of this parliamentary Session, but apparently there is no intention to bring forward a Queen's Speech. The parliamentary Session has now lasted two years and is about to enter its third. We can talk about having too much of a good thing, but probably not when it comes to this government. They have said there will be no Queen's Speech until the withdrawal agreement is agreed, but that timeline ranges from months to weeks to about never, so I would be interested to hear her thoughts about when we can expect a Queen's Speech.

We are acutely aware that if there is a Queen's Speech, some loyal Members of her Majesty's Back Benches may feel obliged to vote it down in a pique of Brexit rage, so we are looking forward to more weeks of business like this: conjured up Bills, Opposition days and—I mean no disrespect to my good friend the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns)—more Backbench Business debates. There will be no new substantial legislation and no new programme of Government. To call this a zombie Government would be to show massive disrespect to the brain-eating living dead, and the purgatory that we will now endure in the business of the House is acquiring a semi-permanent nature.

May we have debate about when a Government can no longer call themselves a Government? This Government have now lost almost half their ministerial team. They are running out of people to promote, and even more Back-Benchers are saying, "No thanks," and want nothing more to do with this shambles. I do not know how much longer that can be sustained or endured. There seems no prospect of a general election—even these zombies

will not vote for a zombie Christmas to put them out of their misery, and the Prime Minister seems to limp on from week to week. Perhaps it is now time for Prime Minister "Shaun of the Dead", and the full, unleashed zombie apocalypse to come.

Andrea Leadsom: How does one respond to that, Madam Deputy Speaker? I was hoping that the hon. Gentleman might allude to the fact that he is after Mr Speaker's job. Had he raised that issue in the context of next week's Bill, which will ban wild animals in travelling circuses, I could have questioned him about whether he in fact hopes to be the new ringmaster, or the new greatest showman. Since we all absolutely love Hugh Jackman—well I do anyway—I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman could completely fill his shoes, but I would be willing to give it a try, particularly because he said that if it came to a tie he would vote against Scottish independence.

Pete Wishart *indicated dissent.*

Andrea Leadsom: Oh I think he did.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Among many other things, yesterday was National Gujarat Day in India. I was privileged to be at the Indian high commission last night as we joined celebrating not only what is going on in the economic powerhouse of India but the contribution of the Gujarati people in the UK and across the world. Wherever Gujaratis have made their home, education, entrepreneurship and family life have improved, as has law-abiding behaviour. Will my right hon. Friend make time for us to debate the contribution made by Gujaratis to the United Kingdom, especially given that only in the past few days we have held excellent debates about the contributions made by Jains and Sikhs? It is time to celebrate what those in the Gujarati community have done for this country since they chose to make it their home.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an excellent proposal, and I agree that the Gujarati community has made a significant contribution to the United Kingdom. I pay tribute to him for raising that issue on behalf of his constituents. He might wish to seek a debate in Westminster Hall so that all hon. Members can share their experiences.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and particularly for Thursday's Backbench Business Committee debates on acquired brain injury—that debate is sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—and on the 25th anniversary of the death of the late John Smith, leader of the Labour party. Only last summer, I had the privilege of visiting John Smith's graveside on the beautiful island of Iona, and I am glad that we will commemorate his loss, which was a tragedy for the Labour party and for British politics.

If we are allocated time on 16 May, we already have two debates lined up. One is the previously postponed debate on the definition of Islamophobia. That is time-specific to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, so we would be very grateful to get that debate.

When we come back after a bank holiday, we change the sitting hours so that on Tuesday the Chamber sits with Monday hours. The times in Westminster Hall are

[*Ian Mearns*]

a variation of that, so instead of starting at 9.30 am, it starts at 11.30 am, but on a Monday Westminster Hall does not start at 11.30 am. That makes life difficult for those who wish to participate in those debates but have to travel from further afield, including Members from the north of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and the south-west. May we have a look at that issue, because it is rather unfair if Members who wish to take part in debates at 11.30 am on a Tuesday following a bank holiday have to travel down the night before, as that is not the case for all Members across the House.

Andrea Leadson: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I am happy to look into it. Perhaps I can meet him to discuss it further. I will bear in mind his point about 16 May, as I was disappointed that the debate on Islamophobia had to be pulled due to the number of statements on that day. It would be good to see that debate reinstated, as well as the other one he mentioned.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I know that the Leader of the House will be seized with the importance of dealing with the climate emergency we face, and she will agree that this place must show leadership in achieving net zero emissions as soon as possible. Let me make three immediate suggestions. First, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority should allow carbon offsetting as part of travel expenses; secondly, those travelling on House of Commons business should be steered towards low-carbon transport options where available, or otherwise have their carbon offset by the House authorities as part of those travel arrangements; and thirdly, IPSA should make available a one-off fund for the installation of energy efficiency measures and other clean tech in our constituency offices, so that we can decarbonise our efforts beyond here.

Andrea Leadson: My hon. Friend makes excellent recommendations, and since 2010 the Government have been delivering on our ambition to be the greenest Government ever. I look forward to introducing the first environment Bill in more than 20 years, and I will certainly take seriously his recommendations about what more Parliament can do. I myself always choose to travel by broomstick since I am so frequently accused of being a witch. I find it a very low-carbon, green form of travel and I commend it to all hon. Members. We can certainly consider what more can be done.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Delays, mistakes, lost documents, extortionate application fees, and being on the receiving end of a default mode of suspicion is the experience, every single week, of my constituents in their interactions with the Home Office. Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the systemic failures of his Department and say what he will do about them?

Andrea Leadson: The hon. Lady makes a serious accusation, and hon. Members frequently raise particular constituency problems. I am always sympathetic to individual issues, and have raised a number of them on behalf of Members with the Home Office directly. If she wishes to seek a more general discussion about the

way the Home Office manages visas and so on, I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate or raise the issue directly during questions to the Home Office.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Earlier this week, “radiotherapy for life” organised an excellent venture in the Palace of Westminster. My wife is a therapeutic radiographer who treats patients with cancer on a daily basis, not just in Brecon and Radnorshire but throughout the Welsh borders, and I remind Members that one in four of us will require radiotherapy treatment at some time in our life, and 40% of cancer cures are thanks to radiotherapy. May we have a debate on what more we can do to help those excellent medical professionals carry out their job and to encourage more people to enter that worthwhile profession?

Andrea Leadson: I commend my hon. Friend for raising that issue, which gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to the important work of radiographers. A number of my family have benefited from the hard work and skill used in radiography, and I am sure that is also the case for many right hon. and hon. Members here today. He will be pleased to know that we have over 3,200 more diagnostic and therapeutic radiographers compared with 2010, and NHS England has confirmed funding of more than £600 million to support the delivery of the cancer strategy in England.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May we have a debate on the cruel impact of no recourse to public funds? One of my constituents who first came through my door in May 2015 is working all the hours she can, but cannot earn enough to make ends meet and her British-born daughter asked me why they do not have any money. No recourse to public funds is pushing families into poverty and I would like the opportunity to hold the Government to account on this issue.

Andrea Leadson: The hon. Lady raises a very serious issue and she is right to do so. As ever, if she wants to write to me about a particular case, I can take it up on her behalf. Otherwise, I suggest she seeks an Adjournment debate, so she can raise the issue more generally with Ministers.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate on Yemen? My constituent Luke Symons is being held captive by the Houthis in Sana’a. Despite the efforts of the Foreign Secretary, the United Nations and others, that is still the case and his family are becoming increasingly exasperated. The new Minister did promise a meeting before Easter with me and the family. That has not materialised, and I have not yet heard back from his office. Will the Leader of the House use her good offices to encourage that meeting to take place as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadson: I am sorry to hear from the hon. Gentleman that there has been no progress on the meeting. I will certainly make contact with the Department again and remind them of that commitment. As all hon. Members know, the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe is taking place in Yemen. The UK Government are doing an awful lot to try to find a way forward. I am sure they will be very happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Leader of the House values the contribution that faith communities make to our society, so will she arrange for a Home Office Minister to urgently come to the House and explain why recent changes to the tier 5 visa system will make it more difficult for churches and temples to bring in supply ministers over the summer? Catholic churches in my constituency are very concerned—the issue is on the front page of the archdiocesan newspaper—and she will know that the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) raised this matter with the Prime Minister. When will a Minister come and explain this unnecessary and unexplained change of policy?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly recall my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) raising the matter at Prime Minister's questions. If I recall, the Prime Minister said that she would ensure that it was considered. I will also take steps to ensure that the Home Office are aware of this concern. If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me with any specific examples, that would be helpful.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): In January, the Department for Work and Pensions announced draft regulations for compensation payments for those who have moved from universal credit and lost their severe disability premium payments. Three months on, there is no movement from the Government and in the meantime vulnerable constituents are suffering. When can we approve this much-needed support for severely disabled people?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have sought at all times to put people with disabilities at the heart of our policy. The intention behind introducing far greater personal independence was to provide better support for people living with disabilities. Hundreds of thousands more disabled people are now in work than there were in 2010, giving them the opportunity to support their own lives. She raises a particular question about a judgment that was made. Work and Pensions questions will be on Monday 13 May. I encourage her to raise her question directly with Ministers then.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Next week is national Deaf Awareness Week, a unique campaign in that many different organisations participate, each able to provide their own work within the broad spectrum of deafness. This year's theme is celebrating role models in education, employment, health, sport, entertainment, family, youth, technology and politics. May we have a debate in Government time on how best the Government can support deaf people to contribute even more fully, as they wish, in society as a whole?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. Deafness is incredibly difficult for people to live with and the Government have sought to take strong steps to improve quality of life, the inclusiveness of services and so on to try to support people who suffer from deafness. The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important issue and I recommend that she perhaps seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can share their ideas.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not think so cruelly of the Leader of the House. I think of her more as the Wizard of Oz. Hmm. I know she dismisses the

whole issue of how long the parliamentary Session has gone on for, but in the old days we used to have a new parliamentary Session every year. The Government laid out their programme and then we debated it. Opposition and Government Members had the chance to hold the Government to account. We had a new process of starting private Members' Bills with a new ballot, and we had a fixed number of Opposition days and days for Backbench Business. All that has gone out of the window. Today, we are sitting for the 296th day in this Session, which makes it the longest Session of this Parliament since the Glorious Revolution in 1688. I think that that is a mistake. We used to get two weeks' business in a row. Now we get just three days' business in a row. I know she will say, "Oh well, it is because there are all sorts of important things that you shouldn't have to worry about," but the truth is that we all have constituencies. We like to make commitments to our constituency. Some of us have important medical appointments. I have heard of male and female Members who want to go to a screening, because they are over 50 or over 45, but have not been able to make a commitment to do that. In the interests of everybody's health, will she please get back to a proper process of having a Queen's Speech every year and announcing the business two weeks' in advance?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman, if I was the Wizard of Oz, could certainly be a munchkin. He would be very welcome in that role.

Valerie Vaz: He's Dorothy!

Andrea Leadsom: No, I do not think he would see himself as Dorothy at all.

Chris Bryant: A friend of, anyway.

Andrea Leadsom: Indeed. With the red shoes, no doubt.

Chris Bryant: Ruby slippers!

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. He will be aware that at the beginning of this Session we announced that it was going to be an extended Session because we had a significant amount of Brexit legislation to get through, as well as a very packed domestic legislative programme. That remains the case and we keep the end of the Session under review. He talks about announcing two weeks of business. There is no specific convention around announcing the future business. It has been the case for a very long time that the period of future business announced depends on the predictability of future business. If this House were to embrace the opportunity to deliver on the will of the people as expressed in the 2016 referendum and vote to leave the European Union, we could get back to normal. We could end the Session. We could move on. We could all start talking about something else. I therefore encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to think again about voting for the withdrawal agreement Bill when it comes back.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Perhaps the best comparison to the Government are the white walkers in the "Game of Thrones".

May we have two statements? First, may we have a statement on what the Government are doing to try to resolve the industrial dispute between Interserve employees

[Chris Stephens]

and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? Secondly, may we have a statement on why those Interserve employees, who were due to be paid for their work in April, have not been paid? The suggestion was that their pay dates would be changed to June. That does not seem to have been the case. We now have some of the lowest-paid workers left unpaid for their work in the FCO. Does that not demonstrate that Interserve is unfit to deliver public services?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government take very seriously any private sector provision of public services and ensure at all times good value for taxpayers' money as well as proper safeguards. We have Foreign and Commonwealth questions on Tuesday 14 May. I encourage him to ask his specific question then.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I know that we will all welcome the fact that the Transport Committee is conducting an inquiry into road safety, but it strikes me that it has been a heck of a long time since we have had a debate on road safety issues in this House. One particular concern of mine is excessive speeding and driving bans, or in many cases the lack of driving bans. I can think of some examples in north Wales—a car going at 122 miles an hour and a bike going at 138 miles an hour. I believe that they were both on single carriageway roads in rural areas. I am really concerned about this issue. Will the Leader of the House please consider having a debate on it in this Chamber in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises the incredibly important issues not only of top speeds on single-lane roads but of people speeding through towns, past schools and so on, creating dangerous situations. I absolutely encourage her to go to the Backbench Business Committee and seek a debate, so that all right hon. and hon. Members can make their views known.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma—DIPG—is the second most common type of primary high-grade brain tumour in children, affecting around 40 children each year in the United Kingdom. It is not amenable to surgery, and radiotherapy is only for palliative purposes. Only 10% of children affected survive longer than two years after diagnosis, and that prognosis has not improved in the past 40 years. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on the need to increase funding for research into DIPG, to further improve and enhance recognition and treatment of this devastating illness as we approach DIPG Awareness Day on 17 May?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. Quite often in the House, colleagues raise rare and unusual forms of cancers and other

illnesses, and it is absolutely right that they do that. While we can all be proud of the significant increase in people surviving cancers in general, it is concerning, as she says, that those survival rates have not improved in many decades. Health Question Time is on Tuesday 7 May, and I encourage her to raise her issue directly with Ministers then.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the concerns of the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) about clergy visas, which have also been raised by priests in my constituency. While churches are a critical part of our communities, many other aspects are also important, particularly our high streets. I commend Scran, a new café on Alexandra Parade in my constituency. It won the Scottish entertainment and hospitality award for best café in Scotland, despite being open for only seven months, which is a great achievement for its staff after all their work. Could we have a debate in Government time about the critical role of high streets and small businesses in our communities, and what we can do on business rates and VAT restrictions on those businesses to maximise the environment in which they can flourish and form an important part of our town centres, high streets and cities?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises pieces of great news from his constituency. I congratulate the café he mentions for its contribution. He is absolutely right that thriving high streets and community hubs are a vital part of all our lives, and he is right to pay tribute to his constituents. The Government are determined to ensure that we do everything we can, through our advisory council and our reductions in business rates and so on, to support our high streets. I recommend that he seek a Westminster Hall debate, so that all hon. Members can share their experiences.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Leader of the House may be aware of the Parliamentary Review, which is apparently a key fixture in the political calendar; it is so important that the foreword is provided each year by the Prime Minister or the Chancellor. Staff of Alite Systems, in my constituency, have been asked to appear as experts in this year's review and to attend a grand ball full of political dignitaries. However, the reality is that they are being asked to purchase a £3,300 advertorial. Can we have a debate on the merits of the Prime Minister and politicians associated with this publication being involved in what is, frankly, a money-making exercise?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that sounds of concern. I am sure he will have taken this up directly, in his own way, with the Prime Minister's office. However, I think it is absolutely right that Ministers write forewords for important documents and reviews. He has not mentioned the purpose of this particular one, but I am sure he will find a way to perhaps raise a parliamentary question about its appropriateness.

World Immunisation Week

12.34 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Immunisation Week.

It is an enormous privilege and pleasure to stand here for the first time as Secretary of State, but it is a deeper pleasure to be in the Chamber talking about immunisation. Immunisation is an extraordinary story that illustrates why international development really matters, how complicated it can be, in public policy terms, to pull off, and how important it is to be able to communicate to the public and others how, in the end, preventing the terrible loss of a child from polio can be connected right the way back to scientific research, businesses, international co-operation, and very brave doctors and health workers on the ground.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I be the first person in the Chamber to warmly welcome the Secretary of State to his new post? It is a delight sometimes to see a square peg in a square hole—if that does not sound rude, somehow or other. I warmly congratulate him on his new job.

Is not one of the most disturbing developments of recent years the fact that there are politicians around the world, in some of the most advanced societies, who preach an anti-immunisation message, which will lead to the unnecessary death of children?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. It is grossly irresponsible and, I am afraid, profoundly and disturbingly misleading, and even ignorant, to go around doing that. It ends up stoking public paranoia and fear, and leads to the unnecessary loss of life. From the beginning, the story of immunisation—and, indeed, the story of international development—has often been about challenging public perceptions and irrational fears, and following through. There are reasons for that. The heart of what immunisation is carries within it the seeds of that challenge. The basic idea of immunisation is, of course, to make somebody sick to make them better. From the very beginning, that has involved not only challenging public fears, but something that Governments find quite difficult: taking risks and working, genuinely and collaboratively, internationally.

Although we tend to pat ourselves on the back a great deal in this country, immunisation was, of course, not a European discovery at all. It was a Chinese discovery of the early 16th century. Chinese public health officials, or their 16th century equivalents, went into villages and sneezed into people's mouths, which rapidly reduced the mortality rate by tenfold or twentyfold. The normal mortality rate for smallpox was 20% to 30%, but remember that that reduced mortality rate under the new technique was still between 0.5% and 2%, so the procedure was very risky. Moving on with my international point, this immunisation practice arrived in Britain in about 1700.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) *rose*—

Rory Stewart: I give way to the honourable and learned doctor.

Dr Whitford: I, too, welcome the Secretary of State and congratulate him on his new post. It was actually a bit more dramatic than that: variolation involved cutting into veins and putting in smallpox scabs. That did indeed make people ill, and then they were immune. However, modern vaccines do not do that—they are no longer based on making someone ill. There is a fallacy that the flu vaccine will give people flu, but it does not. Modern vaccination is no longer based on giving someone an illness to protect them from worse.

Rory Stewart: Moving rapidly forward, the key to this is scientific advances whereby things become safer all the time. Immunisation moved from China to Britain, and in 1799 in Britain, there was the development of vaccination—in other words, the use of cows to do this. There were then the developments of Louis Pasteur in the 1880s in France, and then of course the amazing developments in the post-war period.

Throughout all that, we see something that really matters for the Department for International Development, a Department that co-operates with other countries and puts science at its heart. This story, which in its early history links China to Britain, Britain to France and France to the United States, continues today with Gavi, the global alliance. In all this work, the same themes occur at an accelerated rate. We have, remarkably, achieved the eradication of smallpox, and we are close to a 99% success rate on wild polio. But it is on Ebola that we see most clearly today the security risks, the scientific advances, the complexity and the international co-operation.

In 2015-16, DFID, working with other international partners, began to develop—initially in Guinea, and then, through academic partnerships, in the United States and Canada—the first attempts at inoculation against Ebola. Ebola, like all such diseases, finds no borders, and that has a direct connection with justifying the international aid budget here in the United Kingdom. Perhaps the easiest way of explaining to people why we have an international development budget is to point out that had that disease taken off in Liberia and Sierra Leone, given modern transport mechanisms it would have found its way rapidly to Europe and ultimately to the United Kingdom, and people would have been dying here.

That investment, which seems quite complex, and which often—particularly in the case of diseases such as wild polio—involves spending a surprising amount of money on tracking down the last few cases, is the kind of investment that only a Government can make and only an international aid budget can provide. Why? Because this is not a normal economic case. If an individual were asked whether they wanted to spend a lot of money on inoculating themselves, they might say no, and on the basis of a traditional cost-benefit analysis, one might ask, in relation to that individual, “Why are you spending so much money?” The point is, however, that that individual is part of a community, and that community is part of a broader nation. If the disease takes off, it will begin to infect hundreds of millions of people. At that stage, significant investment in preventing someone from getting polio, for example in rural Afghanistan or Pakistan—there can be quite surprising investments, ending up with the spending of hundreds of thousands of dollars on tracking down the last few cases—is critical if it actually prevents millions of people from getting the disease.

[Rory Stewart]

The same applies to Ebola. The issue raised by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about how we deal with fears is central to the tragic death of a very courageous doctor, who was killed when bringing a vaccine and treatment to people in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He originally came from Cameroon. Part of the same story is the killing of public health nurses on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border when they were trying to inoculate people against polio.

In the solution to this, then, is human courage, and in the driver of this is human suffering, but in the broader story are things that we have to communicate. Pharmaceutical companies, which we are often nervous about, can play an incredibly positive role if properly harnessed. Merck, which is developing some of this vaccination, has a structured contract with Gavi to deliver 350,000 vaccinations, on hold, at any one time. We have reduced the price of vital drugs from \$4 to \$2, which means that we have access to twice as many people. We have worked out how to use the fact that Britain is the global leader in Gavi. Britain puts in 25% of the funds for this extraordinary global programme of vaccination. The second biggest contributor is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the third biggest is the Government of the United States.¹ All that makes our money go much further, and tied into it are the World Health Organisation and some of the best universities and researchers in the world.

In telling the story of immunisation, we are telling the story of international development, and in telling the story of international development, we are telling the story of international co-operation: the fact that researchers from China and Europe can come together; the fact that brave health workers on the ground in eastern DRC risk their lives delivering vaccines; and the fact that a single child in eastern DRC who was saved from death, with their family saved from the horror that they would have experienced, can be traced back to money spent by British taxpayers, alongside people from other countries. It has meant bringing in the private sector, the best academics in the world and, above all, brutal, bruising practicality: how do we make sure that the refrigeration is right in eastern DRC so that the vaccines survive in transport; how do we get the electricity to ensure that the vaccination works; how do we deal with communities, politics and conflict to get to the front line; and how do we understand the political and economic structures on the ground so that we can make sure that the local mullah or village chief in Afghanistan will not block the arrival of the polio vaccine in that community?

Get all those things right and we protect Britain from dying from Ebola. Get all those things right in the world of climate change and we can potentially save the planet. Get all those things right and we can show how our international aid budget can touch everyone in this country, re-energise a younger generation, and prove that if we can sometimes do less than we hope, we can do much more than we fear.

12.45 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I genuinely welcome the new Secretary of State to his role. In his first two weeks as Prisons Minister he visited both the prisons in my constituency, which I thought showed a

great sense of responsiveness to what was needed at the time. I hope that something along the same lines, and a close working relationship, will feature in his new role. I am also delighted that he used his first speech as Secretary of State to advance a robust intellectual defence of our aid spending, and I congratulate him on that.

We know why immunisations matter and why today's debate is so important. Vaccines are, quite simply, a matter of life and death. Between 2 million and 3 million lives are saved every year thanks to immunisations, and in recent decades they have drastically reduced suffering caused by infectious diseases that were once commonplace. Smallpox was completely eradicated in 1977 through a global vaccination programme, and the world is now close to eradicating a second disease, polio. My own grandad contracted polio and lived with it for 27 years, and when I was growing up I heard a great deal about the impact of a disease that paralyses the people affected by it. I pay tribute to one of my constituents, Andy Gilliland, a polio survivor who has lobbied alongside the One Last Push campaigners; I am delighted to have become one of the campaign's polio champions since he lobbied me.

Thanks to successful vaccination schemes the world over, today's generation and our children do not have to suffer from the diseases that were all too commonplace for our grandparents. Immunisations are not only saving lives, but are a cornerstone of global health security. They are vital to the achievement of several of the United Nations sustainable development goals and to ensuring that no one is left behind. They also provide a vital gateway to wider public health services. If you are a child or parent being given a vaccination, this may be the first time that you interact with the public health system. The simple act of being immunised can boost your chances of going on to access important services such as family planning, birth registration, testing and screening, and regular healthcare. For the hardest to reach, immunisation can be the start of proper inclusion in the public health system.

I am proud that the UK's Department for International Development is a world leader in global health. That has been possible only because of the House's commitment to spending 0.7% of our country's income on overseas aid and to maintaining an independent DFID. However, I want us to do more. Twenty million children around the world are still under-vaccinated. Fewer than 10% of children in the world's poorest countries receive all the vaccinations that they need. In Africa alone, more than 30 million children under five suffer from vaccine-preventable diseases every year, and more than half a million of those cases result in death.

Sadly, in recent years global immunisation rates have stalled, and in some places have even decreased. Key barriers to full immunisation include the high prices of vaccines, and a growing movement of vaccine hesitancy. It is clear that we still have our work cut out if we are to reach all children, across the world, with the essential vaccinations that they need and deserve.

As the Secretary of State said, next year Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, will be up for replenishment at a conference hosted by the Government here in London, and this year the Global Polio Eradication Initiative is being replenished at a conference in Abu Dhabi. The UK should make significant pledges to make sure both are fully funded, and should make the pledges promptly enough to encourage other donors to do likewise. I therefore

1. [Official Report, 7 May 2019, Vol. 659, c. 6MC.]

hope the Minister will use today's debate to update the House on the Government's replenishment plans for both of these funds.

Let me be clear, however, that replenishing funds is only one step to ensuring all children are vaccinated; we can and must do more. Gavi is leaving millions of under-vaccinated children in middle-income countries without all the vaccinations they need. That is because the scheme uses a country's GDP to determine whether it is eligible for support. This is a crude way to assess need: a country's GDP does not take into account the specific needs of that country and its population's health needs. It fails to take into account the state of its health system, and, crucially, GDP measures do not take into account in-country inequalities.

Rory Stewart *indicated assent.*

Dan Carden: The Secretary of State is nodding, and I appreciate that.

This means many of the world's poorest children are in fact living in middle-income countries with a GDP that makes them ineligible for either official development assistance or Gavi support. I hope the Secretary of State will listen to the all-party group on vaccines for all, which has called for Gavi to bring about new criteria beyond a country's GDP.

Let me now turn to another major threat to universal immunisation coverage. It is a threat that we face both here in the UK and right across the world: vaccine hesitancy, a phenomenon that the World Health Organisation has not only warned is on the rise but has now identified as one of the top 10 major threats to global health for 2019. This year's theme of "Protected together: vaccines work!" also points to the difficulties in this area.

Since 2014, the number of countries reporting hesitancy has steadily increased, and in 2017 only 14 countries out of 194 reported no vaccine hesitancy. In England, dangerous false stories about immunisations are routinely spread on social media. The likes of YouTube and Facebook are failing to clamp down properly on those who peddle these lies. We must take tougher action and tell the truth about immunisations because the increasing refusal of vaccines has been described by the head of NHS England as a "growing public health timebomb."

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's recently published online harms consultation needs to include the beefing up of this, and that Facebook and others must be held responsible if they allow such anti-immunisation scare stories to be included on their platforms, because, as we are seeing in America, this is risking and costing lives?

Dan Carden: I agree with my hon. Friend wholeheartedly. We must take tougher action to tell the truth about immunisations, and we need to act fast with global partners if we are to avert the destructive potential of this. According to UNICEF, half a million British children are not vaccinated against measles, and in 2018 there were 966 cases of measles across the country, more than double the number in 2017. This is a worrying and sharp rise that requires our attention.

That is why my colleagues in Labour's health team have committed to a vaccination action plan that includes getting tough with the big social media companies that

are providing a platform that is fuelling a new public health crisis. Labour wants to see the £800 million of public health cuts reversed, more health visitors recruited to provide proper health advice backed by science to parents and GPs given the investment they need to drive up vaccination rates.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important point about the massive positive impacts of public health campaigns, and I am reminded of the great public health drive in Glasgow to eradicate tuberculosis from the city in the 1960s, a public awareness campaign that was a huge success. But is my hon. Friend aware that this creeping cynicism around the positive benefits of immunisation is a critical national emergency, and does he agree that it is worth exploring making it a criminal offence not to immunise our children? Perhaps we should explore whether that is a necessary step given the critical nature of this.

Dan Carden: I agree with my hon. Friend. This is absolutely critical, and our discussion shows the importance of raising awareness in such debates.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making some extremely good points. Does he agree that it is also important to be positive and show the huge impact of past vaccination programmes? In the 1940s, diphtheria killed 3,500 children a year in the UK, but it now kills approximately zero. Showing what has happened in the past and how beneficial it has been for our children will, combined obviously with other measures that the hon. Gentleman has referred to, give us the confidence that vaccination is indeed the way forward to protect our children.

Dan Carden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and the figures in graphs and elsewhere in documentation show the remarkable impact that vaccinations have had. We must carry that story forward.

We know from this experience how vital universal public services are for ensuring that everyone in society, regardless of their income, can realise their right to a healthy life. The Labour party founded our national health service. We are today, like then, committed to a health service that is that publicly owned and publicly run and with universal access. Universal health systems are the building block for everything else: without them we cannot reach full immunisation coverage; without them we cannot protect all the population against the national security threat of disease; without them we cannot reach the poorest and most marginalised in society with the care they need; and without them we cannot invest properly in the health of everyone equally, or deliver the fullest benefit for our society or our economy. And crucially, without universal public health systems, countries cannot fight the soaring inequality that now exists the world over.

There is no greater public asset here in the UK than the NHS, and so too around the world people value and look to the founding principle of the UK's NHS: health care available to all, regardless of wealth. And so I want to briefly mention two important commitments that the Opposition have made to how we would deliver aid and development differently.

[Dan Carden]

Aid is, or at least should be, delivered on the basis of poverty reduction. The Labour party has committed to a second, dual goal—to use aid to tackle inequality, too—and we know there is no better way of bringing about greater equality than universal public services in health, education and other key services. It is a tragedy that while we have our national health service—our own best-loved institution—created by the post-war Labour Government, this Government sometimes use UK aid to export to developing countries the kind of botched privatisation models that have done so much damage in the UK in recent years, instead of helping those countries to secure their own universal public health services.

I have a simple message: as DFID Secretary I would use UK aid to work alongside communities and civil society groups across the global south who are fighting for their own universal public services, and I would use DFID's resources to work in partnership with their Governments to build and strengthen them.

World Immunisation Week is a chance to celebrate the work being done to protect people from vaccine-preventable diseases and to highlight the challenges ahead and the collective action needed. This international awareness week promotes the core message that the immunisation of every child is vital to prevent diseases and protect life. Immunisations are one of the most successful and cost-effective global health interventions of our time. Delivering immunisations gives all of us in this House, as custodians of the UK's important position as a leader in global health, the simple, remarkable ability to save countless lives.

12.59 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to welcome my very good friend the Secretary of State for International Development to his new role. We all know what a tremendous background he brings to this role, with vast international experience beyond the majority of us, and we all know the dedication he has put into his previous ministerial roles, and we are certain that we will see this reflected in what he does with international development. I am delighted to see him in his place. I am also delighted by the further progress of his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), who is now Secretary of State for Defence. She did a terrific job at DFID, and I am really pleased to see her in a post for which I think she has always been destined, bearing in mind her background. She will do a great job there. It was a great pleasure to work with her.

Not unusually for me, I find myself largely in agreement with the speeches that have been made from both sides of the House. I should like to say little bit about a topic for which I had responsibility in the Department until relatively recently and to offer thanks to colleagues who have been so effective on this and who will give great support to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development.

First, a personal word: as some hon. Members know, I have a very personal connection with vaccination, which I never fail to bring out. My dad, who is watching this debate courtesy of the great medium of television, is a doctor. When I was a small boy, it was his responsibility as my doctor to provide me with polio jabs. In the old

days in the United Kingdom, we provided jabs for polio, not sugar lumps. Yes, I am that old. As my dad knows, we are talking serious needles; not the sort of thing that children get these days. These were really serious needles that bubbled away in the steriliser in the corner of the surgery, and they absolutely terrified this small boy. My dad had to chase me round his room. I would hide under the desk, eventually I would be brought out to see all the things that were meant to entertain me as he put the needle in. Then he did it. The lesson I learned from that was that if my dad, who loves me very much, could inflict a degree of pain on his crying little boy, there had to be a really, really good reason for it. And of course there was. Like the grandfather of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), I was spared polio, as were the vast majority of my generation and subsequent generations, because of that vaccination. That first early introduction to vaccination and needles, and the visits with my dad to hospitals that I thoroughly resented for many years—until I did a stint at the Department of Health—have stayed with me, so vaccination matters to me. It is an important thing.

My father subsequently got involved with Rotary International, and any discussion of vaccination and global health has to include a mention of the contribution that Rotary has made to the near-eradication of polio. The United Kingdom remains absolutely supportive of that policy, and we must not get so close to the line but then fail to drive it over. The contribution of Rotary International and its members in this country must always be recognised, and we should thank them most sincerely.

Jeremy Lefroy: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I would like to pay tribute to Rotary as well. I remember when my family was living in Tanzania and my daughter was born there, she was vaccinated against polio through a programme sponsored and funded by Rotary International, as were millions of other children in that part of the world. Rotary deserves huge credit for what it has done, and I thank the Rotary clubs across the United Kingdom for the money they have raised for that programme.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks for all of us in the House in thanking Rotary.

I also want to thank one or two more people while I am on my feet. The first is the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations for all, who will no doubt speak later in the debate. She makes a tremendous contribution on these matters in the House on all available occasions. I also want to thank Danny Graymore, who heads up the global funds team and is our senior DFID rep in Geneva, for all the work that he puts into this, as well as the team of colleagues in DFID who work so hard on this. I offer my deep appreciation to them for all that they have provided for me in the last couple of years.

I also want to thank Gavi's chief executive, Seth Berkley, who does a remarkable job, and Henrietta Fore at UNICEF and her team in the UK. They do a tremendous job in vaccinating and in providing the vaccines and the basis for what both Front-Bench speakers have talked about. UNICEF vaccinates half the world's children and saves 3 million lives a year. Since Gavi came into existence, it has vaccinated some 700 million

children and 10 million lives have been saved, for the reasons that have been set out. We could not do without them.

Nor could we do without the health workers who are out there doing their job but, as those on both Front Benches have mentioned, they are under increasing threat. A specific example is Pakistan, where work is being done on polio. There has been a string of attacks in recent years, with seven policemen being killed in Karachi recently while trying to protect polio workers. In February 2015, four kidnapped polio workers were found dead near Qetta. In June 2015, 15 were killed by a suicide bomb outside a polio vaccination centre. Four were killed in 2014 in Qetta, and in 2012, five were killed in Karachi and Peshawar. This is not just about the threat of intimidation to health workers in different parts of the world; it does actually result in their injury and death. We in this country should always remember what it is like in some of those places. We should remember how important those people consider their work to be and why they consider it to be of such benefit to their communities that they would take such extraordinary risks.

I am proud of the part that the United Kingdom plays in Gavi, the global vaccine alliance. It brings together the private and public sectors in a shared goal of creating equal access to new and underused vaccines for children in the world's poorest areas. It has strategic goals, which are all of importance to the United Kingdom and illustrate why we support it. The first is to ensure equitable uptake and coverage of vaccination. The second is to ensure effectiveness and efficiency as part of a strengthened health system. The third is to be part of the sustainability of a national vaccine programme.

At this point, I want to comment on what the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton said about DFID's role in health systems abroad. This cannot all be done purely through the support of public sector health systems. The combination of private and public in health is absolutely vital, but he can be reassured that the determination of the UK Government and DFID is to strengthen universal healthcare systems. Money and support for healthcare must go into that, but there is a combination of public and private, as was made clear at a meeting with UNICEF in New York in September. It is a partnership, but this does not contradict the fundamental principle on which I am sure the hon. Gentleman and I are united.

Jeremy Lefroy: Does my right hon. Friend agree that state co-ordination is sometimes needed, but that there are different systems? If we look at Zambia, we see that the Churches provide tremendous health coverage throughout the country, but they do so in co-ordination with the state so that everybody knows, as far as is possible, that they have coverage locally. Clearly, they have a long way to go, but they do a tremendous job in co-operation with the Government there.

Alistair Burt: Absolutely, and I think that that is the model to take forward for the development of healthcare systems. We need to bear in mind the nature of that relationship, because it will be absolutely key.

I am proud of the United Kingdom's support for Gavi. We are its largest donor, and we are

“currently responsible for 25% of its budget. The UK has committed £1.44 billion to Gavi from 2016 to 2020, including funding to its

innovative finance mechanisms. This investment fully delivers on the UK commitment to immunise 76 million children and save 1.4 million lives by 2020.”

I am grateful to the team for the briefing it gave me for the meeting with the all-party group, which I have kept. Credit where it is due: that was a quote from the Department's own briefing. The replenishment conference is coming up. There was very little I could say about that when I was a Minister, but speaking from the Back Benches, I can say to the Secretary of State that I am sure we will sort it out and I hope he will be really, really generous. He can be absolutely sure that I will be on his tail if we do not make a serious commitment to Gavi, because it really delivers. Seth Berkley delivers for us, and the visit to Bognor Regis in the past few months when he saw the work being done here was really important. I hope the Secretary of State will bear that in mind.

Vaccination does more than the obvious function of preventing diseases in children. Its background, not only in the health system but in the development of countries, is fundamental. A healthy child goes to school, is able to learn, and grows into a productive adult. Unless that basis for immunisation is clear, so much development work is stymied right at the beginning. Immunisation is part of a sustainable, integrated health system. The reckoning is that the overall impact is that every £1 spent on immunisation leads to a £16 saving in terms of subsequent health care bills and people's inability to interact effectively in the community.

Before I deal with the threats, I want to remind the House of what this is all about, and I will talk briefly about measles, because measles outbreaks have suddenly returned in recent times. The tendency in the United Kingdom is to accept measles as a rudimentary childhood suffering that is easy to go through, so the misery of measles is forgotten. A recent piece in *Forbes Magazine* talked about the problems of anti-vaccination and included a quote from Roald Dahl. His oldest daughter, Olivia, died of measles in 1962 at the age of seven, and the article quotes his words:

“one morning, when she was well on the road to recovery, I was sitting on her bed showing her how to fashion little animals out of coloured pipe-cleaners, and when it came to her turn to make one herself, I noticed that her fingers and her mind were not working together and she couldn't do anything. ‘Are you feeling all right?’ I asked her. ‘I feel all sleepy,’ she said. In an hour, she was unconscious. In twelve hours she was dead. The measles had turned into a terrible thing called measles encephalitis and there was nothing the doctors could do to save her.”

That is how real it is. When we talk about vaccination and take on those who are concerned about it, that is the reason.

Measles has largely died out in the United Kingdom, but it is coming back in different places, and it will come back here unless we challenge it. The United States declared measles eliminated in 2000, but there have been 695 cases this year, mostly concentrated in three outbreaks and mostly concentrated in small tightly knit communities. The rise in measles cases in both the developing world and the developed world is really frightening, and it must be challenged.

When I was first made aware of the rising figures, I had a discussion with my ministerial team about how to deal with it. I have to say that I was pretty gung-ho and thought, “We've really got to take this on aggressively.”

[Alistair Burt]

The team, to their credit, tried to scale me down from that, saying, “There are different reasons for the threat to vaccination, and you need to handle them differently.” That was good advice, and my sense is that the challenges are as follows. The first is the straightforward matter of incomplete coverage—the millions of children who do not currently get vaccinated. Gavi needs to look at where it is developing its resources, but it is committed to go to the poorest areas, and we need to keep that up. We need to deal with the areas where coverage is not great, but there are other threats, too.

We can divide anti-vaccination into several categories. First, there are religious reasons. I am unaware of any tenet in any major religion that suggests that vaccination is inherently wrong. It is quite the reverse. As a practising Christian, I believe that one of the revelations of God has been to give us the skills to discern what harms us and what helps us. That is where science and medicine come in, and vaccination is part of that. We have been given the skills to be able to help our God-given children and keep them healthy.

No major religion contradicts that, but sects in various religious denominations are against it. When we do get an outbreak, such as in an Orthodox Jewish community in New York, it runs around quickly. The United States has seen recent outbreaks in the Orthodox Jewish community, among Slavic migrants, in the Amish community in Ohio and the Somali community in Minnesota, because measles spreads quickly in a small, closed group and then it affects anyone else they come into contact with outside who has not been immunised. The United Kingdom should urgently work with religious leaders worldwide and say, “Please make a declaration to ensure that none of your leaders—none of those who promote a faith under your auspices—are in any way in any doubt about the value and importance of vaccination and say that there is no religious tenet against it.”

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of the terrible measles outbreak in Israel? Many rabbis, including those in Orthodox communities, have come forward to point out that the Torah talks about the preservation of one’s own life and the lives of others. They are trying to counter what has almost become a habit, rather than something that is based on holy writings.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have not been able to discern whether a poor El Al flight attendant who fell seriously ill in the past couple of weeks has recovered, but I am aware of that outbreak. Religious leaders, rather than Government figures or civil spokespeople, need to make the case. We can deal with the religious factor by understanding the fears and trying to descale them so that no one can go to a religious group and find some reason to campaign against vaccination.

A second reason might be conspiracy, which has certainly been an issue in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where those trying to disrupt the vaccination movement say that it is western influenced and designed to harm. All that can be done in response to that is more and more information and transparency, and Governments do have a responsibility there. It must be made absolutely

clear that health workers are not to be used for any other purpose, so that there is no risk of any political contamination. We are aware that it has happened, but it must not happen again. If health workers are not to be targets, they must purely be health workers.

Thirdly, there are medical reasons why a vaccination may not be appropriate for a particular child. These are exceptionally rare, and there is scientific evidence to back that up and it must be handled purely through the medical profession. We have been asked this past fortnight to listen to the science. Whether on climate change or anything else, we should listen to the science. When it comes to medical reasons why vaccination may not be right, listen to the science and recognise how incredibly rare those reasons are. Someone is much more likely to protect their child by vaccination and immunisation than not.

The last reason is misinformation, which is really scary. This is part of the phenomenon of people trying to pull down authoritative sources of information—the mainstream media, experts or whatever. If someone wants to disregard something to try and minimise its impact, it is becoming popular and easy to claim that their own personal experience or anecdotal experience somehow trumps what people are being told by those from scientific backgrounds who are making a serious case. We are seeing an awful lot of that.

The issue follows from the false, discredited and debunked information about the MMR vaccine that came from a doctor in the United Kingdom some years ago, which is used by so many. The issue seems to be extremely prevalent in the United States, where picking up ideas that have little foundation but can be used to inflame people seems to be almost a way of life for some. It is seriously dangerous and anti-expert. It is based on a false dilemma between liberty and the state, which we can see creeping into arguments here on social media. It is all highly dangerous.

Now, there may be other ways of combating the other problems that I have mentioned, but I am afraid that we do have to be aggressive on misinformation. We have to be vigorous and gung-ho. It is nonsense, and we must be clear about taking it on. False information and those who provide it must be exposed, and those who have fallen victim to it must be understood and given as much information as possible.

I recently saw a good piece on the “Victoria Derbyshire” programme in which a couple who were uncertain about vaccinating their child were given the opportunity to question people about it and, in the end, they came to a different conclusion. It shows how worried people are, and we should understand that, but there are answers to their worries and we should not be afraid of making sure people have those answers. We must be clear about those who are deliberately spreading misinformation, who are connected to arguments that have no basis or who are trying to bring together issues of liberty and public health, which is particularly prevalent in the United States, where almost anything provided by the state is somehow suspect—a view I do not hold, as most in this House know. Public health programmes are good, and those who say it is all the state trying to control people are just wrong. That has to be challenged by every means possible.

Immunisation is good. It works and it has proved itself. It is one of the building blocks of world strength and world health and we lose it at our peril. Recent years have taught us that, just because we think something has become part of mainstream culture and is accepted by everyone, it does not mean that the argument does not have to be made over and over again. We have lost valuable things in recent years by not vigorously making the argument for them because we thought everyone understood the argument—I will not go into detail—but we are not going to lose the argument on health and immunisation. If we do so, we would put ourselves at risk. We know it is safe and we know it is good, so let us not leave it to others to make the argument. Let us make the argument ourselves. I know that I can completely count on the Secretary of State and the Minister of State to do that job, and I know that I can rely on this House to do the same.

1.21 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome this debate in Government time on such an important topic as World Immunisation Week. It is just a wee bit tragic that it has been scheduled today, clashing with local government elections, and that therefore the Chamber is so empty when I am sure that many Members would have liked to have taken part.

This topic is of particular interest to me, and I am glad to see in the Chamber other members of the all-party group on vaccinations for all, which I chair. As the Secretary of State mentioned, the history of vaccines goes back long before Jenner to the Chinese empire. Indeed, it was common practice to carry out variolation in the Ottoman empire, too. There is documentation from travellers and the East India Company going back 100 years before Jenner.

At that time, smallpox epidemics were common and a third of people who caught it died. It is hard to get our heads around those numbers. Smallpox left survivors very scarred and damaged, and Jenner followed up the observation that milkmaids were noted for having beautiful skin. Of course there was the fallacy that milkmaids bathed in milk, and there is all the imagery of Cleopatra having bathed in milk, but it is simply that milkmaids tended to catch cowpox, which protected them from smallpox. The word “vaccine” comes from the Latin for “cow.”

Smallpox was declared eradicated across the world in 1980, and we are within touching distance of eradicating polio. Eradicating a disease from the world is an incredible achievement and could not be done using any tool other than vaccination.

The vaccinations for polio came in after five huge epidemics, which were visible here in the UK, between 1945 and 1960. Instead of about 500 or 600 young children a year being affected by polio, the figure went up to 5,000 or 6,000, with about 750 deaths. We got the Salk vaccine, the injectable vaccine described by the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). I was not quite born when that vaccine came in, and I was lucky enough to get the Sabin oral sugar cube version. The oral vaccine had the huge advantage of being able to vaccinate large numbers of children very quickly and, because it was excreted in faeces, it spread protection within communities—it was an accelerated way of carrying out vaccination.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative was established in 1988 and, as has been mentioned, the Rotary Club played a huge part in the UK. At that time, there were still 35,000 cases worldwide every year. Some 2.5 billion children were vaccinated under the programme, and at least 10 million cases of paralysis have been prevented.

Last year, there were 35 cases, and as we have heard, they were predominantly in difficult areas on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where a friend of mine worked for UNICEF for several years—the area is very challenging. The other area where we are not sure what is happening is northern Nigeria, because it is difficult to get data. There has always been this problem of warzones, of extreme poverty and even of communities that we hardly know exist.

The last case of wild polio in the UK was in 1984, and at that time we changed back from the oral vaccine to the injectable vaccine because it uses a dead strain that is not attenuated or weakened and cannot induce polio. As has been said, the UK can be proud of being the lead contributor to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and to the global health fund—the UK is a big supporter of many of these programmes.

The last 10 years, which are being called the decade of vaccines, have seen at least 20 million lives saved, and vaccination is the single most successful health intervention ever. People will say that that is clean water, a civil engineering intervention that does bring health, but if we look at the returns and the lives saved, vaccination is even more successful.

The problem is that uptake is falling. We are lucky in Scotland to have managed to keep the uptake of childhood vaccinations above the World Health Organisation’s recommended level of 95%, which is critical to creating community protection for children who are very young, for babies who are only a few months old and are not yet vaccinated, and for those who are vulnerable for various reasons and cannot be vaccinated.

Unfortunately, the uptake of many childhood vaccines has dropped below 95% in England because of what is described as “vaccine hesitancy”. As has been mentioned, the UNICEF report refers to about half a million children in the UK being unvaccinated. That is a dangerously large pool of children and, now, of young people and perhaps even middle-aged adults who are exposed to catching these diseases.

People often put that down to the anti-vax campaign but, actually, Public Health England’s research suggests that the situation is much more complicated. When it surveyed parents, it found that only quite a small percentage had a strong anti-vaccination feeling. There are also issues of complacency and of access, which we need to tackle so that we shrink it down, as well as the need to tackle head on the fake news we see on social media.

There is complacency simply because vaccines are a victim of their own success. People do not see the awful impact of these conditions. As the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire mentioned, people think of measles as trivial, like a 24-hour flu—they have forgotten what it means. People do not see many cases of polio, but I remember it from my childhood. I was lucky enough to visit vaccination projects in Ethiopia with Results UK. When we pulled in to get petrol, we saw a young man, aged about 30, with obvious flaccid paralysis from polio, and it hit me between the eyes that

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

that is something that we do not see. If people saw the results of polio, they would never think of withholding the vaccine from their children.

We think that there are not great risks from infectious diseases and that antibiotics will treat them, but air travel brings the risk of pandemics. The Secretary of State mentioned Ebola, and when we had a huge Ebola outbreak a few years ago, work was started on a vaccine that has been used to prevent recent outbreaks from reaching the levels we saw in Sierra Leone five or six years ago.

It is important that we realise that antibiotics are not a solution. They do not work on viruses. The only option to prevent dangerous viruses is to use vaccines, and there is also increasing antibiotic resistance.

On access, as the shadow Secretary of State mentioned, across the world we are patting ourselves on the back for the fact that in poorer countries 85% of children are getting the basic vaccines. However, we have stalled—the figure is not climbing and has been at that level for a long time. When the all-party group produced its report on vaccination for all in the developing world, I was shocked to find that only 7% of children in such countries are given the full WHO 11 vaccines.

As global players prepare their next strategies and funding plans, and with the eradication of polio on the horizon, this is a time to step back and think about how we are going to help, across the world, to eliminate more of these diseases. We need to aim for the fully immunised child. We need to come up with strategies to deal with remote areas and warzones, and research is a crucial part of that. It is brilliant to read that the trial of a new malaria vaccine is beginning in Malawi. It is expected to be only 40% successful, which is quite weak for a vaccine. However, malaria is so widespread that it causes more than 400,000 deaths a year, so making 40% of children immune to it will, along with the other manoeuvres and actions being undertaken, such as the use of nets and anti-mosquito treatments, help to bring that number of deaths down.

We face access issues here in the UK. A busy parent may have several children and although the first baby may get all its immunisations, the second and third might not. That can be an issue in some of the religious communities that tend to have large families. Someone who is having their seventh, eighth or ninth baby may struggle to look after the others and get the new baby to its vaccinations. These people need easy access to their GP, nurse or health visitor, and those people need to have time to answer parents' concerns. We are talking about one of the first big decisions a parent will make about their child and they are seeing all this swilling anti-vaccine rhetoric on social media. They need to be able to ask questions, and then not to be patronised or dismissed, but to have their questions answered.

Although uptake in Scotland is high, at above 95%, when we drill down into the situation, we also see variations in areas of deprivation and in religious and cultural communities. We are therefore not complacent, and Scotland is embarking on a vaccination transformation programme, because keeping the rate high, and indeed improving it, will require concerted action. Sometimes this is about policy decisions. When the meningitis ACWY vaccine was introduced for 14-year-olds at school,

Scotland carried out a four-year catch-up, immunising 14 to 18-year-olds, whereas Wales did a two-year catch-up. Sadly, the advice in England was that teenagers, young adults and university students could go to see their GP. At a recent event, it was reported to me that uptake was only 40%—after all, how often are teenagers at their GP? This is not a concerted way to proceed. I do not know whether the decision was based on cost, but analysis of the cost-effectiveness of vaccines shows that they are so cost-effective as to justify any process that will actually raise uptake, even home visits to try to help a busy mother to get her babies vaccinated.

The third thing to mention is the anti-vax campaigns. As I say, Public Health England surveys suggest that we are talking about a relatively small proportion of people, and the situation does seem largely to stem from the MMR—measles, mumps and rubella—vaccine. The vaccine is 97% effective, but uptake fell dramatically after Andrew Wakefield's paper in 1998. He has since been struck off the medical register and his research was completely discredited, yet he is being given a platform in the US again as President Trump is promoting this in America. While uptake has improved, a cohort of teenagers were not given the MMR vaccine when they were babies and they are particularly vulnerable.

As Members have heard, people think that measles is trivial, like a 24-hour flu, yet 2.5 million people died from it in 1980. The figure came down to 73,000, its lowest point, in 2014, but last year the number of worldwide deaths from measles had increased to 110,000. Sadly this year, by only 2 May, 112,000 young people worldwide have lost their lives to measles. It is literally the most contagious disease, and if there is a local outbreak, 90% of unvaccinated people will get infected—it is unavoidable. People are incredibly infectious before there is a rash and the disease is spread simply in the air. During a recent outbreak in America, it was found that patient zero had infected more than 40 people before he even knew he had measles. Last year, we saw 82,000 cases in Europe and 72 deaths. There will a similar number of encephalitis cases, as was mentioned by the former Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire. The disease leaves children with brain damage, and it can leave them blind and deaf. Those are not minor sequelae, but life-threatening things.

In England, thankfully, there have not been any recent deaths due to the disease, but whereas in 2017 there were 259 cases, that had increased nearly fourfold to almost 1,000 last year. In Scotland, we had only two cases, and they involved people who had been travelling outwith the UK. That did not start an outbreak, because we had 97% uptake of the vaccine, so community protection was in place and there was no opportunity for the disease to spread. Community protection is crucial. I know that people use the term "herd immunity", which sounds awful, because it sounds like animals, but we are talking about community protection that allows us to protect our babies under one year old and our most vulnerable.

Even the uptake of the meningitis vaccine, something parents were campaigning for in this House just two years ago, is now only at 92.5% in England. Parents have an image of meningitis. They may know people who have had it and they will certainly have seen the appalling photographs of a child who is dying of meningitis and meningitis sepsis. In Scotland, the uptake is still at almost 96%, but we face the same issues of anti-vax

sentiment; for many vaccines, we also see a drifting down of a few points every year. We cannot allow that to become critical, so we need open dialogue with parents. We must not push their concerns under the carpet, as that simply breeds a greater sense of conspiracy and leaves them open to these terrible social media campaigns.

Just two years ago, the O'Neill report on antibiotic resistance highlighted how crucial antibiotics will be in the future in fighting antibiotic resistance. At the moment, antibiotic resistance causes 700,000 a year, but it is estimated that we will have 10 million a year if we reach a truly post-antibiotic world. As a surgeon, I can tell the House that many procedures simply cannot be carried out if we do not have the ability to protect with antibiotics.

Most antibiotics have a lifespan from development to resistance of less than 10 years—the longest have a lifespan of less than 20 years before we see resistance—yet we are using vaccines that are 70 or 90 years old and do not have resistance. It is crucial that we tackle this anti-vax idea if we are ever to tackle antibiotic resistance. This is particularly the case for respiratory infections, because that is where the greatest use of antibiotics is. There are three ways in which vaccines will help us on this. The first is simply by preventing a drug-resistant infection in the first place. Secondly, they will also prevent the secondary infections from viruses and other conditions, where, again, we are using antibiotics. Thirdly, they will help in respect of viruses, where antibiotics are not going to work in the first place. It is important to realise that vaccines are absolutely central to that battle.

We now see vaccines preventing cancer. A study in Scotland looked at the effect of HPV, partly because we had such good uptake of the HPV bivalent vaccine, and also because our cervical screening started at 20. That study has shown an 85% reduction in precancerous changes on the cervix, which means we are on the road to seeing a really dramatic fall in cervical cancer. Having watched one of my friends lose her daughter to cervical cancer at 28 just a few years ago, I know that eliminating that disease is worth it in its own right.

We will be moving on to directing vaccines against cancer itself, and there is huge potential in vaccines to be realised as we tackle other diseases and scourges, such as multi-drug-resistant TB, but we will realise that potential only if we can tackle the anti-vaccination campaign and re-establish real confidence among parents, not just here but around the world.

1.41 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is a fellow member of the all-party group on vaccinations for all.

Let me start by giving some context. Vaccinations have been around for a long time, with evidence showing that the first form of vaccination for smallpox occurred in China approximately 500 years ago, but it was not until 1796, when English physician Edward Jenner published evidence showing that his smallpox vaccine was effective, that vaccinations in the west really took off. Since that time, vaccinations have been hugely successful in preventing numerous infectious diseases. In the past 100 years, we have seen vaccinations successfully prevent diseases such as diphtheria, tetanus, anthrax, cholera, plague and typhoid, and more recently polio, measles, mumps and rubella.

Many of us will remember receiving vaccinations at school and thinking nothing of it, but the diseases that those vaccinations prevented could have killed us had we been born decades previously. It is safe to say that immunisation has stood the test of time as one of public health's most cost-effective interventions, saving up to 3 million lives every year. It is estimated that between 2011 and 2020, vaccines will avert an estimated 20 million deaths and 500 million cases of illness.

Since its inception in 2000, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, has contributed to the immunisation of more than 690 million children and helped to prevent more than 10 million deaths by virtue of its ability to acquire vaccines in bulk and to enable access to those vaccines by the world's poorest countries. The United Kingdom is one of Gavi's global partners, and through it UK funding has helped to immunise 76 million children against vaccine-preventable diseases, saving 1.4 million lives over the past 19 years.

There is no doubt that without sustained access to vaccines, disease outbreaks and pandemics would be inevitable. With the annual global cost of a severe pandemic being roughly \$570 billion, or approximately 0.7% of global income, vaccinations are the best financial option available for fighting pandemics. The World Health Organisation has estimated that between 2001 and 2020 the economic benefits of vaccination could reach up to \$820 billion.

On top of the distribution of and process of providing vaccines, and as well as the benefit of patients' physical immunity to various diseases, there is also a long-term benefit in the establishment of strong primary and public healthcare systems in places where vaccinations are a new introduction in the fight against diseases. With my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), I was recently part of a delegation to Ethiopia organised by RESULTS UK to look into how Ethiopia is tackling the prevention of tuberculosis. I was impressed by the health system there, in particular the excellent health extension workers, who provide immunisation in the more rural parts of Ethiopia, such as Bishoftu. They store vaccinations in solar-panelled refrigerators. The public health message conveyed by these dedicated health extension workers and community health workers was clearly working well, as were the distribution hubs that delivered the medicines to the outposts in the most efficient manner possible. The people of Ethiopia can be very proud of how they have reduced infectious diseases, and I am sure that they will strive to eradicate infectious diseases altogether.

Huge progress has been made in the virtual eradication of certain diseases through immunisation. For example, cases of wild polio have been reduced by 99.9% since 1988, down from 350,000 cases in 125 countries to just 33 cases in just two countries in 2018. Despite that, millions of children still miss out on basic vaccines, and one in 10 children around the world still receive no vaccines at all. According to figures from the advocacy organisation RESULTS UK, only 7% of children in the poorest 73 countries receive all 11 of the WHO-recommended vaccines, and almost 40% of unvaccinated children—approximately 8 million of them—live in fragile humanitarian settings.

The success of the prevention of infectious diseases through vaccinations has meant that the world has become a healthier, more prosperous place to live. As

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

infant mortality decreases, there is a risk in presuming that immunisation is a done deal and that political and financial investments could be put to better uses. We must make sure that we are not complacent in assuming that the problem has been solved, as complacency would be incredibly detrimental and risks putting millions of lives at risk. We are already seeing immunisation rates fall across many countries, as they reduce the funding for immunisation once they reach a certain level of reduction of infectious diseases, only to see rates then rise and so have to start again from the beginning.

We have the knowledge, resources and expertise to prevent millions of unnecessary deaths every year, yet in Africa alone more than 30 million children under five suffer from vaccine-preventable diseases every year, and more than half a million of those cases result in death. Disparities in immunisation coverage and equity across and within countries mean that children from the poorest families, from the most remote areas and from marginalised groups continue to be left behind, with only 7% of children in the poorest 73 countries receiving all 11 of the WHO vaccines.

For example, there is still a problem in getting vaccines to children who belong to pastoral, rural communities, because despite some of the best and most ingenious refrigeration techniques, it proves difficult over the last mile to keep the vaccinations at the right temperature so that they do not degrade. It is now essential that global immunisation efforts prioritise reaching those who are left behind and currently receive no vaccines at all. These children must be reached with vaccines and other health interventions to ensure that we meet the sustainable development goals and that the UK meets its “leave no one behind” targets.

A changing world means that a large proportion of under-immunised children are located in middle-income countries or fragile and conflict-affected states. We must ensure that our aid investments are fit for purpose and can reach these children, no matter where they are. The UK should be focused on reaching the poorest children, not the poorest countries. We must also not forget that malnourished children do not respond as well to vaccinations.

To ensure that vaccines are most effective, investment in infrastructure is vital. Strong and functioning health systems are required to deliver vaccines. It is essential that at the same time as investing in immunisation systems, we invest in strengthening health systems. This will enable more vaccines to reach more children and allow for the easier introduction of new vaccines. Gavi must continue and increase its investment in its work to strengthen health systems, which must be tailored to meet countries’ needs, and the UK must ensure that its bilateral work on health systems strengthening complements Gavi’s work. Investing in immunisation delivers on impact beyond immunisation to the whole health system, because reaching every child with free vaccines requires multiple points of contact with a health system and offers the opportunity to increase access to multiple health services, such as nutrition, making vaccines excellent value for money and central to achieving universal healthcare.

Polio funding has had a far-reaching impact by, for example, supporting 70% of global surveillance systems and funding health workers who deliver other essential

vaccines and health interventions. But polio eradication efforts could be compromised as countries struggle to mainstream polio essential functions into weak health systems. Domestic resource mobilisation and country ownership are key to managing the transition, yet in the 16 polio-priority countries, the average Government expenditure on routine immunisation within immunisation budgets is just 31%.

The UK must continue to prioritise polio transition as an issue to ensure not only a polio-free world, but that it is working with countries to help them understand and plan for a transition away from polio funding. I ask the Government to redouble their commitments to vaccinations and to make ambitious commitments to financing Gavi and the GPEI in their upcoming replenishments over the next 18 months and remain a leader in the global immunisation efforts.

I also ask the Government to ensure that the focus of global immunisation efforts is on reaching those left behind who currently receive no vaccines at all. We need to ensure that all investment in immunisations is focused on strengthening immunisation systems so that every child receives the full schedule of recommended vaccines.

Great progress has been made in eradicating infectious diseases, but we must not be complacent and we need to ensure that we keep our eye on the ball and do all we can to help those in the hardest to reach and poorest areas to get the vaccinations that they need.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank you for your indulgence and seek the forgiveness of Members present for this extremely worthy debate this afternoon for barging in mid-way through it with this point of order.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that earlier today the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Minister for the Cabinet Office responded on behalf of the Government to an urgent question concerning leaks from the National Security Council. The Minister said several times from the Dispatch Box that the Government would co-operate with any police investigation, but during those proceedings the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, made a public statement in which she said that the police could start proceedings of an investigation only if they were requested to do so by the Cabinet Office, the Minister for which was on his feet at that time. He must have known when he was on his feet responding to Parliament’s questions that that was the case—that there could be no co-operation with a police investigation if the Government had no intention of asking the police to proceed with one.

Given that there is a degree of being casual with the facts, shall we say, may I ask you whether the Minister could come back to the House to clarify exactly what the Government’s position is and what their role might be in getting what many in this place believe to be pivotal, which is the police to investigate the entire sorry affair?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It will be no surprise to him or to the House to hear me say that, of course, what Ministers say at the Dispatch Box is not the responsibility of the occupant of the Chair. From the Chair, I cannot answer the point that the hon.

Gentleman raises. What I will say is that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office is most assiduous in carrying out his duties in this House and is never shy about coming to the Chamber when there is a matter that he has to address. I have every confidence that if the hon. Gentleman uses the usual methods of taking forward the point that he has raised, and if there are matters to be discussed further by the Minister in question, I have no doubt that that Minister will assiduously as ever carry out his duties and come here to this House and answer those questions.

1.54 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is truly a pleasure to follow not only my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), but the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) and all the Front-Bench speakers, and I am sure that the summing up speeches will also be a pleasure to hear. It is truly a pleasure—a constructive pleasure—to be able to say during a debate in this place that there have been excellent contributions from everyone in the House. We have already come to various points of consensus and agreement. We can all point to things that need to be done, as well as to places that we can learn from and successes that we can celebrate. I will try to confine my remarks to areas that have not been covered by others—I always try really hard not to repeat things that other people have already said. I will focus mostly on antimicrobial resistance and the relationship with immunisation.

In the 1970s, when I was nine, I went to India for the very first time. Just like the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire, who described his experience with his dad, I can still remember the pain and discomfort of the vaccinations. I can also remember much more clearly the impact of seeing someone with elephantiasis when I reached India, and of meeting a relative who had been affected by one of the deadly diseases, which she had survived but which had left her permanently disabled, that I had been vaccinated against. It was a really visceral experience of the connection between the discomfort and pain of the vaccination and the consequences of not having access to that vaccination. It was also a real-life experience of inequality—the fact that I had received that vaccination because I was a UK citizen, and the people whom I met in India at that time were not getting those vaccinations. The experience transformed me and my understanding of what vaccinations did. Obviously, I was a child, so I was transformed from being a child without information to being a child with a really strong sense of the importance of vaccination. As an adult, I have been left with a real passion about the value of vaccinations, particularly in the way that they eradicate inequality as well as disease.

I am glad that this debate falls under the Department for International Development rather than the Department for Health and Social Care; it is an interesting place from which to be discussing this matter. Others have already provided examples of diseases, such as smallpox, and also polio, with its permanent debilitating effects. Polio is a good example of a disease that has been virtually eliminated in most countries through widespread vaccination, but still circulates partly because the symptoms are not easily recognised in certain parts of the world. The value of vaccination is so crucial in those diseases where early signs are not necessarily clear or where

infection can be transmitted before there are early signs, such as in the case of measles, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned.

While I cut out from my speech things that others have already said, I will also add something about the decision not to vaccinate a child. The hon. Lady was absolutely right: we must not patronise parents. If they have valid questions, they must be heard, and if they have worries, they must be understood. The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire mentioned certain specific examples of why we have to listen to people. Obviously, we can be gung-ho in our attitude, but not in our interactions. I apologise for being personal about this, but it occurred to me that if someone said to me right now that there was someone in the Lobby who could vaccinate me against ever having cancer again, I would not be seen for dust. We would all rush. We would have no question. We probably would not even stop to ask what the side effects would be. We would be out there immediately. It occurs to me that in our lived memory, we have lost the understanding of the fact that measles is also a deadly disease. Hearing the right hon. Gentleman read out that account from Roald Dahl was really moving and served, perhaps, as a reminder of the issues, or even as new information to many parents who are fortunate enough to live in a world where measles is no longer in front of us—in this country certainly—causing those deaths.

Dr Whitford *rose*—

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Lady, who is about to intervene on me, gave us examples of how it still is an issue in some parts of the world.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. As I said at the end of my speech, there are researchers who are actually working on the ability to vaccinate against cancerous cells. This is something that we will hopefully be seeing in our lifetime. Is it not then surprising that, in England, even the uptake of the meningitis vaccine, a disease that parents are terrified of, has fallen down to just 92.5%, which means that the community protection is not there.

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I do find that baffling, but that does reinforce the point that she and the right hon. Gentleman made about listening to people's worries and concerns. We will not get very far if we barge through them saying that they are wrong—they are wrong, but we need to listen to where those concerns come from and to try to address them.

Take the influenza vaccination, for example. I declare an interest, in that one of my sisters has to have this vaccination every year because of problems with her immune system. Influenza is a disease about which many of us nowadays would think, "I'll take a few days off work, take some pills, have a bit of a lie down and sweat it out, and I'll be back to work, as right as rain." But of course, not only does influenza still kill people today in other parts of the world; it can kill people today in this country, if their immune system is depleted or for other reasons. Influenza is a really good example of a microbe that is mutating, so new vaccines will have to be developed. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, some vaccinations are the same as the ones that we were being given 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years

[Thangam Debbonaire]

ago, but others will need to be developed. The job is not done on vaccinations. We still need to respect the developing science.

The diseases that we could eradicate forever include elephantiasis, which I mentioned earlier, as well as polio, measles, mumps and rubella. The MMR vaccination has attracted particular attention, partly because of the discredited research by that dreadful person who I do not feel like naming because I feel so angry with him. I just think that these diseases are horrible, and the irresponsibility he showed at that time was quite extraordinary.

What really struck me while I was having cancer treatment was the sheer volume of unqualified, non-medical people willing to give pseudo-medical advice online, when it would not be allowed offline. The Front Benchers here are not quite from the right Departments to address this specific issue, but I ask them to pass on my message to their colleagues in the relevant Departments. I would like to see work done in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that there are equivalent levels of regulation for online medical, pseudo-medical and pseudo-scientific advice as there are in the offline world, because the harm done is the same. I would not expect to go to anywhere on the high street and be given pseudo, incorrect, dangerous, non-scientific advice face to face. It would not be legal; there are laws against it. But in the online world, not so much.

I return to antimicrobial resistance. As I am sure the House is aware, if left unchecked antimicrobial resistance will lead to 10 million deaths a year by 2050, as the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, has said. Immunisation is a vital intervention against AMR. AMR happens when microbes adapt to become resistant to antimicrobial drugs. Once resistance occurs in pathogens—the microbes capable of causing disease—treatment options become very limited and lives are then put at risk. There are already about 700,000 deaths a year caused by infections that are resistant to treatment.

I urge all Members to read or to read a precis of—certainly to absorb the messages of—the brilliant O'Neill review on AMR of 2016, which concluded that vaccines have been overlooked as a tool to reduce AMR and that there should be a much greater focus on and investment in them. Immunisation helps to reduce the increase of AMR in two critical ways. First, it prevents infections in general and drug resistant infections, thereby preventing the disease and deaths. That then negates the need for ever more complex drugs to be used, which are often much more expensive and are therefore probably not available in poorer countries, to treat those resistant infections. Secondly, by preventing infection and the need for treatment at all, the use of antimicrobial drugs overall is reduced in both humans and animals.

Vaccines offer sustained long-term and, in some cases, lifelong—although that depends on the pathogen—protection from infection. Antibiotics do not. Far too many people have in their heads the idea that when they get sick, they will get an antibiotic and that is all that needs to happen. Many vaccines still effective today were introduced many years ago, but the same cannot be said for antibiotics. If there are high rates of mutation, we will need new vaccines. We therefore need to think

about the money and investment that we put into developing vaccinations, as well as into maintaining the use of proven ones. The O'Neill review also identified some really clear contexts in which immunisation can reduce AMR, including vaccinating against hospital-acquired infections, and discussed the importance of investment in research for the early stages, when commercial viability may be some years or decades off. The effects of vaccines on AMR are, preventing disease and death; reducing progression and the severity of disease; reducing transmission; and reducing antibiotic use, and therefore the pressure of resistance.

Vaccines work. They save lives, halt the spread of disease, reduce the impact of antimicrobial resistance and prevent rare infections and illnesses. So why do we need a debate at all? Well, we need a debate partly to celebrate the achievement and the impact of vaccination, but also to reiterate the case for it. Sadly, there has been a decline in the use and take-up of vaccinations, with consequent increases in illnesses and infections. The case has to be restated to prompt parents just to check. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, there are parents in countries across the world who are busy for all sorts of reasons. They may get to their third or fourth child, and getting them vaccinated is either not practically easy or it slips their mind. Just check—I am asking all parents out there, with absolutely no judgment whatever, to use this week as an opportunity just to check whether their children are up to date with their vaccinations.

As people who travel to different countries, it also behoves us all to ensure that we are not being complacent when we travel. I know how easy that is. I have relatives in India who I like to visit on a fairly regular basis, and it is important for us adults to make a little note-to-self to check that our vaccinations are up to date.

I will refer briefly to social media because although the Library research paper—I thank the Library researchers and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology for providing briefings for our debates—reassures us that most parents say that the information they have seen about vaccination is supportive; unfortunately, 4% said they had seen anti-vaccination information, most of which had come from the internet or social media. We need to tackle that issue.

This debate has been located in the context of international development, so it would be remiss of me not to say how much I value the work of the Department for International Development, across Governments of different political persuasions and over many years. This Department has a high reputation. Of course, that also goes for right hon. and hon. Members who have served in it over many years, so I thank the Department. By way of triangulation, I recently visited the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle—I declare an interest, as my brother-in-law works there—where I was really impressed not only by the thoughtful way in which the organisation contributes to vaccination across the world, but by the high regard in which it holds DFID, and for good reason.

I would, however, like there to be a greater focus on the spread of information via social media and the internet in our international work, because disease knows no boundaries, poverty knows no boundaries and the internet knows no boundaries. Perhaps there needs to be a tie-up between the work done with social media

companies, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for International Development. Forgive me—that may already be happening, and I applaud officials if it is.

I reiterate that any right hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber who have not read the O'Neill report of 2016 on antimicrobial resistance need to read it. We have talked a lot this week about the climate emergency, and it is definitely an emergency, but so too is AMR. I am going to say this again because it is so shocking: if we stay where we are, by 2050, 10 million people a year will be dead because of antimicrobial resistance.

Alistair Burt: We cannot mention AMR in this House without mentioning Dame Sally Davies, who has done such a fantastic job. If my memory serves me right, she is standing down relatively soon as chief medical officer, but she has made a fantastic contribution, particularly in relation to AMR. She absolutely deserves that we carry on this fight when she moves on to a different role.

Thangam Debbonaire: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I join him in that tribute. I also pay tribute to all the scientists across the world who are helping not only to understand and promote information about AMR, but to help us rethink our relationship with antibiotics. They are also helping us to understand the need to respect antibiotics, but also to respect disease prevention, rather than having a reliance on antibiotics.

Again, I urge all parents to check their children's records and get them vaccinated if they have not already done so. I also urge all adults to remember to do so themselves when they visit other countries; and I include myself in that. I applaud DFID, the World Health Organisation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and others for the work they do, and particularly the support of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. I urge the Department of Health and Social Care—this is a slight, but brief, sidebar—to accelerate the expansion of the human papilloma virus vaccination to include boys. I know that that is in train, but I would just like it to hurry up, please.

I urge social media companies and internet providers across the world to work with health services and Governments across the world on not only tackling the misuse of the internet for promoting incorrect information but highlighting the value of the internet and social media in promoting good-quality information and messaging. There are social media companies and internet providers who want to be seen as a force for good, and this is a really good way that they could contribute to that. In particular, I would like DCMS to work with the Department of Health and Social Care and with DFID on tackling those harms. This should be a cross-departmental initiative.

I join others in wishing the new Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, well in the mission that he described earlier. He is another Minister, and now a Secretary of State, who is well respected across the House. He brings an enormous amount of knowledge and experience of a range of world contacts to this post, and that can only be a good thing. I would like him to bring that experience to this issue with razor-like precision.

I would really like us to get back to respecting experts. That does not mean doffing the cap, or never arguing or asking questions. It does not mean just saying, "Doctor knows best"—if the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire will forgive me—but saying, "Doctor probably does know best." In my experience, the hon. Lady generally does know best, and I probably do always say that she is right. I would like us to respect experts because they are experts and, when we ask them questions, to remember that they probably do know quite a lot, but, in return, as she said, for them to listen to us and to remember that our reasonable questions have to be heard if we are going to make progress together. I would like us to respect medical science. I would like us to respect researchers and respect research—and to invest in it. In this country, we do well at that. We are an internationally respected country for knowledge creation. I would like us to continue that tradition and to challenge anybody, anywhere, who says stuff about experts in a way that is not just unhelpful but, in this context, life threatening.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for this debate, because it is a really good example of how a small number of people in the right room at the right time can produce a consensus on something where our country can help to show the world leadership and contribute to saving millions of lives.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The House has had the opportunity during this week to congratulate many hon. Members who took part in the London marathon last week. I do not think there has yet been an opportunity for the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) to be congratulated on her particularly courageous performance and on raising so much money for great causes, so she also has the congratulations of the House.

2.12 pm

Dan Carden: With the leave of the House, I would like to speak briefly in the closing of the debate. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).

This has been a debate of great quality. It is pleasing to know that across the House there is deep concern for the health and wellbeing of children and adults across the world. Care and compassion must never stop at our own country's borders. I have enjoyed the contributions of all Members who have spoken today—the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), and my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Bristol West.

In many places around the world, parents walk for many miles simply to get to a clinic and a vaccine that they know could save their child's life. Yet the same cannot be said in all parts of the world. Many barriers still exist in getting people the healthcare they need. No matter how much money we give or how many vaccines are developed, immunisation will not succeed, in the UK or overseas, unless people trust that clinics, hospitals, medication and vaccines are safe; and unless they know that the care they receive is available free of charge. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the alarming outbreak of Ebola continues to spread. It is a tragedy that many communities simply do not trust that the new Ebola vaccine is safe. Despite efforts to develop a new

[Dan Carden]

vaccine for this horrific virus, around one in 10 people who are offered the vaccine are not taking it up. So we need system-wide solutions that tackle the root causes of ill health as the only way to bring about sustainable improvements to people's lives. Clearly, we need to build trust between communities and health services. Too often in developing countries, the clinic is thought of as the place we go to die rather than recover. If we want global coverage of immunisations for all, then we must do far more to support countries to invest in public, free health services.

I agree with Ministers on their goals for immunisation, but my party disagrees with the Government, in some ways, on how we should support health systems overseas. This Government send Ministers to developing countries to talk up public-private partnerships. They encourage Governments to open up their health systems to British businesses. Labour Members want the UK's international development work to be focused on supporting publicly owned, publicly run services that everyone can access, and an end to promoting private finance initiative schemes overseas. The next Labour Government will increase the aid spend on health and education and set up a new dedicated public services unit within DFID to help countries to invest in their public services and get them working for everyone. We want a fairer international patent regime that helps people to access medicines, not pharmaceutical companies to hoard profits. Only with a system-wide approach like this will we achieve the goal of immunisations for all.

2.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): It is great pleasure and honour for me to be able to respond to this incredibly important debate in World Immunisation Week. It has been exceptional to see the quality rather than the quantity of the contributions that we have had. We started with my new boss, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who leapt into action on his first day in the job to come to the Dispatch Box and speak without notes, giving a sweeping review of not only the history of vaccination but DFID's important work in it as of today. I think that Members across the House have been able to be reassured by his passion and commitment to this incredibly important work.

I was also pleased to hear contributions from a range of other Members. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) spoke very movingly about the lessons he learned from his own grandfather. The stories that we heard throughout the debate of the personal experiences that we have had ourselves or in our families really stood out, because we have been part of a generation—an era—that has made a dramatic difference in this area. We have all pledged ourselves this afternoon to continue to be part of that difference.

The hon. Gentleman asked about replenishment, as did a number of other Members. We are in a period from 2016 to 2020 when we are contributing £1.44 billion to this important work, delivered primarily through Gavi. As a Government, we are very much looking forward to being able to host the Gavi replenishment in 2020. I can announce today that we will of course continue to be a leading contributor to the Gavi replenishment. Obviously,

we will hold our horses in terms of announcing to the House exactly how much we will be contributing to that replenishment in due course.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of other important points, including the issue of vaccine hesitancy. We must, as we did this afternoon, send a united message on behalf us of all here in the UK against that taking hold here in the UK, but also on how important it is to work on this around the world. We heard a range of contributions about social media, in terms of fake news, being part of the medium for these unhelpful messages. That is clearly an online harm. I would encourage all hon. Members to engage with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on the online harms consultation.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the important issue of middle-income countries. Of course, DFID's work prioritises the poorest countries. To reach the sustainable development goals, it is important that we contribute overseas development assistance, and we are proud that the UK is the first country to put into statute the 0.7% contribution. But we must also—this is where there is an element of political difference between the hon. Gentleman and me—crowd in the extra \$2.5 trillion that is needed every year to reach those goals. That will necessarily come from outside the public sector. Members have raised the importance of pharmaceutical companies in this research and the role of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I need hardly say that if it were not for a successful capitalist system, they would not have been able to donate that money to their foundation.

Dr Whitford: At the moment, the transition begins when a country reaches a certain level of gross national income, which is a relatively crude measure. We are seeing a greater number of unvaccinated children, often in middle-income countries, and multiple countries requiring post-transition support. Obviously, Gavi is rethinking that strategy, and I ask the Government to encourage it to look at something a bit more multifactorial than a number on a piece of paper.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is right to emphasise that point. We all hope that low-income countries will become middle-income countries and graduate from being supported by Gavi. In 2015 and 2016, for which we have the most recent data, countries that graduated from the Gavi programme maintained the levels of vaccination, but this needs to inform the next period in terms of replenishment, because we cannot afford to lose the community benefit of the level of vaccination.

I was deeply moved by the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who I enjoyed having as a colleague for so many months, and I pay tribute to the work he did to champion this cause. I hope his father is still watching television—hello, Mr Burt.

Alistair Burt: Dr Burt.

Harriett Baldwin: Dr Burt. His father can be really proud of what his son, having survived those vicious injections as a child, has gone on to deliver, in terms of saving the lives of so many millions—literally, millions—of children around the world with his work.

My right hon. Friend paid tribute to the work of Rotarians. I know that all Members will have come across Rotarians in their constituencies who have been

steadfast in raising money to eradicate polio. We are truly on the cusp of doing that. He also mentioned the dangers that health workers face in delivering vaccines. He rightly paid tribute to the Pakistani health workers and police who were killed in terrible attacks in the last month. I think daily of the bravery of health workers who are going into eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo to deliver for the first time in human history the experimental vaccine developed for Ebola. He mentioned the tragic loss of Dr Mouzoko in a conflict zone, with the community resistance to the process of vaccination that has been with us for centuries.

My right hon. Friend made a range of other important points. He talked powerfully about the impact that measles can have and of the three challenges concerning messaging via religious leaders, countering conspiracy theories and countering anti-vax messaging on social media.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) for the expertise she brings to her chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations, with her many years of experience as a doctor. I know that she continues to be active in this field. She gave a sweeping review of the contributions to the development of vaccines throughout history, and particularly in the UK. She rightly mentioned the promise of the malaria vaccine trials. Scientists continue to come up with new and better ways to deal with more and more frequent diseases, including the neglected tropical diseases, and we continue to support that through the Department for International Development.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) drew attention to the sheer millions of children who have been protected thanks to this vaccination programme. We can estimate how many millions of lives have been saved as a result. He rightly called for us to continue that work through the replenishment of Gavi.

I salute the achievement of the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) in running the marathon on Sunday. She made a very good speech. It is never easy, as the last speaker in a debate, to bring in new points, but she did. She drew attention to the brilliant O'Neill review of antimicrobial resistance in 2016, and I noted her family interest in the work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

We heard a number of themes in the debate. The first was that disease knows no boundaries. The Department for International Development is responding to the debate because this ties our world together. We need to work as a world to tackle this challenge and ensure that every child has access to vaccinations. Another theme was the expertise of the Department for International Development in this area—

Alistair Burt *rose—*

Harriett Baldwin: I give way to one of those experts.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for saying so. The expertise in the Department has been much commented upon, and we are fortunate to have it there and across the Government. We are working increasingly with the Department of Health and Social Care, and there is a new committee, which I hope my hon. Friend will follow, to enhance our work. Ensuring that the research base remains strong and is reflected in Departments' work is important, as is acknowledging that it is my hon. Friend's birthday. We appreciate her spending her time with us and enlightening us. Despite all the other things we have to think about, the importance of this topic is central, and today's debate shows that this House can work together on important things, as indeed it must.

Harriett Baldwin: That is very kind, and I am grateful for those good wishes.

I want to conclude with the following observations. We are talking about a public good—perhaps in no other area of human endeavour is there more of a public good—and it is right that we strengthen the public response and public health systems with regard to this work. Every £1 we spend in this area leads to a £16 benefit, in terms of lives saved, time saved and people's ability to continue to contribute to society. It is remarkably good value for money. As well as strengthening public health systems, we must strengthen our worldwide economy, and that needs to happen through a combination of public services and a successful and thriving private sector. We need both if we are to deliver on this global challenge. I would like to recognise and thank everyone who has taken part in this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Immunisation Week.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 8 May, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, for three hours and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Andrea Leadsom.*)

New Town in Essex

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Sir David Amess.

2.29 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am particularly fortunate that you are in the Chair as I make the case for a new town in Essex, because you are a fellow Essex Member. Given the strains and stresses with the need for housing, I know we share the same ambition that we want to do our bit in Essex. Irrespective of exactly where we want to do this—I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing will come on to this in his brief response—garden towns are a splendid idea, and I know that Epping Forest and Southend West stand united in doing our bit on housing.

My hon. Friend the Minister is probably puzzled by what has triggered all this, but some months ago I was asked to chair a meeting of Essex MPs with leaders and chief executives of their local authorities. There was a pretty broad agenda, but at the heart of it all was the issue of housing. I absolutely applaud what the Government are doing with North Essex Garden Communities and the Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission, which wants a minimum of 1 million homes, which are needed to support economic growth in the Thames estuary, by 2050. That equates to 31,000 per year. There has also been an excellent paper from Policy Exchange, “Tomorrow’s Places: A plan for building a generation of new millennial towns on the edge of London”.

It occurred to me that, as all parliamentarians know, whenever there is a decision to build something in or near their area, there will be a group of people who are not too keen on it. The area that I represent, Southend West, is an oblong alongside the Thames estuary, and there is literally nowhere to build—we cannot build on the parks we have—so I thought it was wrong for me to suggest precisely where in Essex such new building could take place. Then I suddenly thought that I am the first and last Member of Parliament for the constituency of Basildon, which was the largest and most successful new town in the country. In those heady days of 1983, I represented Basildon and Jerry Hayes represented Harlow.

A number of my colleagues wanted to be in the Chamber for the debate, but obviously other things are happening in our country at the moment. In particular, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) wanted to be able to tell my hon. Friend the Minister that Harlow is an extraordinary place of aspiration, opportunity, achievement and community. Many people come to Harlow from the edges of town to make their lives better, to have good-quality housing and to be surrounded by green spaces. Our right hon. Friend believes, rightly, that it is

“a place of achievement because we invented fibre optic communications and are a renowned sculpture town”—

I am beginning to think he, too, is bidding for his town to be a city—

“and we will soon be the home of Public Health England making us the public health-science capital of the world. Our new Enterprise

Zone and Advanced Manufacturing Centre will provide education, skills and training to our young people so that they can climb the Ladder of Opportunity.”

Our right hon. Friend believes that Harlow has brilliant schools and a wonderful hospital, but any further help the Government can give it as it prospers and develops would be greatly appreciated.

When I say that I am the first and last Member of Parliament for Basildon, it is true. Much has been written and much has been said about the issue, but perhaps I could describe the semantics of who has represented Basildon as the devil at work. I want the House to know that when I was elected in extraordinary circumstances in 1983, I had five local colleagues: Sir Bernard Braine, Sir Edward Gardner, Sir Richard Body, Sir Bob McCrindle and Harvey Proctor. After the 1979 election, the Boundary Commission decided that the new town should stand alone, with the eight wards of Fryerns Central, Fryerns East, Langdon Hills, Lee Chapel North, Nethermayne, Pitsea East, Pitsea West and Vange. I and my family lived in Nethermayne. We had all represented the new town, but as part of a much larger area. When I won the seat in 1983, it was against an extraordinary background, because every single district and county councillor was Labour and the key officers, who were supposed to be impartial, were also Labour. It was me against an army of people trying to do me down, as it seemed at the time.

I want to say to my hon. Friend the Minister, looking at housing in Essex, that my experience of the new town, through the development corporation and the Commission for the New Towns, was absolutely first class. I and the then Member for Harlow had the same chairman, Dame Elizabeth Coker—sadly, she has now died—who was absolutely wonderful, and a brilliant chief executive called Douglas Galloway. As we know, if such projects are going to be successful, they need strong leadership.

Since 1997, the Boundary Commission has intervened again, but the media did not seem to understand that and a few people pretended that the constituency was still Basildon. Well, it was not: as it is now, it is partly Basildon and Billericay and partly South Basildon and East Thurrock, and since then two representatives have always represented the town. It looks, unless the Boundary Commission changes its mind, that I will be the first and last Member of Parliament for Basildon.

Those were 15 glorious years. Our family was raised there—all the children were born at the local hospital—and our children were educated there. We had very happy times, although we did have some unpleasant incidents when, for whatever reason, the opposition attacked my family about the way I educated my children. They did not go to private schools; they just wanted a Catholic education in a single-sex school, but forces went to work against that. In one of the most extraordinary events, at one election—in those days, only four Conservative MPs were anti-fox hunting, of whom I was one—leaflets were distributed by the opposition saying that I was pro-fox hunting, even though somebody from the League Against Cruel Sports was involved. Fortunately, however, my wonderful agent—I think it was the late Barbara Allen—threatened litigation, and a substantial amount of money went to charity. Some very unpleasant things happened, but most of it was really very positive in every sense of the word.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that the development corporation and the Commission for the New Towns put in all the infrastructure that was needed. We had the roads, the schools and the industrial sites for businesses. Every single week, I was opening a new factory, a new plant or a new business. Royalty came to Basildon. In fact, although it had nothing at all to do with me, Basildon-mania took hold of the country. We had visits from Sir John Major and Baroness Thatcher. Everyone wanted to visit Basildon and see what was happening with this economic miracle.

I would say to my hon. Friend the Minister that there were certainly two miracles during my time that I was very proud of. The first was St Luke's Hospice. It started with a penny from Trudy Cox, and the hospice now supports a very wide community. That was a miracle for human beings—it was opened by Princess Diana and the Duchess of Norfolk—and then we had a miracle for animals when we opened the horse, pony and donkey sanctuary. There is an Act of Parliament—I assume it is still there—that I promoted to stop such animals being cruelly tethered.

Wonderful things happen in Basildon. When I started, we had one police station, and by the time I left in 1997, we had three. Not one person was murdered in the 15 years that I was there. There were no school closures: we stopped them happening. There was a crazy suggestion that the A&E should close and move to Orsett, as should the maternity unit, but we stopped it. In those days, one could stop things more easily than today—a silver birch forest was to be razed to the ground, but we stopped that from happening. Sadly, after 1997, there were school closures, the hospital went into special measures after a time, and the silver birch forest was razed to the ground. It was very unfortunate indeed.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and I were invited to attend the 70th anniversary of the founding of Basildon. It was not exactly a trip down memory lane—many of the people I knew had gone or moved on—but he and I sat there and listened to what was said. It was not quite as we remembered, but my hon. Friends the Members for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) are doing a splendid job in jointly representing the town.

I come now to the crux of my speech. We all accept that we need more housing. When I got off at Fenchurch Street and went to Tower Hill, I saw people sleeping on the pavements. That is not acceptable. I remember when Mother Teresa came to the House. When she met Baroness Thatcher, she said, “What are these people doing?” It has always happened, and of course many of them have mental health problems and it is a real struggle to house them, but there is a housing shortage. The Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission has estimated that a minimum of 1 million new homes will be needed by 2050 to match population rises and to support economic growth throughout the region. As I have said, that is the equivalent of 31,000 homes a year, which is certainly an ambitious target.

At one time in Basildon we had 40,000 homes in public ownership, which is a huge number. Under the right to buy, which I supported, many were sold, but it was found that 10,000 were affected by clay heave and no one could get insurance for those properties, so we

persuaded the then Housing Minister, now Lord Patten, to repurchase 10,000 properties. One can imagine what that meant for local residents.

Every builder had a go at designing an estate in Basildon. One estate was known as “Alcatraz”—they were not all totally successful—but by and large people valued the home they had been given. It was the east end displaced. That is where I come from. Many of my relatives moved there from London, and some still live there. They were thrilled to get their first house. Some might say, “Oh, but they weren't very attractive,” and all the rest of it, but people had a home, a place to educate their children, a shopping centre and good transport. As far as I am concerned, the new towns were very successful.

If new towns are delivered in the right way, they not only offer affordable homes to many, but become new communities that people want to be part of. They create jobs, infrastructure links and new opportunities. When planned holistically, a new town can address our housing crisis while protecting existing communities from sprawl and the overbearing impact on local services and infrastructure.

It cannot be beyond our wit today to replicate those successes in another part of Essex. I have been here so long that it is an awful long time since I have heard anything original said: people talk enthusiastically, but it has all been said and done before—it is just reinventing the wheel and coming full circle. We do not need terribly clever people to tell us we already have two success stories in Harlow and Basildon. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister, however, that while we do not have space in Southend West, there is space in other parts of Essex.

Essex is a wonderful county. Some people say that Kent is God's own county, but I happen to think that Essex is God's own county. It is vibrant and extremely well led, and it is entirely understandable that people would want to move there. I know that the Minister is going to tell me about three projects he has in hand, but, whatever the political situation at the moment, the Government should grasp the nettle and do it. Let us build on the successes we already have. One could not find anyone more enthusiastic than me, I am, the first and last MP for Basildon, for a new town in Essex.

2.45 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on securing this important debate on new towns in Essex. He is a particularly effective campaigner for his constituency and very persuasive and passionate in championing those he represents. We are fortunate also to have you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you are also an exemplary representative for that particularly beautiful part of the world, blessed or otherwise from the heavens—in my view, the whole country is so blessed.

As my hon. Friend and many others have highlighted in the House, we have not built enough homes over the last few decades, and we certainly do not build them quickly enough. It is our intention to fix that. As he rightly highlighted, there is much we can learn from the post-war new town programme about the importance of place-making, jobs and skills, infrastructure and the need for the long-term stewardship of place. The design of many of those new towns is often criticised—as he

[*Kit Malthouse*]

said, it was hit and miss—but it was largely successful, though challenges arose from the rapid development and centralised planning that underpinned them.

New towns were also hugely successful in providing homes and thriving communities for lots of people. Over 2.5 million people now live in a new town, including in lovely Basildon and Harlow. As my hon. Friend recommended, we want to learn those lessons from the past but apply them in a modern context. That is why we believe well-planned, well-designed and locally led garden communities should play a vital role in helping to meet this country's housing need well into the future by providing a stable pipeline of homes.

This is not just about getting the numbers up; it is about building places that people are happy to call home and that have the potential to become vibrant, thriving communities where people can live and work for generations to come, as my hon. Friend pointed out. We are currently supporting 23 locally led garden communities across the country, from Cornwall to Cumbria, including North Essex Garden Communities, an ambitious proposal for three communities across north Essex with the potential to deliver up to 43,000 new homes.

In March, we announced a further five garden towns, including one in Essex. They include Easton Park garden community, North Uttlesford garden community and West of Braintree garden community. It is an opportunity to deliver up to 18,500 homes. We will make further announcements on more successful places in due course. Each place in the current programme is unique, but the expectations on quality and innovation are high. The council-owned Graven Hill site in Bicester garden town is providing the biggest opportunity for self and custom built homes in the country. Didcot garden town is promoting the innovative use of technology and partnership working between the public and private sector, to underpin a quality agenda.

Garden towns and villages are a key part of the solution to our housing crisis, and we want them to have every lever at their disposal. Last summer, building on the success of post-war new towns, we passed regulations that enabled the establishment of new town development corporations, to be overseen not by the Secretary of State as was previously the case, but by the local authorities that cover the area designated for the new town. Where there are complex delivery and co-ordination challenges, we consider that new town development corporations may be the right vehicle for driving forward high-quality new communities at scale. With a statutory objective to secure the laying out and development of the new town, and with their own suite of powers, those corporations should have the focus and heft to get things done.

Our Housing White Paper “Fixing our broken housing market” was published in February 2017 and committed the Government to allowing locally led new town development corporations to be set up. Section 16 of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 enabled that to happen, and regulations passed in July last year brought those new powers into force—that was one of my first acts as Housing Minister. Some functions, such as the confirmation of compulsory purchase orders, remain with the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of State will continue to lay any regulations that designate new

towns, or that establish and dissolve new town development corporations. Those regulations do not change the powers of new town development corporations; they simply localise their oversight.

The regulations provide the mechanism to set up a locally led new town development corporation, but they do not enable the Government to do so simply at the behest of a local authority or group of local authorities. If—as we hope and expect—local authorities consider that a locally led new town development corporation is the right vehicle, we will need to undertake a public consultation. Only if we consider that designating a particular new town would be expedient and in the national interest will we lay the relevant statutory instrument. Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise each proposal for the designation of a new town, and a statutory instrument designating a new town must be debated in both Houses.

I emphasise that locally led new towns must be just that—locally led—and it will be for those local authorities interested in setting up such a body to make the case to the Government for why that would be expedient and in the national interest. That is a complicated way of saying that local and national bodies need to work together to produce the sort of communities that my hon. Friend refers to. We firmly believe that the success of those communities in future will be founded on local acceptability and control.

My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of delivering not just homes but the infrastructure to support them, and we wholeheartedly agree. That is why we have more than doubled the housing infrastructure fund, dedicating an additional £2.7 billion of funding, and bringing the total fund to £5.5 billion. We have given final approval to 94 marginal viability funding projects that will help to unlock a potential 104,000 new homes, bringing forward a pipeline of homes at pace and scale, and helping to solve the problems facing local communities today. That includes more than £11 million of funding to unlock up to 1,500 homes in Colchester and Chelmsford—not far from the area represented by my hon. Friend.

Following expressions of interest to the forward funding stream of the housing infrastructure fund, we have worked with Essex County Council to develop its bids. We have so far announced seven successful forward funding projects, totalling £1.2 billion of grant funding for infrastructure that will unlock up to 68,000 homes across the country.

As my hon. Friend said, housing and infrastructure are only part of the puzzle, and nowhere is that truer than in the Thames estuary, which encompasses the area from lovely Southend to Canary Wharf, as well as north Kent. Comparable in scale to the midlands engine, the northern powerhouse and Oxford-Cambridge arc, the Thames estuary has tremendous potential to power growth for the benefit of local communities, including those represented by my hon. Friend in Southend, and throughout our country.

In the autumn Budget 2016, we asked the Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission to come up with an ambitious vision and delivery plan for north Kent, south Essex and east London. In June last year, the commission, which was led originally by Lord Heseltine and concluded by Sir John Armitt, announced its vision for the estuary. In March this year, the Secretary of

State welcomed the commission's vision and backed its ambitious plans to create 1.3 million new jobs and generate an extra £190 billion for the local economy.

In the context of achieving that economic growth, we want more homes in the estuary, and the Government have announced further commitments to support the delivery of the commission's vision for inclusive and well-balanced growth. Those commitments include £1 million to support a new Thames estuary growth board; launching a strategic communications campaign to promote the estuary as a great place to live, work and do business; funding for the creation of masterplans and feasibility studies on key sites in the estuary's creative production corridor; exploring the potential for two locally led development corporations; and bringing together relevant authorities to collaborate on the Thames Estuary 2100 plan, to ensure that growth is sustainable and resilient.

Moreover, a Cabinet-level ministerial champion will be appointed to act as an advocate and critical friend for the region within the Government—it is not as if the area needs any additional advocacy, but this will be at ministerial level. Our response marks this Government's commitment to the estuary, and we have a long-standing commitment to local growth in that area of the country. Indeed, the Government have invested a total of £590 million through growth deal funding since 2014 in the South East local enterprise partnership, which covers the constituency of Southend West. Some £22 million has been spent on 29 skills capital projects, designed to equip the resident workforce with the right skills to meet emerging employment opportunities. By 2021, that investment will deliver 15,000 additional qualifications and over 7,300 apprenticeship places.

In fact, within or close to the Southend West area, the South East local enterprise partnership's investments include funding to develop the Southend and Rochford Growth Hub; help to develop the area around the Victoria Avenue gateway to Southend; and a package of transport projects comprising capacity enhancements to the A127, as well as a Thames Gateway South Essex local sustainable transport programme—snappily named. They also cover £6.4 million to improve broadband

infrastructure in Essex, and a Southend and Rochford joint area action plan towards a new business park adjacent to Southend Airport.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the tireless work, on top of all that activity and investment, that my hon. Friend is doing on his long-standing campaign to turn Southend into a city, a campaign of legendary status now in this House. Although we are debating new towns, we should reflect that the Government are very much committed to supporting existing towns across England to harness their unique strengths to grow and prosper. That is why we have established a stronger towns fund, from which £37 million will be going to the south-east area. The funding will enable town deals across England, and the money will be used to deliver locally led projects creating new jobs, providing further training and boosting local growth.

In conclusion, we have covered a lot of ground in this short debate. I once again thank my hon. Friend for giving us the opportunity to do so, and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for supervising a debate about the area you represent so royally. We want to ensure that everybody who wants a home of their own can have access to one at a reasonable price in a place they want to live. Well planned, well designed, locally led garden communities have a crucial role in helping us to fix our broken housing market by providing the long-term pipeline of homes this country badly needs. But this must be about more than just numbers. We need to learn the lessons from the past—as my hon. Friend quite rightly pointed out—and make sure that we build places that people are happy to call home; places that can support vibrant, thriving communities where people can live and work for generations to come, and that may in the future be candidates to be conservation areas, as I hope Basildon will, in time, become.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. What an excellent short debate.

Question put and agreed to.

2.57 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 May 2019

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Working at Height: Safety

1.30 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered preventing serious injury and fatalities while working at height.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I pay tribute to everyone who contributed to the all-party parliamentary group on working at height report, which we published just a few months ago. The acknowledgments on the back pages list the organisations in the sector that brought their expertise to bear.

A 1970s public information film told us:

“The effects of gravity can be grave.”

We all have a stake in our constituents being safe while working at height, including the workers in this very building, which is shrouded in scaffolding, including just outside the doors of Westminster Hall.

Last year, the APPG on working at height undertook an inquiry to understand the reasons why falls from height occur, and to examine their consequences for individuals and their families. It published a report in February, “Staying Alive: Preventing Serious Injury and Fatalities while Working at Height”, which makes a number of recommendations that we hope will help to create a safer environment for the millions of people who work at height in the UK every day.

More than 60 respondents to the APPG took the time to share their experience and suggest ways to improve and build on the current guidelines and legislation. Working at height is not the sole preserve of those we might automatically think of, namely people in the construction sector. We must also consider the work of window cleaners, sole traders, small businesses, people in the oil and gas sector, farmers and agricultural workers, and many other professions besides. The evidence gathering helped us to shape the report’s recommendations and gave us a valuable insight into the challenges faced by those various sectors. The fantastic response from the public and industry highlighted the importance of this issue and the desire to see improvements across all sectors involved in working at height. I pay particular tribute to the Access Industry Forum, and to Peter Bennett OBE of the Prefabricated Access Suppliers’ and Manufacturers’ Association and the No Falls Foundation, which are based in my constituency and forged the idea of setting up the APPG.

At the report launch, we were humbled to hear from Paul Blanchard, who had a fall in 2010 when aged 55. After falling from a roof, he broke his back and 18 ribs, suffered severe head injuries and punctured a lung. He subsequently spent three months in a coma in hospital.

His family were told twice that he might not survive, and that if he were to survive he would likely have significant brain damage. Miraculously, he pulled through, but was left with no sense of smell and damaged hearing, and was paralysed from the chest down. At the launch, he spoke movingly about how he is still coming to terms with the changes to his life and that of his family. His account is a stark reminder that a fleeting lapse in concentration can have devastating, lifelong consequences. That must be our main motivation to do all we can to improve the regulatory environment and the rules and guidelines. No one should ever not return home from work as a result of a fall from height.

Although we have a good record in the UK, 35 families last year lost a loved one due to a fall from height. I am sure you will agree, Mr McCabe, that that is 35 too many. The fantastic “Get a Grip” safety campaign, which was launched recently by the Ladder Association and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, aims to raise awareness of the importance of using ladders and step-ladders safely, both at work and at home, in an attempt to reduce accidents. The campaign features a short film comprising an interview with Abbi Taylor, whose father, Jason Anker, who also gave evidence to us, was paralysed after a fall from height when she was only three years old. Abbi talks candidly about the profound effects that her father’s accident had on her. She speaks about how he was not able to walk her down the aisle at her wedding or babysit his young granddaughter. It is an incredibly powerful message and helps to convey the hugely important message that there can be devastating, real-life consequences to using ladders, or working at height in any capacity, if proper precautions are not taken. I recommend Abbi’s video to everyone here, and would be happy to share the details if anyone is interested.

I would like to see more of that type of campaign, as we do not have the public information broadcasting that we used to have. I am keen for the APPG to explore and be more involved in that. As Dr Karen McDonnell, occupational safety and health policy adviser for ROSPA, said recently:

“We are aware people have deadlines and other pressures, but by cutting corners you’re putting yourself in harm’s way. By making people think about what could happen to family and friends in the event of a fall, we can get people to think twice about their safety”.

I could not agree more. It is one thing to tell people about rules and guidelines, but quite another to tell them of the life-changing impacts that carelessness can bring about. We all see people working on buildings and ladders doing those kinds of things, and we sometimes wonder why people have done what they have done. Often, it is due to a lapse of concentration or because someone has cut a corner.

To tackle some of these issues, the APPG has made four recommendations and highlighted two areas where we want to consult further. First, we want to introduce enhanced reporting through the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995—RIDDOR—which would at a minimum record the scale of a fall, the method used and the circumstances surrounding the fall. It would also be useful to link up with NHS data, which could provide further details. Previously, data was collected through the home accident surveillance system and the leisure accident surveillance system, but that ended in 2003, leaving a significant data gap.

[Alison Thewliss]

Secondly, we recommend the setting up of an independent reporting body to allow confidential, enhanced and digital reporting of near misses and accidents that do not fall under RIDDOR reporting. That could then be shared with the Government and industry, to inform health and safety policy. We heard evidence from the Confidential Hazardous Incident Reporting Programme charitable trust, the UK Confidential Reporting Programme for Aviation and Maritime, and Confidential Reporting on Structural Safety, all of which have seen the benefit of such a reporting scheme. It would be particularly useful in addressing emerging new risks in newer areas of industry and construction. Things are changing, and buildings look very different. The occasions on which people may have to work at height, such as music festivals, are developing all the time, and we must consider how accidents can be reported.

The first two proposals attracted broad agreement from those who responded to the APPG's inquiry. There is concern that safety improvements are hindered by a lack of empirical data, knowledge and understanding of the root causes of falls from height. The issue is compounded by a cultural obstacle when it comes to supporting people to report unsafe practices. The recommendation concerning improved reporting suggests a change to existing systems of data collection, as opposed to building something from scratch. Free-text boxes and not asking the right questions hamper the learning that can be taken from incidents. The Minister will be glad to hear that stakeholders believe that making those improvements would have little financial burden on the Government. It would be a quick win and would improve data quality and accuracy almost overnight. For those reasons, I would be grateful if the Minister gave the proposal serious consideration.

Our third recommendation concerns extending the "Working Well Together—Working Well at Height" safety campaign to a wider audience outside construction. There are now many industries that involve work at height that ought to be considered, and it appears that stakeholders would welcome such an initiative. The Health and Safety Executive analysed 150 falls from height that it investigated in the food and drink industry over three years. Its website indicates that 40% of workers fell from ladders; 17% from vehicles or forklifts; 10% from machinery or plant; 10% from platforms; 8% from stairs; 7% from roofs or false ceilings, 4% from scaffolds and gantries; and 4% from warehouse racking. A range of incidents can occur. Workplaces are increasingly complex, and workers are perhaps not as prepared as they could be due to the nature of work, including temporary and zero-hours contracts. Workers in those environments need to be protected wherever they are.

The APPG has suggested changes that draw on best practice or existing mechanisms. That is why our fourth recommendation is that the Scottish fatal accident inquiry process should be extended to all parts of the UK. In Scotland, Ministers are required under section 29 of the Inquiries into Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths etc. (Scotland) Act 2016 to report on fatalities. FAIs are mandatory for deaths occurring in the workplace, and the outcomes are publicly available online. Extending that to all parts of the UK would go some way to ensuring that all fatalities in the workplace, including those as a

result of a fall from height, are properly and thoroughly investigated and reported, and that recommendations for change are made.

The APPG wants to look further at a digital technology strategy, including a new tax relief to help small, micro and sole traders to invest in new technology. That is more an issue for the Treasury, rather than the Minister, but we think it is important. We heard from the City of London Corporation about its initiative to improve understanding of working at height among facilities management companies, and from construction giant Balfour Beatty about its use of drone technology to carry out bridge inspections, cutting the risk for workers at height. Technology offers great potential and it should be available not just to wealthy companies but as widely as possible, including to small businesses and lone workers so that they can avoid putting themselves at risk. This is also a good time for Government to instigate a major review of work-at-height culture, which should include investigating the suitability of legally binding financial penalties in health and safety. Those funds could go towards raising awareness.

I have been contacted by people interested in preventing injury from dropped objects, for which the data is also quite sketchy. The HSE collects information on those struck by moving objects, which accounted for 13% of deaths and 10% of injuries, but there is no sense of exactly which objects were moving, in what manner, how they caused harm or what happened. Information suggests that dropped objects are in the top 10 causes of injury in the oil and gas industry alone. That requires much more investigation, and the APPG intends to look into it further.

Work is being carried out in the United States, with the ANSI/ISEA 121 dropped object prevention solutions standard, and in Aberdeen with the dropped objects prevention scheme, or DROPS. I encourage the Minister to investigate whether those schemes could enhance the HSE's work.

I am sorry to disappoint hon. Members who came to the debate hoping for a wee break from Brexit, but it is important to touch briefly on the potential impact that leaving the European Union may have on this area of policy, which we must bear in mind when it comes to people's safety. In a recent survey, 97% of businesses asked by EEF said that they wanted no immediate change to regulations as and when the UK leaves the EU. We must not sacrifice red tape, because it provides a safety net.

The UK Government introduced the Health and Safety (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which are designed to ensure that all EU-derived protections are fully incorporated into UK law. The message from the APPG is clear: Ministers must ensure that no individual who works at height is any less safe after Brexit. I hope the Minister will make a commitment on that.

Before I conclude my remarks, I thank the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), who is an excellent member of the APPG and is very committed to the issue. I am glad to see him here. I am sure that if it were not for today's local elections, the debate would have a much wider attendance.

Although I acknowledge that the UK has some of the lowest workplace fatality and serious injury rates of any country in the European Union, the latest data—

published last year by the Health and Safety Executive—shows that, averaged over the past five years, 26% of deaths at work happen as a result of a fall from height, which is by far the leading cause. In 2017-18, 8% of workplace injuries were the result of a fall from height—those injuries can be very serious. Many of those deaths and injuries are preventable, and that is a tragedy. We in this place must therefore do everything in our power to minimise risk and protect individuals as much as possible. One fatality at work is one too many.

1.42 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I support the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) in commending the APPG report to the Minister and to the House as a whole. I have played a small part in the group, but was able to attend a number of sessions and helped to sign off the report's recommendations. I have done so because it is self-evident and important that we must try to reduce still further the number of deaths and injuries caused by falls from height.

My first memory of my dad was visiting him in hospital after he had suffered an industrial injury and was off work for six months. It is important to remember that it is not just the individual who is affected by an injury at work, but their family, as the hon. Lady said. Although my dad was not injured by a fall from height, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Work at Height Regulations 2005, which were both passed by a Labour Government, are critical pieces of legislation. They ensure that those who work at height, either for big businesses or when self-employed, come home safe, contribute at work safely and are free from injury or—in some cases, sadly—death, as a result of their efforts at work.

We have a responsibility not only through business, central Government regulation and legislation passed by this House, but through the exploitation and promotion of good practice, to ensure that we do all we can to make that happen. The report shows that in the last year for which we have figures, 18% of people who died at work died as the result of a fall from height, so inroads the Government make in tackling that challenge will help to reduce the overall number of deaths at work. Our figures are very good compared with other European countries, partly because of the legislation passed to date, but as the hon. Lady said, the report mentions some important ways we can not only build on the regulations that place duties on employers, self-employed people and any individuals who contract people to work at height, including building owners, facility managers and householders, but rise to the challenges set out in the report. I look forward to hearing what the Minister thinks the challenges will be.

The hon. Lady mentioned the importance of reporting. There is now a reporting mechanism, but the APPG's report asks for enhanced reporting to examine still further, and at a minimum, the scale of the fall, the methods used and the circumstances—to get as much information as possible about the fall, so that we can learn and help to prevent future injuries. Is the Minister happy with the current level of reporting and with the demands put on it? Is there scope to improve reporting, as the hon. Lady and the report have requested? If so, as Minister, he has a duty to improve reporting and prevent future injuries and deaths.

The hon. Lady mentioned that our report asks for an independent body to ensure that we allow confidential, enhanced digital reporting of near misses. Reporting a number of near misses that could have resulted in death or serious injury is crucial to oblige good practice and to ensure that we reduce the potential danger and the threat of poor behaviour. What is the Minister's view on an independent body? Does he think it worthwhile or would it be an additional burden on business? I do not think it would be, but I would like some clarity on that, because it is important that we have that level of support.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Working Well Together campaign and the Working Well at Height safety campaign for industries outside the construction sector. Many businesses regard that as a critical part of their work for training, assessments and so on. For some businesses, however, working at height might be occasional and not central to their daily work. What is the Minister's view on the Working Well Together Campaign? Can it be improved? He has the ability to make changes if his good team of officials assess them and support him in doing so.

The hon. Lady mentioned Scotland's fatal accident inquiry process, and I think that there is merit in that. If I get nothing else from the Minister today, I would welcome confirmation of whether he has even looked at Scotland's fatal accident inquiry process. If he has, what is his assessment of it? I am not asking him today to expand it; I am just asking whether he has looked at it. Have his officials looked at it? Will he be reviewing it? Will he bring to the table an assessment of whether lessons from Scotland could improve safety at work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I want to help the right hon. Gentleman. Perfectly legitimately, he is making, as did the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), a number of particular points. It may also help colleagues who have yet to speak if I make this brief point in an intervention. Clearly, this matter requires the Health and Safety Executive to report back to the Government on it. The Government would rightly be criticised if they were too definitive without first receiving a specific response from the HSE. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I will attempt, within the bounds of what I am able to say, to answer the points raised by the hon. Lady and by him, but obviously we are subject to the formal response by the HSE.

David Hanson: I am grateful to the Minister for putting that on the record. He knows that I acknowledge that relationship, but the key point is that, as the Minister, he can commission work, ask for reviews and, if he has not already, ask the Health and Safety Executive to look at the Scotland fatal accident inquiry process to assess whether any improvements have been made.

Finally, the report also suggests a review of working-at-height culture. Potentially, with the great modern technology we have, that includes mechanisms that the hon. Member for Glasgow Central mentioned, such as drones and other activities. We do not wish to put people out of work, but the threats and dangers of certain aspects of work can be minimised by advancing technology. Again, the Minister has the overview to work with the Health and Safety Executive, that great Labour Government invention, to reduce the number of deaths and injuries at work.

[David Hanson]

I support what the hon. Lady said, and I want to put on record my support from the Labour Back Benches for the recommendations. I hope that our discussions over 18 months to two years will result in some changes that prevent injury and loss of life, and give some people the opportunity to go back to work the following day, contributing to our economy without threat to their life or their family's future.

1.50 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. When I saw your good self and the Minister sat there, I thought that I was in a Select Committee. I was ready to ask him impertinent questions—

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman is never impertinent.

Chris Stephens: I will perhaps have to quote the Minister's comment back at him during a future inquiry.

I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Theewliss), on all her work on working at height, which is particularly prevalent in sectors such as construction. I come from a trade union background and was a Unison activist in Glasgow, and we were very aware of such issues, in particular those around whether workers should get additional payments for the context in which they work—at height, for example—and so on. We should remember that in some sectors of the economy, blacklisting by employers was prevalent, often of individuals who expressed the health and safety concerns of workers. That is a real problem and it is still happening. Blacklisting is illegal, but some evidence presented to the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs last year suggested that the practice continues. I refer Members to the early-day motion in my name that calls for a public inquiry into blacklisting.

Every fall from height can have life-altering consequences for workers and their families. The working-at-height culture needs to improve, as the APPG report demonstrates clearly, but sadly the issue does not yet appear to be at the top of decision-making agendas. Lack of data prevents us from understanding the causes of falls from height, which is compounded by a cultural obstacle to supporting people to report unsafe practices.

This excellent report looks at the issues that the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) talked about, in particular the four primary recommendations: the enhanced reporting system; the appointment of an independent body to allow confidential, enhanced and digital reporting of all near-misses, to be shared with Government and industry to inform health and safety policy; the extension of the Working Well Together programme; and the extension of the Scotland fatal accident inquiry process to other parts of the United Kingdom.

Another concern to share is that, under the coalition Government, the HSE suffered cuts and job losses. Many of us from a trade union background and those Members in Parliament at the time had real concerns about the deregulation of health and safety and the reporting of it. I hope that the Minister will tell us what the existing staffing levels are at the HSE, because I would be concerned had the numbers reduced over the past 10 years. Clearly, we should not be cutting jobs at the Health and Safety Executive.

In Scotland, under section 29 of the Inquiries into Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths etc. (Scotland) Act 2016, Ministers are required to report on fatalities. Fatal accident inquiries are the legal mechanism through which deaths in the workplace are investigated. Inquiries are mandatory for deaths occurring in the workplace, as well as in custody, or when the circumstances are deemed to be in the public interest, and they are usually held in the sheriff courts. The outcomes of all fatal accident inquiries since 1999 are publicly available and can be accessed online via the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. The all-party group calls for an equivalent system to be introduced in the rest of the UK, to ensure that employers are held to account for fatal injuries occurring as a result of workers falling from height, and that incidents are reported with sufficient information.

The Scottish Government are looking at the law on culpable homicide and considering proposals made by Members of the Scottish Parliament. For example, Claire Baker MSP launched a consultation, which ran from 7 November to 23 April this year, on how the law on culpable homicide can be tightened, and the related Bill appears to have cross-party support.

Companies can be prosecuted under the UK Government's Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007. We support the Act, but have concerns about the lack of prosecutions under it. Will the Minister talk a bit about that when he responds to the debate? Individual directors can also be charged with the common law offence of culpable homicide or with offences under health and safety legislation, but the SNP position is that if existing legislation can be improved by devolved legislation, we will consider what further steps should be taken.

In the 2018-19 programme for government, the Scottish Government committed to establish in spring this year a new support service—developed and delivered with Victim Support Scotland—to give families bereaved by murder and culpable homicide dedicated and continuous support. That is an important part of the Government's programme. Wider work to look at the law of homicide is also under way. The Scottish Government asked the Scottish Law Commission to consider that law, and examination commenced in February 2018. Our view is that every fatality at a place of employment in Scotland should be investigated, and that the nature of the deaths requires a detailed and often lengthy investigation involving complex, technical and medical issues and expert opinion. The law already allows individual directors to be charged, which of course is necessary.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central. Clearly, Scottish National party Members are leading the way in this Parliament in promoting the rights of workers. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is campaigning against discrimination against young people in the living wage; my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), is producing legislation on unpaid work trials; and I am promoting—this debate is another opportunity to do so—the Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill, which touches on issues such as a worker's status. People in industries such as construction believe that they are workers or employees, but later find out that they are somehow self-employed. We need to get on top of the issue of precarious work.

Thank you, Mr McCabe, for chairing this debate. I commend to the House the report of the all-party parliamentary group on working at height.

1.58 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr McCabe.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on securing this important debate, and on her work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on working at height, which produced a thought-provoking report in February. I thank her for her comprehensive and effective speech.

From conservation work on Big Ben to pruning trees and cleaning windows, it is estimated that each year, more than 1 million British businesses and 10 million workers carry out tasks that involve some sort of working at height. Action to protect the health and safety of workers has been a central issue for the labour movement throughout its history. Lord Shaftesbury, a Conservative politician, also campaigned for factory reform in the 19th century. However, some Conservatives see health and safety as part of some kind of “nanny state”, implying that there is no need for health and safety regulation, and that providing safety in the workplace is in some way damaging to the economy. The last leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister said, in January 2012:

“One of the coalition’s new year resolutions is this: kill off the health and safety culture for good.”

That is truly shocking, and shows a real disregard for the health and well-being of millions of working people throughout the country.

Strong health and safety legislation is as important today as it has always been. The latest figures for injuries and fatalities at work show that there is still a real need for robust health and safety regulations, especially for working at height. In 2017-18 there were 555,000—over half a million—non-fatal injuries at work, according to figures from the Health and Safety Executive, which has been responsible for safety in the workplace since 1974.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on drawing attention to the Labour party’s strong track record and pivotal role in health and safety legislation. In 2017-18, 8% of all non-fatal workplace injuries were due to a fall from height, and of the 144 workers killed at work, 35 were due to a fall from height. Deaths due to a fall from height represent a high proportion of the total, that being the largest reason for a death at work. The figures for 2017-18 are broadly in line with the average of 37 a year since 2013-14. Twenty of those 35 deaths occurred in the construction industry, although falls from height also occur in other parts of the economy, such as agriculture and the service industries.

The last Labour Government introduced the Work at Height Regulations 2005, which are widely considered to have led to a significant improvement in safety at work. The number of deaths resulting from falls from height at work in 2017-18 was 27% lower than in 2005-06. Nevertheless, we need to do more. I want to talk about three areas—reporting, enforcement and the future uncertainty we face as we leave the European Union.

On reporting, the HSE has estimated that only around half of non-fatal injuries are reported, and that the self-employed, who make up 37% of jobs in construction, report an even smaller proportion. In her report for the last Labour Government into the underlying causes of fatal accidents in the construction industry, Baroness Donaghy commented:

“It is a disgrace that we have such a low level of reporting of serious accidents, let alone near-misses”.

Yet in 2013, the HSE amended the regulation on the reporting of injuries at work to reduce the reporting burden on industry, so detailed data on falls is no longer collected. What consideration have the Government given to requiring reporting of the circumstances of a fall, such as how it happened, the distance, and the experience and training that the person had received on working at height? Regulation and reporting are vital, as is enforcement.

On enforcement, according to Government figures, the Treasury’s funding for the HSE is set to be over £100 million less this year than in 2009-10, which is a cut of 45%—almost half—over 10 years. That is shocking. How do the Government seriously expect the HSE to continue to carry out its statutory duties, as well as take on new ones post Brexit, with cuts of that scale to its funding? The number of enforcement notices issued by the HSE fell in 2016-17 and 2017-18. What assessment has the Minister’s Department made of the impact of funding cuts on the number of inspections that HSE undertakes? The Government have so far failed to respond to the tailored review of the HSE, which was published in November last year. When do they intend to do so?

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) mentioned Brexit; if future funding is one key uncertainty for health and safety regulation, Brexit is another. After the UK joined what was then the European Economic Community in 1973, European directives on health and safety mirrored much of what was in the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. However, in certain respects European legislation went further, and working at height was one area where UK regulation followed a European directive.

The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) said during the referendum campaign that the UK could slash safety standards after Brexit. That is a truly shocking proposal and shows disregard for the well-being of working people. Will the Minister give us a guarantee that existing health and safety legislation will not be watered down after we leave the EU, and that as the EU seeks to extend health and safety legislation, the protection that UK workers enjoy will keep pace?

The tragedy is that falls from height can very often be preventable, through proper enforcement of existing legislation and increased awareness of good practice. The 2005 regulations state that work at height should be avoided altogether wherever practical. As has been mentioned, new technology makes that possible in certain circumstances, such as the use of drones to inspect bridges or buildings. New technology also provides real opportunities for companies and organisations to provide vital health and safety training to help protect people in the workplace.

Rita Donaghy’s 2009 report into fatal accidents in construction was titled “One Death is too Many”. I am sure that is a sentiment that we can all agree on.

[Margaret Greenwood]

Those who criticise health and safety regulations as an example of a nanny state might reflect on the impact that deaths and injuries at work have on bereaved families or victims whose lives are shattered as a result.

2.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Thank you for being in the chair in today's debate, Mr McCabe. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) is right that it feels a little like a reunion of the Work and Pensions Committee, but it is certainly a privilege to respond on behalf of the Government to a worthy and important report, and I will attempt to address as many of the points as I can.

I should explain from the outset that I am not the specific Minister with departmental responsibility for this matter. I convey the apologies of the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), who will ultimately respond to the report on behalf of the Government. Departmental officials have briefed me on the report to allow me to respond to many points, which I will do to the best of my abilities. I reiterate the point that I made to the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson)—that the HSE needs to feed the Government its views on the report as a whole and on the specific recommendations.

It is right and proper to thank all colleagues for attending; I think the hon. Member for Glasgow South West made the fair point that today, many constituents will enjoy the pleasure of their Member's company at the local elections and the like. Otherwise, I am certain more would have been here. I put on the record the Government's acceptance and acknowledgment of the cross-party working that went into the production of the report. That is to the credit of all colleagues who have worked together. I also thank the Access Industry Forum and all the witnesses. Sadly, we will have to discuss Brexit briefly in a moment, but it is often said that this Parliament is solely focused on thing, unaware that there are many other things that Members are doing. The issue we are talking about is of great worth and merit and is part of an ongoing process.

I will push back slightly on the right hon. Member for Delyn, who seemed to suggest that it was solely the Labour Government who were interested in these matters on an ongoing basis. He will be aware of the Factories Act 1961 and the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992. Successive Governments, of whatever shape or form, have attempted to address health and safety at work in a multitude of ways, to try to reduce the number of accidents and increase the degree of ongoing safety.

I spent 15 years representing claimants who had suffered similar injuries to those described by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) in her opening speech. I worked on approximately 200 or 300 personal injury cases concerning falls from height, sometimes union-backed. I endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow South West that there have been many examples where unions have been very supportive of members and have ensured that they got the best possible

representation and compensation. I was lucky enough to represent many unions on an ongoing basis in cases in the past.

This issue affects a whole host of different industries. It is easy to say that it affects only scaffolders and roofers, but it can also affect farmers and, self-evidently, people who work in the oil and gas industry. Bluntly, it also affects the mum or dad who chooses to fix their own windows or roof, or to mess with their television aerial. There are many examples of individuals working from height without necessarily understanding the consequences of what they are getting involved with.

I welcome the debate. Let me say, for the avoidance of doubt, that this is an extremely important issue. I shall make a few preliminary points. First, the Health and Safety Executive has informed the Government that it will respond formally to the APPG's report in due course. I have pressed for a specific timetable. I do not want to inscribe this in stone, but I am told that a response will be made within 60 working days at the very latest, and cover all the points raised in the report and any other issues raised in this debate that are outstanding. I assure the House that the HSE's response will be deposited in the Library.

It is right to note—I do so not to make a party political point, but because we cannot discuss health and safety at work without putting this on the record—that Great Britain has lower levels of accidents and injuries at work than most nations. The report states fairly at page 6 that, since the introduction of the 2005 regulations, “the UK has consistently had some of the lowest workplace fatality and serious injury rates in the European Union.”

The report cites the 2014 statistics for the UK and similar countries: the UK had 0.55 fatalities per 100,000 employees, compared with 3.14 in France and 0.81 in Germany. We all agree that one fatality is too many, but that should not detract from the fact that successive Governments have done good work in this field. I also recognise, if it needs to be recognised, that falls from height are a major cause of serious and fatal injuries. The right hon. Member for Delyn fairly made the point, with the poignant tale of his father, that this issue affects each and every person in our communities.

As a practising barrister, I was involved in cases concerning scaffolders and the like both before and after the Work at Height Regulations 2005 were introduced. The report rightly makes it clear that it is agreed that the regulations are fit for purpose and fundamentally appropriate. The HSE has indicated that it welcomes the report and the desire for action. A key strand of the “Helping Great Britain Work Well” strategy for health and safety is acting together, and it is pleasing to see the work at height industry coming together in this way. The HSE undertakes to continue working with stakeholders to promote better working practices in the industry to try to protect workers in the workplace.

The report recommends that the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995—RIDDOR, as we all know them—should include enhanced reporting, so that additional intelligence is available. When those regulations were amended in 2013, the key change for work at height was the removal of the high fall—2 metres and above—and low fall categories. However, the free text box on the current reporting form where the reporter includes information about the incident

remains the same, and can still be used to record additional information about any work at height incident. That text box can be used to record information about the height of a fall.

The report suggests that enhanced reporting would help to identify the causes of falls from height. It is not for me to come to that conclusion at this stage, but we will listen to the HSE before the relevant Minister comes to a view on that issue. The HSE and industry have already undertaken plenty of excellent work in investigating work at height accidents, and they have established the main reasons behind such falls. Much good guidance is already available from the HSE and industry that addresses this important topic. The Government feel that it is fundamentally more important to place emphasis on the need to follow existing guidance and good practice to prevent falls wherever practicable, or to mitigate their effects should a fall occur.

Another recommendation in the report is that an independent body should be appointed to allow confidential reporting, and that that reporting should include near misses and other non-RIDDOR accidents. The HSE is fundamentally supportive of efforts in this area, but wishes to respond in more detail. However, it is right to put it on the record—this addresses points that several Members made—that the HSE operates a complaints advisory team, to which employees and the public may report concerns about work at height and dangerous practices in the workplace. Crucially, people may make such reports anonymously, and that can lead to the HSE inspecting areas of concern. The Government believe it is important that near misses are reported first and foremost to the employer as soon as possible. It is the employer who needs to investigate and introduce controls.

The report further suggests extending Working Well Together beyond the construction sector. The Access Industry Forum already helpfully provides financial and resource support to Working Well Together, so its groups around Great Britain can run “Working Well at Height” safety and health awareness days. The HSE already works with the Access Industry Forum and Working Well Together. It will continue to promote them and will explore whether there is an appetite for extending the campaign outside the construction sector. The agriculture sector is well known for similar incidents, so the HSE will discuss with the Access Industry Forum how it might also support that sector. As a representative of a very strong farming community, I will be looking to the National Farmers Union in my area to see how it wishes to address this point locally.

A couple of colleagues mentioned Brexit. I wish to make it very clear that we agree with the statement on page 10 of the report that the Government must ensure that no change is made as a result of Brexit that makes individuals who work at height less safe. On that point, the Prime Minister has committed to protecting workers’ rights as the UK leaves the European Union. That includes specific health and safety protections. The Prime Minister has said that there will be no lowering of standards after Brexit.

Hon. Members mentioned the approach in Scotland, where fatal accident inquiries are reported on and then entered on a publicly accessible database. I accept that the report recommends that a similar process should be introduced for England and Wales. I do not want to

give a politician’s answer, but I will do so, to a degree. This is an issue for the Ministry of Justice. To be fair to the Ministry of Justice, it is aware of the issue and is looking to respond as part of the HSE response and the Government’s response.

The Ministry of Justice will certainly come back to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central and the APPG on this matter, but I have been asked to make a couple of points in the interim. In England and Wales, the coroners’ courts make findings and reach conclusions. Although those are not routinely made available, they are read out in public at the hearing, and there is a system where the coroner will write to ask relevant bodies and organisations to take action if they believe there is a continued risk to life. Those reports and responses are published in “prevention of future deaths” reports by the Chief Coroner and are publicly available. On that particular issue, the Government at present have no plans to change the proven process, but we will wait to see what the HSE says.

Several colleagues spoke about the causes of falls. I think it is fair to say that there is a fundamental view that the causes of falls are already well known from the many HSE and industry investigations. It is questionable whether gathering additional information would reveal new causes, given the extensive work over decades to identify what causes falls. I endorse entirely the benefits of enhanced data and of drones providing better preliminary assessments of the proposed height at which one would be working. There is absolutely an ongoing desire to ensure that there are fewer injuries in the long term.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central for her efforts, both in terms of the report and in bringing this important matter before the House. I hope Members are assured that there is a plan to take this matter forward. The Government will continue to support the work of the HSE and industry in reducing the number of serious injuries and fatalities, and we will provide a response shortly. The Minister with responsibility for this area looks forward to meeting the APPG and having an opportunity to set out the Government’s position following the HSE’s response.

2.20 pm

Alison Thewliss: I thank everyone for coming and contributing to the debate. I appreciate what the Minister said about not perhaps being the correct Minister to cover this debate, but I appreciate the way in which he responded and the expertise he brought to the debate, which is important. I am glad that the HSE will provide a comprehensive response to the report, and that that will be made available in the Commons Library for others to see. That is useful.

I also look forward to receiving the reports on how fatal accident inquiries might be widened or used. I appreciate that that is a Ministry of Justice issue, but the implications of such inquiries, where we have seen them in Scotland, have been quite useful in their process and in making public recommendations. There is currently a much delayed and much publicised one going on about the Clutha helicopter crash in Glasgow. That has involved a huge evidence-gathering process. People will be able to go and watch, and in time the findings will come out. It is a good process for finding out where something has gone wrong and putting it right for the future.

[Alison Thewliss]

The Minister is correct about the farming sector. The NFU was a keen contributor to the report. I had a conversation with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—unusually, he is not in his place—who said he was away to fix something on the roof of his farm with a ladder and then he realised, “What am I doing? I am on my own here. Why would I go up on the roof with a ladder? Something could happen.” The House would be much poorer for the loss of him, so I am glad that he saw that. That story shows how easily decisions can be made that cause people to take risks without thinking them through and end up injured or worse. More can be done on educating the public about that.

There is still a need for enhanced reporting, so I urge the Minister to look at that. While there is the free text area within the reporting, it does not go far enough to gather the right information. We therefore do not know whether someone using equipment was trained, had particular qualifications or was part of any organisations that might have given advice. It would be useful to have as much background detail as possible to get to the bottom of what went awry to cause the accident.

Guy Opperman: I am interrupting the hon. Lady’s final peroration to add two points. First, I accept that that is a live issue; to pretend otherwise as to how we do that would be wrong. She has also reminded me that I failed to respond to a point raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) about blacklisting, which is a loathsome practice. It is quite right for a Government Minister to make it absolutely clear that we wholeheartedly oppose such a process. Employers have a legal duty to consult employees and their representatives on HSE complaints. Blacklisting is absolutely

not acceptable in any way, and full support will be given to those, of whatever shape or form, who bring forward cases of such heinous behaviour.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister for adding that—I was about to come on to blacklisting and the risk that some workers feel on reporting when things are not right. Employees in precarious employment in particular feel that if they become a whistleblower, they could quickly and easily lose their job, with the issue going unresolved for the next worker to come up against as well. I urge him to consider whether the anonymous reporting scheme that he mentioned covers that eventuality. There may be a time lag between someone’s reporting and an investigation; investigating needs to be done more efficiently and quickly, so that there can be a resolution without that worker being put at individual risk of losing their employment.

I was glad to hear what the Minister said about workers’ rights. We will hold the Government to that—he had better believe that we will. Working at height is increasingly complex, because buildings and the employment spectrum are more complex. It is right that the regulations are looked at again to ensure that they are entirely fit for purpose, because things have changed dramatically since they were written and we need to ensure that they are always effective in protecting workers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered preventing serious injury and fatalities while working at height.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): The next debate is scheduled to start at 3 pm, so I am required to suspend the sitting until then.

2.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

Sharia Law Courts

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

3 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sharia law courts in the UK.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I am extremely grateful to all hon. Members who have turned up on a Thursday afternoon when there is not much business on and at a time of local elections. That shows their devotion to this House and to the subject of this debate.

The genesis of this debate is a report prepared for the Council of Europe in January, at which I happened to speak. The report was led by a paper prepared by a member of the Spanish Socialist party, and it looked at the compatibility of sharia law with the European convention on human rights. I will turn to that topic later. The report singled out the UK, not completely approvingly, for how it approached this issue, as well as other countries, such as Greece, which have taken a different approach.

When approaching this issue, I am aware that the charge of Islamophobia may be levelled against us, but it is right that we consider sharia law courts or councils in terms of their conformity with the European convention on human rights, just as we do with other aspects of UK society. I am also aware of “The independent review into the application of sharia law in England and Wales”, which was produced in February 2018. The review was chaired by Professor Mona Siddiqui of the University of Edinburgh, and the panel included distinguished lawyers and religious and theological experts. I read that report with great interest.

The Council of Europe called on the authorities of the United Kingdom to do a number of things. I will read them out but comment on only one of them. First, it called on the UK to

“ensure that sharia councils operate within the law, especially as it relates to the prohibition of discrimination against women, and respect all procedural rights.”

Secondly, it called on the UK to review the Marriage Act 1949,

to make it a legal requirement for Muslim couples to civilly register their marriage before or at the same time as their Islamic ceremony, as”—

the report claims—

“is already stipulated by law for Christian and Jewish marriages.”

As an aside, I am aware that a number of imams are also qualified registrars and can therefore conduct the civil service at the same time as the religious service. Similarly, a number of Catholic priests are qualified registrars. However, I do not think there is a legal requirement for that to go ahead.

Thirdly, the Council called on the UK to

“take appropriate enforcement measures to oblige the celebrant of any marriage, including Islamic marriages, to ensure that the marriage is also civilly registered before or at the same time as celebrating the religious marriage.”

Fourthly, it called on the UK to ensure that vulnerable women are provided with safeguards against exploitation and informed about their right to seek redress before

UK courts. The Council also called for awareness-raising campaigns to be put in place, to encourage Muslim communities to acknowledge and respect women’s rights in civil law, especially in marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance. As an aside, I think there is a lot to be said for emphasising that particular point and ensuring that we indulge in awareness campaigns.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point about awareness. Like him, I carefully read the independent Home Office report, which said:

“It is this misrepresentation of sharia councils as courts that leads to public misconceptions over the primacy of sharia over domestic law and concerns of a parallel legal system.”

Although the hon. Gentleman has been careful with his language, as I would expect, the Order Paper says “sharia law courts”, which is precisely what the Home Office report said we should avoid.

John Howell: I realise that the independent report calls them sharia law councils, but we can come on to look at that in the moment. I was reading out the Council of Europe’s descriptions, which calls them sharia law courts. We should continue with that, at least for the moment.

The Council’s next point was that the UK should “conduct further research on the ‘judicial’ practice of Sharia councils”—

to use that term—

“and on the extent to which such councils are used voluntarily, particularly by women, many of whom would be subject to intense community pressure in this respect.”

The Council of Europe committee held meetings with Professor Ruud Peters of the University of Amsterdam and Professor Mathias Rohe of Erlangen University in Germany. On 5 September 2017 it held another hearing and the participants included Mr Konstantinos Tsitselikis, professor in human rights law and international organisations at the University of Macedonia, and Ms Machteld Zee, a political scientist and author. Finally, I was pleased that the committee held an exchange of views with Professor Mona Siddiqui, whom I have already mentioned.

Professor Sandberg from Cardiff University has recently said:

“Surely the issue of concern is whether people are pressurised into the form of alternative dispute resolution provided by Sharia councils? The Resolution distinguishes between situations where Muslims submit voluntarily and, alternatively, where they submit under social pressure”.

He says that the report does not pursue that any further and:

“That, however, is the nub of the issue.”

He goes on to say:

“Where the decision to use a religious authority for dispute resolution is genuinely voluntary on the part of both parties then this should be no more objectionable than any other form of alternative dispute resolution”—

provided that it also conforms with UK law.

As the Council’s report makes clear, sharia law is understood as the law to be obeyed by every Muslim. It divides all human action into five categories: what is obligatory, recommended, neutral, disapproved of and prohibited. It makes two forms of legal ruling: one designed

[John Howell]

to organise society and one to deal with everyday situations. It also has a legal opinion, intended to cover a special situation.

Sharia law, therefore, is meant in essence to be a positive law, enforceable on Muslims. Although most states with Muslim majorities have inserted in their constitutions a provision referring to Islam or Islamic law, the effect of those provisions is largely symbolic or confined to family law. Those religious provisions may have a legal effect if raised in the courts, and a political effect if they intrude into institutional attitudes and practices.

I shall consider the general principles of sharia law in relation to the European convention on human rights, particularly article 14, on the prohibition of discrimination on grounds such as sex and religion, and article 5 of protocol 7 to the convention, which establishes equality between spouses in law. Other aspects of the convention may also have an effect.

In Islamic family law, men have authority over women, because God has made the one superior to the other. It goes on to say that good women are obedient. It encourages women who stray from those norms to suffer punishment. In sharia law, adultery is strictly prohibited, and legal doctrine holds that the evidence must take the form of corroborating testimony from witnesses to prove an individual's guilt. In the case of rape, which is seldom committed in public, there must be four male witnesses who are good Muslims, so punishing the rapist is difficult, if not impossible. In practice, women are obliged to be accompanied by men when they go out, which is not conducive to their independence.

Under Islamic law, a husband has a unilateral right to divorce, although it can be delegated to the wife and she can therefore exercise her right to divorce. Otherwise, she may initiate a divorce process but only with the consent of her husband, by seeking what is known as khula, in which case the wife forgoes her dowry. In cases where the husband has deserted the wife, has failed to co-operate with the divorce process or is acting unreasonably, the marriage may be dissolved, but only by a sharia ruling. While divorce by mutual consent is enshrined in Islamic law, the application must in this case come from the wife, since the husband can repudiate his wife at any time. There is also the question of equal rights regarding divorce arrangements, such as custody of children.

For the division of an estate among the heirs, distinctions are made according to the sex of the heir. A male heir has a double share, whereas a female heir has a single share. In addition, the rights of a surviving wife are half those of a surviving husband. Non-Muslims do not have the same rights as Muslims in criminal and civil law under sharia law. That applies, for example, to the weight attached to their testimony in court, which is discrimination on the grounds of religion within the meaning of articles 9 and 14 of the convention.

The European Court of Human Rights had the chance to rule on the incompatibility of sharia law with human rights in the early 2000s, in its judgment on the Welfare party v. Turkey, which held that

“Turkey, like any other Contracting Party, may legitimately prevent the application within its jurisdiction of private-law rules of religious inspiration prejudicial to public order and the values of

democracy for Convention purposes (such as rules permitting discrimination based on the gender of the parties concerned, as in polygamy and privileges for the male sex in matters of divorce and succession).”

In that particular case, the decision by the Turkish constitutional court to order the dissolution of the Welfare party, which advocated the introduction of sharia law, was held to be compatible with the convention, and the Court clearly affirmed the following:

“It is difficult to declare one's respect for democracy and human rights while at the same time supporting a regime based on sharia, which clearly diverges from Convention values, particularly with regard to its criminal law and criminal procedure, its rules on the legal status of women and the way it intervenes in all spheres of private and public life in accordance with religious precepts.”

With respect to sharia law itself, the Court expressly stated that

“a political party whose actions seem to be aimed at introducing sharia in a State Party to the Convention can hardly be regarded as an association complying with the democratic ideal that underlies the whole of the Convention”.

However, although the Court has ruled that sharia law is incompatible with the convention, that does not mean that there is absolute incompatibility between the convention and Islam. The Court also recognised that religion is

“one of the most vital elements that go to make up the identity of believers and their conception of life”.

Accordingly, the Court's relatively firm position should not be taken as a rejection of all elements of sharia or of Islam as a whole, while taking into account the existence of structural incompatibilities between Islam and the convention which, as far as sharia law is concerned, are sometimes absolute and sometimes relative.

It is also likely that a large number of cases concerning the position of Muslim women under Islamic law never come before the ordinary courts or the European Court of Human Rights because women are under enormous pressure from their families and their communities to comply with the demands of the informal religious courts. Such cases give rise to the question whether to use the concept of public order to refuse to recognise, or enforce, discriminatory decisions, even if they are not challenged by the women concerned.

There is currently no single accepted definition of the term “sharia council” in the United Kingdom, where such bodies generally provide advice and attempt to resolve disputes relating to family or personal issues according to the principles of sharia law. However, little is known about their work, which is conducted in private, and decisions are not published, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability. There is also uncertainty about the number of sharia courts operating in the UK. A study by the University of Reading identified 30 groups involved in such activity, and a report by the think-tank Civitas estimated that at least 85 groups are in operation, although that figure also includes informal tribunals run out of mosques or online forums.

Sharia councils provide a form of alternative dispute resolution, something I am very familiar with, having chaired the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution for the past three years. Members of the Muslim community voluntarily consent to accept the religious jurisdiction of sharia councils. Marital issues and the granting of Islamic marriage divorces account for about 90% of their work. They also advise in matters

of law, including issues of inheritance, probate and wills and Islamic commercial law contracts, and they provide mediation, counselling and religious ruling services.

Sharia councils are not considered part of the British legal system. They are not courts and their decisions are not legally binding. However, despite having no judicial authority, some councils see themselves as authoritative on religious issues, and the power of sharia councils lies in how they are perceived by their communities.

A significant number of Muslims do not have a marriage recognised under British law. Those who do not register their marriage under civil law, and some who have been married abroad, have little redress available to them, as their position under British law is similar to that of unmarried cohabitants who have few financial remedies on the breakdown of their relationship. A significant number of Muslim couples fail to civilly register their religious marriages, and some Muslim women therefore have no option of obtaining a civil divorce. Some women may have no other option but to obtain a religious divorce, for which the judgment of a sharia council is normally required.

Furthermore, even in cases where women have a civil law marriage, some might seek the decision of a sharia council for reasons of self-identity or community standing, or to provide reassurance that they have the religious freedom to remarry within their faith. Those who obtain a civil divorce but not a religious divorce might find it difficult to remarry—a position sometimes referred to as a “limping marriage”. One of the experts invited to testify before the committee, Ms Zee, denounced what she described as “marital captivity”.

There are numerous reports citing examples of how Muslim women have been discriminated against by sharia councils. Examples of such discrimination include women being pressured into mediation, including victims of domestic abuse; greater weight being given to the husband’s account of reasons for divorce; women not being questioned impartially by council members, who are almost all men, and feeling blamed for the breakdown of the marriage; and unjustified requirements to pay back their dowry.

There are also allegations that sharia councils have issued discriminatory rulings on child custody. The Casey review cited claims that

“some Sharia Councils have been supporting the values of extremists, condoning wife-beating, ignoring marital rape and allowing forced marriage.”

Researchers were told that

“some women were unaware of their legal rights to leave violent husbands and were being pressurised to return to abusive partners or attend reconciliation sessions with their husbands despite legal injunctions in place to protect them from violence.”

The majority of the evidence, however, is anecdotal, as little empirical evidence has been gathered in relation to users of sharia councils. Further research is therefore necessary; I am aware that the Select Committee on Home Affairs has done some work. Mechanisms are required to provide safeguards and ensure that vulnerable women are not exploited or put at risk. Many of the women are not aware of their rights to seek redress before the British courts.

Sharia councils should not be confused with arbitration tribunals. The Muslim Arbitration Tribunal was established in 2007 under the Arbitration Act 1996. It operates within

the framework of British law and its decisions can be enforced by civil courts, provided that they have been reached in accordance with the legal principles of the British system. Its legal authority comes from the agreement of both parties to give the tribunal power to rule on their case. In cases where decisions do not conform to the principles of British law, they may simply be quashed. Moreover, the 1996 Act cannot be used to exclude the jurisdiction of the family law courts. The MAT can therefore conduct arbitration according to Islamic personal law on issues such as commercial and inheritance disputes. Many of those issues were considered by Baroness Cox, who promoted the Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill in 2011. I will leave hon. Members to look at that.

The independent review was set up because sharia courts were deemed to be discriminating against women, as I have outlined. It has three recommendations. The first is to ensure that civil marriages are conducted before or at the same time as the Islamic marriage, in line with the way in which most Christian and many Jewish marriages are conducted. It also states that there should be a requirement for Muslim couples to civilly register their marriage, and that there be consequential changes to divorce.

I will skip the second recommendation and go to the third recommendation, which is to carry out some regulation of the sharia courts. The Government have declined to do that, for the obvious reason that that would legitimise the courts as part of the judicial establishment, which they have no intention of doing. To go back one, the second recommendation is for a general awareness campaign to acknowledge women’s rights and to inform women of those rights, including the fact that arbitration that applies sharia law in respect of financial or child arrangements falls foul of the Arbitration Act.

The independent review sets out several bad practices, including inappropriate and unnecessary questioning about personal relationship matters; asking a forced marriage victim to attend the sharia council at the same time as her family; insisting on any form of mediation as a necessary preliminary; and inviting women to make concessions to their husbands to secure a divorce. Lengthy processes also mean that, although divorces are rarely refused, they can be drawn out.

There are several other faults with the system, such as inconsistency, a lack of safeguarding policies or clear signposting, and the fact that, even with a decree absolute, a religious divorce is not always a straightforward process. Civil legal terms are adopted inappropriately, which leads to confusion. There are few women panel members of sharia councils, and some panel members have only recently moved to the UK, so they have no understanding of the UK system.

It is often proposed that, based on the evidence of discriminatory practices in some sharia councils, they should all be shut down and banned. The main problem with that argument is that a ban cannot be imposed on organisations that can set up voluntarily anywhere and that operate only on the basis of the credibility given to them by a certain community. The evidence that the review heard indicates that women use sharia councils almost solely to obtain religious divorces, for a number of different reasons, such as community acceptance of the divorce and their own remarriage hopes.

[John Howell]

It is clear from all the evidence that sharia councils are fulfilling a need in some Muslim communities. There is a demand for religious divorce that is being answered by the sharia councils. That demand will not simply end if they are banned and closed down; instead, that could lead to them simply going underground, which would make it even harder to ensure good practice and would make discriminatory practices and greater financial costs more likely and harder to detect.

The main point is that there needs to be an acceptance of the law of the land, as there is within other communities, particularly the Jewish community, whose members accept that British law overrides their religious law. It is impossible to understand why somebody would enter a sharia court voluntarily, when they know that they are going to be under pressure to conform with whatever is said there. I discussed that with another Minister, who had better remain nameless. She was incandescent about sharia courts and told me to warn the Minister not to give a mealy mouthed response, or she would be after him. I mention that as an aside; I do not want to influence what the Minister will say at all, but that is a good indication that, particularly among women—that Minister was a Muslim lady—the effect of sharia courts is quite controversial. I am glad that the Home Affairs Committee took evidence on the issue.

3.26 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I wear many hats in this debate, which I thank the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for securing. Contrary to the accusations of Islamophobia, I am a Muslim woman who is a member of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims. We have just launched our definition of Islamophobia, which I am proud that the Labour party has adopted; it would be useful if the hon. Gentleman's party did, too. This debate, which brings the issue of sharia councils to the House, is welcome because it is right that we have such conversations.

I agree with many things that the hon. Gentleman has said. Sharia councils are not entirely fit for purpose, as I am only too familiar with as a former member of the Home Affairs Committee with the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). Before the review, the Committee took evidence from many people about sharia councils. Yes, 90% of their work is about divorces, and yes, despite that, they do not offer counselling services. I have raised that privately and publicly with imams and scholars across the board. I would also say, however, that while it is right that we debate the fact that sharia councils have a huge way to go, we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

One thing I really struggled with in the previous speech was the idea that God made men superior to women. I am not a theologian; I am a politician, but one thing I am clear about as a Muslim woman is that my God did not make me unequal to a man. He gave me many rights and I enjoy those rights. One of those rights affords me being the Member of Parliament for Bradford West. Many Muslim men chose to vote for me and put me here. I disagree with the idea that in Islam, God makes men superior to women. The idea of needing four witnesses to rape is also news to me.

During our Select Committee inquiry, we also heard the idea that is out there, and peddled by the right-wing media, that sharia courts are taking over and replacing the British legal system and judiciary. There is absolutely no truth in that, because the first law of sharia—the first concept and the key tenet of it—is that the law of the land takes precedence.

I really struggle with the idea that somehow Muslims need to accept the law of the land—Muslims do accept the law of the land. The majority of Muslims in this country, as with the majority of people of any faith or the majority of people of no faith, accept the law of this land. However, many people still break the law of this land. If we look at prisons, we see that the people who are convicted of breaking the law of this land are not just Muslims. Muslims do have respect for the law, and I take it very personally and feel really offended at the suggestion that Muslims need to accept the law of the land. We do accept it.

There is not a requirement for there to be four witnesses to a rape, and as for the idea that a husband has a unilateral right to ask for a divorce, to return to the Select Committee inquiry, we heard lots of evidence against that. As a Muslim woman, I can instigate a divorce. Every Muslim woman in this country can instigate a divorce. A Muslim woman does not need the permission of her husband; she can instigate it, and she can go and get that divorce. That is a right afforded to every Muslim woman.

Yes, there is a question as to whether every sharia council actually implements that and works to the letter of the law and to its essence. And many sharia councils do discriminate. We have heard horrific—horrific—cases of women being discriminated against. The Select Committee took evidence from women who had been forced to go back to the perpetrator of violence against them, rather than reporting that violence. As a Select Committee, we went out and took our inquiry into the community. And yes, we heard of issues involving women where the arbitration service did not work, and where women were discriminated against—of course we did. However, that is no different from any other community. I have heard of lots of cases from constituents who were not happy with what had happened in a court of law because they felt that they had to do things that were not conducive to women's rights.

I speak from experience. I speak as the daughter of a woman who was convicted of murdering an abusive partner and served 14 years in prison; I speak as a woman who had a forced marriage at the age of 15. So I am absolutely familiar with the patriarchal cultures within which women are oppressed and abused, and I stand very tall against them; I really do. I know that when my mother sought help from the community, she was not afforded it. However, let me say this: more than 25 years ago, when my mother was driven to do what she did, there were many other women in prison at the same time, and many other women who had killed their abusive partner. In fact, the majority of women who are in prison have experienced some form of abuse. Women do not just willy-nilly go and kill people; it is not what we do.

What I am saying is that when women are abused, it is not just the sharia councils that have a responsibility to respond. I won an award in 1998—the Emma Humphreys award—and that was one of the first times that the issue

of abuse against women had been raised. Let us be clear: 90% of the sharia councils' work is about divorce, which affects women. The nub of the issue for me is whether the sharia councils are fit for purpose for women, and treat women with equality and empower women. However, I agree that that is not the case at present.

Emma Humphreys was not a Muslim woman. There were many other women who went to prison for killing their partners. In those days, even judges did not have the understanding of domestic violence that we do today. So we as a country have come a long way. But in this country, which is such an advanced democracy, we have not got it right when it comes to women just yet. We have got a long way to go when it comes to giving women equality in courts of law, where there are years of experience and magnificent judges, but we still get it wrong.

So sharia courts do serve a purpose. They might not be brilliant and I absolutely agree that they need some regulation. Our Select Committee took evidence from the Muslim Women's Network UK; perhaps the hon. Member for Henley could read the Committee's report and read the evidence from the Muslim Women's Network UK about sharia councils.

We all agree that sharia councils cannot be abolished, as that would send them underground and we do not want that to happen. This service has to be available. As a Muslim woman, I need the sharia council; I want to be able to access the sharia council, but yes, I also want it to be fit for purpose.

What I do not want is for this issue to be conflated with anything else. The hon. Member for Henley, at the start of his speech, said that he would be accused of Islamophobia for securing this debate, but I would argue that that is not the case. However, I will also point out something else that he said, which is something I really struggle with, and this is where we enter a grey area.

I do not have an issue with anybody criticising my religion; I have no issues with that whatsoever. The definition—the definition by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims—of Islamophobia clearly sets out that there is nothing wrong with people having a debate about what Islam is and what Islam is not. However, in this debate today the hon. Gentleman referred to the Casey review, and when talking about it he said that its findings included sharia councils supporting extremists and wife-beating. I get some of that context, but the whole idea of extremism in sharia councils—I have yet to come across that. That is not the debate that I hoped to have today, and I did not expect to hear the word “extremist” mentioned in this debate.

As I have said, 90% of sharia councils' work is about divorce. In my constituency of Bradford West I have addressed gatherings, including majority male or male-dominated gatherings, and I have talked to people and said, “Why is it that we have so much money when we spend on the mosques, yet we are not talking about having counselling services for women, even though divorce is such a big deal, tearing children and families apart? We need to have those support services in place.”

So I agree that sharia courts need regulation, but what I do not accept, and will not accept, are all of these ideas about all of the sharia councils, including the idea that God has made men superior to women,

the idea that there need to be four witnesses to a rape, and even the idea that someone needs to say the talaq three times for divorce, and that a divorce can just be granted and a woman has to accept it. No, she does not.

Let me tell people something else that the sharia councils could do if they were fit for purpose, which is what we should be working towards. We have a marriage contract—a nikah—and in that nikah a woman can stipulate that the man must forgo his religious idea of a polygamous marriage, such that he can take another wife. A woman can stipulate that in the contract. That contract is absolutely legally binding, as far as the sharia council is concerned, and the woman can divorce if that contract is breached. There is no need for her to have her husband's permission.

However, what I want is for every Muslim woman in this country to understand that their nikah does not give them legal protection in this country. Their nikah—their marriage contract—does not give them the rights that a civil marriage does. And we should be absolutely promoting that message across the communities, to make sure that women are empowered.

I have come across men who have abused their position and taken on a second wife, even though a nikah is in place, and not respected the rights of their first wife; and I absolutely agree that we should be making sure that that practice does not exist. We need to make sure that women understand that they can write contracts, and we need to train the imams and other people in how to give women their rights, including their contractual rights. And we should say to women, “Look, think outside the box. If you don't want this in a marriage—in a normal relationship, we have what we like and what we don't like, and that is the same with a marriage in Islam.” There is nothing to stop any woman from doing that.

There are three things that I really want from this debate today. I want women who are listening to this debate, and the men who are listening to it, from all communities, to know that there is no Islamophobia in talking about sharia councils; in fact, such talk is very welcome. Sharia councils are not brilliant, they are not perfect, they have got a way to go, but we should support them and regulate them, or support them to regulate themselves, because communities have their own solutions; it is not necessary for us as a Parliament to impose solutions upon them.

We need to empower sharia councils; we need to get the regulations in place. We need to get women and men across the communities to understand that that contract does not give those rights under the law. As I have said before—I repeat it because I feel it is so important—the first tenet of sharia law is that the law of the land presides. The *Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and the right-wing media would have people believe that we have a parallel legal system running in this country. That does not exist. We are not about to bring sharia law into the country and take over. Less than 5% of the British community is Muslim, but somehow that 5% is taking over the whole of England's British law? The 650 of us are making all of these laws, but somehow 5% of the community is taking over and is going to abolish all of what we have done for hundreds and hundreds of years? That is not going to happen.

Let us empower the women; let us talk to the Muslim communities, not about the Muslim communities. Let us change how we deal with this issue, not conflate it

[Naz Shah]

with words such as extremism when we are having a debate about sharia councils. Ninety percent of what those councils do is about divorce. Please, let's not go there.

I make a plea to the Minister: please look at the APPG definition of Islamophobia. I have talked to the Home Secretary, I have asked the Prime Minister and many Ministers, and there is an absolute denial that Islamophobia exists in the Government. That needs to be addressed, and when we have addressed it, these debates will be much more constructive. They would not need to start with a Member of Parliament saying that he is going to be accused of being Islamophobic, because this is not Islamophobic; this is the right debate to have for the sake of women, of equality, and of all our communities.

3.41 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) on having secured this important debate about sharia councils. I take part in this debate with some trepidation, as it is a complicated issue, touching on family law, freedom of religion, culture, gender relations and many other issues in between. It is quite right to say that our response should first and foremost be informed by the experiences and views of those most affected: those are, of course, Muslim women, 90% of whom are seeking a divorce. Their experience of sharia councils varies greatly, which reflects the fact that sharia councils themselves vary significantly. Unsurprisingly there is no unanimous opinion, even among Muslim women, on how—or whether—we in Parliament or the Government should respond to some of the issues that have been raised, both today and in other reports.

I too was a member of the Select Committee on Home Affairs when it was looking at the issue of sharia councils. It was probably one of the most polarised issues that I looked at during my time on that Committee, involving widely diverging and strongly held opinions. On the one hand, at some of the events that the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) has described, I spoke to women who were absolutely positive about their experience with sharia councils and how they had secured divorces there; others pointed to horrendous practices and discrimination, which we have heard about.

Dr Siddiqui's report found similar disparities in practice, but that review, as we have also heard, concluded that banning sharia councils is not a realistic option; I support that conclusion. There is demand for advice and guidance, for determinations on the meaning of religious texts and procedures, and for religious divorce. That review warned that if anything, such a ban would likely drive councils underground, making transparency even more difficult and risking more widespread bad practice and discrimination.

The second issue I want to touch on is how civil marriage law can play a role in this area. I make absolutely clear that I am not a family lawyer, so I will not go into fine detail about the specific proposals for marriage law reform in England and Wales that Dr Siddiqui's review put forward. However, it does seem—the evidence suggests this—that a significant number of Muslim women in

the UK have a religious marriage, but not one that is recognised by the civil law. As we have heard, that seriously limits the options and powers available to women, should that marriage then break down.

However, I went on to the website of Glasgow Central Mosque today to see what options there are for marriage. I was met with a well set-out and positive page that starts by celebrating the fact that

“Family life is a building block of a successful society, and marriage is an occasion of great joy.”

That page goes on to say:

“We can perform religious marriages, which are recognised by the law. A marriage ceremony (Nikah) at Glasgow Central Mosque must also be a religious marriage (i.e. the legal equivalent of a civil marriage conducted by a registrar). Our Imams are authorised to solemnise religious marriages, therefore it is not necessary to have a separate civil marriage. If the civil marriage has already taken place, please bring the marriage certificate on the day.”

I read an article by a Muslim woman who is a solicitor in Glasgow, who wrote about how the culture in the Glasgow mosques is one of working together to ensure that the civil requirements are met at the same time as the religious ones. It seems—of course, I stand to be corrected—that the general practice in that city has become to meet both religious and civil requirements at the same time. It would be good to know how that culture has come about. It would be good to find out what impact that has had on the number of women who are without a civil marriage in Glasgow and Scotland, and whether the doubling-up of those processes has been encouraged or helped by provisions in family law—slightly different in Scotland from those in England and Wales—or whether something else has made that happen. That could inform our thinking, both in Scotland and in England and Wales, as to whether there needs to be legal change or whether we can do more in terms of culture and awareness raising, as the hon. Member for Bradford West has said.

John Howell: For many years I have been an organist, and I have played at Catholic weddings. In many cases, the service has been delayed because of the late arrival of the registrar. A marriage conducted by a priest is religiously legal, but in order to make it civilly legal, a registrar has to be there. That seems to be the established position in the Catholic Church; as I understand it, only in the Anglican Church and the Church in Wales is the priest automatically a registrar.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is interesting to hear. If there is a way to remove such complications to ensure that such delays can be avoided, it should be looked at. I understand—I repeat, I am not a family lawyer, so I might be completely wrong—that that is not the position in Scotland, where priests are generally able to conduct both the religious and civil ceremonies in one go without the presence of a registrar. To my mind, that clearly makes things simpler.

The second group of recommendations in the Siddiqui report is essentially about empowering women, a topic on which I suspect we will all be at one. That seems to be front and centre of the issue that we face. There absolutely must be awareness raising about rights; for example, many of those who have ended up with a religious but not a civil marriage have done so purely because they did not know about the law or their status.

Awareness-raising about civil rights is only the first step in empowerment. Support is also needed to ensure that all are able to overcome the potentially “huge cultural barriers” described in the report, which can inhibit the exercise of rights even when people are aware that those rights exist. Those barriers stop women choosing to pursue civil remedies instead of religious ones. We need to give greater backing to all the NGOs, advice centres, human rights bodies and others that can provide that support. That is not just about supporting women to overcome barriers; those organisations can help to lower the barriers in the first place, encouraging a culture that respects women who choose to use their civil rights in the first place.

Do we need to go further? That question takes us on to the third group of recommendations in the Siddiqui report. The steps that we have just discussed about empowerment tend to focus on providing alternatives to sharia councils. We also need to ask whether we can improve practices in sharia councils themselves, which is perhaps the toughest issue.

As we have heard, the Siddiqui review recommended a form of regulation via a state-constituted body and a code of practice, and many sharia councils and women’s organisations supported such an approach. Presciently, the report acknowledged that the Government could be reluctant to adopt a wholesale regulatory approach for fear of being seen to legitimise a different system of law. I can understand that response, but it should not be an end to the matter. Not adopting full-scale regulation does not absolve us of the need to look at the seriously bad practices that have been recorded in some cases, how that relates to the law, and whether the law can be changed in other ways to stop those practices. If I understood it correctly, that was what the dissenting opinion in Dr Siddiqui’s report was getting at.

For example, should we require in law that anyone providing advice about family law matters must provide signposting to civil remedies? How should the law respond if an institution is seen to aid and abet domestic violence by coercing a victim to mediate with the perpetrator? Are there existing regulations in respect of “service providers” that could be strengthened and better applied to stop the serious issues that we have seen? What should happen if evidence shows that councils are undertaking tasks that should be exclusively for the courts? Crucially, given that consent is so important, what is the legal response when certain councils are engaging in proceedings, providing opinions and making judgments when there was never genuine consent to the process in the first place? I do not have the answers to all those questions, but we have to consider them and be led by the evidence, particularly the evidence we hear from those who have been caught up in these processes.

On balance the Siddiqui review is correct that banning would be ineffective, counterproductive and not justified. The main objective must be to encourage the use of civil processes and access to civil redress and rights where appropriate. Marriage law changes might help with that, but more importantly, so too might policies that empower women, such as support for NGOs and other groups. While a distinct form of regulation and a complete new regulatory regime may not be the right approach, that does not mean that we should not be looking at whether other civil and criminal laws and regulations could be better applied to stop or prevent some of the

bad practice we have heard about. If we do all that, hopefully we can continue to protect the sharia councils that are doing a job that accords with all the values we want to be upheld, while at the same time clamping down on those that are not.

3.50 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I begin by commending the speeches that have been made from the Back Benches, starting with the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). I acknowledge his expertise and interest in this issue. I also acknowledge his work in the Council of Europe and the Justice Committee and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on her passionate speech. I congratulate her on her work in the all-party parliamentary group and her work in our party on the definition of Islamophobia that has been adopted. I also congratulate her on the experience and expertise she brought to the debate today, both in terms of the workings of sharia councils and the extraordinarily passionate and personal section in her speech on her fight against patriarchal culture wherever it is found in our society. I thought she said something extraordinarily true when she said we should always look to talk to communities, not about them. That is something we can all take away from this debate.

As my hon. Friend set out—I echo it—there is nothing Islamophobic at all in bringing this debate forward. It has been a good debate across the board, but I want to speak about Islamophobia not only in the context of this debate, but in the wider context of our society and the time in which the debate takes place. We all acknowledge that Islamophobia and far-right attacks on Muslims here in the UK and across much of the world are rising. The figures show a record number of such attacks and incidents of abuse, and recently five mosques in Birmingham were vandalised on a single night. That does not happen in a vacuum.

While I do not want to stray beyond the confines of this debate, I do think that not only social media companies but the mainstream media have a responsibility for how such matters are covered. Indeed, the UK’s assistant commissioner at the Metropolitan police—the national head of our anti-terrorism measures in the UK—Neil Basu said:

“The reality is that every terrorist we have dealt with has sought inspiration from the propaganda of others, and when they can’t find it on Facebook, YouTube, Telegram or Twitter they only have to turn on the TV, read the paper or go to one of a myriad of mainstream media websites struggling to compete with those platforms.”

He was referring to the wake of the terrible Christchurch attacks in New Zealand and the fact that mainstream media were spreading the awful streaming of that terrible attack. We even see anti-Muslim sentiment whipped up in relation to the food that many Muslims eat. Clearly we all stand together in condemnation of such discrimination, abuse and hatred.

Protection of the rights of religious minorities is an essential feature of any democratic society, and there is a richness to our culture in the United Kingdom. We have people who practise many different religions. It is right that the state should not prevent people from acting according to their religious beliefs and cultural

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

traditions, provided that, first, it does not break the law—I include in that being compliant with our human rights obligations—and, secondly, it is always a product of free choice and by consent.

In that regard, I think we can pick up certain positive aspects, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West indicated. Mediation is based on consent with an agreement on process from both parties, and we can see that happening. We have heard about the percentage of divorces that are dealt with by sharia councils, but such things as boundary disputes, housing, wills, probate and estates can be dealt with, too. We can see positive outcomes when there is agreement on process. In addition, the hon. Member for Henley mentioned the work of the 2007 Muslim arbitration tribunal in that regard.

It is important that we stick to facts when it comes to any form of alternative dispute resolution or religious council, because there is no suggestion that they somehow trump or overrule the rule of law.

Naz Shah: Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the title of this debate, which refers to sharia courts, rather than sharia councils?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Indeed. I mentioned that when I intervened on the hon. Member for Henley, who referred to them as councils in his speech. One of the conclusions drawn by the Home Office's independent report was that the real problem with using "courts" is that it gives the impression that there is a parallel or competing courts system when there is not. That is an extraordinarily important point, and it brings me to my next point, which is that we have to be very wary of misinformation, particularly given the idea that Parliament is somehow introducing this parallel law. That is clearly not the case. It is incumbent on us all to make that clear and to be careful about the language that we use in that regard.

To draw my remarks to a close, the two pillars have to be the rule of law, which will always be paramount, and a basis of consent. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West spoke extraordinarily powerfully about the role of women. She is an example of a woman in an extraordinary role and an exemplar to others. We must bear in mind, too, that human rights are always central to how we judge any form of alternative dispute resolution.

3.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, not least because it protects me from being challenged by difficult questions from someone who did my job many years ago with great skill and knowledge.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this debate, which addresses an area of significant interest and importance. It is right that this House debates such issues. The work of the Council of Europe has no greater champion or more active participant than my hon. Friend. I am very pleased to be able to respond to the debate. It was due to be responded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), until his well-deserved promotion yesterday evening, so I confess that I am not an expert in this area, but I have been fascinated by the debate.

I am grateful to all hon. Members who have taken part late on a Thursday afternoon. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), not only for the passion and power that she habitually brings to her speeches, but for the depth of her knowledge and understanding of the subject. I am pleased she was able to be here.

I also recognise the contribution of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who spoke in his usual measured and sensible tone. His contribution was particularly valuable in highlighting the practice in Glasgow, which he touched on.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I omitted to mention the speech of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) not because I did not think that it was impressive, but simply because I treated it as a Front-Bench contribution, not a Back-Bench one. I join the Minister in commending the speech.

Edward Argar: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention; I was about to respond to his speech. As ever, he made a powerful and sensible case. He highlighted, as other Members have, the importance of choosing our words with care when we speak in this House, not just on this subject but on all subjects, and the responsibility that we all have, and the broader responsibility of the media and others in this space, to choose our words with care.

I will set out the Government's position on sharia law. As the Prime Minister has said, and as Members have mentioned today, there is one rule of law in the United Kingdom. In practice, that means, within each of the UK jurisdictions, a single system of law, legislated according to our constitutional arrangements by this Parliament or the devolved Administrations. Our judicial systems interpret, apply and, where necessary, enforce those laws. There is no parallel system of sharia law in operation in the UK; Her Majesty's courts enforce our laws. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley was right to say that sharia law is not part of the British legal system. We must ensure that we do not succour such misinformation or misconceptions beyond these walls.

Our vision for our communities is that all British citizens, whatever their religious background, should be free to practise individual religious freedom. Many British people of different faiths and none benefit a great deal from the guidance that religious codes and other practices offer. Those values allow us to enjoy our individual freedoms and to lead varied lives in diverse communities. That is one of the great strengths of this great country; however, it has to be within a framework in which citizens share and respect common rights and responsibilities, with unfettered access to national law and our legal institutions to enforce those rights when necessary. Equal access to the law is a key benefit of living in a democratic society. As the hon. Member for Bradford West highlighted, that respect for the law is, I hope and believe, shared by everyone in our country, irrespective of background, gender, religion or any other factor.

If there is any conflict between religious practices and national law, national law must, and will, always prevail. In particular, I highlight the Equality Act 2010 and, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), highlighted, our strong

and important human rights legislation and the framework behind it. The Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government lead on the broader issues surrounding faith, community integration and British values. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for the operation of the justice system, including the use of non-court dispute resolution services such as mediation, and for the law governing marriage.

I heard the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley on the use of sharia religious principles and the operation of sharia councils. In particular, he highlighted concerns about various forms of discrimination on the basis of sex or religion in family matters, in particular divorce, in relation to the evidential weight applied. I acknowledge too the views set out by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in its resolution, passed in January this year, about the need to combat all forms of discrimination based on religion. As my noble and learned Friend Lord Keen of Elie has said, people may choose to abide by the interpretation and application of sharia principles if they wish to do so, provided their actions do not conflict with national law; however, that must be their free choice, and does not supersede national law.

The resolution reiterated the obligation on Council of Europe member states to protect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as enshrined in article 9 of the European convention on human rights. That right represents one of the pillars of a democratic society, and we share the Council's view of that important principle. The resolution also noted that the exercise of the right to manifest one's religion may be subject to some limitations necessary in a democratic society; it is not an unqualified right. Furthermore, it noted that the operation of religion should never act to limit or remove other convention rights or freedoms to which citizens in a democratic society are entitled, and we agree with that too.

While supporting and, I argue, even encouraging pluralism, the resolution expressed concern about the official or unofficial application of what it termed "sharia law" in several Council of Europe member states. As hon. Members have set out, in relation to the UK specifically the Council of Europe set out its concern about what it views as the judicial activities of sharia councils that, although not part of the British legal system, attempt to provide a form of alternative dispute resolution.

The resolution drew attention to members of the Muslim community, sometimes voluntarily but sometimes under pressure from peers or their own conscience, accepting the religious jurisdiction of such councils. The resolution further noted that it occurs mainly with regard to marital issues involving divorce, as the hon. Member for Bradford West said, and some matters related to inheritance and commercial contracts. The resolution expressed concern that the rulings of sharia councils could discriminate against women in divorce and inheritance cases.

The UK Government are clear that all rules, practices and bodies, including systems of alternative dispute resolution, must operate within the rule of law. Our law provides for a formal system of legally binding arbitration under the Arbitration Act 1996, which allows parties to consent to apply a system of law other than English law, with appropriate procedural safeguards to protect against

duress or coercion. Arbitral decisions can play an important role, but only if the necessary procedural requirements and legal safeguards are satisfied. Most types of family dispute can be resolved in a legally binding way only if they are adjudicated by the courts.

The Government understand the concerns that some Members have set out about the operation of sharia councils. Indeed, the resolution on the basis of which the debate has been tabled acknowledged and welcomed the Home-Office-commissioned independent review, chaired by Professor Mona Siddiqui and commissioned by the now Prime Minister. That review looked at whether sharia law was being misused or applied in a way that is incompatible with domestic law in England and Wales, and whether there were discriminatory practices against women who use such councils.

Naz Shah: Does the Minister welcome, as I do, the finding in that review that, despite the fact that there is understood to be a conflict in very minute parts of sharia law, in terms of inheritance being discriminatory, in this country that would not apply because the rule of our law would override all of it in any case?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the primacy of our national domestic law in that context.

The review was published by the Government in 2018, with the Council of Europe calling the recommendations "a major step towards a solution".

The review found evidence of a range of practices across sharia councils, both positive and negative, and made three recommendations, which have been touched upon. Some of them mirror, or are very similar to, the UK-specific proposals set out in the Council of Europe resolution. I will run through them, as other hon. Members have, and respond on behalf of the Government.

The review's first recommendation was to amend marriage law to ensure that civil marriages are conducted before, or at the same time, as the Islamic marriage ceremony, thereby establishing the right to a civil divorce and to financial protection on divorce. The law already provides the option to solemnise a legally valid Islamic marriage if it takes place in a mosque registered for worship and for marriage, as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East mentioned. However, we understand and appreciate that many Muslims choose to marry at home and, as the hon. Member for Bradford West said, may be unaware that that means that their ceremony, while religiously recognised, is not recognised under national law.

We will continue to engage with key stakeholders, including faith groups, academics and lawyers, to test their views on the policy and the legal challenges of limited reform relating to the law on marriage and religious ceremonies. I am keen for us to make as rapid progress as possible, but as the tenor of this debate has shown and as hon. Members will recognise, this is a sensitive area that involves the expression of religious freedom, so it is important that we get any changes right.

With respect to the current marriage law, the second recommendation proposed developing programmes to raise awareness among Muslim couples that Islamic

[Edward Argar]

marriages do not afford them the legal protection that comes with a civil marriage—a point that the hon. Lady made very powerfully. The cross-Government integrated communities action plan, which is led by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, commits to supporting awareness campaigns to educate and inform couples and their children of the benefits of having a civil marriage alongside a religious marriage. The plan is a powerful opportunity to drive our vision for integrated communities in the UK. As the Prime Minister has said, we will use it to proudly promote the many values that unite us, including democracy, free speech, human rights and the rule of law—values that allow us to enjoy our individual freedoms and lead varied lives in diverse communities.

The third recommendation proposed regulating sharia councils by creating a state-established body with a code of practice for the councils to adopt and implement. The review team's failure to reach a unanimous agreement on that proposal demonstrates the complexity of the issues involved. The Government consider that a state-facilitated or endorsed regulation scheme for such councils could confer on them a degree of legitimacy as alternative forms of dispute resolution and risk introducing what might be perceived as a parallel system of law. As the then Home Secretary set out at the time, the Government do not consider it an appropriate role of the state to act in that way.

Naz Shah: Does the Minister agree that the role that the Government have to play in these communities, as in any communities, is to support them in getting to where they need to be with sharia councils to make them compliant with our existing laws on non-discrimination regardless of gender?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I believe that the Government have an obligation in a range of areas to do what we can to ensure that all bodies and organisations comply with our national laws. She is right that it is incumbent on us all to encourage compliance with the laws that we make in this House.

The Home Office review found some evidence of sharia councils in England and Wales forcing women to make concessions to gain a divorce, of inadequate safeguarding policies and of a failure to signpost applicants to legal remedies. That is clearly not acceptable, as the hon. Lady made clear in her speech. Where sharia councils exist, they must abide by the law. Legislation is in place to protect the rights of women and prevent discriminatory practice; the Government will work with the appropriate regulatory authorities to ensure that that legislation and the protections that it establishes are being enforced fully and effectively.

The Council of Europe's resolution calls on the UK authorities to do more to

“remove the barriers to Muslim women's access to justice...step up measures to provide protection and assistance to those who are in a situation of vulnerability...conduct further research on the ‘judicial’ practice of Sharia councils and on the extent to which such councils are used voluntarily, particularly by women, many of whom would be subject to intense community pressure in this respect.”

The Government are clear that we must do more to support people in faith communities to make informed choices about how to live their lives. Key to that is our work on integration and on a shared understanding of British values and the system of law that underpins them. My colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will consider those points further as work progresses on the integrated communities action plan.

Naz Shah: The Minister mentions British values again. Does he agree with my view as a Muslim woman that there is no conflict at all between my Muslim values and British values?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that point. I believe that our values, which include the rule of law and the belief in human rights and democracy, are shared throughout our whole country, irrespective of people's background, gender, age or religion.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley again for giving us the opportunity to debate these important issues. I assure him that what he and other hon. Members have said today has been heard, and that my colleagues across Government and I will consider carefully all the points that have been raised on all sides.

I conclude by repeating what I said at the beginning of my speech: many British people of different faiths benefit a great deal from the guidance that their religious codes, beliefs and practices offer. Such values allow us to enjoy our individual freedoms and lead varied lives in the diverse communities that are a hallmark of our country, but that has to happen within a framework in which citizens can share and respect common rights and responsibilities as they share in the benefits of living in this great country. There is, and remains, one rule of law in the United Kingdom, democratically enacted by this Parliament and the devolved Administrations, and applied by our independent judicial system.

Today's important debate has been conducted in a manner that does credit to this House, which those who watch our proceedings may not always think is the case. It has been a very worthwhile way of spending our afternoon.

4.16 pm

John Howell: Once again, may I express my gratitude to all Members who stayed for this debate, especially the three Front-Bench Members? It has been very useful.

I said earlier that sharia councils should in no way be abolished, and that they provide a useful function in Muslim communities. I stick by that—they certainly do. However, there are two issues that I think we all agree are important. The first is the protection and empowerment of women; I am as keen that that should happen as any Member of this House, and a lot of my remarks were directed towards ensuring that it does. The second issue is human rights, which the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) mentioned and to which, as a delegate to the Council of Europe, I am absolutely committed. I pointed out how differences in human rights approaches have been raised in the Council of Europe; if we had the time, we could go through the situation in all the countries that the Council has looked at.

I am grateful to hon. Members for their participation and their help in raising this important subject. I agree that it is very sensitive, but that does not mean that we should not raise it or talk about it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Sharia law courts in the UK.

4.18 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 2 May 2019

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Luxembourg on 15 April.

The main item on the agenda was the reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP) post-2020, with a focus on the proposed new green architecture. Ministers highlighted their willingness to commit to higher levels of overall ambition such as spending 30% of pillar 2 funding on climate change actions, and endorsed the new policy design. However, some member states also pressed for large chunks of the Commission's proposals to be optional, including some of the Commission's eco-schemes.

This was followed by a ministerial lunch debate which focused on the impact of large carnivores and other species on agriculture. The Commission's position that 100 % state aid was permissible to compensate for attacks on livestock did not satisfy several member states, who wanted greater latitude for farmers to shoot wolves and other predators.

Council reconvened with an exchange of views on the task force in rural Africa, with the final report proposing a new alliance between the EU and Africa. I intervened on the item, highlighting the importance of developing countries in the global food supply and giving examples from UK projects that increase smallholder inclusion in the value chain and empower women economically.

Commissioner Hogan also provided an update on the market situation, describing a stable and positive picture overall with concerns in sugar, apples and pears, and olive oil.

A number of other items were discussed under "any other business":

The Netherlands informed Council about EU action against deforestation and forest degradation. I intervened, stressing our support for the proposal and encouraged the Commission to prepare an ambitious communication to step up action against deforestation.

Slovakia presented its joint declaration with the Czech Republic and Poland on the renewable energy directive post-2020.

The presidency informed the Council of the outcome of the research and agriculture conference held in Bucharest on 5 April.

[HCWS1534]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 8 April 2019

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and I attended

the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 8 April. It was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.

Current affairs

The High Representative and Foreign Ministers had an exchange of views on the most pressing issues on the international agenda. In particular, they expressed their concern over developments in Libya. They urged all parties to implement immediately a humanitarian truce, refrain from any further military escalation and return to the negotiations. They reiterated their full support for the efforts of the UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé in working towards peace and stability in Libya.

Foreign Ministers also referred to the implementation of the penal code order in Brunei and expressed their strong opposition to cruel and degrading punishments, prohibited by the convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, which was signed by Brunei in 2015.

In relation to the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, the Council reiterated the EU's strong opposition to the extraterritorial application of unilateral restrictive measures, which it considered contrary to international law.

Afghanistan

Ministers discussed the situation in Afghanistan. They focused on how the EU could best contribute to current peace efforts. The High Representative debriefed Ministers on her visits to Islamabad on 25 March and Kabul on 26 March.

Eastern partnership

Ministers discussed the eastern partnership (EaP) in view of the EaP ministerial meeting (13 May) and the high-level event (14 May) to mark the EaP's 10th anniversary. Ministers highlighted the importance of the partnership, which is based on shared values and principles, and an approach combining inclusivity and differentiation.

Ministers welcomed the progress achieved with eastern partnership countries within the "20 deliverable for 2020" framework, and in particular the tangible and concrete results in trade, people-to-people contact, transport, connectivity, infrastructure and economic reform. They agreed that implementation of reforms in sectors such as governance, anticorruption and the judiciary require additional efforts.

Informal lunch on Venezuela

Foreign Ministers exchanged views on Venezuela. They discussed the outcome of the second meeting of the international contact group (ICG) on 28 March in Quito. They agreed to step up work on the two tracks of the ICG: facilitating humanitarian access, and creating the conditions for free, fair, transparent presidential elections.

Council conclusions

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council adopted conclusions on the Afghanistan's peace process.

The Council endorsed the framework on counter-terrorism, developed jointly by the UN and the EU. The framework identifies areas for UN-EU co-operation and priorities until 2020.

The Council endorsed the 2018 progress report on the EU strategy against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The Council concluded the agreement establishing the EU-Latin America and the Caribbean international foundation.

The Council adopted conclusions on the European Court of Auditors' special report No 15/2018 entitled "Strengthening the capacity of the internal security forces in Niger and Mali: only limited and slow progress".

The Council authorised the signature of the EU-Pakistan strategic engagement plan on behalf of the EU.

The Council endorsed the continuation of the EU's action in support of the UN verification and inspection mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM), from 1 April 2019 to 30 September 2019. The EU is contributing €4.9 million to UNVIM for one year.

The Council authorised the opening of negotiations with Vietnam for an agreement to establish a framework for its participation in EU crisis management operations.

The Council adopted conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action (ST 7749/19).

[HCWS1535]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Pursuits Consultation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Last year, we published a public consultation on the initial findings of a review of the legislation, guidance and practice surrounding police driving in England, Wales and Scotland. As we said last May, this Government are determined to get ahead of and tackle emerging threats like motorcycle-related crimes, including those involving mopeds and scooters. People must be able to go about their daily lives without fear of harassment or attack and criminals must not think they can get away with a crime by riding or driving in a certain way or on a certain type of vehicle.

Since this work commenced, we have already seen an impact on offending behaviour through operational responses, such as ensuring that merely removing a crash helmet will not result in the police discontinuing a pursuit. The Government will continue to work closely with the police in England, Wales and Scotland, the

College of Policing and other organisations to clarify driver training standards, including the requirements for refresher training.

I am grateful to the 383 individuals and organisations that responded to the consultation, including 222 police officers, forces and other related organisations. We will be publishing a full response later today on gov.uk. I am pleased to confirm that the overwhelming majority of responses were supportive of the proposals set out in the consultation, either in full or in principle. In addition, during and since the consultation period, we have also continued to work with the Independent Office for Police Conduct, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Police Federation, the National Police Chiefs Council and others in order to refine our proposals.

The Government will seek to introduce a new test to assess the standard of driving of a police officer when parliamentary time allows. This new test will compare the standard of driving against that of a careful, competent and suitably trained police driver in the same role rather than use the existing test which compares driving against a standard qualified driver who would not normally be involved in police action.

As a result of the responses to the consultation and the related work, the Government have also decided to examine how we can best:

Make clear that police officers should not be regarded as being accountable for the driving of a suspected criminal who is attempting to avoid arrest by driving in a dangerous manner, providing the pursuit is justified and proportionate.

Review the various emergency service exemptions to traffic law to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

We have been clear from the beginning of this review that we must ensure that the outcome of these changes enables the police to do their job effectively and keep us safe while ensuring that we continue to keep our roads among the safest in the world. I believe that the action we intend to take will do just that, while giving police officers greater confidence that they will be appropriately protected by the law if they drive in accordance with their training with a view to protecting the public.

We would like to develop a uniform approach across Great Britain and will engage with the devolved Administrations in recognition of devolved interests.

[HCWS1536]

Petitions

Thursday 2 May 2019

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Closure and relocation of Solihull Post Office

The petition of residents of Solihull,

Declares that local residents have concerns over the proposed closure and relocation of Solihull Post Office, Mell Square.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Post Office to re-consider the closure of the Solihull Post Office in Mell Square due to its size and accessibility.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julian Knight, Official Report, 6 March 2019; Vol. 655, c. 1060.]

[P002434]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):

The Government value and recognise the important role that the Post Office plays in communities such as Solihull and across the UK. That is why we committed in our 2017 manifesto to safeguarding the Post Office network and protect existing rural services. Since 2010, the number of branches in the network has been at its most stable for decades, at over 11,500.

While the Post Office is publicly owned, it is a commercial business. The Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office - to maintain a national network accessible to all and to do so more sustainably for the taxpayer - and allow the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business.

The Post Office's proposals to franchise or host Crown branches, including the Solihull branch, are part of its plans to ensure a sustainable network in the face of challenging trading conditions in the Post Office's core market and the wider retail sector. In fact, moving Crown post offices to retail partners has helped reduce losses in this part of the network from £46 million per year in 2012 to break-even today. Working with a retail partner is a sensible response to the challenges facing High Street retailers, enabling shared costs across the combined businesses, with the franchise partner benefiting from increased footfall and income from Post Office products. Furthermore, in terms of quality of service and access arrangements a recent report by Citizen's Advice indicates that franchised branches are performing in line with or better than traditional branches.

We understand that changes to Post Office services will be a concern to some local residents of Solihull, but franchising will help retain Post Office services on high streets throughout the country and bring further investment and modernisation for customers.

WHSmith has been successfully operating post offices within its stores since 2017 and currently runs over 130 branches, demonstrating proficiency to run the branch

in Solihull. The franchise arrangement will bring extended opening hours and 7-day trading for customers offering a wide range of products and services.

In relation to accessibility, when relocating a branch, the Post office is aware of the needs of its customers, including the most vulnerable. In fact, the Post Office works with the new partner to ensure that Post Office branches meet all relevant legal accessibility requirements, whether branches are directly managed or franchised within WHSmith, and indeed all franchising partners.

The Post Office has a proven track record for going above and beyond to ensure convenient access for all customers, including those with disabilities or mobility issues. In fact, the Post Office now provides accessibility information on the on-line branch finder. The Post Office also invites the local community to submit comments on access as part of a formal consultation process.

Regarding the Post Office's consultation in Solihull, this ran for 6 weeks and closed on 6 March 2019. This process sought to inform, and gather views from, opinion formers and local stakeholders on the proposed changes to the network and to allow the public to inform the Post Office's plans for the new branch. The consultation document highlighted that the branch will be moving approximately 70 metres away from its current location, that opening hours will be extended by eight and a half hours per week and will now include Sunday opening. The document also confirmed that the vast majority of products and services available in the Solihull directly managed branch will transfer to the proposed franchising, with the exception of a cash machine. Although the ATM will not transfer, customers can withdraw money from the Post Office counter as part of the agreement with all the major High Street banks.

The Post Office also runs a customer forum to allow the public to speak to them directly. This process is in line with the Post Office's Code of Practice on changes to the network agreed with Citizens Advice. A recent review by the Citizens Advice reported that the Post Office consultation process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed in most cases, demonstrating that the Post Office listens to the community.

A final decision by Post Office Limited regarding the proposed move of Solihull Post Office has not been made as of yet. However, once all the responses from the consultation have been reviewed and all feedback considered then the community, staff and concerned parties and individuals will be advised on the decision.

The sustainability and future success of the Post Office network continues to remain of the utmost importance to this Government. We recognise the value Post Offices add to or communities, residents, businesses and tourists in all parts of the UK, including Solihull. We will continue to honour our manifesto commitments so that Post Offices' can thrive and remain at the heart of our rural and urban communities for years to come.

Closure of Middleton Crown Post Office

The petition of Heywood and Middleton,

Declares that Crown Post Offices provide a vital service to their communities; further that the Post Office propose to close the Middleton Crown Post Office and to franchise the service to a local branch of WH Smith; further that there is concern that this will adversely affect jobs, quality of service, and accessibility, and

have a negative impact on Middleton town centre; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter has received signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government and Post Office Ltd to keep Middleton Crown Post Office open at its current location.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liz McInnes, *Official Report*, 13 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 481.]

[P002438]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):

The Government value and recognise the important role that the Post Office plays in communities such as Middleton and across the UK. That is why we committed in our 2017 manifesto to safeguarding the Post Office network and protect existing rural services. Since 2010, the number of branches in the network has been at its most stable for decades, at over 11,500.

While the Post Office is publicly owned, it is a commercial business. The Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office - to maintain a national network accessible to all and to do so more sustainably for the taxpayer - and allow the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business.

The Post Office's proposals to franchise or host Crown branches, including the Middleton branch, are part of its plans to ensure a sustainable network in the face of challenging trading conditions in the Post Office's core market and the wider retail sector. In fact, moving Crown post offices to retail partners has helped reduce losses in this part of the network from £46 million per year in 2012 to break-even today. Working with a retail partner is a sensible response to the challenges facing High Street retailers, enabling shared costs across the combined businesses, with the franchise partner benefiting from increased footfall and income from Post Office products. Furthermore, in terms of quality of service and access arrangements a recent report by Citizen's Advice indicates that franchised branches are performing in line with or better than traditional branches.

We understand that changes to Post Office services will be a concern to some local residents of Middleton, but franchising proposals will help retain Post Office services on high streets throughout the country and bring further investment and modernisation for customers.

WHSmith has been successfully operating post offices within its stores since 2017 and currently runs over 130 branches, demonstrating proficiency to run the branch

in Middleton. The franchise arrangement will bring extended opening hours and 7-day trading for customers offering a wide range of products and services.

In relation to accessibility, when relocating a branch, the Post office is aware of the needs of its customers, including the most vulnerable. In fact, the Post Office works with the new partner to ensure that Post Office branches meet all relevant legal accessibility requirements, whether branches are directly managed or franchised within WHSmith, and indeed all franchising partners.

The Post Office has a proven track record for going above and beyond to ensure convenient access for all customers, including those with disabilities or mobility issues. In fact, the Post Office now provides accessibility information on the on-line branch finder. The Post Office also invites the local community to submit comments on access as part of a formal consultation process.

Regarding the Post Office's consultation in Middleton, this ran for 6 weeks and closed on 6 March 2019. This process sought to inform, and gather views from, opinion formers and local stakeholders on the proposed changes to the network and to allow the public to inform the Post Office's plans for the new branch. The consultation document highlighted that the branch will be moving approximately 170 metres away from its current location, that opening hours will be extended by nine hours per week and will now include Sunday opening.

The Post Office also held a customer forum on 13 February to allow the public to speak to them directly. This process is in line with the Post Office's Code of Practice on changes to the network agreed with Citizens Advice. A recent review by the Citizens Advice reported that the Post Office consultation process is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed in most cases, demonstrating that the Post Office listens to the community.

Following the consultation and review, Post Office Limited has made the decision to proceed with the proposal to move the Middleton Post Office into WHSmith at Unit G9 F9 Middleton Shopping Centre, Middleton, Manchester, M24 4EL where it will be operated by WHSmith High Street Limited. It is expected that the current branch will close at 17:30 on Wednesday 5 June 2019, with the new branch opening at 09:00 on Thursday 6 June 2019.

The sustainability and future success of the Post Office network remain of the utmost importance to the Government. We recognise their value to communities, residents, businesses and tourists in all parts of the UK, including Middleton. We will continue to honour our manifesto commitments so that Post Offices' can thrive and remain at the heart of our rural and urban communities.

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